LEADING
Cross-
Culturally
Covenant Relationships for
Effective Christian Leadership

Sherwood G.
LINGENFELTER

Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Sherwood G. Lingenfelter,
Leading Cross-Culturally: Covenant Relationships for Effective Christian Leadership,
## Contents

Preface 7

1 What Is Leading Cross-Culturally? 11

### Part 1 Inspiring People

2 Kingdom Vision and Work 29  
3 Kingdom Values and Rewards 43

### Part 2 Building Trust

4 The Necessity of Learning 57  
5 Covenant Community, the Highest Priority 67  
6 Creating Covenant Community 81  
7 Trustworthy Leadership 91

### Part 3 Pathways to Empower

8 Power-Giving Leadership 105  
9 Empowering and Mentoring 120  
10 Responsible-To Leadership 130  
11 Exercising Power, Asking for Correction 143

### Part 4 Leading Cross-Culturally

12 The Challenge of Cross-Cultural Leadership 155  
13 The Hope of Cross-Cultural Leadership 163

References 171  
Index 173
This book is the third in a series that addresses the issues of culture and the practice of cross-cultural ministry. The first book, Ministering Cross-Culturally, was written for people called to serve and witness for Jesus Christ in any culture other than their own. Developing a framework of contrasting values, the book guides the reader to begin by understanding one’s values as a culture-bearing person, then to understand the contrasting values of others, and ultimately to learn how to add to one’s cultural repertoire to be effective in cross-cultural ministry. Looking to the incarnation of Jesus into our human world as a metaphor for our ministries, the book challenges the reader to enter another culture, learn its language and customs, adapt to its values and structures, and live incarnationally in that context to bear witness to Jesus Christ.

The second book, Teaching Cross-Culturally, was written by my wife, Judith, and me for the Western-trained educator who is working or planning to work in a non-Western schooling setting or in the multicultural schools and universities in the major cities of North America. The goal of this work is to help teachers to understand their personal culture of teaching and learning, and then to equip the reader to become an effective learner in another cultural context, with specific focus on learning for teaching. By reflecting on the cultural differences and conflicts we have with others from the perspectives...
of Scripture and our faith in Jesus Christ, we show how the Bible gives us principles for living that transcend culture, but we often miss appropriate application of those principles because of our cultural blindness. We therefore seek to discern where we are culturally blind and then learn how to cope with that blindness in our teaching and other cross-cultural relationships.

The intended audience for Leading Cross-Culturally is broader than that for the first two books, for it speaks to Western and non-Western leaders who are working or planning to work with and lead people in multicultural teams and ministry contexts. Significant attention is given to issues of cultural diversity and ministry partnerships that cross cultural boundaries, and to the way that cultural biases of every kind create obstacles to effective leadership and ministry partnerships. But more importantly, the topic of leadership cannot be addressed biblically without engaging universal issues of control and power and the human interests and emotions that arise from our struggles over them. Given that focus on power, which pervades all cultural expressions of leadership, the book is relevant to anyone leading or preparing to lead in church and mission contexts.

Whatever the leadership assignment—a short-term ministry outreach, a multicultural ministry team, a local church, or a parachurch mission organization—the cultural issues and power obstacles to effective leadership are common to all. I therefore have several goals for this book. The first goal is to help leaders to understand their personal culture of leadership, and how that culture pervades their thinking about vision, community, and teamwork. We all participate in social and cultural contexts that become the norm for our expectations and behavior toward others. Unless we have a clear understanding of self and our own culture, and how its beliefs and values restrict our acceptance and service of others, we will not readily reach an understanding of others or be able to serve them effectively. I challenge readers to examine their culturally bound vision, values, and rewards in light of Jesus’s teaching about and practice of the kingdom of God.

The second goal is to equip the reader to become an effective learner in another cultural context, with specific focus on learning to build communities of trust. Toward that end, we will examine in depth the relationship of culture to leading, to following, and to building
effective ministry teams. Leadership is always part of a larger community context, and for multicultural teams, members bring varied context assumptions to both leading and following. The most difficult challenge is to build teams and communities whose members trust one another. My objectives in this exploration are to show how our “default cultures” undermine the trust essential to effective teamwork, and to help leaders grasp, apply, and train others to obey the teachings of Scripture that are essential to the transformation of teams into covenant missional communities.

The third goal is to reflect on how the human propensity to seek power and control pervades all persons and cultures and infects leaders of every kind. Through a careful analysis of power and power-seeking behavior in leaders, the book examines the temptations that leaders face in all cultural settings, temptations that undermine the work of Christian disciples everywhere to follow Christ. The book illustrates how these temptations, and our human failure to obey Christ when tempted, undermine ministry effectiveness in every corner of the world.

The fourth and most challenging goal is to define the pathways for biblically based, Christ-centered, power-giving leadership in single-culture and multicultural contexts. I will reaffirm that the Bible gives us principles for living that transcend both our human sinfulness and the prison of our culture, but we often fail to apply those principles appropriately because of our selfish motivations and interests and our cultural blindness. This book explores how both our personal brokenness and our cultural blindness create obstacles to obedience and effective leadership, and then illustrates how, through the grace of God, many have overcome both brokenness and blindness to become very effective, power-giving leaders in any cultural context.

The ultimate goal is to give joyful service as servants of the Master, inviting others to follow Christ as we follow Christ. Everyone called to ministry wants to experience God’s blessing, the fruitfulness of the Spirit, and the joy of seeing others follow and discover new, abundant life in Christ. Achieving this goal is most challenging when we come together in multicultural teams—bringing old identities, habits, and expectations to the challenge of working together for the mission of God. By exposing the pitfalls of disobedience common to ministry
teams and then uncovering pathways to obedience, I pray that the Holy Spirit will use this work to help those he has anointed for service to exercise power-giving leadership that mobilizes others for ministry. To this end, I have provided practical illustrations and aids from ministries around the world.

During the past thirty years, I have worked with many colleagues who are leading in multicultural contexts. Some have received cross-cultural training, but that training has rarely included any specific guidance on leadership. I have found that people commonly assume that leadership is the same everywhere, and that they have been trained adequately to guide others. This book provides many case studies that illustrate the often disastrous consequences of leading from these false assumptions.

I am indebted to many friends and colleagues for the case studies in this book and for their numerous insights as we have dialogued together about the challenges of leading cross-culturally. I owe a special debt of thanks to my friends Louis Shanks, Harriet Hill, Jim and Ginny Tomlinson, John Watters, and many others in Wycliffe International; to Harald Gorges, Detlef Krause, and Manuel and Mihamm Rauchholz in the Liebenzell Mission in Germany; to church leaders Nobumasa Mitsuhashi and Akira Izuta of RENGO in Japan; and to Chul Shin Lee, Timothy Kiho Park, and other church and university leaders in Korea. I am especially grateful to my former doctoral students, who have taught me so much from their research and personal ministry experience, including Lorraine Dierck at Biola University and Alan Weaver, Jin Seok Park, Christopher Flanders, and Anita Koeshall at Fuller Theological Seminary. I thank these men and women and my colleagues in ministry—Doug McConnell, Paul Rhoads, Peter Lin, and Gilles Gravelle—who gave significant time to reading this manuscript and helped me correct errors and clarify and sharpen earlier drafts. I am also grateful to Jim Kinney and the very fine editorial staff at Baker Academic for their continuing confidence in and enhancement of these books.
What Is Leading Cross-Culturally?

Church Planting and the Internet Café: A Case Study

Galen and Kate graduated from Midwest Bible Seminary in the United States, where God gave them a vision for multiplication church planting in Eurasia. Henry, a Chinese from Singapore, caught his passion for mission while preparing for ministry in Singapore and married Myra, a Filipina accountant who attended his local church. They joined an international mission where they met Galen and Kate, and together they decided to form a church-planting team to work in Eurasia.

After spending a year in language school together, they moved to a large city in Eurasia where they began their ministry. Henry, gifted in evangelism, had soon gathered together a group of young people who wanted to know more about Jesus. Myra, with her gift of hospitality, and Kate, with her gifts of evangelism and music, made these gatherings great fun and fellowship. Within months Kate had led several young women to pray to receive Christ, and Henry had led three young men. As Henry continued evangelistic outreach, Galen began to teach the men the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith, which he felt essential to their growth and maturity. Kate tried to encourage the women to study Scripture with her, but although...
they promised to come, only two or three did so regularly. Although these young people came from two different ethnic groups, the team used the national language of government and schooling for their ministry.

As the team developed more intimate friendships with these new believers, they discovered that faith in Christ came with significant costs. Several expressed fear about exclusion from their families if they should disclose their new faith. To make matters more tense, the parents of two of the young men banished them from their homes after they learned that they had become followers of Christ. Galen and Kate asked church members in the United States to help provide food and shelter for these young men during their crises. As the team struggled with how to become a positive presence in the local community, Henry proposed that they start a small business, an Internet café, where the two young men could work and make a living. Henry raised money from his home church in Singapore to purchase computers, and Galen challenged his home church to lease a shop in the market area where they could open the café. Within a few months they had an Internet café up and running, and they hired the men and women in their discipleship group to run the business. Myra, with her business background, served as the financial manager and accountant.

The café proved very appealing to urban youth and also solved several ministry problems. The men who needed support now had a regular job and could afford their own food and lodging. Several of the women also worked in the café, where Kate then held regular Bible studies to help them mature in their faith. For the next three years, the café business created many new contacts, and Henry and Kate guided the local believers working there to lead many local youth to make decisions for Christ. The fellowship grew to nearly thirty who attended weekend worship services in Galen’s rented house. The role of the missionaries, however, had become more complex as they now provided access to financial as well as spiritual benefits.

From the time he had gained his vision for church planting in seminary, Galen had as his goal to turn over as quickly as possible the responsibilities of the church plant to local leaders. In the fourth year of this ministry Galen and Henry decided, after a season of prayer and fasting, that the men they had discipled were ready to begin to assume
leadership of this blooming church plant. After assessing the spiritual
gifts of the men and women in the group, they gradually encouraged
individuals with the appropriate gifts to take leadership responsibility.
With the help of Kate and Myra, they encouraged men and women
alike to lead worship and to teach, and they rotated the responsibil-
ity for preaching among the men. While these young people did the
work, Galen observed that men and women alike continued to come
to them for direction. Further, once or twice a month Galen had to
step in at the last minute and preach, when the man assigned for that
week called to say he was sick and could not come. Kate also found
herself helping more than she wanted to in the weekly Bible studies,
as these young women turned to her for guidance and then stepped
back as she responded to questions and issues of discussion.

Over the next two years, Galen and Henry turned the weekly ser-
vices over to three of the young national leaders, all of whom worked
in the Internet café. One had become the supervisor of the café and
was quite effective in business. However, this man was not an effective
preacher, and the people began to complain about him. Some in the
group, seeing the pattern of other church plants in the area, asked
that Galen and Henry appoint just one person to be the preaching
pastor of the church. When Galen took a stand against this, the man
who wanted to be preaching pastor left the group, and fifteen others
from his ethnic group went with him to form their own fellowship.
Three of the women who left still worked in the Internet café, and this
created problems for their supervisor, who was hurt by their rejection
of him as a spiritual leader.

When Galen and Kate departed for their second furlough, they
were deeply discouraged. What had been such a promising church
plant seemed shattered. Their vision had been to equip men and
women to share Christ with others and to become the leaders of a
new church-planting movement. Many young people had responded
to the gospel, and they had seemed ripe for discipleship and leadership
training. Yet, somehow the momentum had been lost. The fellowship
was broken, relationships were shattered over who should preach, and
instead of a movement, these believers wanted a traditional church
structure that focused on Sunday services and preaching rather than
mission. The only thing that seemed to be working was the Internet
café, and in that Myra, as the financial manager and accountant, assured its ongoing success.

Good People, Misguided Leadership

In the example of the Internet café, we can discern a fundamental flaw in this team’s leadership. Although Galen and Henry thought they had done an effective job of church planting, after nearly eight years of work they had become the owners of the business, senior management that propped up all the ministries. Everything that happened originated from their vision and initiative. Although they had carefully nurtured a team of three men, Galen notes that these men turned to them for direction in even minor matters. The church they had planted looked very much like a successful community of believers, but in reality these people had become dependent on the expatriate missionaries.

What went wrong? These missionaries had learned the national language of government and education. They had diligently shared the gospel with people who had not heard, and when many responded, they organized them as a community of believers and faithfully taught them the foundational doctrines and practices of Christian living and witness. With their considerable ministry training and skills, they had organized a form of church that they believed would reproduce and tried diligently to train local people to carry out these ministries. In spite of their best efforts, their leadership training failed to achieve their objectives. At times these new believers deferred to expatriate skill and expertise, and at other times they resorted to familiar local patterns of leadership.

Although Galen and Henry were frustrated with their disciples’ responses, they did not recognize their contribution to the situation. What they had hoped would become a movement of their disciples sharing Christ in their communities and beyond was instead a weak community propped up by the skill and diligent work of these two missionary couples. In spite of their theological and missionary training, in the stress of an emerging church-planting ministry, Galen, Kate, Henry, and Myra had defaulted to habits of leadership and
What Is Leading Cross-Culturally?

church from their home cultures and had failed to understand that their disciples were doing the same.

This book is about very good people who practice misguided leadership, leadership that seems right but jeopardizes and sometimes destroys their vision and ministries. Like Galen, Kate, Henry, and Myra, most of these people feel called by God and sacrifice themselves wholeheartedly to the work of ministry. Many are deeply sensitive to the people they lead to Christ and desire above everything else to see these women and men mature in their relationship with Christ and become part of the work of ministry to reach their communities with the gospel. Yet all Christian leaders, regardless of their cultural background, carry their personal histories and cultural biases with them wherever they serve. And like Galen and Henry, they cannot see how their histories and culture shape their ministries and blind them to the unintended consequences of these practices and values in their discipleship and leadership-training activities. They in fact are locked into “traditional behavior,” derived from their life histories and social context, even though young people such as Galen often adamantly deny having any “traditions” that influence their ministry.

But the fact is that all people engaged in Christian ministry bring to their work a culture and tradition of ministry and leadership. Throughout the history of the church, Christian communities have developed many and diverse understandings of what constitutes leading and leadership. In their recent edited volume, Richard Mouw and Eric Jacobsen (2006) present nine different traditions of leadership in the faith communities of Western culture. Each of them presumes certain characteristics of structure, certain notions about authority, and an understanding of theology and faith that influences and defines what each tradition means by leading and leadership. And each of these cases documents in some way a struggle with the inherent contradictions between social traditions and the teachings of Scripture on faith community and leadership.

The argument presented in the following chapters examines how even the most current traditions of leadership are culturally bound, and when applied in cross-cultural and multicultural contexts, these traditions become obstacles to effective ministry.
What Is Leading?

Robert Banks and Bernice Ledbetter (2004) have done a masterful job of summarizing the vast literature on leadership written in the United States. In the opening chapter of their book, they address the question of the difference between leadership and management. They state very clearly that management is not leadership. “Leadership activity is aligning people” by translating vision and values “into understandable and attainable acts. . . . Managers achieve their goals by organizing and staffing” (2004, 18). Banks and Ledbetter go on to define the characteristics of leadership in terms of vision, setting direction, monitoring trends, and motivating and inspiring people to follow. Their insights are helpful as we seek to answer the question, what is leading? Yet secular and business perspectives on leadership are inadequate for Christian ministry.

For the purpose of this book, I will reference the leadership literature from time to time but give priority and privilege to insights that we gain from the life and teaching of Jesus and from the Scriptures written by those who followed him. This book is about the clash of worldviews inherent in cross-cultural and multicultural relationships and the impact of that clash on the practice of leadership. In my view the gospel is transcultural, and the life and teaching of Jesus gives Christian leaders the spiritual resources essential to meet the challenges of interpersonal conflicts and misunderstandings that arise when teams and followers embrace conflicting worldviews. The Internet café church-planting team thought they were applying these spiritual resources well, but they failed to acknowledge and address the worldview conflicts.

The language and definitions of leading that follow have been stimulated by the leadership literature and study and reflection on the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament. The discussion focuses on issues of relationships and community that are foundational to the life and work of Christian community. I begin by defining several key features of what constitutes leading and then conclude with a statement of what “leading” means as addressed in this book.

The first characteristic of leading is **building trust within a relational community**. Galen and Henry focused on teaching new believers...
What Is Leading Cross-Culturally?

the truths of Scripture and the practice of ministry, but they did not focus on building mutual trust. Likewise, Kate and Myra gave greater priority to evangelism and good business than to building trust relationships essential for leadership in Christian community. In a public, business, or secular context, it is clearly possible to lead without having trust relationships; within Christian community, however, the building of trust is a fundamental characteristic of leadership. In John’s Gospel, Jesus makes it clear that the people who follow him, the “good shepherd,” trust him (John 10:4–5). They know his voice. They will not follow a stranger because they do not recognize the stranger’s voice. From the perspective of the Gospels, building trust is a key feature of leading. Many stories illustrate how Jesus engaged in those trust-building relationships with his disciples. John 1:35–51 describes how Jesus encountered Andrew and a friend and invited them to come and stay with him. They followed him and spent a Sabbath with him. Afterward Andrew invited his brother Simon Peter to come and get acquainted with Jesus. Through these relational engagements, Jesus inspired the confidence and trust of these men.

The second characteristic of leading in the life of Christ is the defining of a compelling vision for life. Andrew reported to his brother Simon, “We have found the Messiah.” Jesus then encountered Peter and Andrew fishing, and he challenged them, “Come, follow me, . . . and I will send you out to catch people.’ At once they left their nets and followed him” (Matt. 4:19–20). Jesus proclaimed a new vision of the kingdom of heaven that redefined the kind of relationships that people have with one another and with God. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . . Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. . . . Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God” (Matt. 5:3–9). To reflect again on the case study, Galen and Kate were driven by a vision for multiplication church planting, but this vision had little if any meaning for their new converts and disciples. Further, none of these new believers understood the wonder of the kingdom of heaven, and none was willing to leave everything and follow (Matt. 19:27).

A third characteristic of leading is stepping out ahead. Again in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “When he has brought out all his own, he
goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:4). Jesus did not ask his disciples to do anything that he had not already done with them. He called them to accompany him as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom, taught the crowds, and healed the sick. After they had seen and heard him many times, he sent them out, two by two, to do the same. Jesus’s example suggests that leading means doing the things that you expect those who follow you to do and showing them by your actions and example that this is the way to walk and to live. Our Eurasian church planters understood this principle and did lead by action and example. But once again they did not grasp the worldview conflicts, and they quickly reverted to the routines of their home culture—singing, preaching, teaching, study, and then the business of the Internet café. These activities, perhaps church work rather than kingdom work, proved to be the undoing of their vision.

The fourth principle that Jesus employed was calling others to follow him. Jesus met Peter, James, and John at their fishing boats, overwhelmed them with a catch that nearly caused their boats to sink, and then called them to leave it all and follow him (Luke 5:1–11). Jesus also encountered Levi, a tax collector, and invited him to follow. The importance of the principle of “calling” is that people often are waiting for such an invitation, and when they receive it, they respond by following. Paul encourages Corinthian believers: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Following Christ must be the first priority of every believer, and that means becoming a follower before one even considers a calling to lead. Galen and Myra were particularly good at inviting others to follow, but they were too good at what they did. Their followers were intimidated, fearing their lack of skill and confidence. Galen’s disciples deferred to his preaching and teaching skill, and Myra’s employees were just that. None of these local people felt secure enough to step up and participate as leaders in this new context.

The fifth and last principle is empowering those who follow you—a leader or leadership team (two or more)—and sending them out to do the same things that you have done. Luke 9:1–6 details how Jesus granted power and authority to the Twelve who had followed him and sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God. From this example,
What Is Leading Cross-Culturally?

we see that leading is much more than having people follow you; it is mentoring them in such a way that you can empower and release them to do the same thing on their own that you have done with them. The men and women in the Eurasia team sought to mentor new believers, but they did this from their own cultural experience and agendas. They failed to learn how mentors lead others in this Eurasian culture and rejected essential social activities and expectations that would have enabled trust and the empowerment of others.

Leading, then, is inspiring people who participate with you in a community of trust to follow you—a leader or a leadership team—and be empowered by you to achieve a compelling vision of faith. Working from this definition, and the example of Jesus from the Gospels, we might ask Galen and his team to reflect on their church plant. How did they end up becoming an “Internet café” that propped up a weak church plant? As we reflect on their story, we see that they clearly had a vision for church planting and training leaders to lead this new church. They excelled in stepping out ahead, showing what must be done, and gaining the trust of their disciples to follow them; in fact, the disciples themselves often limited their behavior to following. But as we look more closely at Galen and Henry’s plan, their priority was “the organization and establishing of a new church.” Galen and his team called the meeting and identified the men and women who should become the core leaders. Galen, Kate, Henry, and Myra set the agenda and the time frame in which all these things should happen. And Galen had as his goal “to turn over as quickly as possible the responsibilities of the church plant to local leaders.” Although Henry’s Chinese background made him less urgent, he too wanted his disciples to take more responsibilities.

Galen and his team failed in the most important priority for leaders: building a community of trust. These believers trusted Galen and the mission team, but they did not trust one another, an obstacle exacerbated by their two different ethnic backgrounds. When Galen suggested that they take responsibility for preaching and other duties, fear of rejection by their peers paralyzed them. These believers accepted the formal organization proposed by the missionaries as long as the missionaries took responsibility. When Galen proposed that they step into these roles, they did not trust one another or the Lord enough to risk failure.
The data in the case also suggest that these believers did not share the vision that motivated the mission team. They did not see themselves as part of a church-planting team. They did not envision the possibility of being like Galen and Henry or Kate and Myra, doing the things that these expatriates did. And although the team tried to push them into these roles, every time one new believer or the other did the work of ministry, they only went as far as they felt comfortable. Galen and Kate often stepped in to assist, and Myra managed the café finances alone. Galen and Kate tried to empower their disciples to lead, but they left for furlough in despair over the fragmentation of this ministry. All four of these missionaries failed to understand the culture and values of these Eurasian people groups, and they did not learn how to engage their disciples in such a way that empowerment would be possible.

What Is Leading Cross-Culturally?

The complexity of leading cross-culturally lies in the challenge of building a community of trust among people who come from two or more cultural traditions that provoke a clash of worldviews. Because people rely on their cultural understandings for meaning, security, and significance, cultural differences have inherent power in human relationships to foster fear and mistrust. Cultural values related to such simple matters as how one deals with time, crises, and achievement can precipitate serious conflicts when people cling to diverging expectations. When people disagree about deeper values, such as those regarding one’s relationship to God, ancestors, or community, or those of satisfying personal and corporate interests, the gulf of mistrust may become so wide that working together becomes impossible.

Also, different cultures inevitably have different structures and processes for organizing community relationships and work. When culturally diverse people try to work together toward mutual goals, their assumptions about structure and working relationships may create serious issues of conflict and disagreement. Unless people resolve these differences, they cannot work together effectively. Further, each cultural community has its socially defined understandings about how issues of resources and power should be managed. Some communities insist on
sharing resources and upholding power as a collective group. Others delegate or allocate the management of resources and power to an individual or an organizational hierarchy within the community. Such differences about how to structure control of resources, power, and authority always create problems in work requiring trust and cooperation.

Finally, every community has its own standards of accountability, and the issues and structures of accountability vary significantly across cultures. Some societies, and particularly Western industrial nations, insist on accountability structures that require extensive documentation and external structures and processes. Others insist on accountability as a product of relationships and emphasize that people are accountable primarily to the groups to which they belong and to the standards the groups hold for their members. As a consequence, building a community of trust is always a major challenge for cross-cultural leadership.

Leading cross-culturally, then, is inspiring people who come from two or more cultural traditions to participate with you (the leader or leadership team) in building a community of trust and then to follow you and be empowered by you to achieve a compelling vision of faith.

Why Is Leading So Difficult?

On July 1, 2007, I began my twentieth year of academic leadership, first as provost and senior vice president at Biola University, then as dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, and now as provost and senior vice president at Fuller. Over these nearly two decades of leadership, I have found that leading is always an incredibly difficult challenge. One might attribute that to my personal limitations and character, but as I examine the tenure record of pastors, academic leaders, and mission leaders, my experience is not unique. The average term of a president of a college or university in the United States is less than seven years. George Barna reports (www.barna.org) that the average pastor in the United States serves only five years. Research on the tenure of senior pastors suggests that senior pastors stay in such positions fewer than eight years. One wonders why leadership is so challenging that people choose not to continue to serve in leadership positions.
I personally have found that it is much more difficult to play the game of leadership than to teach or write about it. I began doing research on leadership as part of my doctoral dissertation work in 1969. Since that time I have done considerable research, writing, and teaching on this topic. I find it relatively easy to develop lectures on leadership out of my research and to give students the principles that I have learned from that research regarding how to practice effective leadership. Writing this book has been much easier than leading in any of the contexts in which I have lived and worked.

Why is leading so difficult? In the summer of 2007, the news media gave considerable attention to the fact that the Philadelphia Phillies had lost more games in their professional history than any other professional sports team. Sports commentators cited the ten thousand losses of the Phillies as a national landmark of team and leadership failure. The challenging fact is that most professional teams lose more games than they win, and most leaders fail to provide effective leadership for their teams and organizations more often than they succeed. The hard facts are that leading is a very difficult thing to do, and the challenges of leadership usually result in something less than the success to which leaders aspire. Perhaps this is a key reason why we see leadership turnover in the church, the university, and government. Leading is simply a very difficult and challenging task.

Facing Weakness and Dependence

In my personal experience as a leader, I have come to understand that my weaknesses significantly affect my leadership. I have observed, however, that my weaknesses are closely correlated with my strengths. When I rely on my talents, I tend to place my trust in myself rather than in God. As a consequence, my strength becomes one of my most serious weaknesses.

I also have areas of blindness and weakness in my working relationships with people. I have learned over the years that if I do not depend on other people in the body of Christ to help me in those areas—if I ignore these weaknesses or try to rely on my strengths—there are critical defects in my leadership. I cannot lead effectively without the diverse gifts
What Is Leading Cross-Culturally?

of others in the body of Christ. My assistants in my work as provost have been some of the most important people in my life. They help me see what other people need when I don’t recognize this. They coax me to do thoughtful things, such as writing birthday cards and sending thank-you notes, when my natural disposition inclines me not to give those things priority. My priorities, felt needs, understanding, and skills—as gifted or as limited as they might be—are inadequate for the challenges that I face in trying to lead a diverse community of people. I am capable of leading at a place like Fuller only when I am surrounded by people with diverse talents and gifts who can complement, correct, and expand the talents and spiritual gifts that God has given me.

In brief, I have come to understand that I am completely dependent on God’s people around me, people who have diverse gifts and are capable of contributing, adding value, critiquing, and expanding the competencies and gifts that the Lord has given to me. Some of my most significant failures as a leader have come when I have ignored my dependence on others and the limitations of the gifts that God has given me.

The temptations that I most often face bubble out of the emotional cauldron of my personal strengths and weaknesses: being impatient with God’s people, oftentimes expecting them to do things my way on a schedule and calendar that fits my expectations, and focusing on results. Although I pray often for the Lord to clothe me with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, I find myself significantly lacking in all those virtues. Instead of showing compassion toward coworkers, I too often judge their motives and respond to their performance with impatience and criticism. Even though I know this is not God’s plan for us, the temptations ferment daily, and I find myself judging, condemning, and being impatient.

One of the most subtle and destructive temptations for leaders is arrogance. Early in my tenure as provost at Biola University, a position of authority in which I was affirmed by many around me for my work, I soon began to think more highly of myself than I should have. Working with a large team of colleagues in a supervisory role, I was routinely called upon to evaluate performance. I found myself judging rather than providing constructive counsel, and, impatient with the performance of some, I yielded to arrogance. Arrogance is a deception about self and others, and the community often does not
help to counter it. For example, people at Biola and at Fuller referred to me as “provost” instead of using my name, and they treated me as if I had elevated importance, which encouraged me to be the arrogant person that I was inclined to become. Yielding to the temptation of arrogance has a devastating impact. As soon as I think I am important, I begin to look down on others who are part of the body, and the inflated sense of self becomes a source of personal and leadership disaster.

A second common temptation is seeking to control and exercise power in order to accomplish one’s will and achieve desired results. Yielding to the temptation to control and forcibly influence outcomes completely undermines and destroys spiritual ministry. We cannot do the work of the kingdom of God by exercising the tools of the devil. When we distort God’s will, when we seek power to achieve the ends that seem right to us, when we refuse to love as Christ commanded us, when we use power to make things happen that we think are essential, we have fallen into the trap that the evil one so cleverly sets for us, and we destroy the work of the kingdom of God.

A third area of temptation lies in what I have come to experience as “the silent God.” Often in my journey I have cried out to the Lord in anguish about some of the circumstances that I have faced in my leadership. More times than not, God was silent. I did not hear a voice or find a particular verse of Scripture that gave me assurance or direction; instead, I experienced God as silent. As I reflect on this, I interpret it not as the absence of God but rather as part of the mystery of God’s relationship with human beings. God’s revelation of self comes first in the Scriptures, and as Jesus recounted in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, God’s voice in the Scriptures is enough. We have the Scriptures to guide us, to provide wise counsel, and to give us direction for leadership. I know these Scriptures, have studied and memorized them, and I come back to them time and again. Perhaps God is silent because God has already spoken through the Scriptures and is waiting for me to respond and to obey what I have heard.

However, in the anxiety that comes with the work of leadership, not knowing where to turn or what to do, seeking guidance and receiving contradictory counsel from different directions, I have doubted God. I have doubted God’s presence and direction, and I have questioned...
why leading should be so painful and people so difficult. At times I have been moved to desperation, wondering if God had heard, or had an interest in responding, and if there would be an end to the pain that I was experiencing. I can now say with assurance that God will often be silent, that I will not receive supernatural direction for every crisis that I face, and that I will be challenged to trust God to the extent that God has chosen to reveal God’s will and purpose in the Scriptures. Sometimes I feel the presence and even the direction of the Holy Spirit, but those are unusual times. Most of the time I must act in each given circumstance based on what I understand to be obedience to the Word of God given to me in the Scriptures.

Marguerite Shuster, in her classic work on our obsession with power in human life, points to the way of weakness, fellowship, and forgiveness (1987, 209–34). Shuster argues that only by following Jesus and understanding that the path of effectiveness is through weakness are we able to achieve the will of the Master. Jesus challenges us to follow him and to understand that we are weak; only as we depend on him within the supportive fellowship of Christian community can we have the power to accomplish his purpose. Jesus also reminds us of the essential importance of fellowship and forgiveness in our relationships with others. We cannot accomplish the work of the kingdom of God unless we are willing to work together in the fellowship of a loving community and forgive as he has forgiven us. Paul reminds us of this in Colossians 3:15, and Jesus emphasizes it repeatedly in the Gospels. In our relationships in covenant community, we are to forgive even as Jesus has forgiven us.

In the pages that follow, we will examine many other case studies and reflect on the question, why is leading so difficult? What are the challenges that keep us from fulfilling our vision and aspirations as God’s servants, to lead cross-cultural or multicultural teams, extending God’s healing reign in our broken world? Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the question of how we inspire people to achieve a compelling vision of faith. How does God call and then motivate people to follow and work as one body for the mission of God? What is kingdom work, what are the essential kingdom values for partnership in kingdom work, and what should we expect as rewards for kingdom work?
Chapters 4 through 7 explore the leadership challenge of building a community of trust when people come from different cultural traditions. Anyone who aspires to lead a multicultural team must invest time and resources to learn who the people on the team are, what expectations they have about teamwork, and how those expectations create the potential for mistrust and conflict. Leaders must understand that individuals in stressful situations, despite their considerable cross-cultural learning and experience, regress to their default culture—habits, values, and patterns of interaction acquired in childhood. When members of a multicultural team are so distressed that they begin to operate in these default modes, the dysfunction and failure of the team is virtually assured. How can leaders help team members break the habits of their default culture? What priority should a leader give to the creation of a covenant community in which team members commit first to one another as people of God and then to working together as one on the mission of God?

Chapters 8 through 11 develop the concept of power-giving leadership and define pathways to empower others to achieve a compelling vision of faith. Beginning with the proposition that all people are inherently “power seekers,” we examine the implication for leaders that team relationships will be fraught with struggles for power and control. What then does Scripture teach about our exercise of will and desire to control others and outcomes? Drawing a contrast between mentoring to manage and mentoring to lead, we ask why leaders should take the risk of releasing control to emerging leaders.

Finally, chapters 12 and 13 reflect upon the challenges of leading cross-culturally by reviewing case studies from earlier chapters in light of the responsibility and challenge every leader faces when exercising power associated with his or her social and spiritual authority. One cannot lead without exercising the power inherent in all social and team relationships. The challenge for a leader is to understand how power is abused in every social environment, and to learn how to use power biblically in different social structures. But most importantly, leaders must learn how to align people with their diverse gifts to achieve the vision that God has given them and then empower them to be about this kingdom work.