

Canoeing the Mountains:
Christian Leadership in
Uncharted Territory
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Drawing from his extensive experience as a pastor and consultant, Tod Bolsinger brings decades of expertise in guiding churches and organizations through uncharted territory. He offers a combination of illuminating insights and practical tools to help you reimagine what effective leadership looks like in our rapidly changing world.

Seminary didn't train me for this.

Over the last ten years I have had one church leader after another whisper to me the same frustrated confession: *"Seminary didn't train me for this. I don't know if I can do it. I just don't know . . ."* A number of pastors are ready to throw in the towel. Studies show that if given a chance to do something else, most pastors would jump at it. Reportedly, upwards of fifteen hundred pastors leave the ministry *every month*.

A couple of years ago I learned that three of my pastor friends around the country had resigned *on the same day*. There were no affairs, no scandals and no one was renouncing faith. But three good, experienced pastors turned in resignations and walked away. One left church ministry all together. The details are as different as the pastors themselves, but the common thread is that they finally got worn down by trying to bring change to a church that was stuck and didn't know what to do. Their churches were stuck and declining, stuck and clinging to the past, stuck and lurching to quick fixes, trying to find an easy answer for what were clearly bigger challenges. What all three churches had in common was that they were mostly blaming the pastor for how bad it felt to be so stuck.

"If only you could preach better!"

"If only you were more pastoral and caring!"

"If only our worship was more dynamic!"

"Please, pastor, do something!" (That is what we pay you for, isn't it?)

And to make matters worse, the *pastors* don't know what to do either. As a seminary vice president, I am now charged with confronting this reality head-on. Our graduates were not trained for this day. When I went to seminary, we were trained in the skills that were necessary for supporting faith in Christendom. When churches functioned primarily as vendors of religious services for a Christian culture, the primary leadership toolbox was

- *teaching* (for providing Christian education)
- *liturgics* (for leading Christian services)
- *pastoral care* (for offering Christian counsel and support)

In this changing world we need to add a new set of leadership tools. And this applies equally well to Christians serving in leadership beyond the parish. The challenges of a changing world come even more rapidly in business, education and nonprofit leadership. And while this book's primary audience is congregational leaders, I have added some material specifically for Christian leaders in other contexts.

This is a guidebook for learning to lead in a world we weren't prepared for. Our guides will be none other than the first American adventurers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.



BOOK EXCERPT



Tod Bolsinger (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is the vice president for vocation and formation and assistant professor of practical theology at Fuller Theological Seminary. He is the author of *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian* and *Show Time*. A frequent speaker, consultant and blogger, he serves as an executive coach for corporate, nonprofit, educational and church organizations in transformational leadership. For seventeen years, he was the senior pastor of San Clemente Presbyterian Church in San Clemente, California, after serving for ten years at First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood.

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Lewis and Clark's expedition to explore the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase was built on a completely false expectation. They believed, like everyone before them, that the unexplored west was exactly the same geography as the familiar east. This is the story of what they did when they discovered that they – and everyone else before them – had been wrong. And how instructive and inspiring that story can be to us today. . . .

From Lewis and Clark we will learn that if we can adapt and adventure, we can thrive. That while leadership in uncharted territory requires both learning and loss, once we realize that the losses won't kill us, they can teach us. And mostly, we will learn that to thrive off the map in an exciting and rapidly changing world means learning to let go, learn as we go and keep going no matter what.

-Adapted from Chapter One, "Seminary Didn't Prepare Me for This"

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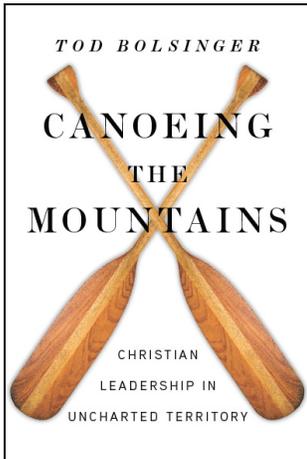


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“You’re not going to want to read this book. . . .”

*“Contemporary pastors and church leaders face a daunting challenge. The world and the church have changed dramatically. Congregational expectations have never been higher or more complex. How can we lead our churches with wisdom and kingdom impact in the ever-changing world of today and tomorrow? Tod Bolsinger answers this pressing question in his timely book *Canoeing the Mountains*. Combining solid biblical theology, contemporary leadership theory and years of experience as a pastor and church consultant, Bolsinger offers a new vision of pastoral leadership as well as dozens of practical examples that bring this vision to life. All pastors and church leaders need to read this book, for their own sake, for the good of their churches and for the advance of God’s kingdom in the world.”*

— **Mark D. Roberts**, executive director, Max De Pree Center for Leadership

“Since the missional church discussion began to develop real momentum, the constant question has been, how does this theological vision of the church after Christendom translate into the practice of real congregations struggling with enormous challenges? A great deal of excellent work has been done, and there are excellent resources for the community and leadership seriously committed to missional change. But Bolsinger’s book is a major step forward. It is based on solid missional theology, rooted in concrete congregational experience, shaped by provocative research of many diverse voices and communicated energetically and creatively. Most importantly, it is shaped by theologically informed hope, not just optimism, and takes the risks that must be taken for the sake of faithful witness today. I strongly commend this book!”

— **Darrell L. Guder**, Henry Winters Luce Emeritus Professor of
Missional and Ecumenical Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary

“As a committed practical theologian, Bolsinger blends the best insights from Scripture and leadership theory with an empathetic understanding of the most pressing questions of today’s leaders. If you’re like me, you’re not only going to want to read this book, you’re going to want to read it multiple times.”

— **Kara Powell**, faculty member at Fuller Seminary,
executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute

*“Combining the mind of a scholar, the heart of a pastor and the experience of a consultant, Tod Bolsinger is the rare leader who can also teach. Using the example of Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery, he also authentically shares from his own experience, both positive and negative, to make the most important concepts in organizational leadership accessible to pastors, nonprofit executives and Christians in the marketplace who are charged with giving leadership in a changing world. *Canoeing the Mountains* should be required reading in seminary classrooms and leadership*

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seminars. I know it will be for the pastors and leaders we coach."

— **Kevin Graham Ford**, principal of TAG Consulting, author of *The Secret Sauce*

"Do not canoe another stroke or portage another step without Canoeing the Mountains in hand. In today's post-Christian world, we are navigating uncharted waters where our churches demand innovation at every turn. How do we lead for transformation when the world is transforming even faster? For anyone committed to and dazed by the changing realities of today's church, Tod Bolsinger offers a needed vision."

— **Meritt Lohr Sawyer**, executive director, Paul Carlson Partnership,
Evangelical Covenant Church

"There are lots of books these days on leadership, but this one shines because of the author's ability to pull together the many threads of leadership literature. In a most winsome and engaging way, Tod Bolsinger weaves together the best of current leadership research – adaptive change, systems theory, organizational transformation – with the real-life challenges of a pastor/practitioner who has spent years trying to put all this together in a congregation while still preaching Sunday by Sunday and doing funerals on Monday. Tod has lived this book out in denominational circles and as a coach to other pastors trying to bring change within a congregation. Like a master storyteller, Tod also weaves in the story of Lewis and Clark as a historical parable of the change and challenge in which we find ourselves today in the church. This is a book that you simply must read!"

— **Jim Singleton**, associate professor of pastoral leadership and evangelism,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

"When I first heard Tod share his insights about questions that keep leaders up at night, I was hooked. Lewis and Clark prepared for river canoeing and then suddenly faced a literal and insurmountable mountain range that threatened their mission. We read headlines every month about some established company confronted with extinction. They were unprepared to adapt and climb. The lessons in Tod's book may be based in history but are so timely and relevant for today. Facing unpredictable and confounding unknowns defines this era of leadership. Tod's book is one I am recommending to my clients. It's a map for navigating the future that I have made part of my practice."

— **Rex Miller**, author, futurist, principal for mindSHIFT

"When Fuller Seminary decided to launch out in our own uncharted terrain, we called on Tod Bolsinger to join our leadership team. When you read Canoeing the Mountains, you'll immediately understand why. Bolsinger brings a scholar's mind, a pastor's heart and a wealth of leadership and consulting experience to the task. His ability to translate the most important organizational leadership material into the day-to-day challenges of the Christian leader is without peer. His vulnerability and authenticity resonates as he shares his own leadership learning journey. This is the leadership book the church needs today."

— **Mark Labberton**, president, Fuller Theological Seminary