

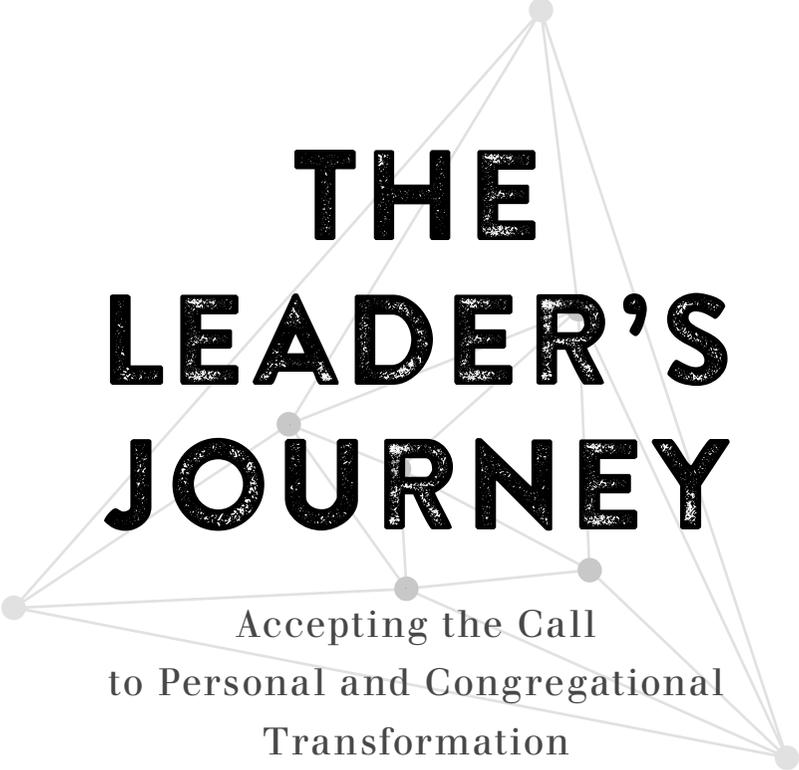
SECOND EDITION

# THE LEADER'S JOURNEY

Accepting the Call  
to Personal and Congregational  
Transformation

JIM HERRINGTON,  
TRISHA TAYLOR,  
*and* R. ROBERT CREECH

SECOND EDITION



# THE LEADER'S JOURNEY

Accepting the Call  
to Personal and Congregational  
Transformation

JIM HERRINGTON,  
TRISHA TAYLOR,  
*and* R. ROBERT CREECH

  
**Baker Academic**

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

# Contents

Preface ix  
Acknowledgments xi

Introduction 1

## **Part One The Call to Personal Transformation**

1. The Need for Personal Transformation 9
2. Following Jesus on the Leadership Journey 25

## **Part Two Leading Living Systems**

3. Understanding the System 39
4. Thinking Systems, Watching Process 57
5. Becoming a Calm Leader 75
6. Leading in Uncertain Times 91

## **Part Three Family Patterns**

7. Going Home Again 111
8. The Nuclear Family 127

## **Part Four The Spirit and the Journey**

9. The Spiritual Life and the Path to Transformation 149
  10. Learning to Learn Again 163
  11. Thinking Systems as a Christian 177
- Epilogue 189

Appendix A: Constructing a Family Diagram	191
Appendix B: Developing a Rhythm of Spiritual Practices	199
Appendix C: Bowen-Based Training Programs	205
Recommended Reading	211
Glossary	217
Notes	221
Index	229

# Preface

When the first edition of *The Leader's Journey* appeared, none of us imagined how well readers would receive the book or the impact it would have on our personal lives. Back then Robert was the pastor of a large church in the Houston area, Trisha was a pastoral counselor in private practice in Houston, and Jim was serving as an executive for a Houston-area denominationally based group of churches.

Today Robert teaches pastoral leadership at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas. Each semester he trains seminary students in the principles of living systems. Additionally, he speaks at national conferences on family systems, leadership, and pastoral ministry. He has authored *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry* and coauthored, along with Joe E. Trull, *Ethics for Christian Ministry: Moral Formation for Twenty-First Century Leaders*.

Trisha and Jim have worked together on multiple pilot projects across the country, teaching the principles of living systems to hundreds of pastors and congregational leaders. They have focused on integrating the principles of living systems into a Christian understanding of spiritual formation. Working with many congregations over a multiyear period, they have seen firsthand the impact of practicing living-systems principles. They have shared much of their learning in their 2017 publication, *Learning Change: Congregational Transformation Fueled by Personal Renewal*. Today they offer leadership-development coaching based in living-systems principles to leaders across the country through their business initiative, *The Leader's Journey: Coaching for Wholehearted Leadership* (<http://theleadersjourney.us/>).

The need has never been greater for leaders who understand living systems and the power of calm leadership in the face of anxiety and enormous, on-going change. We hoped the first edition of *The Leader's Journey* would help our pastoral colleagues. We offer this second edition with a conviction that work of this kind is essential to the core curriculum of any leader who hopes to thrive in today's context.

# Introduction

An effective leader—one who can galvanize individuals and groups, and who has the potential to help transform society—is a person who has *the capacity to know and do the right things*. As it turns out, *knowing* the right thing is often much easier than *doing* the right thing. The pressure to compromise sometimes feels like a dozen atmospheres pushing on us. For most of us, this kind of leadership is something we learn, not something we brought with us into the world.

We have all seen leaders who are at best inept and at worst self-serving. Inept leaders are hard-pressed to help us find the direction we are looking for, because they can't find it themselves. Self-serving leaders use the trust and authority that accrue to them to help themselves rather than to help find solutions to our challenges. Sadly, this situation is as true for pastoral leaders as it is for political leaders.

People once naturally looked to the pastoral community for leadership. But in the face of today's social and economic challenges, the pastoral community itself is in serious trouble. Just like congregants, pastoral leaders face addiction, stress, and temptation. Despite expectation that it would be otherwise, we are no different from those we serve.

Most efforts to address the crises faced by the pastoral community rely on the assumption that information alone produces solutions to these challenges. Consequently, a pastor may go to conference after conference, filling notebooks with the latest information from the most recent highly successful leader. But without a clear perspective on the nature of the system they are a part of, pastors return home to the demands of life and ministry unchanged. We talk with many pastors and congregational leaders who have become

discouraged and cynical. Although they frequently know the right things to do, they lack the capacity to do them when pressured to compromise.

We wrote this book to offer a practical pathway to transforming the lives of pastors and congregational leaders. As friends and fellow travelers on the journey of discipleship, we write with a conviction that if we are to lead congregations to change, then profound change must occur in the self-understanding of pastors and congregational leaders, in how we understand our role in the groups we lead, and in the level and quality of discipleship we experience and express every day. We cannot lead others in transformation unless we are experiencing it ourselves.

When we wrote the first edition of this book, our convictions grew out of a journey, taken individually and collectively, in the pastoral community of Houston. These convictions have been shared and tested in a variety of settings, from the classroom to congregations across the United States and in Canada. On this journey, we have continued to distill and refine our thinking about the essential work of personal transformation. This second edition in part reflects our ongoing stories of transformation and a growing number of stories of transformation of pastors and lay leaders. It also contains the practical tools we have found useful in the process of personal transformation. We want you to know that, although we have protected the identities of those whose stories we share by changing names, places, and details of events, these are the stories of real people. We hope these stories and tools encourage you and provide a practical pathway to personal transformation. In writing, we affirm with the apostle Paul, “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil. 3:12 NRSV).

## **A New Way of Thinking about Leadership**

In this book, we write about living systems: a different way of thinking about leadership that we have been learning in recent years. This perspective has changed how we see our role as leaders. Most leadership-development processes focus on “leadership techniques”—essentially a bag of tricks for the leader to use on those they lead. We are learning to go in another direction. We understand that as leaders we are part of living human systems of engagement and relationship, and we must learn to become aware of these systems and navigate them wisely. We focus on managing ourselves rather than managing others.

Leadership that recognizes an organization or a congregation as a living system requires a different way of thinking. To clarify this way of thinking

about leadership, we introduce some concepts and terms that may be new to you. These ideas are rooted in the seminal work of Dr. Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory. Dr. Bowen understood human behavior in families as natural systems (living systems). These living systems play by a set of rules that we can see and name. Learning to "think systems" requires understanding these concepts, which will allow us to think differently about what we see taking place in our own behavior and that of others. These concepts also offer us a way of thinking about how to participate most responsibly in the systems to which we belong. These ideas give us options to consider besides our usual automatic responses to others or the frustrating effort to attempt to manipulate others to change.

We have organized this book into four sections. The chapters in part 1 ("The Call to Personal Transformation") introduce (1) the problems we as pastors or congregational leaders face every day, (2) the call to personal transformation, and (3) the elements of this inside-out process. We also examine the life of Jesus and reflect on the living systems of which he was a part, observing his ability to know and do the right thing despite enormous pressure to do otherwise.

The chapters in part 2 ("Leading Living Systems") introduce basic principles of systems thinking that we need to understand so that we may lead more effectively. The keys to employing this approach to leadership are (1) learning to *think* differently about how people in a living system affect each other, (2) learning to *observe* how anxiety holds chronic symptoms in place and keeps people stuck in old roles, and (3) learning to *manage* our own anxiety. All this enables us to handle ourselves more calmly and to lead even in an anxious congregation or during uncertain times of chaos, crisis, or conflict.

In part 3 ("Family Patterns"), we turn our attention to our origins as leaders: What family systems produced our usual approach to life and leadership? What role do we play in our current family system? These chapters include strategies to help decrease anxiety in the face of a living system's reactivity and to be more influential in our own nuclear families. A leader's marriage and family are the most intense emotional systems in their lives. Learning to do a better job there equips us for leadership in congregational life as well.

Finally, in part 4 ("The Spirit and the Journey"), we commend classic spiritual disciplines as a primary means of hearing the voice of God and finding the transformation for which we long. God's Spirit is the crucial resource that guides us as leaders to know the right things to do—and to find the courage to do them. An intimate relationship with God is the center of gravity that keeps our lives in balance when the pressures of the system threaten to topple us. We lay out a learning process that results in personal change. The process

involves mastering information, engaging in practice, and reflecting carefully on what we experience. We repeat that process until the new behavior is a permanent part of our lives. We believe that we are more likely to achieve the goal of personal transformation if we have the accountability and support of a learning community that includes both a coach and a peer group (Eccles. 4:9–12). We conclude this part with a chapter that faces the theological and biblical issues around thinking systems as a Christian.

At the end of each chapter, we have included questions for reflective self-assessment. These questions have no right or wrong answers; we offer them simply as a way for you to engage with this journey and to be present with yourself. Consider writing your answers in a journal so you can reflect on your own transformation during the journey. Finally, although there are cues in the book that signal whose words you are reading, here is a breakdown of who wrote which chapters: Jim wrote chapters 1, 5, and 10; Robert wrote chapters 2, 3, 4, and 11; Trisha wrote chapters 7, 8, and 9; and we collaborated on chapter 6.

### **What Is New in This Edition?**

If you read and used the first edition of this work, you might wonder what has changed in this revision. We have updated stories and illustrations based on years of practicing and teaching these concepts. We significantly revised some chapters based on our experience and the feedback we have received from readers. Chapters 7, 9, and 10 reflect this kind of change. We added two chapters. Chapter 6, “Leading in Uncertain Times,” takes up the necessity of less anxious leadership, especially during times of social chaos, organizational crisis, or intense conflict. Chapter 11 responds to questions we have encountered over the years regarding the relationship between Bowen’s concept and Christian theology.

Additionally, we have revised the appendixes to make them more useful. Appendix A, “Constructing a Family Diagram,” received minor revisions. Appendix B, “Developing a Rhythm of Spiritual Practices,” replaces “An Overview of Key Spiritual Disciplines” from the first edition. We added appendix C, listing Bowen-based training programs for clergy located across the country. We expanded our recommended reading list to include many more books and articles related to Bowen Theory as well as to spiritual formation. Finally, our glossary of terms related to Bowen Theory contains more terms essential to mastering the theory and practices we present in the book.

## How to Use This Book

This book is a basic overview of some of the principles of leadership in a living system. Pastors, congregational leaders, and seminarians will find it a helpful primer. Although most of the people in our examples are pastors and congregational leaders, any person who offers leadership in a living system—a school, a business, a community, a family—can apply the concepts.

Because information about leadership in a living system is not enough, we recommend practicing the ideas contained in this book. This happens best if you have a group of people around you who are seeking to master the practices as well. Chapter 10 addresses this subject in some detail.

May God be with you on your journey.



PART ONE

**THE CALL  
TO PERSONAL  
TRANSFORMATION**



# 1



## The Need for Personal Transformation

Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention.

—Jesus, Matthew 7:13–14 (Message)

Leaders do the right things. Managers do things right.

—Burt Nanus and Warren Bennis,  
*Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*

Over the years, we have walked intimately with pastoral leaders from a variety of denominations and cultures in our city and across the country. In our roles as pastor, professor, counselor, coach, and friend, we have discovered that far too many are fighting fatigue and spiritual emptiness. The day-to-day stress of managing an institutional church—small or large—in the face of changes in their ministry context, occurring at breakneck speed, robs them of their personal spiritual vitality.

We wrote the words of the previous paragraph a number of years ago. Since that time, our experience with pastors and congregational leaders has caused that reality to become clearer. What we could only glimpse back then,

and what we can see clearly now, is that the slow but unmistakable death of Christendom and the continuously accelerating pace of change have become almost paralyzing to congregations. Even for those that have managed to continue growing numerically, few if any sense that they are impacting the culture. Tod Bolsinger writes, “We are in uncharted terrain trying to lead dying churches into a post-Christian culture that now considers the church an optional, out of touch, and irrelevant relic of the past. What do you do? If you are like me, indeed, like most people, what you do is default to what you know. You do again, what you have always done.”<sup>1</sup>

In this condition, two things are obvious. First, due to the growing pace of change, congregations of all sizes increasingly face the alternatives of deep change or slow death. Second, providing the effective leadership required to guide a congregation down a path of deep change is more challenging than it has ever been.

### Stories from the Trenches

Kenneth was the forty-seven-year-old pastor of a forty-two-year-old urban congregation. He held a PhD from a seminary in his denomination. He had served as a graduate assistant in seminary and as an associate pastor in two previous congregations before coming to his current assignment. Twenty-two months into his tenure, he called me and said, “I’m stuck and I’m embarrassed. I have all the formal education our denomination provides, and I cannot get our congregation off dead center. I’ve read the leadership books. I know the concepts. But as I’ve tried to lead this congregation to engage its community, we seem to stay in a constant state of conflict. Sometimes the conflict is public and intense. Other times it’s behind the scenes and less focused. And I seem incapable of stopping it.”

Over several weeks of conversation, I (Jim) learned that Kenneth had grown up in a highly conflicted family. Caught between warring parents, he often found himself in the middle, attempting to keep the peace. Although Kenneth knew this part of his history and was aware that it affected his leadership style, he was unable to change how he managed the conflict in his church. He asked, “Will my congregational ministry always be controlled by the dynamics of conflict that I learned as a child?”

I also noticed this perspective in a focus group with twelve pastors from a denominational group with whom I worked. They were African American, Anglo, Chinese, Hispanic, and Vietnamese; female and male; ranging in age from thirty-one to sixty-four. I was conducting a series of focus groups, and

in one of those groups, I asked, “What is your denomination doing that helps you?” Several pastors gave polite answers before Dave, a fifty-one-year-old pastor, got to his feet to respond: “Your question angers me. You have no clue what my life is like, and you presume that anything the denomination does helps me in my world.”

He then went on to talk about his life. He described how he left seminary with a resolve to call people to the life of Jesus, to help them learn to follow Christ. He described how his hope of fulfilling that calling slowly died while the daily grind of institutional maintenance and codependent personal relationships took its place.

The longer he talked, the more impassioned he became. As he concluded his comments, his voice softened and tears welled up in his eyes. He said in profoundly vulnerable words that were barely audible, “I’m working harder than I’ve ever worked, for less results than I’ve ever gotten. My health is failing, my family is falling apart, and I don’t know what to do.”

In 1997, Robert Creech and I (Jim) participated in initiating a weeklong leadership-development process for sixteen pastors in the Houston area. During the day we taught leadership skills, and at night we worshiped together. Following each evening worship experience, we divided into groups of five to debrief the day and pray for one another. Much to our surprise, the groups stayed together until nearly midnight the first night. As the week unfolded, several pastors came to us to report their experiences in the groups.

One of the participants, Sharon, said, “I told my group last night that my husband and I are about to drown in credit card debt.” Another participant, Marcy, said, “For nearly four months, I’ve been engaged in an intense conflict with my elders. It’s killing me, and I’ve been so alone. I shared that struggle with my group last night and found such grace and relief.”

Yet another, Austin, came to me and said, “I want to talk with you. For three nights in a row, I’ve been talking with my group. They’ve insisted that I come to you.” After some hesitation he continued. “This is hard to say, but my wife and I are in trouble. We’ve been married eleven years, and I love her deeply. She loves me too. But I have such a temper. Sometimes I get so angry.” He paused. “I haven’t ever hit her, but often I grab and shake her. It hasn’t happened for a while. Then it happened again last week, and she threatened to leave me.”

Austin began to weep. I stood with him as he grieved his own failure and expressed his fear for their future. We talked about places he and his wife could get the help they needed, and we made a commitment to be accountable to one another throughout the days ahead.

These stories are a sample of our experiences and, we believe, are common among all kinds of people. They illustrate things we all know but frequently refuse to say. A survey by *Christianity Today* revealed that “most pastors have struggled with pornography” at some point along the way.<sup>2</sup> Those statistics are startling, and they give you a glimpse into a larger reality.<sup>3</sup>

The pastoral community is in trouble. Congregations expect pastors to lead, but these men and women face the same challenges that every other follower of Christ faces. Although people expect them to assist others in personal transformation, pastors often have no place to turn for the encouragement and coaching required for their own spiritual formation.

As we talk with pastors and congregational leaders, they often ask, “Yes, but where can I get the help I need?” What if someone asks you that question? How we answer is determined in part by what we believe about how transformation occurs.

## **Beliefs about Personal Transformation**

Coming face-to-face with the fact that many in the pastoral community are in trouble has served to clarify our beliefs about personal transformation. We have tested these convictions in the crucible of life, where real change is taking place. As we coach pastoral leaders and guide groups in leadership development, these beliefs form the essence of much of our guidance. We believe that transformation is a process that involves the whole person, and we believe there are three dynamic processes in the Christian life that help to grow the whole person to maturity.

### *The Whole Person*

When Christians use the adjective “spiritual,” they often intend to set something apart from secular things. Or sometimes “spiritual” is simply a synonym for religious things. A fuzzy understanding of the human spirit and of our spirituality is a part of why we often struggle in the journey of following Christ.

When I use the word “spirit” or “spiritual,” I am referring to the inner life of a human being. Like the human body that is one whole system comprising several subsystems (cardiovascular, skeletal, nervous systems, etc.), the human spirit has at least four parts that make up the whole—thoughts, feelings, will, and desires. We call the intersection of these four the “soul.” The spirit then resides in a deeply interconnected state with the body and from there interacts with the outside world.<sup>4</sup>

In my own upbringing both at home and at church, I learned to focus primarily on my thinking. It was essential that I knew and understood all the teachings of Jesus. It was also important for me to make a commitment to following those teachings through the strength of my will. However, my emotions and my desire received mostly negative attention. Emotions—and especially negative emotions—were banished. Hide them or compartmentalize them, but never express them. Good Christians didn't feel fear or sadness or anger. If you did, it meant that you needed to study your Bible or pray more. And desire was associated with the human body and with lust, and all such things were evil.

One of the consequences of this was that I grew up knowing a good bit about the teachings of Jesus and was aware of a clear expectation that I should obey those teachings. But the lack of attention to my feelings and my desires left those parts of my inner life as unchecked forces that, especially when relationships grew anxious, would undermine my best efforts to follow the way of Jesus.

In our understanding of transformation, it is the whole self—our entire spirit—that must conform to the image of Jesus. Furthermore, we find effective leverage in change by working inside out. Through the strength of will, I may be able to follow Jesus when things are easy. But when circumstances or relationships are difficult, I make the most progress by working on the underdeveloped parts of my inner life. In other chapters we will delve into these ideas in more detail, but it is important to start with this understanding as we endeavor to explore the work of transformation.

### *Transformation*

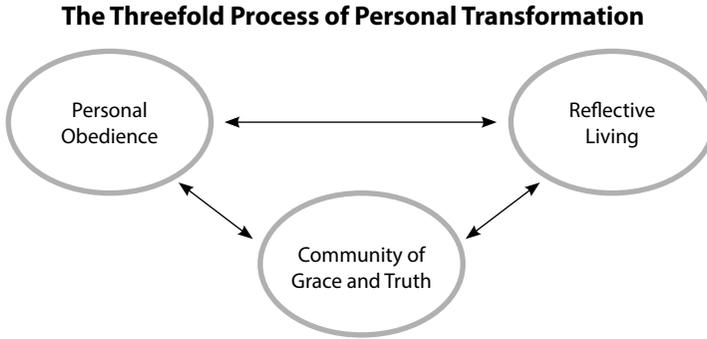
When we learn to engage our whole selves, the transformation journey takes on a rich vitality that produces deep change in our ability to live the lives that Jesus calls us to live. We will briefly describe these three processes. We find each process reflected in and modeled by the life of Jesus.

1. Personal transformation happens best as an inside-out process of committing to obey all the teachings of Christ.
2. Personal transformation happens best in the context of a loving community that extends grace and truth.
3. Personal transformation happens best when we develop a reflective lifestyle.

Each belief is essential because personal transformation occurs when a leader holds the three in dynamic tension. It is important to note that this

is not a linear process. Each part influences and is influenced by the other. It is when we hold them in tension that deep change becomes possible. Figure 1.1 reflects this process.

Figure 1.1



### *An Inside-Out Process of Commitment to Obedience*

Jesus is the perfect human, the New Adam, the only fully human being.<sup>5</sup> In his life and teachings, we find the pathway that empowers us to live the life he calls us to live. He says, “Those who love me will keep my word” (John 14:23 NRSV). Furthermore, he instructs us to make disciples who can obey his commands (Matt. 28:19–20). In his commands he sets the bar high, calling us to love God, neighbor, stranger, enemy, and self (Matt. 5:44; Luke 10:25–37). But how do we learn and help others to learn this obedience?

In my own journey, I (Jim) was taught to obey the commands of Jesus, but I was never taught how. My teachers assumed that if I had the information the Bible provided, then with effort and some prayer, I could master his teachings. That, however, was not my experience. I could obey Jesus’s teaching sometimes. But often I found myself in circumstances where with Paul I could claim, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:15 NRSV).

What if knowledge of the teachings of Jesus, as important as that is, is still not enough? What if a process of internal transformation must occur in order to learn obedience? We believe that this is profoundly true, and in the following chapters we will present a way of thinking that will provide access to this internal transformation. For now, I simply want to introduce the idea of a “first formation.”

First formation is shorthand to describe the set of experiences we had in childhood and adolescence that shaped how we first learned to see our-

selves and the world.<sup>6</sup> We all have a first formation. Your first formation happened like this. You grew up in a family and a context where you had a set of experiences. Some were good, pleasant experiences, and some were painful. Most people have a mixture of both pleasure and pain in their first formation.

In your formative years, as you were learning what was pleasant and what was painful in terms of your relationships with parents, peers, extended family, and community leaders like pastors or teachers, you learned a set of relationship habits in which you attempted to maximize the pleasure and minimize the pain.

What gives our first formation so much power is that the habits we developed happened mostly outside our conscious awareness. As children our brains had not yet developed the capacity to think abstractly, so every experience was concrete. We began to develop a patterned way of dealing with pain in our relationships that shaped our thoughts, our feelings, our will, and our desires. *This is the way I am. This is the way the world is.*

Based on those experiences, we started practicing behaviors that kept us safe. If they worked in our lives, we kept doing them until those behaviors became habitual. First formation behaviors develop early and become so habitual that we don't think of them as habits. The habits insert themselves into our brains so deeply that our responses become automatic, like blinking or breathing. They happen below the level of consciousness. It's an automatic way of responding in relationships—especially when things become tense or anxious.

So here is what happens. I know that as a follower of Jesus I should always tell the truth. However, in my first formation I was often punished and shamed when I told the truth about mistakes I had made. I learned to think in a certain way about telling the truth because of those painful emotional experiences with telling the truth. And I had a profound desire to be safe.

This resulted in a persistently held habit of hiding mistakes from authority figures. That habit became so ingrained that as a young adult I often found myself hiding mistakes in my marriage and in my work from my wife and from my bosses.

Did I not understand the teachings of Jesus? Or was it that I did not have a desire to follow the teachings of Jesus? Was I not exerting effort to obey? None of that was true. I wanted to obey more than anything. But in certain circumstances, just like I blink or like I breathe, I would hide the truth. When the experience passed and I could calm down, shame and regret filled my mind. "What is wrong with me?" I thought. "Why do I do the very thing that I don't want to do?"

When I was forty years old, I attended the funeral of a family friend. When the graveside service was over, I looked up and saw my father walking to his family's cemetery plots. I followed him and found him standing in front of his grandmother's tombstone. As I stood beside him, he said, almost as if talking to the wind, "My parents were alcoholics, so she raised me. Then, when I was fourteen years old, she was shot and killed in my presence in the living room of my house." All of that was information my dad had never shared with me before.

In that moment, I realized that it wasn't just my parents who had shaped my experience with telling the truth. My dad had a whole set of experiences with his family of origin, and those individuals had a whole set of experiences with their families of origin. It wasn't just that my dad punished and shamed me when I didn't tell the truth. The generations who came before influenced him, shaping his thinking and actions. A multigenerational process is at work in our first formation. It's helpful to see and name that, and we will say more about that later in this book.

The early church understood the power of habits that come from our first formation and of the need to disrupt those habits, replacing them with habits that embody the gospel. Alan Kreider writes, "The sources rarely indicate that the early Christians grew in number because they won arguments; instead they grew because their habitual behavior . . . was distinctive and intriguing. . . . When challenged about their ideas, Christians pointed to their actions. They believed that their [habits], their embodied behavior, was eloquent. Their behavior said what they believed; it was an enactment of their message."<sup>7</sup>

We believe that transformation is an inside-out process in which we bring the habits of our first formation into the light. In a safe and shame-free environment, we can tell the truth about these habitual, automatic behaviors that express our disobedience. Only then can we begin to learn, through the power of the Spirit, to disrupt those behaviors and learn obedience. With practice, accountability, and encouragement from others, we can learn to obey.

We start by telling the truth about our habitual disobedience. It's an inside-out process that requires effort and time. Paul speaks to learning obedience this way when he writes, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12 NRSV). John writes, "If we claim that we experience a shared life with him and continue to stumble around in the dark, we're obviously lying through our teeth—we're not *living* what we claim. But if we walk in the light, . . . we also experience a shared life with one another, as the sacrificed blood of Jesus, God's Son, purges all our sin" (1 John 1:6–7 Message). James also encourages us to such a practice:

“Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (James 5:16 NRSV).

### *A Community of Grace and Truth*

It is important to make a commitment to learning obedience as an inside-out process, but that is not enough. Personal transformation requires a community of grace and truth. The Gospel of John proclaims, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of *grace and truth*” (John 1:14 NRSV; emphasis ours). Personal transformation happens best when we enter a grace-filled environment. When Jesus encountered Thomas’s doubt following his resurrection, he did not lash out in anger. He responded with grace (John 20:27). Judgment, criticism, guilt, or shame can produce short-term behavioral change, but meaningful, long-term, inside-out change requires an atmosphere permeated by grace. Creating an environment where an individual experiences acceptance despite failure allows personal transformation to take root.

Brad and I had been friends for several years. He was an affable, engaging man who appeared to be a healthy, successful pastor. He joined our leadership-development process and the peer group that I facilitated. In the peer-group experience, one pastor told his story each night. Several of the pastors demonstrated a striking honesty and vulnerability. On the second night, one of the pastors wept as she told a particularly painful part of her story.

The next day, Brad saw me during one of the breaks.

“That was some meeting last night,” he said. “Carolina got really honest with us, didn’t she?”

“Yes,” I replied, “she did.”

“I’ll never be able to cry in a group like that. I haven’t cried since I was nine years old.”

“That’s OK. The goal is not for you to cry. It’s just for you to be honest.”

Brad’s turn to share came on the last evening. As his story unfolded, he courageously related a frightening series of experiences of family violence between his mother and father, who was a pastor. After each outburst, his dad personally threatened him: “If you tell anyone what happened here tonight, I will lose my job.”

For years, Brad faithfully hid the family violence. He revealed it for the first time in the peer group, and as he did, he expressed years of profound anger toward his father. Powerful sobs racked his body as group members waited. Then the shame kicked in.

“I know it’s wrong for me to feel this way toward my dad. I’m sorry. I know the Bible calls me to honor my father and mother. But those experiences were like living in hell, and I’ve never recovered from their impact. Every now and then, something happens to trigger the anger. I lash out at my wife or my kids, or it shows up as passive-aggressive language in my sermons. But then I go back to pretending that it’s not there. I feel so hopeless. Please don’t judge me.”

*Please don’t judge me.* This is the unspoken plea that so many pastors carry in the hearts. Their experience may not be as intense as Brad’s, but the world in which they minister continually places unrealistic expectations on them. They are vulnerable people who experience pain and struggle. Yet they suffer in silence, for fear of others perceiving them as weak or unqualified for their calling. They long for a place where grace rules—a place where they can be transparent about their lives and the challenges they face. Meeting this crucial longing is necessary for personal transformation to occur.

But grace is not enough. In the context of that grace, truth must also prevail. The apostle Paul tells us to speak “the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15 NRSV). Change becomes possible only when we face the truth. Doing the best they can with their wounds, pastors long for a safe place in which they can get wise counsel, encouragement, and accountability. Deep change does not come without all those things.

Even though we can encounter this truth in many ways, the context of a peer group with the guidance of an effective counselor or coach has proven to provide a powerful environment for disclosure and discovery.

As Brad’s peer-group experience unfolded over the next few months, they encouraged him to explore the impact of his first-formation experiences in his current ministry. As the trust among the group grew, Brad became increasingly candid and more open to the group’s wisdom (Prov. 15:22).

Over time, he began to connect these experiences and his eating habits (he was about forty pounds overweight). He also began to acknowledge that in response to his father’s sin, he had sinned in return. He had allowed his father’s failure to fester in his heart. He had become angry, even bitter, and lived out that bitterness in a variety of relationships in his life.

With the group’s encouragement and with the wise guidance of his coach, Brad began to face the truth about himself and his estranged relationship with his dad.

As a result, he began to visit his dad regularly. Even though his father neither asked for forgiveness nor acknowledged his responsibility for the relationship, Brad began to find freedom. He found that it was increasingly possible to relate to his father based on his own principles rather than on his father’s

actions. Focusing on changing his own behavior rather than attempting to change his dad produced dramatic progress for Brad.

In the last peer-group meeting, he said, “I cannot thank you enough for all that you’ve done for me. I would never have told my story in any other setting. And I would not be experiencing this new freedom if you hadn’t accepted me, provided encouragement and wise counsel, and held me accountable to face the truth at the same time. My life has been changed.”

### *A Reflective Lifestyle*

We tell the truth about our habits of disobedience in a community of grace and truth. Even so, there is still much work to do. Personal transformation happens best in the context of a reflective lifestyle. The classic disciplines of the Christian faith—worship, solitude, fasting, prayer, silence, and study—are essential to the formation of Jesus’s character in our lives. Our mechanistic worldview has compartmentalized these disciplines, separating them from our daily life.<sup>8</sup> Marginalizing these practices robs them of their power to transform us. Rather than living a reflective life characterized by the classic spiritual disciplines, far too often we live a frantically busy life that has the disciplines assigned to the “spiritual” or “Sunday” part of our lives rather than permeating all that we do. We have a prayer life (like our love life, work life, leisure life) rather than a life of prayer.

A genuinely reflective life engages practices that allow us to slow down and listen. When we do this, the Spirit helps us see our automatic, habitual ways of responding when anxiety shows up in our relationships. How do we break those habits and replace them with new ones?

As our story unfolds in these chapters, we will assert that a learned response to the presence of anxiety in our relationships is at the root of our disobedience. Until we can see the anxiety and the automatic responses that it causes, we are powerless to change. The apostle Paul tells us to “[strip] off the old self” and “[clothe] yourselves with the new self” (Col. 3:9–10 NRSV). We cannot take off what we cannot see. Learning to see our old self, which was born in our first formation, gives us access to disrupting those old-self behaviors. Seeing the old self and learning to disrupt its behaviors becomes central to the work of discipleship. With a commitment to telling the truth about our habitual disobedience and a community of grace and truth that supports us, we can begin to see, name, and eventually disrupt those habits. In that process, the Spirit fills us with the hope of new habits that allow us to increasingly embody the gospel message in our daily lives.

Meredith is a pastor and participant in our leadership-development process who engaged me as her coach. One morning in our regular coaching session, Meredith and I began by praying. As she prayed for some key leaders in her congregation, she said, “Lord, I confess that I do not love these people. I’ve become bitter and resentful.” She confessed the long-standing sense of anger and frustration that characterized her relationship with these leaders. She asked for God’s forgiveness and then asked God to change her heart. Telling the truth about not loving people in her congregation was painful to her, but it revealed something that began to grow.

As our coaching relationship unfolded, one day she asked, “How do I learn to love these people?” As I sought to understand more about her circumstances, Meredith told me that she felt consumed by the daily demands of ministry. In an urban congregation averaging 220 in worship attendance, she often worked sixty or more hours each week. The demands of preaching, pastoral care, and administration often overwhelmed her. And as a woman in ministry in a denomination without many women pastors, she felt an extra burden to do well for all the future women whom God might call to serve as pastors. Her only encounter with the Bible came as she prepared to preach and teach. She rarely had a long period of quiet reflection. In the stress of work, she also had developed a pattern of neglecting her relationships with her husband and sixteen-year-old daughter.

One day in a moment of vulnerability, she said, “I can’t remember a time when I didn’t work long, hard hours. Both of my parents were professionals who did well in their jobs. I was an only child. When I didn’t live up to their standards or my own, they simply encouraged me to work harder. The implied message was that hard work is the solution to any challenge that I face. That became what I learned in my first formation about work.

“As we’ve been talking over these past four months, I’ve learned to recognize that there is no one in my church who is asking me to work harder. But it feels like I’m doing more than my share of the work. When there is a breakdown in some part of the church or when we don’t reach goals that we have set or when a volunteer doesn’t do the agreed-upon job, I immediately get this burning in my chest. My shoulders tighten, my cheeks flush, my thoughts race, and I just automatically move into high gear. I’m good at that, and it has served me well up to this point in my life. But recently I realized that I feel like I’m doing more than my share, and with that realization I’ve begun to resent the other leaders in our church.

“At first, I made excuses for them, but over time I have become resentful and bitter. In these conversations I’ve come to see that it is the presence of anxiety in my life that has me overfunctioning.”

She paused, and then she said, “Maybe I’ve been focusing in the wrong direction. Rather than trying to change my congregation, maybe if I could learn to respond differently to anxiety, some things would change.”

Meredith’s ability to name an anxious response in her work life and tie it to a part of her first formation was a giant step forward. She had not yet learned to disrupt that pattern, but now that she could see it, she had access to something new. We will say more about the process of unlearning and relearning in chapter 10.

“Personal transformation” has become a buzzword these days. In this book, when we talk about personal transformation, we are talking about disrupting patterns of disobedience and developing patterns of obedience that allow you to increasingly embody the gospel in your life. The way that we live becomes the evidence that draws others to Jesus. To increasingly embody the gospel, we develop a lifestyle of telling the truth to ourselves and to a community of grace and truth about places where our lives do not align with the teachings of Jesus. Then we patiently develop a reflective life that allows us to name the places where we automatically—like blinking or breathing—disobey the teachings of Jesus. We learn to disrupt those automatic habits and, with practice over time, replace them with habits that do align with Jesus’s teachings.

## **A Call to Personal Transformation**

In all of this, there is good news and bad news. The bad news is that the church and many of its leaders are in trouble. The good news is that God calls us to personal transformation and promises to empower it. Paul declares, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations” (Eph. 3:20–21 NIV).

God is able! The transformation journey includes some things that only God can do. It also involves some things that God won’t do unless we do some things. Our part is to bring our whole self to these three interdependent processes—a commitment to obedience in a community of grace and truth where we learn to live the reflective life.

The question we must face is this: Will we allow God’s power to be at work within us for an ongoing, life-changing process of transformation that allows the very life of Jesus—the mind of Christ—to live in and through us?

If you respond to that challenge with a ringing “Yes!” then keep reading. However, if you are like most of us, you bring a strong ambivalence to this question. The possibility of living the life that God created you to live inspires

you. The possibility of living a life of passion and purpose where your true self is known and celebrated and contributes to the common good is inviting. It's also true that you likely have attempted to change—perhaps many times—and your success rate is very low.

In one of our first leadership cohorts, Virginia came up to me during a break and said, “I need you to pray for me. I’ve been married twenty-five years, and for most of those twenty-five years, I’ve been praying for God to change my marriage.” She described the desire for intimacy and purpose in her marriage and efforts at marriage enrichment and counseling that had not changed things. With a deep sadness in her voice, she said, “Either God is not able to change my marriage or there is something wrong with me.”

If you come to this conversation with such ambivalence, I want to invite you also to keep reading. What if it is neither that God is unable nor that something is wrong with you? What if the way you think about and practice efforts at transformation need to change?

In the chapters that follow, we use the life of Jesus and the conceptual framework of living systems to guide you on the journey of personal transformation. Your journey will take you on a practical, proven pathway that we have tested in our own lives and have witnessed in the lives of the pastors and leaders we serve.

For the sake of your own personal health, for the health of your family, for the health of your ministry, and for the sake of the world, we invite you to begin your journey of personal transformation now.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What has changed about you in the past year? The past five years? The past ten years?
2. What are your personal beliefs about how transformation takes place in a person's life? What is necessary for one to experience personal transformation?
3. If transformation is to take place internally, what is the role of community in the process of personal change? What role do you think others might play in your experience of transformation?
4. When you think about your first formation, how do you see those experiences showing up in your ministry today?
5. What do you think are the key components of a reflective lifestyle?

6. Assume for a moment that nothing transformational takes place in your inner life and character in the next ten years. How would you describe what your life will be like then?
7. How would you describe the kind of changes you'd like to see take place in your life? In what way would you like things to be different?
8. If you were the pastor/leader that you believe God called you to be (as opposed to being the one that others say you should be), what would you be doing differently? (Substitute for "pastor/leader" another role, such as wife, husband, father, mother, or friend, and continue to reflect on this question.)