

Forming Leaders to Flourish in Crises

David Emmanuel Goatley

INTRODUCTION

One might characterize the year 2020 as one of crises. Some 7.4 million illnesses and nearly 210,000 deaths were attributed to COVID-19 in the United States as of early in the fourth quarter of the year.¹ More than thirty-five million confirmed cases of COVID-19, including over one million deaths, had been reported to the World Health Organization by the first week of October.² These numbers continue an upward trend.

The World Bank forecasts that the 2020 economic impact from the coronavirus pandemic will result in the largest contraction since 1870. They project potentially long-term damage to developing and emerging economies.³

Anxiety and depression are rising while mental health services are being interrupted globally. This underscores the need “to urgently increase investment in services for mental health or risk a massive increase in mental health conditions in the coming months,” according to the United Nations.⁴

Racial disparities were present in the United States prior to the coronavirus-caused catastrophes. They are increasing as the pandemic continues. The trajectory indicates expansion subsequent to the pandemic. This

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affects Black and Brown people existentially and seems to be stirring greater awareness and stimulating alliances across various demographics. Older Americans have experienced high degrees of vulnerability and fatalities. Globally, the pandemic has highlighted existing fragility and created new fractures in places where people suffer because of ethnicity, gender, statelessness, landlessness, and various kinds of trauma.

Police killed 897 people in the United States between January 1 and October 28, 2020. Twenty-eight percent of those were Black people despite their being only 13 percent of the population.⁵ Individual people and those who loved them are behind these tragic numbers. Breonna Taylor was slain in her Louisville, Kentucky, apartment by police executing a no-knock warrant. An officer murdered George Floyd by asphyxiation in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The dreadful deaths and persisting damage continue. The murder of Black people by police with impunity has become more noticed by a wider audience nationally and globally due largely to social media capabilities that capture horrific images and communicate them in real time and repeatedly.

Police murders of Black people disproportionately and with impunity are deeply wounding and substantially embedded in the U.S. experience. A June 2020 *Fortune Magazine* article titled “Why Police Violence against Black People Persists—And What Can Be Done about It” states:

It’s now been documented that when people see Black faces, their visual systems process things differently. They become quicker to see (or think they see) weapons, and become more likely to think about crime. Similarly, when scientists prime experimental subjects with suggestions of crime and violence and then show them pictures of groups of people, the subjects’ eyes move automatically to the Black faces. Blackness, the researchers said, operates as a ‘visual tuning device.’⁶

The training of police includes excessive examples of assault on officers. It cultivates a warrior mentality. It further advances the idea of living and working under constant threat. Training officers in contexts of fear, combat, and racism yield racially disparate fatal outcomes.

Widespread physical illness and death, growing mental anguish and distress, deepening economic contraction and collapse, continuing and escalating racialized police aggression, and a polarized U.S. national election have created significant volatility at the conclusion of 2020 and commencement of 2021. The on-ramp that brought us to this dangerous highway was

long. The experiences and impacts of these formidable challenges will linger for years. Many individuals, congregations, institutions, communities, and societies will bear lasting injuries and permanent scars as we emerge from these calamities and/or enter new ones.

Some think of crises as turning points. Others conceive of them as troublesome periods. Regardless, people locally, nationally, and globally are having their share of crises—and some to spare!

AN INVITATION TO RESPONSIBLE FORMATION

Institutions of higher theological education are often accused of functioning without relevance or responsiveness to pressing demands of the church and the world. One can hear complaints around the world that newly trained ministers are insufficiently equipped to lead, while recently graduated ministers assert that they were not adequately prepared for the challenges and problems they face. Some faculty and administrators are accused of preparing leaders for an era of ministry that has long passed, pursuing teaching and research projects that satisfy their interests but seem not to connect to the witness of the church or squandering time with irrelevant squabbles.

Those entrusted with the vocational formation of ministry leaders are called to help students cultivate the *skills* needed to lead and serve as well as nurture the *selves* needed for leading and serving faithfully, particularly in unpredictable and precarious times. This season of crises is not likely to be a storm that will blow over quickly. We may be facing paradigmatic shifts that people around the world will be forced to negotiate for the foreseeable future. Failure to form ministry leaders with attention to present volatilities and swiftly evolving realities is irresponsible. Forming leaders equipped to serve amid both calmness and crises is good stewardship. Current and up-and-coming leaders need to be formed with attention to adaptability, humility, spirituality, and sustainability.

ADAPTABILITY

Leaders need formation that helps them develop adaptive capacities for serving because their contexts often are dramatically different from those for which they planned. Tod Bolsinger makes the case for adaptive leadership by referring to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who led the Corps of Discovery at the beginning of the nineteenth century on a westward expedition across the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase to discover a waterway to the Pacific Ocean.⁷ The two led a team to find a water route to the West Coast to facilitate more efficient trade with the Far East. They discovered that there was no direct passageway when they reached the Rocky Mountains. Consequently, they had to adapt to traversing mountains rather than sailing rivers. The canoes that brought them *to* the mountains could not carry them *through* the mountains. In the words of some wise bards, “What got us here will not take us there.” They needed different tools, technologies, and tactics. This serves as a metaphor for ministry in the twenty-first century.

The strategies leaders have deployed to this point are insufficient to take them on the future journey. One cannot canoe through mountains. Forming ministers who are able to adapt for good and faithful ministry is the work to which we are called. Those who lead clinical pastoral and theological field education and those who equip pastoral theologians and spiritual directors must adjust their substances and strategies to nurture ministers “to serve the present age.”

What changes must be engaged? It is impossible to itemize everything that continues to evolve in the contexts in which our students serve. A few examples, however, should suffice. Among the fast-evolving trends our students must negotiate are the following:

1. Technology continues to change the way we work, communicate, and define community.
2. Globalization connects people around the world in more and more ways—information, economics, business, education, etc.
3. Ecological degradation increases more dramatically and erratically with intensifying climate change.
4. The economic gap between rich and poor globally continues to broaden and thrust more people into poverty.

5. The global population will grow from seven billion to nine billion by 2050, with the largest growth in the countries with the least resources and capacity to absorb their increasing populations.
6. The rate of upward socioeconomic mobility has stagnated in the United States, and it shows no signs of improvement.
7. The U.S. population will grow from three hundred million to four hundred million between 2005 and 2050 and will become more ethnically diverse.

Forming people for ministry in ways that would have been effective in 1980, 2000, or 2019 is irresponsible. It may be a dereliction of duty. Assumptions that shaped ideas and approaches for serving and leading during the perceived or assumed relative stability that some enjoyed during the last few decades no longer hold in these critical times. One should also note that the relative stability and security enjoyed by some in earlier decades is the testimony of those who live with unearned comparative privilege. This has not been the case for most.

Susan Beaumont articulates helpfully the ministry of leading during liminality. The ethnographer Arnold van Gennep introduced the concept in the early twentieth century. The anthropologist Victor Turner expanded on the idea half a century later.⁸ Liminal seasons are in-between times. They are the periods of being on thresholds where one is not outside or inside. Beaumont asserts, “Leading in a liminal season requires helping people manage their anxiety, embrace the freedom of unknowing, explore new possible identities and pathways, and resist the temptation to reorient people before they are ready.”⁹ She further holds:

A liminal season is different from other seasons of change, because the level of disruption is so profound. In a liminal season we don’t have a clear picture of where we are, nor do we have clarity about where we are going. We only know that a step in some direction is required to keep on learning.¹⁰

HUMILITY

Forming people to lead in liminal seasons—in this season—is difficult because of the reluctance of so many to live with ambiguity. People in the United States seem to prefer and even be enthusiastic about decisive leaders—even when they are decisively wrong. Apparently, significant numbers of people can be convinced to believe a leader (or an aspiring leader) who

speaks loudly, confidently, and repeatedly. Logic and coherence are not always essential. Casting a vision, speaking authoritatively, taking charge, and the like are often marketed as desirable attributes. Some ministry leaders succumb to this model of leadership to satisfy self-centered ambition while others do so in their pursuit of perfectionism.

While addressing the cultural pressures of perfectionism in Japanese culture that impact women in particular, Nikki A. Toyama notes that this tendency is present in many cultures and is problematic for Christians and Christian leaders. She writes, “With my strong performance mentality, I came to assume that I could earn God’s favor and blessings.” She goes on to note that “I thought that I had the ability to do things perfectly and that God would reward me with a good life if I did what I was supposed to do. Perfectionism drove me deep into myself and away from God.”¹¹

Tragically, reflective and inclusive leaders are sometimes thought to be weak and incompetent. Negative self-talk as well as implicit and explicit messages from the communities that ministers serve complicate appropriate serving and leading in liminal seasons. Some leaders and the people they lead often appear to prefer resorting to models developed in more stable times when aggressive leadership models were more accepted—or tolerated.

Unilateral, hierarchical, and charismatic leadership belong to the past, if anywhere. This style is embraced by those seeking to lead followers. A different modality is needed for leaders who can lead leaders. This different approach is helpful for leaders who seek to empower people to exercise agency that amplifies the impact, sustainability, and resiliency of communities. We need to form ministers for this work in the twenty-first century. There is precedent for this kind of leadership formation drawn from twentieth-century womanist leadership consciousness.

Debora Jackson offers a compelling case study of the legendary civil rights leader Ella Baker who, despite the “great man” leadership preference of the organization and era, became the *de facto* executive leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which she helped to form in 1957.¹² Despite her strategic and operational acumen that helped propel the organization forward, she was never fully appreciated for her leadership capacities or deliverables.

Among her lasting impacts was her role in shaping the guiding principles of what became the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The

organization was formed out of her convening a youth leadership meeting in during Easter weekend of April 1960 at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Effective lunch counter sit-ins and nonviolent demonstrations by college students led to an awareness of the opportunity to “chart new goals and achieve a more unified sense of direction for training and action in Nonviolent Resistance.”¹³ This would enable Black college students to exercise greater influence and leadership in the Civil Rights Movement. Baker’s principles for grassroots leadership and social change were as follows:

1. Prioritize people’s needs.
2. Value a variety of viewpoints.
3. Regard small groups.
4. Build relationships across boundaries.
5. Develop local leadership.
6. Resist authoritarian, charismatic, competitive, and hierarchical leadership.
7. Understand the methodical, detailed, and slow pace of organizing.
8. Value the narrative strength of Southern folk culture.

Baker’s principles for grassroots leadership and social change stand in stark contrast to the “great man” model that characterized leadership approaches in another era. Her principles were shaped out of Black women’s leadership experiences at the precarious intersection of racism, classism, and sexism. There were no mapped routes for this journey. The principles, however, enabled people to progress and leaders to mature amid the crises of legal, historical, and cultural opposition. This approach empowered adaptability among leaders and the people they served.

SPIRITUALITY

Congregations, communities, organizations, and societies need leaders formed for spirituality. Spirituality, for our purposes, means awareness of God’s presence in the world and conformity to the Spirit’s guidance in one’s life. This way of being and living for Christians can benefit from insights akin to that of Howard Thurman.¹⁴ His approach emerges from discipleship inspired by the perspective of the dispossessed. It is radically different from understandings shaped by power and privilege. As more people in this era of crises seem to be awakening to the vulnerability of people caused

by racism, it may be wise for those engaged in critical reflection on formation and supervision of ministry to attend more intentionally to the wisdom born from reflection on the “religion of Jesus” for those who live with “their backs against the wall.”

Thurman noted in his 1940s publication of *Jesus and the Disinherited* that, among the various perspectives concerning the life and lessons of Jesus, “Few of these interpretations deal with what the teachings of the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall.”¹⁵ There has been increasing attention since the 1960s to the conviction that God has a preferential option for the poor. However, the weight of scholarly guilds, academic institutions, trade publications, denominational productions, and congregational preaching and teaching does not embrace the preferential option for the poor or the insights of Thurman’s approach.

Thurman asserted that Jesus was (1) religiously a Jew, (2) socioeconomically a poor Jew, and (3) culturally part of a minority group that was subject to the domination of a larger and more powerful group—Roman imperialists. Jesus was one among the dispossessed. This particularity has much to teach universally. How to relate to an oppressive and controlling power is the question of all people who are disinherited in every era. As Thurman asked, “What must be the attitude toward the rulers, the controllers of political, social, and economic life? This is the question of the Negro in American life.”¹⁶ Will one assimilate? Will one resist? In what ways will one do either? Whether to conform to the political, cultural, and financial patterns and structures of the world or to resist through renewing the mind by the ways and will of God (Romans 12:2) was and is the operative question for Blacks in America particularly and for Christians generally.

People can follow the path of fear, deception, hate, or love. Thurman wrote,

What then, is the word of the religion of Jesus to those who stand with their backs against the wall? There must be the clearest possible understanding of the anatomy of the issues facing them. They must recognize fear, deception, hatred, each for what it is. Once having done this, they must learn how to destroy these or to render themselves immune to their domination. In so great an undertaking it will become increasingly clear that the contradictions of life are not ultimate. The disinherited will know for themselves that there is a Spirit at work in life and in the hearts of men which is committed to overcoming the world. It is universal, knowing no

age, no race, no culture, and no condition of men. For the privileged and underprivileged alike, if the individual puts at the disposal of the Spirit the needful dedication and discipline, he can live effectively in the chaos of the present the high destiny of a son of God.¹⁷

Leaders who bear good and faithful witness to Jesus in the world cannot embrace practices and patterns of societies that extract resources from vulnerable people, impose their will upon them through violence, and redistribute resources to the wealthiest in society and the world. Those who help to form vocational ministers can learn important lessons from the perspective of Thurman. The ways of Jesus and the disinherited can effectively shape the spirituality of those in ministry formation and clinical pastoral education.

SUSTAINABILITY

Many leaders seem to believe that their flourishing in ministry is primarily evidenced by returns on their investments during their tenures of service or within their lifetimes. We need to form leaders who do not evaluate their thriving primarily by quantifiable evaluations during their tenure of service or time in vocation. Forming people to value and prioritize planting and watering that to which God can give increase enables them to live and lead with the joyful anticipation that God will ultimately complete what God began. This attention to sustainability is not limited to periodic resource development efforts that set and meet goals.

Cora Pair Thomas and her husband, William, are examples of leaders formed to engage in sustainability beyond their tenure in office or time on earth. They served in Liberia through the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Society¹⁸ during the first half of the twentieth century. The Lott Carey Mission School they founded remains a leading educational institution that provides quality education in a safe and nurturing Christian environment for children pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade more than a century after its establishment.

Rev. William H. and Mrs. Cora Pair Thomas were the most influential Lott Carey leaders in Liberia in its formative years. These two graduates of Shaw University, the second historically Black college or university founded in a southern state (established 1865), were deployed to lead the work in Liberia shortly after their marriage in 1908. Cora had also pursued additional

missionary training at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. The Thomases framed the early impact of the Lott Carey Missionary Society impact in Liberia. William was primarily a preacher and administrator. Cora was primarily a teacher and shared administrative responsibilities.

Evangelism was essential to their Christian witness. Education, however, became the primary aspect of their missional efforts and survived more substantially over the long term. Arriving just six decades after Liberia's independence, Cora and William recognized the country's prospects of a good future would require the emerging generations of young people to have character formation, industrial proficiencies, and intellectual capacities. The motto for the Lott Carey Baptist Mission School became "Character, Industry, Scholarship."

The great demands and limited resources produced constant pressure on the husband-and-wife team throughout their tenure. They could have expected economic challenges since their financial resources came from their African American Baptist funding community in the early twentieth century. The ongoing economic disparities due to racial prejudice and legal discriminatory practices in the United States would consistently work against African American economic viability. Predictable financial difficulties were exacerbated by global upheavals.

World War I (1914–1918) began in Europe and came to embroil all of the major economic powers of that time. This led to national debt, impacted agriculture and industry, and required financial reparations in its aftermath. Political and economic difficulties of African Americans who lived under Jim Crow laws, which legalized discriminatory practices, complicated financial support for the Liberian work. The U.S. Lott Carey office could not even communicate with the Thomases or transfer financial support for nearly a year during the war.

The Great Depression (1929–1933) was the most devastating economic decline in the Western world. Markets crashed, financial institutions fell, industry collapsed, and people and organizations with mortgages lost properties. As destructive as this period was for White Americans, it was more catastrophic for Black Americans, who lived without the protections that were insufficient to defend even many in the White privileged class from financial ruin.

World War II (1939–1945) was the deadliest war in Western history. More than thirty countries were involved, with deaths exceeding seventy

million people. The U.S. involvement in the war included a significant number of African Americans, and the U.S. attention to the war challenged successful promotion of missions in Africa.

The Thomases led the Lott Carey work for almost four decades in Liberia, beginning in 1908. William died in 1942. Cora succeeded William as superintendent with the assistance of their son, David, as principal of the school.¹⁹ The leadership of the Thomases concluded in 1946 after thirty-eight years of pioneering service when Cora retired because of ill health. Their faithful service and guidance in leading the organization for nearly forty years was not overlooked in the country. A demonstration of the value of Lott Carey's missionary work during the first half of the twentieth century was the government's grant of 1,500 acres of land to expand missionary, educational, and industrial purposes.²⁰

Cora and William Thomas demonstrate ministry leadership by Christian ministers who were formed to understand that sustainability is not limited to a particular leader's tenure or time of life. Their commitment to nation-building led them to prioritize evangelism and education, both of which are focused on thriving across time for people who will outlast and outlive those who evangelize and educate. While evangelism is woven throughout the character of the school, education remains the primary focus because stability and security are impossible without generations of children with quality education and character formation. Leading with this kind of formation is essential for those preparing emerging leaders for the church and the world.

CONCLUSION

People are always living in crisis. Many of us in higher education, however, live with certain buffers that prevent us from feeling the impacts that injure masses of people. Individuals, families, and communities locally and globally live amid poverty and persecution, homelessness and ill health, human trafficking and forced commercial sex work, substance abuse and addiction, and more. Fear and fragility are real and widespread.

Relative privilege often distorts perception. We must remove the false vision that perverts the wise discernment that enables leaders to engage in good and faithful service. The present crises related to the pandemic, policing, and politics seems to be clearing a bit of the fog for more people. How

might our developing a bit clearer vision in these crises help us to form better leaders?

Some of the key characteristics that people responsible for those who lead clinical pastoral and field education and those who equip pastoral theologians and spiritual directors should seek to form are adaptability, humility, spirituality, and sustainability. We need current and forthcoming leaders who can adjust to ever-emerging challenges and opportunities in ways that empower leaders to exercise agency for sustainability and liberation wherever they find themselves in institutions or societies. These leaders need the continuing awareness of God's presence in the world and the Spirit's power in their lives that equips them to resist structures and systems that oppress, and they need to embrace the liberating love of Jesus who is for and with people whose backs are against the wall. These characteristics will enable people to serve in ways that develop ministries sufficient to surpass our leadership and lives. This approach to formation will enable good and faithful ministry in the present time of crises and in preparation for the crises to come.

NOTES

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- 7 Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).
- 8 See Bjørn Thomassen, "The Uses and Meaning of Liminality," *International Political Anthropology* 2, no: 1 (2009): 5–28.
- 9 Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 20.
- 10 Beaumont, *How to Lead*, 41.
- 11 Nikki A. Toyama, "Perfectionistic Tendencies," in *More Than Serving Tea: Asian American Women on Expectations, Relationships, Leadership and Faith*, ed. Nikki A. Toyama and Tracey Gee (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 60.
- 12 Debora Jackson, *Meant for Good: Fundamentals of Womanist Leadership* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2019), 110–19.
- 13 "Call for Youth Leadership Meeting, Shaw University, Raleigh, NC, April 15–17, 1960," SNCC Digital Gateway, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6004_sncc_call.pdf.
- 14 See Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1949; Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1981). Citations refer to the Friends United Press edition.
- 15 Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 11.
- 16 Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 23.
- 17 Thurman, 108–9.

- 18 The Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Society was organized in 1897 by African American Baptists who were committed to conducting missions in Africa with intentionality and integrity. The name honors the life and legacy of the first Baptist missionary to go to Africa from North America. He was born enslaved in 1780, became Christian in 1807, purchased his and his family's freedom in 1813, and led the first Baptist missionaries to Africa from the Americas in 1821. See "History," Lott Carey, accessed 25 October 2020, <http://lottcarey.org/about-us/history>.
- 19 *Lott Carey Annual Report, 1942–1943*, 11–12.
- 20 *Lott Carey Annual Report, 1944–1945*, 17–18.