



Leading Like a Methodist – Intercultural Perspectives

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Good morning, good day, and good evening. It is an honour to join you for this virtual leadership symposium that spans the world. In particular, I would like to thank the Rev. Dr Jane Leach, a trusted colleague and friend, for the invitation to speak this afternoon.

Before I delve into the topics I wish to address this afternoon, I would like to set the stage:

First, I want to describe how I experience and understand the purpose of leadership formation and development.

In my professional and vocational life as the General Secretary of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church, I am called to embrace the ministry of learning and leadership formation in the Methodist and Wesleyan tradition; serving United Methodist, pan-Methodist, and Christian leaders around the world who are defined, formed, and shaped by a holistic process of intellectual engagement, spiritual and character formation, and transformative leadership practices on behalf of the church, the academy, and the world. That is to say I believe that:

1. Christian leadership, both personal and corporate, is a 'quality of being' (i.e. identity) as well as a 'quality of doing' (i.e. vocation). 'Leadership is a way of life, a way of being and becoming that influences others toward a common vision, mission, and purpose', attending to the 'qualities of character' and the 'skills required to fulfil functions' that define leadership.¹
2. A leadership formation process is devoted to defining the qualities of character that constitute transformative leadership, as well as the skills and competencies required to fulfil this function; consequently, supporting leaders as they 'discover, claim and flourish in Christ's calling in their lives'. Furthermore, transformative qualities of principled, Christian leadership are embodied by leaders who are inspired (engaging in the baptised life as someone called into ministry), connected (shaping sacramental and missional communities of love and justice), rooted (re-presenting the Christian faith as the Methodist/Wesleyan tradition has received it), and agile (re-imaging God's future in the church, the academy, and the world).²
3. A leadership formation framework will provide leadership benchmarks (outcomes, means, and measures) as a basis for formation and development, assessment and supervision throughout a leader's career, quantifying the normative, formative, and restorative aspects of leadership. Each benchmark will be

¹ Kenneth L. Carder and Lacey C. Warner, *Grace to Lead: Practicing Leadership in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: GBHEM, 2016), xxiii.

² Jane Leach, *A Charge to Keep: Reflective Supervision and the Renewal of Christian Leadership* (Nashville: GBHEM, 2020), 164–68.

mapped to the corresponding knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics (KSAPs) required for effective and transformative leadership.³ After all, as we learned yesterday in the presentation by Paw Liang The, mutual accountability should be construed as a spiritual discipline.

Second, I believe that the task of leadership formation and development is especially challenging because of the uncertain times in which we live (at least in my context).

Susan Beaumont, in her book *HOW TO LEAD When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*, describes our current leadership challenge in the following way: 'How do you lead an organization stuck between an ending and a new beginning — when the old way of doing things no longer works, but a way forward is not yet clear?'. She calls such in-between times 'liminal seasons — threshold times when the continuity of tradition disintegrates and uncertainty about the future fuels doubt and chaos. In a liminal season, it simply is not helpful to pretend we understand what needs to happen next.' But she insists, and I think correctly, 'that leaders can still lead'. It feels like the church, the academy, our traditional way of life exists in uncertain times that will not be resolved soon. The old ways and structures are being called into question, but we do not know yet what will emerge in their place. This has created a sense of dis-orientation, dis-integration, and dis-engagement that feels overwhelming. Beaumont warns that

Feeling stuck 'in between' fuels anxiety. People try to return to the comfort of a previous era's status quo or look for ways to leap dramatically forward. They hope their leaders will ease their discomfort, and when a leader can't restore equilibrium quickly, they doubt the leader's ability. During liminal times, people often attach themselves to tricksters—charismatic figures who make empty promises, thrive on chaos, but are incapable of leading well in institutional settings.

However, we are still called to lead even in these in-between times, and we can lead, just not in traditional ways. Herein lies the good news: as challenging as this liminal season appears, it also creates a sacred space in which experimenting and risk-taking are encouraged. We are freed to question our tradition and the status quo, determining 'what is worth preserving, what can be released, and what must be adapted'. Because certainty seems unattainable, illusory (or, at best, ambiguous), a transformative leader in a liminal season encourages her community to discern their clarity of purpose centred on four basic questions: 'Who are we? Who are we here to serve? What do we stand for? What is God calling us to do, to be, [or become] next?' A transformative leader in liminal times will provide a non-anxious presence, resist the 'quick fix' that works everywhere - anytime, and embrace the 'freedom of not knowing'. 'At the same time, the leader must inspire confidence in the organization and in her leadership. She must help the organization to learn. Attending to all that is arising, the liminal leader is deeply connected to God and the soul of the institution and helps individuals and groups to embrace the liminal state for as long as it takes to get clear about identity and to discern new pathways forward'.⁴

Out of this professional and societal context, I would like to emphasise two ways that leaders can navigate these in-between times: 1. Embracing the reality of contextual connectionalism, and 2. engaging the opportunity for traditioned innovation in this liminal season.

Embracing the reality of 'contextual connectionalism'

To understand the reality of 'contextual connectionalism', I will begin with a passage of Scripture from Luke 9:18-20.

Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?' They answered, 'John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient

³ Leach, *A Charge to Keep*, 151–52, 227–64; and learnings from a 'Flourishing in Ministry' consultation with Drs. Rick DeShon, Jane Leach, and Matt Bloom with the staff of GBHEM, 2019.

⁴ Susan Beaumont, 'How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going,' Susan Beaumont and Associates (blog), last modified October 29, 2019. <https://susanbeaumont.com/2019/10/29/how-to-lead-when-you-dont-know-where-youre-going>.

prophets has arisen.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered, ‘The Messiah of God.’ (NRSV)

I read this passage several months ago in a devotional practice known as *Lectio Divina* (a form of praying with scripture, not an exegetical inquiry). In my first reading, the question ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’ jumped off the page. What a courageous question for Jesus to ask. It is not only how I perceive myself, but it is also how the people perceive me (the crowds of life, the communities in which I live, the society that has formed me) that is important for the self-awareness and self-reflection which leads to transformation! In my second reading, however, the question ‘But who do you say that I am?’ hit me between the eyes. An incredibly courageous and risky question for Jesus to ask because Peter could have said anything. So it is not only how I perceive myself, or how the community perceives me, but it is also how the people closest to me, my most intimate relationships, perceive me that form ‘who I am’ and ‘who I am becoming’. I believe this scripture is describing the theological and relational depth of belonging – a connected, contextually rooted, inter-dependent community that is relevant for this time, in this place – a contextual connectionalism.

As I ponder the reality of contextual connectionalism, I am reminded of the words of the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in his memoir *No Future without Forgiveness*, as he tries to render the African concept of ‘Ubuntu’ into a Western language. Tutu says, ‘It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, “Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu.” Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.” We belong in a bundle of life. We say, “A person is a person through other persons.” It is not, “I think therefore I am.” It says rather: “I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.” A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.’⁵

Like Bishop Tutu, Diana Butler Bass, in her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, reminds us that, ‘throughout the scriptures, God is a God who delights in diversity. ... Indeed, the New Testament depicts Jesus’ followers as one of the most diverse groups imaginable. And, when Jesus called people, he never said, “Come with me, and you will become just like the rest of us.” Jesus never issued a demand for uniformity. Rather, he beckoned people to follow with a promise of healing, transformation, and love . . . He did not say that his followers would be alike; he said that despite their differences, they would be changed by love . . . “As God has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”’⁶

Let me provide an example: as I listened to the panel discussions and participated in small group conversations yesterday, over and over, I heard and felt our concerns regarding the presence of systemic racism, colonialism, privilege, and bias in the church, the academy, and the world. As I embrace the gift of contextual connectionalism, I am then led to answer the questions we heard in the scripture in the following way, a somewhat confessional response:

So, who am I? For this time, ... in this place?

I am a United Methodist clergyperson, and I hear the crowds asking the church and the academy, ‘How can you stand by and say or do nothing about the systemic racism, colonialism, privilege, and bias that is embedded in our society, in our dominate culture, and in our church and academy?’ The Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church answered this question on June 8, 2020:

The past few weeks have left many hurt, angry and outraged as we have witnessed the deaths of unarmed Black persons at the hands of police and racism; Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and the countless others whose names are known only to mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and friends.

⁵ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 31–32.

⁶ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), 149–51.

Many bishops have worked to amplify and magnify one another's voices. The words of Bishop Bruce Ough, resident Bishop of Minneapolis area, were a clarion call to the crisis before us, 'There is more than one pandemic ravaging Minnesota and our country at this time. In addition to fighting COVID-19, we are besieged by a pandemic of racism, white supremacy, and white on black or brown violence.'

The voice of Bishop LaTrelle Easterling, resident Bishop of the Baltimore- Washington area, gave power to the realities, 'Being Black is not a pre-existing condition; being Black is not justification for probable cause; being Black is not to be inherently suspicious nor suspect. Being Black is a gift from Almighty God and a manifestation of an aspect of God.'

These prophetic voices and those of others have provided words when we had none. It provided a clarity of purpose during uncertain times. Therefore, ...

As bishops of the United Methodist Church, we ask every United Methodist to reclaim their baptismal vows to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.

We ask every United Methodist to name the egregious sin of racism and white supremacy and join together to take a stand against the oppression and injustice that is killing persons of color.

As bishops of the whole church, we affirm the peaceful protests as a means of giving voice where it is needed most.

We are clear that it is beyond time for all United Methodists to act. It is time to use our voices, our pens, our feet, and our heart for change.⁷

In my opinion, this courageous answer from our Council of Bishops is a political and moral statement from the leaders of our church rooted in the historic and foundational values of the United Methodist Church and the Wesleyan tradition. It is a call to action for social justice and advocacy in our church and communities and in the institutions and family systems that form society throughout the world – which, in truth, may require protest and action by the church on behalf of the common good. But, if I fully embrace the reality of contextual connectionalism, then the question becomes more personal and intimate.

So, who am I? For this time, ... in this place?

I am a person, a flawed human being who strives for perfection, ... a cisgender, abled, white male, who comes from social and economic privilege. I am a person who must face and be transformed by the uncomfortable and challenging reality that is a constituent part of the explicit and implicit biases I have learned from birth – white privilege, white supremacy, and white fragility.

As Professor Robin DiAngelo insightfully says, in her book that describes *White Fragility*, 'One of the greatest social fears for a white person is being told that something that we have said or done is racially problematic. Yet when someone lets us know that we have just done such a thing, rather than respond with gratitude and relief (after all, now that we are informed, [hopefully] we won't do it again), we often respond with anger and denial. Such moments can be experienced as something valuable, even if temporarily painful, only after we accept that racism is unavoidable and that it is impossible to completely escape having developed problematic racial assumptions and behaviors.'⁸

So, I am called as an individual, and we are called as the church, the beloved community of Christ, to centre the words, life, and experiences of our black and brown siblings for this time and in this place, in the midst of this moral and spiritual crisis in our land and in our world. We are called to listen to their stories, we are called to be

⁷ Cynthia Fierro Harvey, 'Council of Bishops statement on the Scourge of Racism,' last modified June 8, 2020. <https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/files/websites/www/pdfs/cob+statement+on+racism+-+june+8+final.pdf>

⁸ Robin J. DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 4.

challenged and transformed by their names and their experiences, and we are called to act. The time for statements and resolutions is no longer sufficient. The time for systemic change is now.

So, who am I becoming? For this time, ... in this place?

Realizing my own white fragility and how I have been complicit in supporting systems of racism, privilege, and bias in all parts of my life is only an initial step. Professor Ibram Kendi, in his book *How to be an Antiracist*, contends that it is indeed good to recognise that we know how to be racist, and we know how to pretend to be 'not racist', but this realization by itself is insufficient if we fail to learn and embody how to be antiracist. He goes on to say that:

The opposite of 'racist' isn't 'not racist.' It is 'antiracist.' What's the difference? One endorses either the idea of a racial hierarchy, as a racist, or racial equality, as an antiracist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the root of problems in power and policies, as an antiracist. One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of being 'not racist'.⁹

There are several bits of good news in his thought that give me hope. First, being racist or being antiracist are not 'fixed identities'. That is to say, 'What we say about race, what we do about race, in each moment, determines [what we are, not who we are].' And, second, Professor Kendi believes that if we focus on dismantling systems of power and privilege rather than people, and changing policy and practice rather than groups of people, we may be able to overcome our 'cynicism about the permanence of racism'.¹⁰ So, he does believe it is possible to transform the policies and practices of a racist society and cast a vision of a new antiracist way of being in all of its intersections and manifestations. It is a journey 'about the basic struggle we're all in, the struggle to be fully human and to see that others are fully human'. A journey where 'humanity can come upon the clearing of a potential future: an antiracist world in all its imperfect beauty'.¹¹

So, who am I becoming? For this time, ... in this place?

At GBHEM, as we discussed how we become intentionally antiracist, as a people and an organization, we made the following initial commitments:

- In response to the Council of Bishops' call to action, we are committed to becoming an antiracist institution through the intentional and tangible transformation of our practices, policies, procedures, and governance – interrogating and dismantling the systems of racism, privilege and bias in our own structure and practice in particular, and in the church and the academy in general.
- Along with our historic collaborative partners, we are committed to reimagining the pedagogical landscape of theological and higher education as an intentional expression of antiracism. As Professor Willie James Jennings describes in his book, *After Whiteness*, dismantling the dominant forms of white self-sufficient masculinity in education and, instead, creating a pedagogy of belonging (a place where we 'enter the struggle to rethink our people').¹²
- We recognise that, although the relationship between the church and the academy in the Central Conferences and in our Pan-Methodist relationships around the world remains strong and vital, the relationship between the church and the academy has drifted apart in the United States. Therefore, in response to this reality, we committed to becoming a catalyst that will stop the drift, and rebuild relationships, between the church and the academy in the United States, and maximise the vital relationships already existing in the other parts of the world. GBHEM will fully embrace its historic global focus and posture, practicing proactive, rather than reactive, decision-making in all parts of the agency regarding our ministry around the world; we will embrace the historic and foundational relationship between the church and the academy by breaking down

⁹ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 9.

¹⁰ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 10–11.

¹¹ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 218

¹² Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020), prologue, Kindle.

the traditional bureaucratic silos between higher education and ordained ministry, and, instead, modelling a non-traditional, cross-relational way of working among our staff in service to the church and the academy.

- We are committed to convening the generative and transformative inter-disciplinary dialogues and experiences that will challenge the increasing anti-intellectual and anti-scientific trends prevalent in our society – thus, redefining and reimagining the conversations regarding personal liberty vs. social responsibility, developing strategies to eliminate the racial, economic and public health disparities exposed once again in the global COVID-19 pandemic, mitigating the effects of climate change experienced in the tragic wildfires on the West Coast, and so on ... that is to say, to be in partnership with all of you present to confront the realities we have been discussing over the past two days, creating alternative narratives of hope and transformation!

Engaging the opportunity for ‘traditioned innovation’

‘Traditioned innovation is a way of thinking and living that points toward the future in light of the past, a habit of being that requires both a deep fidelity to the tradition that has borne us to the present and a radical openness to the innovations that will carry us forward.’ It is a practice and a way of life that draws us into being co-creators with God, embodying the ancient scriptures for our contemporary context, and embracing interdisciplinary habits, integrative thinking, and improvisation. Christian leaders hold in tension the creative imagination that desires innovation and the faithful tradition of God’s people that should be maintained and adapted into our contemporary context. We engage our communities in the kind of integrative thinking and improvisation that leads to traditioned innovation.¹³ I think of it as a kind of leadership jazz.

It is important, however, to contrast tradition with traditionalism. Traditionalism, often authoritarian and exclusive, is a custom or habit, focusing on ‘the way we’ve always done it’ – or ‘just as it always had been.’ In contrast, tradition is the body of insight, wisdom, interpretation, and perspective of God’s people over time, usually several hundred years of reflection, discernment, engagement, and practice. Tradition moves beyond custom and habit. Tradition is an ‘open, participatory, and dynamic process of engaging the past while acting out its meaning in the present, with an eye toward the future.’¹⁴

It is from this ‘living’ tradition that new, relevant, and innovative visions of what the church was (tradition, not traditionalism), what the church is (practice, not purity), and what the church should be (wisdom, not certainty), emerge.¹⁵ John Wesley, in his sermon on The New Creation, suggests that such a vision for the living tradition we call the Wesleyan/Methodist movement is rooted in that ultimate vision from the book of Revelation 21:1-5.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,

I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race. God will dwell with them and they will be God’s people. God will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away.’

The one who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ Then he said, ‘Write these words down, for they are trustworthy and true’ (NRSV).

However, as we embrace God’s generative and transformative promise, it is important to understand that innovation is not a quick fix, a magical acceleration of the historical timeline, where ‘a genius jumps ahead fifty years and invents something that normal minds, trapped in the present moment, could not possibly imagine.’ Instead,

¹³ Victoria Atkinson White, ‘The Hope of Traditioned Innovation’, D.Min. thesis (Duke Divinity School, 2016), 25.

¹⁴ Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, 45–53.

¹⁵ Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, 45–53.

innovation is more like a gradual, yet relentless probing of possibilities and potentialities over time, testing limits and identifying openings – a story of one door leading to another door, and to another door.¹⁶ Dr. Stuart Kauffman, a theoretical biologist and complex systems researcher, believes that alongside the other general laws of physics should be something he calls the ‘Adjacent Possible Theory.’ The idea of the ‘adjacent possible’ suggests that at ‘any given moment there is a space around every person [and around every community and institution] of untapped potential and possibility.’ Entering a new field of energy is the lure of the ‘adjacent possible.’ In other words, a halo of possibility and promise is always right beside us.¹⁷

Kauffman’s law of the ‘adjacent possible’ suggests that real change takes place when you re-arrange the current configuration of things, opening a new possibility for movement and matter. So, innovation is rooted in incremental growth, one step at a time, over time, until something new is realised and/or created. Stephen Johnson, in his book *Where Good Ideas Come From*, suggests that traditioned innovation is like improvisation in music. It is ‘a controlled breakdown – the musicians disassemble the melody in a way that opens up opportunities for exploration of the adjacent possible: musical phrases, rhythmic changes, tonal variations that expand the listener’s experience and feeling for the tune. But if the band or soloist wander too far from the melody [from the tradition], the music can descend into a kind of chaos—the melody stops evolving and the notes become disassociated sounds.’¹⁸ As I said before, a kind of leadership jazz.

So, I wonder ... what would happen if we re-configured the space in our souls, in our minds, in the things that we do and the things that we say, ... in our life? The ‘adjacent possible,’ a halo of promise and potential that lies just outside our standard zones of existence, ... taking our first step through the door that leads us to all that God has created us to be. So, for the past two days, I have been listening for the doors that our opening all around us, leading us into a halo of possibilities:

- If the values of grace and responsibility, freedom and clarity of purpose, and the role of the pastor and the prophet are paired contrasts that are meant to be held together, how does it inform leadership formation and development in the church and the academy? For example, embodying mutual accountability as a spiritual discipline, a form of responsible grace. Understanding character and spiritual formation as a fundamental experience of leadership development and formation for the church and the academy. Embracing value- and character-based education and ministry. Emphasizing the missional, rather than the commercial aspects of education and ministry, innovating new forms and fresh expressions of church and academy while maintaining the essence of Methodist education and ministry.
- If racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural diversity, and all its manifested intersections, is a gift from God (because this is how God has created us), then how does understanding diversity as a gift change the way we strive for unity and inform Christian and Methodist/Wesleyan identity? For example, intercultural competency that forms into intercultural mindfulness over time – that is, it becomes second nature, a core value, a way of life – becomes a necessary competency and character trait for relational, transformative leadership.
- If a movement, such as the City of Sanctuary, is a fundamental expression of the Methodist/Wesleyan tradition and ethos, how does a religious institution entrenched in the status quo encourage, embrace, or create movements that lead to institutional and societal transformation? For example, the disciplines of faith-based community organizing and community development become a fundamental competency for transformative, public leadership. The church and the academy create policy/polity free zones for experimenting and innovating with new forms of ministry and learning.

What have you heard these past two days? To what doors of opportunity is God beckoning you? I know we have many challenging days ahead during this liminal season, and that the task and risk is great, but I believe in who we are called to be and who we are becoming in this beloved community that inhabits the Methodist/Wesleyan tradition.

¹⁶ Cliff Guren, ‘A Triptych on the Adjacent Possible’, Syntopical Blog (blog), last modified February 18, 2021. <https://www.syntopical.com/blog/2021/2/18/a-triptych-on-the-adjacent-possible>

¹⁷ Leonard Sweet, *The Well-Played Life: Why Pleasing God Doesn’t Have to be Such Hard Work* (Stream: Tyndale, 2014), 171.

¹⁸ Guren, ‘A Triptych on the Adjacent Possible.’

As a pathway to navigate through the current liminal season, I believe in the reality of contextual connectionalism as a gift from God and the opportunities of traditioned innovation that will lead us to clarity of purpose for our next season together. I believe that the church and the academy can embrace a theological and relational depth of belonging – becoming more fully a connected, contextually rooted, inter-dependent community that is relevant for this time, in this place, for the transformation of the world. I believe! Amen!

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