
PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS, 2018 - THE FORMATION AND TEACHING OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP: A SACRED AND COMPLEX CALLING IN COMPLEX TIMES¹

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The clock on the wall reads 9:15 a.m.; it is time for class to begin. The room is near capacity, and another two dozen students are streaming online. Scanning the room, I see this year's entering class. Some look excited to start seminary; others seem distant. A few are talking with those around them, but most are quiet. Everyone, myself included, is anxious for the beginning of the semester. Before I call the class to order, I wonder what, if any, impact this leadership course will have.

The formation and teaching of religious leadership is a sacred and complex calling. Seminary curriculums attend to this work in implicit and explicit ways, often without a collective understanding or operating framework. Those of us charged with tending these curricular elements understand the multifaceted nature of this work. Mysterious and disciplined, personal and communal, we know that many aspects of leadership are outside our reach. Yet each semester we cultivate spaces, hoping to make a difference in students' lives for the sake of God's church.

Russell West reflects on this calling in this way:

Although it is not always recognizable, educators involved in church leadership formation are caught in a predicament. They have accepted a share in the task of forming church leaders. They do so often in the hallowed halls of theological learning and tradition. However, they do so often with a serious methodological handicap. They

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¹ This address was delivered at the annual meeting of the Academy of Religious Leadership in Minneapolis on April 13, 2018.

perform their work at the distinct disadvantage of working, sometimes cloistering, beyond the walls of the operational context—the local church. Graduate pastors know better than seminarians-in-process of the delayed costs of functioning at this disadvantage. It comes in the forms of questionable confidence, competence, and credibility.²

The complexity of this calling is accentuated by today's disruptive environment. With higher education and the church experiencing disruptions at every level, it appears to be a good time for the Academy of Religious Leadership (ARL) to revisit our call to form and teach religious leaders in light of current realities. This issue is the product of the conversation held at our 2018 annual meeting. Each article addresses a particular aspect of this calling or challenge. Together, these articles offer insight and possibilities for the future. Read them independently or in dialogue with one another. This article, an adaptation of the presidential address, frames the theme from three angles: reviewing ARL's past engagement with this topic; offering an understanding of formation, teaching, and leadership; and questioning the implications of today's current realities.

ARL's Past Engagement

This section scans ARL's past engagement with the formation and teaching of religious leadership from three perspectives: annual meetings, analysis of syllabi, and articles from the *Journal of Religious Leadership* (JRL). This high-level review lifts up lessons from the past and identifies aspects that have changed.

ARL Annual Meetings

In reviewing the past twenty years of annual meetings, the 2012 meeting, centered on *The Teaching of Leadership: Equipping, Training, and Forming*, stands out. Hosted by President Kris

² Russell W. West, "Church-Based Theological Education: When the Seminary Goes Back to Church," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 2(2) (2003): 113.

Stache, the topic was addressed from various angles. Russell West and Robert Martin introduced play as a way of teaching religious leadership.³ Norma Cook Everist pointed out that “*how* we teach teaches as powerfully as *what* we teach.”⁴ Scott Cormode (with others) shared research on how ecosystems nurture the vocation of Christian leadership.⁵ It was a fruitful conversation, highlighting the importance of thoughtful, creative pedagogy and the multifaceted nature of vocation. While no one would argue that these things are still worth our attention, revisiting these articles made it apparent that the context of this work has changed radically. Attending to vocation and pedagogy is not enough. Today classrooms are residential and virtual, candidates come with a wide range of experiences and expertise, adaptive challenges are the norm, and leadership competencies are fluid, interdisciplinary, and contextually based. The calling is the same, but the context is different.

Syllabi

Syllabi, as artifacts of teaching, provide a glimpse into the commitments of our school’s formal curriculum. In 2003 they were used to sketch a picture of the current state of teaching leadership in theological schools in North America. Thirty syllabi from twenty-two theological schools were analyzed by Craig Van Gelder and Lovett Weems, Jr., and this is what they discovered:

- A total of 123 different books were listed. Only seven were required in more than one course and fourteen overlapped with the analysis done in 1998. Based on this finding, they asserted that “no clearly identifiable

³ Russell W. West and Robert Martin, “Insisto Rector: Provocative Play for Serious Leadership Learning,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 11(2) (Fall 2012): 33–63.

⁴ Norma Cook Everist, “The Teaching of Leadership,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 11(2) (Fall 2012): 5–31.

⁵ Emily Click, Scott Cormode, Terri Elton, Theresa Latini, Susan Macos, and Lisa Withrow, “The Ecology of Vocation,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 11(2) (Fall 2012): 81–155.

common canon of resources”⁶ was shared among North American seminaries.

- Seminaries “appear to be wrestling with how to think theoretically and theologically about leadership in relation to their mission and curriculum as a whole”⁷ making it a vibrant time for studying leadership in theological education.
- Working with denominations, in particular their different understandings of the office of pastor, is one of the primary challenges.⁸

Although the 2018 meeting did not include a formal analysis of syllabi, informal conversation affirmed these three findings; resources continue to be diverse, seminaries continue to wrestle with thinking theologically and theoretically about leadership as they discern how to carry out their mission, and working with denominations and their varying understandings of pastoral leadership continues to be a challenge. Attending and stewarding his calling is ongoing and complex.

The Journal of Religious Leadership

ARL’s most robust source regarding the formation and teaching of religious leadership is the journal. The *JRL* addresses theological education from the perspective of the academy and the church, recognizes the multiple dimensions of formation, and provides a field of study for religious leadership. (Below are some of the articles related to this topic. Scan them for a glimpse of the depth and breadth of scholarship.⁹)

⁶ Craig Van Gelder and Lovett H. Weems, Jr., “Addressing the Question of Canon in the Teaching of Religious Leadership,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 4(1, 2) (Spring/Fall 2005): 18.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lisa R. Berlinger, “The Behavioral Competency Approach to Effective Ecclesial Leadership,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 2(2) (Fall 2002); Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, “What Does It Take to Learn Leadership Across Cultural and Religious Boundaries? Perspectives, Observations, and Suggestions from a Cross-Cultural Location,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 10(2) (Fall 2011);

I will pull out two articles. Lisa Withrow, in “Theological Curriculum at Methodist Theological School in Ohio,” describes her school’s leadership curriculum. Explicit about their approach, Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTO) attends to the formation and teaching of religious leadership by cultivating a learning community integrating “life-philosophy, cultural context, and ecclesiology.”¹⁰ As students engage in dialectal thought, they work out their own understanding of leadership amidst paradox and by participating in a learning process where hospitality and process ecclesiology guide

Karen Dalton, “The Center/Margin of Leadership Dance: Integrating Experience in Education and Formation,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 8(2) (Fall 2009); Michael L. Davis, “Spiritual Formation: Retrieving Perichoresis as a Model for Shared Leadership in the Marketplace,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 14(1) (Spring 2015); Thomas Edward Frankl, “Writing Cases in Leadership: An Occasion for Pastoral Reflection,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 2(2) (Fall 2002); David G. Forney, “Getting Our Bearing: A Schema for Three Ways of Knowing,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 3(1, 2) (Spring/Fall 2004); Scott J. Hagley, “Improv in the Streets: Missional Leadership as Public Improvisational Identity Formation,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 7(2) (Fall 2008); Connie Kleingartner, Richard H. Warneck, and Richard N. Stewart, “Ordination Procedures in the Lutheran Church,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 5(1, 2) (Spring/Fall 2006); Robert K. Martin, “Dwelling in the Divine Life: The Transformational Dimension of Leadership and Practical Theology,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 3(1, 2) (Spring/Fall 2004); Kenneth J. McFayden, “Threats to the Formation of Pastoral Leaders in Theological Education: Insights from the Tavistock Model Group Relations,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 7(1) (Spring 2008); Carson E. Reed, “Motive and Movements: Affective Leadership Through the Work of Preaching,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 13(2) (Fall 2014); Kyle J.A. Small, “Successful Leadership in the Early Years of Ministry: Reflections for Leadership Formation in Theological Education,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 10(1) (Spring 2011); Charles E. Stokes and Penny Long Marler, “Congregations as “Multivocal” Mentoring Environments: Comparative Research Among Three Protestant Denominations,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 14(1) (Spring 2015); Shelly Trebesch, “Ecology of the Learning Environment: Creating the Context for Spiritual Formation,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 12(2) (Fall 2013); Thomas Tumblin, “The Trinity Applied: Creating Space for Changed Lives,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 6(2) (Fall 2007).

¹⁰ Lisa Withrow, “Theological Curriculum at Methodist Theological School in Ohio,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 4(1, 2) (2005): 22.

learning.¹¹ More opened than closed, MTSO offers an intentional pathway for tending religious leadership.

Having clarity about process, however, does not mean participants accept or understand its richness. Withrow notes that it is not uncommon for entering students to push back and ask why they have to take leadership courses, especially if they have served as a church leader for years.¹² Recognizing that leadership formation and theological reflection occur in many settings, Withrow believes the seminary setting is unique, saying, “theological education provides an integrated, rigorous ethic of inquiry and a learning community for leadership development like no other place can provide.”¹³ Therefore, MTSO seeks to expand students’ conceptual understanding of leadership, seeing it as a lifelong, multilayered, communal endeavor. Leadership has particular practices (many that are best honed in living communities), but it also includes reflecting on experience, placing experience into conversation with theoretical and theological concepts, and being vulnerable with and among peers. Having a process where students are pushed, supported, accompanied, and coached over time is an important part of this sacred and complex calling.

Seminaries, when they are at their best, aspire to be communities that deliver on these promises. But, especially in the midst of today’s circumstances, are we naive to assume “theological education provides an integrated, rigorous ethic of inquiry and a learning community for leadership development like **no other place can provide** [emphasis mine]”?¹⁴

To MTSO’s credit, this article was written in 2003. Their process for developing leaders might have worked fifteen years ago, but think about all that has changed since 2003.¹⁵ The question now is “What process fits today’s realities and needs?”

¹¹ Ibid., 22–23.

¹² Ibid., 31.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ To refresh your memory, George W. Bush was president, Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected governor of California, the Space Shuttle

Fifteen years ago, Russell West was looking over the horizon and invited those who teach religious leadership to think about innovative approaches to the formation and teaching of religious leadership. Valuing contextualized formation and exploring church-based theological education, he says:

The Biblical Institute for Leadership Development International (BILD) of Ames, Iowa appears to be one organization poised to offer a model of contextual leadership development that should be of interest to religious leadership educators. It should be of interest because that which functions so well with the BILD model, by contrast, represents what seminaries work hard at, but do not always achieve. It should be of interest because emerging church-based formation options may represent market shifts that evidence a preference for low-cost, in-context, just-in-time training over and against expensive, residential or delayed implementation models. Seminaries could fail to understand both of these issues and thereby miss the “disruptive technology” lessons learned by many conventional corporate institutions when they misread or were unwilling to shift focus and method to accommodate the innovation.¹⁶

In 2003, West recognized that low-cost, just-in-time, in-context training was preferred to expensive, delayed implementation models. He named church-based theological education as not only a program, but also a process and paradigm.¹⁷ He warned seminaries that disruptions were on their way, and he invited us to pay attention. How have we done?

Reminding church leaders that formation has taken different forms throughout history, West highlights the dynamic and

Columbia disintegrated upon reentry over Houston, Texas, *Finding Nemo* was a popular film, Apple launched iTunes, and J. K. Rowling released her fifth book in the Harry Potter series.

¹⁶ Russell W. West, “Church-Based Theological Education: When the Seminary Goes Back to Church,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 2(2) (2003): 114.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

responsive dimension of this work. Each era is informed by the current view of religious leaders and the contextual issues of its time. This work must be responsive to contextual dynamics. How are we adapting to current realities?

ARL, as a guild of teachers of religious leadership, represents a particular point in the history of forming religious leaders. In particular, ARL is part of the professionalization of religious leadership, cultivating it as a discipline. Does that reality cloud our ability to see over the horizon? Does our training and current calling (be it in a school or within a denomination) blind us from seeing and addressing the current realities facing God's church?

As the North American culture shifts away from universal standards and moves toward contextualization, questions are changing, authority is shifting, and credentialing is quickly losing its hold as the "gatekeeper." Are we open to new possibilities, or are we part of the problem? West warns "seminaries which are geared to answer the questions of yesterday-year, in the manner of yester-year, will be by-passed for those options which are relational, meaningful, contextual, and nurturing."¹⁸ One result of this shift is "[t]he sociology of the training environment is emerging as a new factor in decision-making about leadership formation."¹⁹ It is not just content, but also the environment that impacts leadership formation. For West, "the life-on-life tutorship, on-the-job training, church-on-mission approach, so evident in the New Testament, is being preferred by some over traditional seminary options."²⁰ For those of us trained and formed in traditional options, it is important to hear that relationships, context, nurturing personhood, and cultivating meaning are becoming significant factors in forming and teaching religious leadership today. Can our current approaches sufficiently attend to these aspects? Can our institutions recalibrate themselves to address the shifts that are taking place?

¹⁸ Ibid., 132.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 133.

These important questions must be addressed as we move forward.

The ecology for teaching and forming religious leaders is changing. Looking over the horizon is critical, as is remembering that this endeavor must adapt to current circumstances, changing realities, and real needs. Revisiting the formation and teaching of religious leadership in 2018 invites us to anticipate the unfolding future with new thinking, discernment, and creativity.

What Does the Formation and Teaching of Religious Leadership Entail?

Having reviewed ARL's past engagement with the formation and teaching of religious leadership, this section frames the topic by unpacking three key words: *formation*, *teaching*, and *leadership*.

Formation

Formation takes place in relationship to God, others, and the world. Formation is never abstract; it is always particular. For example, I grew up in a household with my mom, dad, and three younger brothers. Our family was active in Christian congregations, usually where my dad was serving as pastor. I moved five times before my eighteenth birthday, living in three different states. And I can't remember a time when I wasn't involved in leadership. These realities shape my identity, impact my views of faith and community, and inform my understanding of leadership.

Religious leadership formation works in concert with the beliefs, values, and practices of a particular religion. Therefore, foundational to Christian leadership formation is Christian formation. Formation as a Christian is a lifelong journey of becoming, a journey focused less on our actions and more on God's. It begins as God, the creator of the universe, creates us in God's own image and claims us as children. It continues as God, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, frees us from the bonds of sin and death and invites us to live in the abundance of God's grace. And it matures as we are sent, by the power of the Holy Spirit, into the world to share God's creative

and redemptive love with others. Christian leadership formation is anchored in the transformational power of God's love, which forms our identity and informs our daily living.²¹

Yet God's actions are not the only force that forms us. We are also formed by those around us. In contrast to the individualism stressed in many Western societies, a Christian understanding of personhood is communal, paradoxically separate and connected. Like the three persons of the Trinity, we discover our personhood in relationship with others. In community, we become aware of our gifts and learn what it means to love others. I understand more deeply who and whose I am as I live in relationship with the one who created me and navigate daily life with my spouse. I discover new aspects of love as I drop my daughter off at college. And I awaken to the gut-wrenching reality of forgiveness as I reenter into relationship with one who has wronged me. Tending to relationships and daily life is imperative in formation.

The world, or external environment, also plays a critical role in formation. In implicit and explicit ways, environments create boundaries and opportunities; they broadcast messages and communicate values. Environmental dynamics socialize us into a way of being and understanding. Our initial understanding of leadership, for example, emerges out of our experience within an environment. Just as we are socialized into the beliefs and practices of religious communities, so too are we socialized into particular understandings of leadership. Reflecting on and critically engaging our leadership experiences and paradigm is an

²¹ This is addressed in Scripture in many ways, but here are some key texts: **2 Corinthians 3:17–18**—Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. **Romans 12:2**—Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. **Colossians 3:9–10**—Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. (NRSV)

important element of religious leadership formation. This work includes looking at the greater ecology of our environment.

Our becoming unfolds over a lifetime, making formation ongoing work. Each stage of life, change in community, and environmental shift opens up opportunities for insights and reflection. Even if formation is not the primary focus of a course, tending to identity, relationships, and leadership paradigms is central to our work as teachers of religious leadership. Discerning how to steward the becoming of religious leaders is part of this sacred calling.

Teaching

Teach is a verb, an action that takes place at the intersection of teachers, learners, and content. Like formation, it is a communal endeavor. Teachers, people whose role it is to teach, are formally and informally charged with helping others learn.

Carol Dweck, researcher and teacher in the area of psychology, recognizes how our mindset impacts learning. *Fixed mindsets* understand abilities (capacities to learn or develop skills) as set and rely on validation from external sources. For example, if I am a beginning skater with poor eye-hand coordination and don't make the hockey team, then I conclude I am not fit to be a hockey player. *Growth mindsets*, on the other hand, understand that abilities evolve and see success as a developmental process. Using the same example, my elementary skating ability and poor eye-hand coordination are clues to where I can focus my development *in order to become* a hockey player. From a growth mindset, obstacles are signs, not barriers. The small yet powerful concept of *not yet* highlights the difference between Dweck's understanding of these two mindsets.²² What if our approaches to teaching focused more on cultivating environments that accompany the *not yet*, and less on evaluating individuals in the now?

Parker Palmer invites teachers to embrace this *not yet* mindset. Explaining the complex journey of teaching, he says:

²² For more, see Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, updated ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2016); <https://mindsetonline.com/>.

The tangles of teaching have three important sources.... First, the subjects we teach are as large and complex as life, so our knowledge of them is always flawed and partial. No matter how we devote ourselves to reading and research, teaching requires a command of content that always eludes our grasp. Second, the students we teach are larger than life and even more complex. To see them clearly and see them whole, and respond to them wisely in the moment, requires a fusion of Freud and Solomon that few of us achieve ... But there is another reason for these complexities: we teach who we are. Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together.²³

Teaching is complex, with some elements within our grasp and others beyond. Discerning where to focus and place our best energy is critical for fruitful teaching. Too often getting command of the subject matter receives all of our attention. Teachers clearly need to have a handle on subject matter, but it is important to remember that this is only one part of the ecology of teaching and learning. Many teachers give students and the learning process their primary attention. That too is important, yet how many of us have devoted significant time to understanding ourselves as teachers? For Palmer, this is as critical to the teaching endeavor as mastering content, focusing on students, and learning new pedagogical strategies.

Good teaching, according to Palmer, emerges from the teacher's identity and integrity.²⁴ Being in touch with who we are and how our identity informs our teaching is part of this sacred

²³ Parker J. Palmer, "The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching," published online, accessed at https://biochem.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/labs/attie/publications/Heart_of_a_Teacher.pdf, 1.

²⁴ Parker defines identity as "an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self" and integrity as "whatever wholeness I am able to find within that nexus as its vectors form and re-form the pattern of my life." *Ibid.*, 5.

calling. This means that a teacher must be in touch with his or her journey of formation²⁵ while also creating space for others. Vibrant learning communities live in the paradox of aligning who we are with our subject matter while at the same time creating an environment that is open and hospitable to difference.²⁶ To the complexity of formation, we add the complexity of teaching.

Leadership

While leadership can be understood in hundreds of different ways, Peter Northouse's definition is a good place to begin. He defines leadership as "a process whereby an individual [or group of individuals] influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal."²⁷ This definition has several dimensions. First, leadership has a goal that gives it direction. Leadership, driven by a mission or purpose, moves people toward something that has not yet happened. Oriented toward the future, leadership provides people with a vision of what could be. For example, all Christians are called to love God and their neighbor, but pointing toward a particular understanding of that mission (having no one in our neighborhood go hungry) shapes the goal, defines the work, and gives people a specific future to strive for.

²⁵ Norma Cook Everist invites teachers of religious leadership to ask themselves these questions: "How do you learn? How do you like to learn? How do you teach? How do you like to teach?" "What languages do you speak? By that I mean not Swahili, German, or French, but carpentry or computers, farming or pharmacy? And what dialect of music do you speak? Percussion or vocal?" Why? Because "The ways we learn often determine the ways we teach. We need to listen to and learn from people in their own languages." Norma Cook Everist, "The Teaching of Leadership," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 11(2) (Fall 2012): 6–7.

²⁶ "Whatever teaching methods we use, establishing a safe, healthy, hospitable, trustworthy learning environment is essential. ... The essential task for leaders and teachers of leaders is to set the tone and engage the participants, the community itself, in helping sustain a trustworthy environment to be different together." *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁷ Peter Northouse, *Leadership Theory and Practice*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, Inc, 2013), 5.

Second, leadership is relational. Leadership is as much about what happens “in between” as it is about what is accomplished. For example, leadership happens between leaders and followers, between what was and what will be, and between the truth as we know it today and the truth that it is unfolding. This relational, in-between dimension lifts up the reality that process, not just the outcome, is important.

Third, leadership is collective; it involves more than one person or one person’s actions. Leadership creates momentum toward a new future as people and actions intersect. In this way, leadership multiplies and expands individual acts or ideas into something bigger. The scale of the collective varies, but this dimension of leadership opens up the possibility of leadership taking all kinds of forms in various arenas.

To these three dimensions, two more can be added. Leadership has many expressions. It has formal and informal roles; involves ordinary, everyday behaviors and strategic, culture-changing decisions; and can happen from various locations within an organization, society, or family. Leadership involves capacities and characteristics, but it also is an ethos and is impacted by external circumstances. Defining leadership too narrowly overlaps one dimension and diminishes its complexity.

Finally, religious leadership has a unique dimension—God. Leadership in most organizations is assigned or chosen, but religious leadership is a calling received and discerned. It is formed, informed, and transformed by a force outside ourselves. Christian leadership sets direction, creates momentum, and pulls together collective efforts in a particular way, joining God’s activity in the world. So for this conversation, let me propose that religious leadership is the process by which an individual or a group of individuals *draws others into God’s unfolding mission in the world*. This understanding recognizes our agency while at the same time creating space for God.

Understanding religious leadership in this way weaves together the formation journey with the ecology of learning environments and the unfolding process of leading a community as it joins God’s mission. As part of the process, relationships

are tended, contextual realities are recognized, and God's presence is claimed. Here we see ties to Russell West's relational, meaningful, contextual, and nurturing themes, as well as Lisa Withrow's life-philosophy, cultural context, and ecclesiology approach. Yet, could West or Withrow have imagined the impact today's contextual complexities would have on this work?

Current Realities

Scholars and researchers describe our current circumstances as increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (or VUCA).²⁸ Theories from various fields support these claims, as does my experience. Life patterns are being disrupted, change is taking place at an accelerated pace, and previously held categories no longer adequately describe the world around us. Working harder does not translate into success, and the leadership handbook that many of us were trained (and socialized) into no longer fits our contexts. The rules have changed, and it is time to open ourselves to thinking about leadership differently.

Jennifer Garvey Berger and Keith Johnston remind today's leaders "that leadership requires ways of thinking anew no matter what era you're in."²⁹ This era is one of complexity. We, teachers of religious leadership, have the opportunity to not only teach leadership, but also to bring people into a new future.³⁰

This new complex era "operates from a different set of choices, and because it is more untethered from the constraints of the past, it lives more in the set of options about what is possible rather than the set of options about what is probable."³¹ This is a shift. So "getting our heads around what is possible (because anything could happen) rather than what is probably

²⁸ Jennifer Garvey Berger and Keith Johnston, *Simple Habits in Complex Times: Powerful Practices for Leaders* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Business Press, 2015), 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

going to happen (which is determined from what has happened before)''³² is critical for leadership.

What does this shift look like? Let's deepen our understanding by diving into a basic leadership task—making decisions. David Snowden, using what he named the Cynefin framework, offers a sense-making model for making decisions based on predictability. For Snowden, discerning the circumstances around a decision is necessary in order to know how to best address it. For circumstances that are highly predictable, where there is a high probability of connecting cause and effect, best (or good) practices from the past are a good approach. Here the focus is on implementing the right practices to get the desired outcome. For circumstances with too many unknown variables, making it difficult to connect cause and effect, learning from the present or imagining what's possible is the best approach. Here the focus is on understanding the system and creating the conditions for the desired outcome.³³ (See Diagram 1 for an illustration of Snowden's model.³⁴)

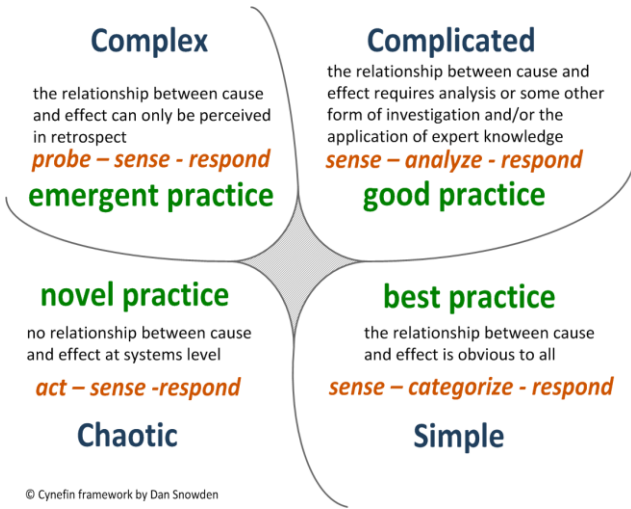
Understanding an environment's predictability helps leaders discern the type of situation they are facing so they can respond appropriately. Knowing the difference between simple/complicated circumstances (probable) and complex/chaotic circumstances (possible) allows leaders to tailor their approach. Fifteen years ago, religious leaders faced primarily simple and complicated situations. Today, more situations are complex, so being able to discern the difference is key.

³² Ibid., 11.

³³ Garvey Berger and Johnston offer a good overview of this process. Ibid., 39–46. Another resource is this introductory video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7oz366X0-8>.

³⁴ <https://recruiterbox.com/blog/cynefin-framework-and-culture-of-feedback>.

Diagram 1: Snowden’s Cynefin Framework



Some years ago, I discovered that the circumstances around me had changed and it was time to revisit my posture of leadership. To be faithful to my calling of preparing religious leaders, I sensed a need to spend less time focusing on what had worked and more energy anticipating and forecasting the unfolding future. This required me to step into new arenas and learn from different sources. It was time to adopt a growth mindset.

Leading with a growth mindset means not being the expert. It requires listening before speaking. It means slowing down and analyzing a situation before acting. It means making mistakes, feeling vulnerable, and “wasting time” finding the way forward through trial and error. Leading with a *not yet* understanding has changed my habits and practices of leadership.

Jennifer Garvey Berger and Keith Johnston share what they have learned about leading in unpredictable circumstances in their book *Simple Habits in Complex Times*. From their experience, they offer leaders habits to ground and guide them in the midst of uncertainty and immense possibility. Since formation, teaching, and leadership are complex endeavors to be tended in

complex times, cultivating new habits that accompany our *not yet* mindset is necessary.

Asking different questions, seeing systems, and taking multiple perspectives are three habits of the mind Garvey Berger and Johnston propose that are simple and transformational.³⁵ First, ask different questions. Questions are powerful for setting the direction of an organization, but questions can also keep our organizations set within old patterns. Being curious and asking questions that probe into new areas is extremely helpful, and necessary, in the midst of complexity. So listen to the questions your organization asks. What do they reveal? What is valued, rewarded, and threatening to the system? Alter the questions and you will reshape the organization.

Second, see the system. Systems have patterns, and these patterns have power. Patterns reveal what a system is inclined to do. Unless interrupted, patterns remain intact. Seeing the inclinations of a system makes invisible forces visible, offering clues on how to change the system to create the conditions for a different, desired future. Look for and reflect on patterns. What do they reveal about the system? What is the system inclined to do? How are the patterns reinforced? How do they contribute to or distract from the desired outcome? It is important to note that in a world of possibilities, discovering what conditions favor the desired outcome is messy. It is not linear and will require experimenting. Letting go of efficiency and embracing curiosity, creativity, and divergent thinking accelerates the process.

Third, in order to see possibilities, not just probability, different perspectives are needed. In the midst of uncertainty, seeking input from outliers is not a threat, but an asset. Invite people outside the “normal” circles to share their insights. Create spaces where different opinions and viewpoints are respected and valued. Learn to listen in a nonanxious way. Embrace ideas that challenge the status quo and push teams to lean into a new way of being. This approach will require sharing power, living with dissonance, and being willing to speak the

³⁵ Jennifer Garvey Berger and Keith Johnston, *Simple Habits in Complex Times*, 13.

truth in love. You will be challenged to adopt new behaviors and make mistakes. Pay attention to your feelings, not just the facts, and the process will be more meaningful and authentic.

In addition to these three habits, the importance of vision cannot be overlooked. Having a picture of the *not yet* is as important as it always has been; the difference is how much or how little can be articulated about the future. Garvey Berger and Johnston note that an organization “needs a vision that is directional without imposing too much (or too little) constraint on people. And leaders need a strategy that is clear enough for new actions but open enough to allow the unexpected to emerge.”³⁶ This is an evolutionary process. The vision sets the direction, but it does not determine the destination.

We who form and teach religious leadership have to be in tune with the shifts that are taking place today. We are in a great position to offer the church a way forward as it strives to participate in God’s unfolding mission in the world. Many of us have one foot in the local church and another in the academy. So in addition to forming and teaching religious leadership, let’s also lead the church into the future. Let’s ask different questions and alter the conversation, keep our eyes open for patterns and inclinations, and create the conditions that move people toward God’s unfolding mission.

We cannot do this alone. In fact, we need the collective wisdom of everyone in the Academy of Religious Leadership and within our expanding networks. This conversation can help all of us gain a deeper perspective of the calling to form and teach religious leadership in the midst of twenty-first century realities, so we all can discern where to invest our energy and resources moving forward. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, may we embrace this sacred and complex calling, as we open ourselves to possibilities not yet imagined, learn from strangers and friends, and lean into leading in unpredictable times.

³⁶ Ibid., 87.