

uncharted territory

by Matt Cook, Pastor, First, Wilmington

When is the last time you took a road trip? I'm not talking about a predictable journey from one place to another, both of which are already familiar to you. I'm talking about an extended journey into unfamiliar territory.

Most of the traveling I do is of the former variety, mindlessly moving from place to place. But sometimes, I end up somewhere far outside what I've seen and experienced and those journeys can change me.

Canoeing the Mountains is a book about the second kind of journey. It's not the kind of journey you take in a car nor is it the kind of journey you make as a tourist. In this case, it's a journey for congregations and the people who lead them.

The book is written by Tod Bolsinger. Bolsinger is a former pastor and current Vice-President at Fuller Seminary. He writes well. He tells good stories, offers practical insight, and doesn't ever come across as preachy.

Bolsinger starts off by covering some familiar, if also foundational, territory. He has chapters on leadership methodologies, missional community, and congregational culture (based on the work of Pat Lencioni which is worth reading all by itself). In Bolsinger's case, however, I found the refresher helpful because he was obviously using it to prepare the readers for new material.

The new ideas in his book pre-suppose some foundational concepts that you can't skip past if you want to be able to lead your congregation into uncharted territory.

The book, however, is an attempt to describe how churches should operate "off the map." Bolsinger uses the story of Lewis and Clark as an extended metaphor. Their journey to map a route from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean was an example of what Bolsinger calls adaptive leadership. Using their story, Bolsinger describes some habits of heart and mind that congregations and their leaders need to operate off the map.

Bolsinger then takes those habits and applies them to some of the real-world congregational challenges. This is where I think the book is at its most helpful. Bolsinger tells the story of his own congregation's struggle to identify and respond to the challenge of dis-engagement (the growing phenomenon

of people's tendency to invest less time and energy into their church, even as they still perceive themselves as fully invested). Some books are long on the "what," offering practical strategy

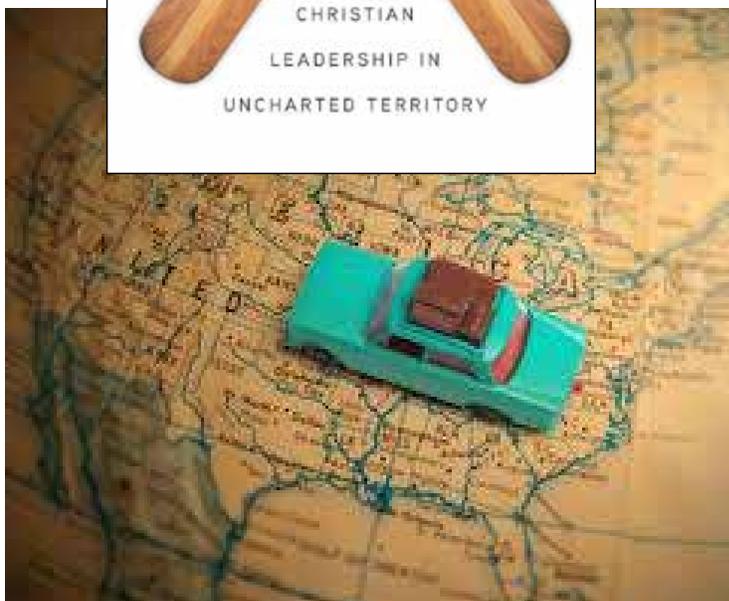
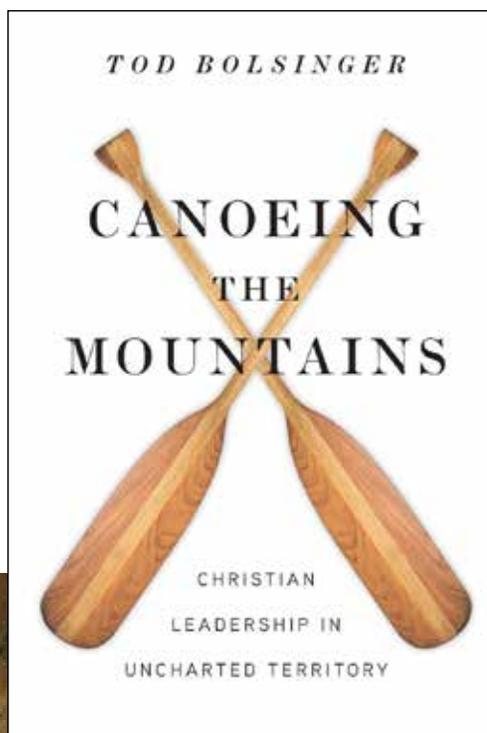
after practical strategy. Other books are long on the "why," offering extended analysis of all the macro factors that impact our congregations. Bolsinger, however, does a good job of building a bridge from his 25,000-foot-level insights all the way down to the nitty gritty of actual challenges.

Another important benefit of Bolsinger's analysis of his own real-world challenges is that it goes a long way toward creating hope in all of us who find ourselves with the same challenges that come with doing church "off the map." Bolsinger is obviously smart and capable, yet he and his church couldn't find easy answers to the problems they were encountering. In congregational ministry in the 21st century, sometimes you need to have someone to remind you that you're not crazy. Congregational life is far more complex and challenging than it was a generation ago.

At First, Wilmington, we are not terribly far removed from a season of great institutional success and yet we've found ourselves facing the same questions and problems that Bolsinger describes. Knowing that there are smart, faithful leaders and congregations other than ours facing these challenges, and also hearing that the way forward isn't greater effort but a willingness to experiment, innovate, and be unafraid to fail is very life-giving. One of my favorite lines from the book is

this, "*The answer is not try harder but to start a new adventure.*" That is both helpful and hopeful.

This book is useful for both ministers and lay leaders. It's not short, so if you're a minister recommending it to a lay leader in your church then they better enjoy reading or you should give them a heads up first. On the other hand, there's nothing in the book that is so technical or academic that an average adult reader can't finish it. I recommend it to you highly!



Tod Bolsinger will be the keynote speaker for the 2019 CBFNC Annual Gathering as well as the Leadership Institute, scheduled for March 28-29, 2019, at First, Greensboro.