

## **Equipping Transformational Leaders Today:**

### **Engaging Critical Global Challenges So There Can be a Tomorrow**

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1. A word about format: I number my thoughts at this point in my life, rather than rely strictly upon paragraph distinctions. It helps keep me rather more clear and intelligible than I might otherwise be. (I became a killer diagrammatician of sentences when in high school; that ability has stayed with me ever since. And my academic tendency to complexify was further augmented by my having learned some other languages—among other things, sometimes people could never tell where my verbs lurked.)
2. I've slightly changed the title of this paper from the time of its original submission. The purpose of that move was to allow me to look at the vital notion of “transformational” leadership. If I engage others well in this dialogue, we all will see a deep and sustained connection between what transformation is all about and responsibility (the cognate of the term that was lost in the title revision).

3. I should acknowledge up front what I'm trying to do in this paper—beyond what was stated in the executive summary previously circulated. I want to get us enmeshed in two fairly big things: first, the nature and purpose of postgraduate theological education in the early years of the twenty-first century (especially, but not exclusively, as practiced in North America). Second, I want to talk a bit by way of case study-like illustration of how the school I currently serve is moving through a re-framing and refocusing in keeping with what I believe to be some deep Wesleyan themes, all for our greater effective service of the worlds we are called to serve.
4. I am convinced that several “threshold” issues face us all within the community of faith more broadly construed and the slightly more focused world of theological education. We will do well to acknowledge them as we try to think about the topic before us here. The first such issue is an uneasiness regarding the relationship between ecclesial bodies and much of higher education, particularly church-related higher education. Years ago, a man who befriended me in his later years invited me to get involved in a modest fashion with a project on which he was laboring: a book dealing with this careful minuet. Published as his last significant writing, Merrimon

Cunningim's Uneasy Partners is a touching testimony to the dynamic uncertainties we all see when church and academy try to fathom one another. The most important take-away learning I got from being in that conversation was this: we each somehow tend to blame the other for our respective weaknesses and (self-)perceived woeful circumstances...and don't seem to notice that we're actually involved in a circular—not a linear, or transactional—pattern of relationship with the other. When I point my accusing finger at you, for instance, I'm at the same time pointing at least three fingers back at myself. Though we don't like to see it this way, we have an opportunity facing us all: to learn a new model of teaching “upstream,” since we both consider the other to be “upstream”—that is, somehow in a more privileged position regarding the connections and power dynamics between us. We can actually reframe how we see one another, thereby finding fresh ways to teach and learn from one another as colleagues, and not as adversaries.

5. Just a few weeks ago, I met with other heads of schools, colleges, and universities connected with the United Methodist part of our global Methodist family. Sequestered in a rather splendid spot on an island in one of our Great Lakes off the shore of Michigan, I was touched to

have been asked to provide a moment of meditation for the gathered presidents. It seems that one of the issues facing this 122-member organization is how to ensure we stay connected with the Methodist family, not to mention the United Methodist Church. I found myself talking with the group about this critical threshold issue by way of focusing on one of the key Wesleyan themes I find essential for us all today—and also for the theme of our gathered group here in Oxford: social holiness, and how that can be a differentiator of significance in the marketplace of higher education, at least in North America.

Comments from a number of the presidents following my meditative reflections confirmed my sense that many of us want, but don't know necessarily how, to overcome this uneasiness we have with the wider community of faith from which we've come and to which we are still accountable. This nuanced and dynamic relationship would be helpful for us to pursue in the successful attainment of the goal we have here—to find clarity on how to do more than simply talk about important issues, and to identify practices that can unite head with heart (another notable Wesleyan theme) and issue forth in effective leaders for the needs of our time.

6. Nearly all of us, whether in higher education or in the church, are basically clueless and skittish about money and its power. For over thirty years, I've been around clergy and faculty in a variety of settings, and have found an unusual preponderance of such folks who think somehow that money is a kind of powerful fetish that we ought to shun...and which, truth be told, we don't really understand. Have you ever noticed how, when we don't grasp something, we somehow find it easy to blame it? We don't, perhaps, see how markets work, how people invest in things that connect with their inner values (even if they are visibly self-serving), and often slide easily to the accusation that people with money are greedy, suspect, corrupt (or soon will be!), and at least teeter on the edge of succumbing to some deep depravity. That is, until we come into an inheritance or actually come to a new discernment about the limits as well as the reach of wealth.
7. On this notion: some years ago, I got involved with a startup organization in Washington, D.C. Called the National Center for Family Philanthropy, I did a little to work with their organizational planning, and then got asked to write a chapter for a monograph they issued on the relationship between faith, wealth, and giving. That piece was sufficiently interesting to families of significant wealth, and

family offices serving wealthy families, that I was asked to write a second essay on the theme. There is a real hunger among people with money to know that they somehow matter, that their wealth is not the fundamental identifier of their lives and their purpose in the world. Really good development officers grasp this, but some of the rest of us need still to learn. Toward that end, I've recently come across an interesting conversation that was recorded between Henri Nouwen and an interlocutor; dealing with the spirituality of fundraising, I commend it to all of us who are anxious on this front. Only when we become more comfortable with seeing money as an opportunity for teaching, learning, and ministry can we actually do more than just talk about matters of empire, power, economics, and a global future—we can indeed help to shape that common future. (As an aside: has anyone here been involved with groups like the Davos Economic Forum, or the Caux Round Table, or similar groups? We have an extraordinary opportunity to help create a future trajectory for how wealth, power, and policy are conceived and implemented by knowing how to engage such people as are in these groups.)

8. Another threshold issue is simply that of the multiple faces of power, and how to engage them well. Moreover, there is the closely related

matter of how to navigate the turbulent waters created by the practices of power in different modes. Take, for example, the issue of power exerted by virtue of office or position, over against the power of natural leadership. Whether one thinks of this latter face of power in terms of Jesus or Wesley, Bonhoeffer or Ken Saro-Wiwa, Martin Luther King or Mohandas Gandhi, most of us know this distinctive role when we see it. In my part of North America, power in different modes is being exercised around several important issues: environmental integrity, political status for non-native citizens of the USA, religious faith and spirituality, for example. One thing I've noticed is that the most effective people usually are not in positions of portfolioed leadership; they are leaders from the sidelines, for the most part. (For those who want a bibliographic reference here, look James McGregor Burns, John Gardner, or Ronald Heifetz on forms of leadership.) The constructive question for us at this point is this: how shall we discern where transformative power lies, and how shall we tap it for its maximal constructive deployment?

9. Another threshold issue is captured in the deep fear many of us have about the likely future of the community of faith as we know it—and various organizations connected with it. What I've noticed is that

when we get scared, we get protective; when change looms ahead, we get defensive and use all our coping skills to deflect it until we feel as if we're once more back in control of our destiny—or simply get pushed over the edge and lose all control whatsoever. Such defensiveness is toxic; and we are involved in multiple death spirals around the planet—especially in developed nations. Communities of faith are dying even as new forms thereof are sprouting up...and thus far there has been precious little connection between them. Ought we not be right at the ramparts, though, helping nudge forward creative emergence in all faith-based enterprises? Why do we allow ourselves to get caught up in inner-family fighting when the wider world increasingly doesn't give a fig for what we're waging war about? In my part of the USA, for example, the real challenge isn't liberal or conservative, Jesus or post-Jesus, but rather the fact that the natural world is extraordinarily splendid in the Rocky Mountains—and people have for a very long time found inner fulfillment by being in that natural setting, encompassed by a loving wholeness that they don't find in churches or colleges or seminaries. And in even the southeastern part of the USA (I'm from the Deep South—the humidity can be lethal, so air conditioning is thought by some to be an

essential component of daily life), the phenomenon known as NASCAR—a network of professional auto racers and their fans—takes a functionally similar role in capturing the hearts of women and men...and children. We must be freed from fear and the sense that change means we lose, or we'll be shuttering nearly all our institutions before 50 years pass. I deeply believe this commitment to reach out, to risk new forms of engagement, is connected with a Wesleyan sense of trust in divine providence and the various faces of grace. And it requires a gentle use of power that invites creative possibility...without feeling a need to define what counts without remainder.

10.Slightly more than forty years ago, two social scientists authored one of the most powerful books I've ever read: The Social Construction of Reality (Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann). Whatever else I learned when I first read it, this lesson remains with me to this day: society, with all its institutions as we know and experience them, is a construction—if we need to speak theologically, we could make a case for it being seen as a human co-creation with God. If it isn't developed further and given dynamic change by each successive generation, it stagnates and dies; indeed, it *must* be reconstructed so

that what any successive generation inherits won't become stale.

Alfred North Whitehead talked about this core thought when he spoke of the purpose of education: its fundamental aim is to make what in the realm of ideas that might otherwise be inert come into active potency. My teacher, Albert Outler, speaking as certain others have others over the modern era, drilled into me the sense that this handed-over part of society—tradition—is living and changing, while traditionalism (grounded in our fears and defensiveness) is dead and brittle. Our social institutions, whether they be ecclesial or educational (or in some cases both!) can be vital and vibrant only insofar as they are dynamic and changing with time. (Doesn't this also help us grasp afresh an implication of the notion of our existence as the "image of [the creative] God"?)

11. Just a few personal background comments should help sufficiently en flesh a few more aspects of what I'm getting at in this paper. My life journey, as perhaps is the case with many others of you, exemplifies wrestling with the threshold issues I've just spoken about. And where have I come out? Based on a calling to ministry that began with ordination in the United Methodist Church in 1972, work in theological education and parish ministry, in university chaplaincy

and higher education administration and leadership, as well as in federal law enforcement and customer service management with a high-end retail organization, I have come just over a year ago to serve as President and faculty in ethics and leadership at one of the thirteen United Methodist-related schools of theology in the United States. What do I see from that vantage point that might be relevant to this working group?

12. I am convinced that if we really care more than just professionally about issues of ethics, economics, and globalization, we won't be satisfied with the strictly intellectual conceptualizing—distancing, actually—that we academics can do so exquisitely well. If, for example, coming to what might possibly be profound understandings by framing matters in nontraditional fashion—finding wisdom from narrative, for example, or from the edges of society where higher education is not a given—and if not being overly troubled that we don't always really have a clue what to do with these generally imprecise insights really hooks us, then we may be at a cusp of recasting how higher education can function to change lives for the better—by being itself an agency of transformation.

13. There are, I think, several marks of such transformative education.

One is the effective cross-pollination of our work so that it crosses disciplinary boundaries. By this I mean not merely boundaries such as between systematic theology and ethics, or biblical scholarship and church history; I mean also the boundary between theology and management study, or law and religion, or educational policy research and spiritual formation, or business strategy and the study of practical ministry. This is not just a matter of pedagogy getting stretched, but is also a deeply spiritual and intellectual challenge to the academy in its various self-identified silos as well as to the wider world—the community of faith being one good aperture to that world. How are we, for example, making our learning and expertise transportable? At Iliff, we now have a continuing project on the vital significance of “traveling knowledge”; and more of our scholarly community is becoming increasingly interested in engaging in what we’re calling public scholarship, and not just academic/peer-reviewed work, however important that still is.

14. I may be in a relatively good position to help nurture this shift. I have spent my academic energy, for the most part, at the intersection of constructive theology and ethics—and then its application. It

didn't hurt that my doctoral work focused on the work of H. Richard Niebuhr. He had a hard time finding a strong boundary between these two disciplines, and I share his sense that we do better if we think in terms of semi-permeable membranes distinguishing them. (I can also blame Robert Greenleaf, now dead for some time, for having helped turn my academic juices from teaching in the classroom to teaching through leading institutions. But that's another story.) That said, though, I do believe that ethics is one of the most promising arenas in which various disciplines can be linked together—and to help connect the academy with the wider world which it exists to serve. And in recent years (the last fifteen or so), I've further become convinced that a sub-category of ethics that needs further development in order to help us grapple effectively with the matters before us in this working group, is that of leadership. For my money, it has both an ethical and a deeply spiritual core in its very articulation.

15. The world of leadership study is a wide one; it comprises some really thoughtful work done by social scientists, business executives, poets, philanthropists, historians, and now (at least in the USA) a handful of us who work in schools of theology. It is a growing discipline that really doesn't need to own its own turf as others have divided it up;

but it does require collaboration from others who've been around before its rather recent birth. It is an unusually promising field in which we can look directly at ways to connect theory with practice, which is a goal that many of us in the community of faith and institutions of higher education see as important (despite the fact that we don't generally do much about it past such giving such a polite nod).

16. Here are some key matters that leadership study can help us tackle head-on: conflict on different scales; global sustainability (whether thinking more comprehensively in terms of global environmental integrity, or less comprehensively in terms of regional or national policy direction); what "social holiness" might look like in a world where fewer and fewer people understand *any* kind of holiness that doesn't reek of self-focus; and the pressing need that we at Iliff have recognized (as have most of you, I'm sure) as a major educational challenge for all of us: to create new learning opportunities and scholarship that help people connect faith and daily life. Those of you who remember the heart of Niebuhr—and Wesley, I suggest—will recognize my emphasis here upon thoughtful, or responsible, agency as lying at the heart of this transformative educational need.

17. I am often asked how we would recognize “transformational”

leadership should we come across it. Most simply put, it is leadership that inspires hope, gives tools for moving from one way of framing the world and the contexts in which we live to others that enhance sustainable community and respect and the evocation of voice from among those who either haven’t had voice hitherto or whose voice was superimposed on them by an expected (some would say “inflicted”) role they were to play. Years ago, I was involved in a big project looking at sustainable development as practiced by the World Bank, one of the largest players on the world scene to address community formation. They were hemmed into a fairly quantitative matrix of criteria of effectiveness for their projects; but when a Jamaican colleague and I got finished with helping nurture a modest process of beginning to shift the criteria of what ought to count as critical success factors, we’d inserted a number of qualitative measures into the mix. Numbers remained important, but significant new attention was given to “human factors” issues such as how to recognize the invigoration of a hitherto emotionally and economically stifled population, and whether and how hope was now resident among them. Adding things like aspiration and yearning—hard-to-

quantify (but you know them if you see them) criteria of measure—made a difference in how to address matters of development and a future that works for people.

18. Years ago, I headed a consortium of postgraduate theological schools.

One of the things I had confirmed for me in that role was that scholars across faith traditions actually do their research quite similarly (with some confessionally-related differences based on church bodies and their respective inquisitorial behaviors—always, I noticed, fear-based—which in my view has no sustainable future in any tradition). We were based in Washington, D.C., and by virtue of that had some “unusual” students—the occasional Member of Congress, judges, military and civilian governmental leaders, as well as a more “usual” motley crew of business executives and NGO leaders. Given the geographic complexity of our organization (we stretched well over a hundred miles from our northernmost to our southernmost school, for example), we only assembled all our combined faculties once a year. On one of those plenary days, I met with all our ethicists—medical, business, social, theological, environmental, and the like—and asked about how they secured the raw data for their research and scholarship. I was rather stunned when some of them acknowledged

that their original work didn't always include speaking with living people who could be extremely important for their findings. For example, we had some folks who worked on just war theory and attendant notions. And we had coming around our schools a man who was a practicing Episcopalian/Anglican who also happened to have as his day job the portfolio for counter-terrorist strategy at the Department of Defense in the Pentagon. But none of my just war folks was especially interested in talking with him about how he wrestled with faith and decision-making, which as I came to know him fairly well over time I realized was a soul-searing experience. That and other surprises about how we in the academy speak about the world we study without necessarily being significantly immersed in it has directed my own journey ever since.

19. So at Iliff, for example, we're working to be clearly publicly accessible in our work. One sign of relative success to this end showed itself in the work of one of my colleagues this year. After hearing me speak several times before our faculty about the importance of recognizing (at least metaphorically) the difference between looking in a mirror (which, I suggest, is one way of talking about higher education's conduct of its scholarship and teaching) and

looking out the window, he simply got active in pursuing some things that were apparently already a-brewing inside him. He invited a sitting United States Senator to speak to a gathering of theological scholars about the connection between faith that's more than rhetorical and major public leadership decision-making, and it was quite an engaging experience. Later this academic year just now passed, the same faculty colleague and another of our Iliff scholars led a conference on re-igniting passion in congregations by connecting the life and work of Friedrich Schleiermacher with the church today. And over 80 people from churches attended the whole 3-day event, and said they loved it! These are just two indicators of what we hope can be transformative. We see it as essential to connect what we do in theological education with the journeys going on among the people of God in the wider world; only in that way can we have a chance of helping to reform the social order in which our economic models and policies, our nationalistic and colonial/imperial tendencies, play out.

20. And for us the linchpin for all of this work is the people we formally educate—whether through degree programs or nondegree study and outreach. We must be mindful of the necessity of helping to connect the symbol systems, the linguistic and conceptual worlds, of the

academy with those used in the worlds we serve—congregations and other forms of faithful community as they exist and emerge in new forms; the academy, for which we also produce future leaders; and the wider civic sphere—where we care very much about public leaders as having their minds and hearts attuned to how “social holiness”—how responsible selfhood in community—can be practiced and not just talked about, where we also care about how those in business exercise genuine corporate social responsibility in the world through their enterprises, and how those in faith-based and still other not-for-profit organizations who have a glimmer of the beloved community to which we’re all called can actually take steps toward that goal. Our role is to be a catalyst of transformation by serving as an equipper of leaders who can be effective in helping to change the world for the better. And I don’t know of a more fitting way to live into a Wesleyan ethos of people and communities in dialogue for nurturing one another towards a more mature embodiment of public holiness.

21. But I can’t end on such a high-sounding note. I have to conclude with a plea for help: after having informally (and therefore not exhaustively) reviewed the stories and trajectories of about half of the accredited schools of theology in North America, I am of the view

that for all the good work many of us are doing in this general arena, none of us has a really outstanding and effective organizational model of excellent theological education—which must include the formation of effective transformational leaders—for the twenty-first century. I ask that those of you who concur can work with me to find (or create) a forum to let those of us who are aware of this situation to become members of a class-meeting-like dialogue to find renewal and fulfillment of the vital calling we've all been given. This forum must somehow be global, and it must be ongoing...and I believe it will call forth from all of us changes of a kind we've not likely even envisioned yet. Perhaps we can begin this by email dialogue after we leave this place. It's for a grand and sometimes overwhelming purpose—working with God to free those in bondage, to give new life and hope, and to find the way home at last.