

Leading differently: Three steps to transformation

By *STEPHEN LEWIS*

We live in an historic moment of disruption and change. Yet every generation of Christians is called to live out the Gospel, to serve the common good, and to be the presence of peace in the world. It isn't easy. Sometimes the church, like any other social institution, sticks its head in the sand and hopes the toughest issues will just go away.

The future of our country, churches, theological schools, denominations, and religious professions invites us to reexamine what really matters and discern different possibilities for the future. It's about whether or not we will sign up for what God is doing now in the world, in this moment of disruption, and help create something new longing to be born. Our normal routine is no longer sufficient.

If you were empowered to lead without the fear of being wrong, able to break away from patterns and traditions, no longer prisoner of your budget's bottom line, what would you do differently? What would the new models for delivering theological education look like? What tools would you invest to help students be effective leaders in today's landscape?

Ultimately, what impact could you have on the world if you had the faith to lead differently?

At the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE), we explored three steps to lead differently:

1. Identify the cultural realities and trends and how you and/or your institution are being called to respond to what's needed now.



FTE President Stephen Lewis leads a brainstorming session with doctoral students and leaders of doctoral institutions at FTE's 2015 Christian Leadership Forum in Dallas.

We are all painfully aware of the shifting cultural landscape that impacts our work: economic stress and income disparity, continued racism in the face of increasingly multicultural demographic shifts, and the decline in religion's social status. The fastest growing Christian populations are immigrant communities of color and Pentecostal communities of faith, while membership in mostly white mainline and evangelical denominations is declining. With 60 percent of freestanding theological schools financially stressed and the increasing cost of education and seminary debt, more congregations cannot afford a full-time seminary-trained minister. The uncertainty of tenure and a shrinking job market continue to impact theological schools and faculty.

Meanwhile, like generations before, Millennials are looking for relevant places and meaningful ways to make an impact in the world. They want to serve others, alleviate suffering, and build God's "beloved community." But many of them are not finding their paths inside church walls, and fewer are discerning calls to congregational

ministry. For many young adults, ministry is the way they follow Jesus Christ, not their commitments to membership in the institutional church.

Which realities are most relevant to your situation?

2. Move past certainty and risk failure to pursue opportunities that lead to real solutions to challenges we face.

The late South African President Nelson Mandela once said, “There is no passion to be found playing small—in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.” Living the life that we are capable of and called to live requires courage that goes beyond our own certainty—what we know for sure—about God, ourselves, our institutions, and others. The ways you and/or your organization are being called now cannot be imprisoned by what you know.

At FTE, we determined that what we knew was not sufficient for discerning where to focus our energy now to help shape a hopeful future. So we took an unusual move—an organizational sabbatical—suspending many of our activities for a year to listen for different ways God might be calling on us. We spent 18 months listening to diverse stakeholders, young leaders, and unlikely partners in an effort to be responsive to the changing times. The result was a new strategic direction, relocation and restructuring of the organization, a name change, and initiatives to support FTE’s vision and mission of cultivating diverse leaders for the church and academy. While we made some mistakes along the way, we took calculated risks that we believe have positioned us well for the future.

No one simple solution exists to address what’s needed now. The best solutions only emerge from the collective wisdom of diverse perspectives. When we value diversity, it can be leveraged as an important catalyst for solving problems. Learning from a world of different people, perspectives, and ideas develops our capacity to

improve conditions in our institutions, our communities, and the world.

3. Lead by a vocation-centered design approach to life.

Seventeen years ago, Apple’s “Think Different” campaign caught the creative imagination of the public: “Here’s to the crazy ones. . . .The ones who see things differently. . . . People who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.” But you and I know the world doesn’t change because passionate people simply think differently. It changes because they actually lead differently. They are concerned with creating relevant solutions to the most pressing challenges we face.

Ours is an uncommon call in a world consumed with power, status, and selfishness. It’s a call to be the “foolish” ones of God who are idealistic and courageous enough to believe they can shape the future of the church and academy . . . and ultimately help transform the world.

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In times of change, we need new questions, choices, and solutions because our existing ones are no longer sufficient. Vocation-Centered Design (VCD)¹ provides leaders with a process for how they partner with God in shaping the future. It begins with a deep understanding of the needs of people and communities we want to impact, what God is already doing to address their needs, and how we are called to participate with our gifts and passions. We learn through collaborative

¹ A process FTE has developed and adapted from IDEO and Acumen’s work on Human Centered Design. See Acumen’s Introduction to Human Centered Design: http://plusacumen.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Week1_readings.pdf and IDEO’s Human Centered Design: http://www.ideo.com/images/uploads/hcd_toolkit/IDEO_HCD_ToolKit.pdf and Design Thinking for Educators: <http://www.designthinkingforeducators.com>.

inquiry, soliciting the collective wisdom of a diverse group of people. We undertake experiments to think, discern, and learn. We discover through VCD, that all things are possible with God and that we can help shape an unfolding future—no matter how big a problem, how little time, or how small our budget.

And so . . .

What God is up to now in the world demands that we see, think, and act differently. It demands that we work across institutional and ecclesial silos and harness our collective wisdom to develop innovative solutions to the most pressing challenges before us.

St. Teresa of Avila reminds us that

Christ has no body now but ours. No hands,
no feet on earth, but ours. [O]urs are the eyes
through which Christ's compassion looks out
on the world. [O]urs are the feet with which
God walks to do good. [O]urs are the hands
with which God is to bless [all] now.

Make no mistake: God is calling us to lead differently, to move our hands and feet over this messy but hopeful earthquake of creative change, to be led by the bold spark of divinity that is in each one of us. God is calling us to be courageous leaders—scholars of hope, teachers of peace, ministers of justice, co-creators with the Spirit to create a hopeful future. What you and I do with our “one wild, precious life”²—joined with the lives of those around us—could be the tipping point in God’s vision for peace and healing in the world.

² Adaptation of the last line from Mary Oliver’s poem, “Summer Days,” from *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures: Poems and Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2008), 65.



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