

THE BAPTIST EDUCATOR



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Gathering Leaders

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Cover image: Courtesy Bluefield University, Virginia



Bluefield University to host annual meeting

The 2023 IABCU Annual Meeting will be held June 4-6 in Bluefield, Va. Dr. David Olive, president at Bluefield University, will serve as host for the event. Pipestem Resort will be our conference hotel.

Dr. Timothy George, who served as the founding dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University from 1988-2019, will present the Hester Lectures. Dr. George is distinguished professor of history and doctrine at Beeson and current president of the Evangelical Theological Society.

George is a life advisory trustee of Wheaton College, serves as co-chair of Evangelicals and Catholics Together, and has chaired the Doctrine and Christian Unity Commission of the Baptist World Alliance. He has served as senior theological advisor for *Christianity Today* and on the editorial advisory boards of *First Things* and *Books & Culture*. George is the general editor of the 30-volume *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*. A prolific author, he has written more than 20 books and regularly contributes to scholarly journals. His



Dr. Timothy George, founding dean, Beeson Divinity School, Hester Lecturer

Theology of the Reformers (2013) is the standard textbook on Reformation theology in many schools and seminaries and has been translated into multiple languages. An ordained minister in the Southern Baptist Convention, George has served churches in Georgia, Massachusetts, Kentucky and Alabama. He and his wife, Denise, have two adult children.

We look forward to seeing each of you very soon at the annual conference!



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- William Carey University
- Williams Baptist University

Final Farewell Hill bids IABCU goodbye

Editor's note: Ashley Hill completed her time with IABCU on March 30, 2023. The following is Hill's letter to the members.

When I became the IABCU executive director in October of 2014, I had little understanding of what my tenure with the organization would look like. I didn't know a single person within the organization and had almost no idea what role educational associations play within the larger scope of higher education. However, even with my limited knowledge in that area, I believed with everything in me that Christian higher education played an invaluable part in the life and development of the church's young people. As it turns out, that hope was enough to make my almost nine years of service to our Baptist family of colleges, universities, and seminaries very gratifying work.

Together, we have kept our institutions connected and unified around the cause of Christian higher ed in the Baptist tradition, worked on collaborative initiatives that enhanced the work of our member institutions, had a hand in shaping federal education policy, and explored the global reach our work could entail.

We have welcomed new leaders and helped to mentor them as they found their footing. We have trained emerging leaders through our Christian Higher Education



Leadership Seminars and educated what would become new faculty through our Baptist College and University Scholars program. Many of you have helped our leaders stay connected and informed by contributing to the nine annual meetings and more than 25 issues of *The Baptist Educator* produced during my time with IABCU. I could not be more proud of and grateful for the way you have joined together in this work.

I will miss the friendships that I have built with you all but have every confidence that our paths will cross again, as I will not be able to stay away from Christian higher education for long. The work is too important to stand on the sidelines. But until then...

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Christian Faithfulness *in* Today's Challenges

D. Michael Lindsay, President of Taylor University and IABCU's 2022 Hester Lecturer



This is the second of three of the Hester Lectures delivered at the 2022 IABCU Annual Meeting at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama.

I had been preparing for this particular interview for many months.¹ I was sitting nervously in the waiting room of the Northern Virginia office of General Colin Powell. He came out to greet me and say that he was running a little late but looking forward to our time together. A few minutes passed and then he ushered me in. We sat at a small conference table, so small that his hulking frame seemed to dwarf the table and chairs.

"Before we get started, Michael, I got to tell you that I read the entire packet of materials you sent me in advance," he barked. "And I know you have spent a lot of time working on this particular line of research and that it's something you think a lot about, but I am sorry. I think this line of research is pretty much worthless."

I sat stunned. Here was a man I respected a great deal, whom I had spent hours preparing to meet,

and in the first thirty seconds of our one-on-one he tells me that my life's work is rubbish. I was so surprised that I did not really know what to say, so I simply replied, "Well, that's interesting, General. Tell me more."

For the next five minutes he berated me. It went something like this: "First of all, you refer to me as a leader throughout your packet of materials. Who's to say that I'm a leader. My wife doesn't really see me in that way, nor do my kids. And even if I were to be a leader, what's to say that you are going to figure that out in an hour-long interview. And even if you could figure it out, who's to say that what worked for me would be applicable to someone else? And you made such a big deal about my year as a White House Fellow. It wasn't a big deal at all. It was just one year among many others. Really, Michael, I think you have made a lot of pretty much nothing."

With each statement, I felt smaller and smaller. And his broad shoulders seemed to get bigger and bigger. As he went on and

on, I honestly thought perhaps I should just thank him for his time and walk out, but in a last-minute effort, I asked the Lord to guide me on what to say, at least to get out with a shred of dignity. Within a few seconds, I uttered something I had not even thought about:

“General Powell, I respect and appreciate what you’re saying, and you are probably far more knowledgeable than me, but I just wonder how you reconcile what you’re saying here with what you wrote in your autobiography. I seem to recall your referring to the White House Fellowship as a turning point.”ⁱⁱ

“Well, it was one turning point among many,” he growled.

“If I may, General, I think it was more than that. Because I seem to recall that you worked directly for Frank Carlucci that year as a White House Fellow, and I gather you developed a real connection with Carlucci. So much so that a few years later when he was tapped by President Reagan to become National Security Advisor, I believe he handpicked you to be his deputy, against the protests of several who did not think a military officer should have that role.”

Powell took a breath and cleared his throat, but I continued. “And then, when he stepped down from that role, I believe it was Frank Carlucci who personally recommended you to be his successor to President Reagan. And I seem to remember learning that neither Ed Meese nor James Baker liked that idea, but Carlucci persevered, and eventually, you got that job.

“In that role, you developed a relationship with then Vice

President Bush, and most people say that it was because of those years of working together in the second Reagan term that George Bush chose you to be the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when he moved into the Oval Office. You were in that role during the first Gulf War, and because of that, you often spent time with the Bushes in Kennebunkport and Camp David. My sense is that during those times, you also developed a relationship with his son, George W. Bush. And through that, the younger Bush came to see you as a key advisor and counselor when he decided to run for the presidency.

“He later named you as his Secretary of State, a role that you have said is your highest honor. And as I look back on your life, I think the year you spent with Frank Carlucci put all of this in motion. General Powell, it wasn’t just a turning point; it was *the* turning point. It changed your life.”

“Well maybe you’ve got a point,” he said with a smile. “Let’s do the interview.”

* * *

Thus began my education in the ways of the U.S. military. I later learned that this is standard operating procedure when you are dealing with four-star generals. Over time, I would interview others like him—Wesley Clark and the Chief of Naval Operations—as well as the CIA Director, and many members of the National Security Council.

All of them talked, at some point or another, about how we live in what the Army calls a “VUCA

“We live in what the Army calls a ‘VUCA World.’ By this, they mean we live in a world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.”

world.” By this, they mean we live in a world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. As I reflect on the work we are doing these days in Christian higher education, I am struck by how apt that phrase really is. We do, indeed, have to respond to all four of these as institutional leaders—volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. As such, it behooves us to be like the Sons of Issachar in I Chronicles 12—to understand the times and to know what to do.

It seems that the pandemic only exacerbated the volatility in our industry. Even before COVID, people were boiling over—from campus protests about police brutality to Trump administration policies toward immigrants to other conflicts in our own backyards. But then the social isolation imposed by the largest public health crisis in one hundred years made it significantly harder to see one another as our neighbor, and many—including those on our campuses—began to see those with whom they disagree as their arch-enemies.

Given the stresses of our jobs and the strains we all feel in this volatile context, it is easy to become like those we are expected to lead, with equally polarizing positions, at least in our hearts. And yet it does not have to be this way.

There are hundreds of academic studies that have demonstrated ways for people to change their behavior and their attitudes for good. It is based on an approach called cognitive behav-

ioral therapy.ⁱⁱⁱ And it is basically a form of B.F. Skinner’s approach to behaviorism. We can change our behavior through reminders, through practice, and through incentives.

The idea of moral experience is as old as the Bible, but Aristotle taught that “The actual possession and exercise of good character is necessary truly to understand moral principles and profitably apply them.”^{iv} So how do we exercise good character so that we could be a ballast for the volatility we see all around us? I Peter 3 has much to teach about the kind of leadership we should exemplify, and it is fairly straightforward.

We begin by setting apart Christ as Lord in our hearts. This reflects our daily devotional practices and willing submission of our will to His, often through a specific and intentional prayer to this effect. And, as we are called upon, we are expected to be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks for the reason that we have hope. We do this, not with polemic or partisanship, but with gentleness and respect. As we exercise self-control, we learn. That becomes a way of strengthening our character, and just as a muscle gets stronger with exercise, so also does our moral fiber.

We have to be intentional about these deposits of our spiritual capital because, as Eugene Peterson has taught, “The volume of busyness in religion far outruns the spiritual capital of its



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leaders.”^v So an active and attentive devotional life is partly how we respond to the volatility we see all around us.

* * *

I particularly appreciate the uncertainty of our VUCA world these days. Over the last ten years, it seems that we have even less clarity around the way to do business as usual and to serve our institutions well. We are uncertain what discount rate is needed to secure the class size we want, and we are unsure that even that will get us the net revenues we need for next fiscal year. We are uncertain how our marketing and outreach efforts will land in our increasingly competitive marketplace, and we are uncertain how to respond when social media flareups become a five-alarm fire for the institution.

We are uncertain how best to navigate the racial tensions we see all around us and when to make an affirmative statement that aligns with our Christian commitments or when to keep quiet and hope that our distinctives do not draw too much negative press. And we are uncertain how to keep the many constituents of our institutions on the same page when we know that our donors may be among the most conservative and our faculty may be among the most liberal, but we need both of them for our institutions to thrive.

I wish I had some good advice to offer in all of this, but it feels like the best I can do is to echo some of the admonitions of Psalm 37, a passage that has been helpful to

me when the way forward seemed uncertain.

You may recall that this is sometimes known as the “meekness Psalm,” the one Jesus alludes to at the outset of the Sermon on the Mount, when he says the meek will inherit the earth. How are we to be meek when we are tasked with leading our campuses?

David has a few helpful suggestions. He reminds us in verse one not to fret “because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass, they will soon wither, like green plants, they will soon die away.” He continues by admonishing us, “Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will do this.”

Taking delight is not something that always comes easy for Type-A kind of leaders. We tend not to take it easy or to waste our time on things that delight us, and yet, that admonition is clear throughout the pages of Scripture. I have found it to be helpful as I have tried, in my own way, to navigate the uncertainty of up and down enrollment numbers, the hot and cold nature of campus support, and the quiet and noise we see nearly every week on social media.

A few years ago, when I was struggling in my calling as a president, I took a long walk on the beach and asked the Lord to remind me what I loved about my job. I began making a mental list of things that were sources of

“An active and attentive devotional life is partly how we respond to the volatility we see all around us.”

“Let us not allow the complexity to keep us from doing the simple thing sometimes required — which may simply entail standing up for what we believe is right.”

delight, and before long, I decided I should jot them down on my phone. I named individuals that I enjoyed working with and parts of the role that came naturally for me and that I genuinely liked doing. I also noted some of the perks and privileges of the role, for it is easy to forget those when you are mired in the quicksand of uncertainty and challenge.

I also made a list of blessings that had happened in recent weeks, and as I did, the tension in my shoulders began to lift. In fact, I found the process so freeing that I decided to start a habit, one that I have continued every day since. I make a list of three things for which I am grateful as a way of reminding myself of sources of delight—both big and small. Over time, it has reoriented some of my thinking and helped me cope better with the barrage of uncertainty that is part of my life.

* * *

Sadly, I have had more experience with complexity than I care to admit, but none more so than the process of navigating my institution’s stance of human sexuality in a hostile media and cultural environment around LGBTQ issues. Now, remember that Boston is ground zero for the marriage equality movement. Massachusetts was the first state to legalize gay marriage back in 2004.^{vi} Gordon is a real outlier in the region. When its chapel services are held every week, it is the largest gathering of evangelical Christians in six states, and Gordon is the largest evangelical employer in all of New England.

So perhaps I should not have been surprised when we were targeted by a group of LGBTQ activists back in the summer of 2014 to try and change our institutional position on human sexuality. That, in turn, led to the hundred-year storm that came to our campus, one that led our regional accreditor to say they would need to think about our academic quality in light of what they perceived to be our discriminatory practices. It was also a media onslaught, one in which the *Boston Globe* ran six negative stories about our campus in the course of three weeks, and because they had no stock photos of our campus, they began running my headshot alongside the pieces.

In the end, we worked through a number of issues, and within nine months’ time, the accreditor announced that “Of course, Gordon’s accreditation is fine,” and much of the media attention died down. But the internal dissent and acts of sabotage continued for quite a while. It is amazing what people will tell you when you leave an institution. Through that process, I became aware of e-mails and conversations held among various faculty, staff, and alumni. To summarize the gist of one person: “If we can’t change Gordon’s position on this matter, let’s burn the house down.”

The complexity comes, of course, because every action we take as an institution can produce an equal and opposite reaction. So even when we want to defend ourselves and uphold the value of our traditional sexual ethic, we have

those who want to tear it down. That grieves me, but is something I have come to understand more fully.

My twins are of the age where they are starting to understand the Holocaust, and my wife and I introduced them to the *Diary of Anne Frank* this year. We want them to understand the heroism of people like Corrie ten Boom and others whose Christian courage is worthy of emulation. I do not feel courageous most days, but I think it is important for us to be willing to take a stand when the situation warrants. The complexity of these matters is real, but let us not allow that complexity to keep us from doing the simple thing sometimes required—which may simply entail standing up for what we believe is right.

Corrie ten Boom has an image in *Life is but a Weaving* where she likens life to a tapestry, one that looks like a beautiful crown on one side, but on the back side, it is just a hodge-podge of threads that do not look very beautiful. And yet every thread, as she suggests, matters. She writes, “Every experience God gives us, every person He puts in our lives is the per-

fect preparation for a future that only He can see.”^{vii}

We only really understand life looking backward, but we have to live it moving forward. At this point, I still do not understand all of the twists and turns of this part of my own journey, one that has introduced me to legal nuances I never even wanted to learn, much less use in an appeal to the highest court in our land. But sometimes the most direct way to respond to the complexity in our lives is to do the simple thing, even if it is hard.

* * *

Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. These are the four horsemen of our context. Ambiguity is, by definition, really hard to nail down. One of the leaders I met while doing my research is Mike Ullman. He is one of the most accomplished Christian leaders I know. He served as the CEO of Macy’s and led them from the brink of bankruptcy. He later served twice as the CEO of JC Penney, one of the most venerable brands in America. He was the longtime Chairman of



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We draw upon our unique institutional narratives to tell stories and craft compelling examples that others cannot claim.”

the Board of Starbucks and of the ministry Mercy Ships, and I was blessed to have him as the Vice Chair of the Board at Gordon for a number of years. Through that, he became a mentor and a trusted advisor. And often, as we traveled together, he would teach me about his own leadership journey.

He was quite a legend in retail, having been one of the people who invented the concept of duty-free shopping. Before we had luxury brands being sold in every international airport and high-end chocolates available tax-free in places like cruise ship terminals and on international flights, Mike piloted the idea of duty-free shopping in Hong Kong in the 1990s. Because of that, he caught the attention of Bernard Arnault, the third richest man in the world and the legendary French businessman based in Paris who owns LVMH, the confederation of 150 luxury brands, including Louis Vuitton and Christian Dior.^{viii}

Apparently, Mike found it hard to lead the many designers and creative teams of the hundred-plus brands under the LVMH house, and he was trying to get his arms around some kind of unifying corporate culture for these disparate brands that worked together but also competed against one another. He brought in a firm to do some analysis, and one of their

conclusions was illuminating, even as it was hard to know what to do with it. Ambiguity, they concluded, is one of the values that high-end brands prize. The people that worked at LVMH liked the creative edge that ambiguity facilitated, and they liked ambiguity's elusiveness because it made their brands interesting, intriguing, and unpredictable in a good way. It is what allowed them to attract a loyal following and to always be on the cutting edge.

At the time Mike was talking with me about LVMH, I was reading some work by the French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, and perhaps because of the shared connection to France, I started thinking about possible connections between the ambiguity of LVMH's culture and some of the observations of Levi-Strauss.

Levi-Strauss touted the value of bricolage, the ability to make do with whatever it is at hand. The concept is taken from a French term, bricoler, which can mean in certain contexts, the ability to “bounce back.”^{ix} Bricolage is a kind of inventiveness, an ability to improvise without obvious or apparent tools or materials. It is basically tinkering around with whatever you can find in the shop, kind of like what MacGyver would do on his weekly TV show, or what

we did as kids when we tried to build things from our imagination even when we did not have the instructions or all the needed tools.

It seems to me that one very helpful way to respond to the ambiguity we experience in higher education today is to take stock of what resources we do have and then to fashion our institutional response to the ambiguous contexts by playing to our institutional strengths. What works for Samford will not likely work for California Baptist, and what works for East Texas Baptist is not likely applicable to Carson-Newman.

But that is part of the genius of bricolage. We draw upon our unique institutional narratives to tell stories and craft compelling examples that others cannot claim. We tout our best athletic teams, even if it is not seen as a premier sport everywhere, and we talk about our strongest academic offerings even if it is not at the top of every applicant's list of intended major.

There is something a little freeing if we can just be ourselves. So much of higher education these days is a bit of an arms race, with each of us trying to parrot the leading actors of our field, even though we do not have multi-billion-dollar endowments or waiting lists that can number into the thousands.



Ours is a God who equips those he has called. And each of us and our institutions have received a calling. I suppose it is possible, in the providence of God, that some of our campuses may cease operations or become mere shells of what we once were. But I cannot believe that is God's preferred will for those institutions that represent Him in the world of higher education. I cannot believe that God does not want us to flourish and thrive, even despite the VUCA world in which we find ourselves.

And perhaps we simply need to be reminded that he has given us all that we need. We just have to improvise a bit and find ways to live with the ambiguity even as we remain unambiguous about our unique contributions as Christ-centered places of learning in a growing sea of woke-oriented sameness and undifferentiated, paler copies of institutions like Yale and Stanford.

* * *

Volatility in our day demands character. Uncertainty requires humility and meekness. Complexity needs a response of simple courage when required, and Ambiguity draws out ingenuity and the reminder that God equips those whom He calls. May we all be found

faithful in our response as we rise to meet the challenges of today.

ⁱ Interview with Colin Powell, August 26, 2009, Alexandria, VA.

ⁱⁱ Powell, Colin L, and Joseph E Persico. *My American Journey*. 1st ed., Random House, 1995.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kazantzis, Nikolaos, et al. "Unresolved Issues Regarding Collaborative Empiricism in Cognitive and Behavioural Therapies: An Expert Panel Discussion at AACBT." *Behaviour Change*, vol. 30, no. 1, Apr. 2013, pp. 1–11

^{iv} Aristotle. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.

^v Peterson, Eugene H. *Under the Unpredictable Plant*. WB Eerdmans, 1992.

^{vi} Neilan, Terence. "High Court in Massachusetts Rules Gays Have Right to Marry." *New York Times*, 18 Nov. 2003.

^{vii} ten Boom, Corrie. *Tramp for the Lord*. "Life is but a weaving." Boston, GK Hall, 1974.

^{viii} Adams, Susan. "The \$100 Billion Man: How Bernard Arnault Stitched Together The World's Third Biggest Fortune with Louis Vuitton, Dior, And 77 Other Brands--And Why He's Not Done Yet." *Forbes*, 30 Nov. 2019.

^{ix} Karl Weick, "The Collapse of Sense-Making in Organizations: The Mann-Gulch Disaster," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, December 1993

Hard Joys & Meaningful Work

D. Michael Lindsay, President of Taylor University and IABCU's 2022 Hester Lecturer



This is the third installment of the Hester Lectures delivered at the 2022 IABCU Annual Meeting at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama.

I want to use this third lecture as a chance to speak personally with some reflections from my research, my life in the presidency, and my general observations. I share these stories in hopes they will be of some encouragement to you in whatever the Lord is doing in your life right now. If there is anything that is applicable or helpful, I hope you will use it. If it does not apply to you, then thanks for allowing me to speak from my heart.

When my oldest daughter, Elizabeth, was four months old, we began to have the sense that something was not quite right with her developmentally. Over the next several months, we tried various tactics to help her catch up. Eventually, we took her to see an experienced pediatrician. On that warm September afternoon, the doctor spent nearly half an hour examining Elizabeth, occasionally asking us questions while poking

and prodding and then watching for certain responses.

The doctor handed Elizabeth back to my wife and then cleared her throat: "Well, I don't know what to say, but something is definitely wrong with your little girl." The doctor continued to speak for a few minutes, but I had stopped listening. In that examination room, I found it difficult to breathe. When we got to our car, we could barely speak to our parents over the cell phone; grief overtook us and made it hard to get out even basic words. In the hours that followed, Rebecca and I agonized and grieved the loss of a future we had never articulated but felt most definitely entitled to.

We prayed hard that our worst fears would not live themselves out, but we dreaded that they would. For the next two years, we took Elizabeth to see a variety of specialists, none of whom were able to identify an underlying condition or a possible treatment for her. It would not be until Elizabeth was three years old that an assistant professor of genetics at the

Baylor College of Medicine would identify an extremely rare genetic disorder which, it turns out, my wife and I (and our families) are carriers for. Elizabeth is one of five hundred or so known cases in the world.

There is no cure, and it is a complicated disorder that entails profound cognitive disability (with no real language to speak of), dangerously low white blood cell count, being legally blind, and having many challenges with internal organs. If you look at Elizabeth from afar, you assume she is typical, but if you interact with her for even a few seconds, you realize that she is very special.

The hinge moment occurred that September afternoon when Rebecca and I had to decide how we would process this unexpected turn in the life of our family. In the intervening years (Elizabeth is now eighteen), we have experienced many moments of satisfying joy in parenting her. But at other times, it has been more like a heavy joy, a hard joy.

* * *

Working in Christian higher education is a bit like living out a hard joy. It seems that there are many challenges lying in wait around every corner. And I do not know about you, but I am just spent at the end of the academic year.

“*Working in Christian higher education is a bit like living out a hard joy.*”

Bill Robinson was Beck Taylor’s predecessor at Whitworth. I spent some time with him early on in my presidency, and he urged me never to decide if I was going to quit my job in May or June.

“That’s not the right time for a college president to make a sound decision,” he advised. “Wait until you’ve rested and then decide in August or September when the tough issues of the last year are a little more distant.”

I followed that advice in my own discernment process when I stepped down from the Gordon presidency. It was very good advice. That is good advice because leading a Christian university entails a lot of hard joys.

As I conclude my time with you, I want to offer three encouragements from my favorite book of the Bible, Philippians. Last summer, I traveled with a cohort of



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There is something special about the providence of God in that He places people in the right places at the right institution in just the right time and season.”

honors students to Greece and had the chance to visit—for the first time—the town of Philippi. It is one of the places Paul was imprisoned, and yet it is also a site where he had strong, lasting connections. His letter to the Philippians contains some of the most joy-filled words of the entire New Testament. So, what is in this book of only four chapters that is applicable to the work we do in Christian higher education?

For one, Paul reminds us that God has begun a good work in us, and He will complete it until the time of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6). When I sat down to interview these 550 people in the PLATINUM Study, I had spent a good bit of time learning about them and looking for patterns. When you do that with hundreds of cases, you can see just how consistently the Lord equips those whom He calls.

I think of Barry Rowan, a committed follower of Jesus whose experience leading a failed telecom business in Brazil later prepared him to do significant work at multiple Fortune 500 companies later in his career. I am also reminded of Drew Faust, the president of Harvard, whose interesting combination of being a first-rate scholar

on the Civil War and a non-threatening presence interpersonally made her the ideal successor to her more bombastic predecessor in the Harvard presidency, Larry Summers. She was like a soothing balm to her institution at a time when healing was needed.

Indeed, the Lord gives us the leadership skills we need for the moment, but there is also something special about the providence of God in that He places people in the right places at the right institution in just the right time and season.

John Gardner was a serial entrepreneur in the social sector, having founded Common Cause and the Independent Sector. He also spent time leading the Carnegie Corporation before being named Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in LBJ's Cabinet. He served under President Johnson and had a close working relationship with him, even though Gardner was a Republican.

Following his time in Washington, John Gardner wrote a slender book called *Self-Renewal*.¹ In it, he argued in favor of a regular interval of making a sober assessment of ourselves and our institutions. The goal was to determine if we were still in the right spot—for

ourselves and for our institutions. He suggested we should ask hard questions along these lines at least once a year.

His book played a role in my own sense that God might be calling to move away from my faculty position at Rice and to the presidency at Gordon in 2010. Then, while finishing my ninth year at Gordon, I re-read the book as I was feeling a bit restless. It is a strange experience to re-read a book and to see what phrases you previously underlined and what marginal notes you wrote as you were processing the call of God on your life at a particular moment.

But something about that experience brought the idea of change back to the forefront of my mind as I approached nearly a decade in Boston. The Lord used that re-reading as a chance to make me open to leaving Gordon—something I never thought I could do. After all, I loved being a university president, and I had worked hard for a number of years. I was ready to enjoy my seven years of plenty.

At the same time, I sensed that my work at the College, which had been exceedingly meaningful for me, was coming to a close. I



grieved this idea. I bitterly wept at the idea of having to give this up. Looking for some consolation, I re-read the Book of Philippians one night, and my mind fixed on chapter 1, verse 6: “He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it.”

Just because the Lord might be calling you to do something that’s out of your comfort zone does not mean that there is not good work ahead for you. So, my first encouragement to us all is not to be afraid to make a move if that is what God might be calling you to do.

I have since found wonderful alignment between my gifts and experiences and what the Taylor presidency needed. As I was weighing options about eighteen months ago, I had a few friends who were concerned that I might be making only a “lateral move” since Gordon and Taylor are similarly sized and in a similar ecosystem. They raised some concerns about what this would mean for my career, longer term. I appreciated that concern and had some pause myself. I was blessed to have three wonderful options that Rebecca and I were considering when God clearly called us to Taylor. But through a series of divine confirmations, I felt a strong sense that this was where we were to be.

I think I am far happier in my current role than I would have been in those other two options. I did not fully understand that at the time I accepted the Taylor role, but even just a year later, I can see it much more clearly.

There are many places and ways we can do meaningful work, and it is important to be led by God to find the right place that is the right match for the right season. I may very well not be the right person for Taylor in another season, but for this one, it seems like a very good fit. And no doubt, there have been and there will be hard joys associated with this calling. They do not go away, even when you are in precisely the right spot. But self-reflection and self-renewal is a very good thing to practice, and I encourage you to use the summer months as a chance to take stock and ask the Lord to guide you.

* * *

I was never a great chemistry student, but my prayer partner when I was on the faculty at Rice was one of the world’s leading chemists. Indeed, during the years that we met every Thursday morning to pray, he was one of the top ten most cited chemists alive.ⁱⁱ His name is Jim Tour, and his particular expertise relates to carbon molecules and nanotechnology. I knew virtually nothing about the topic when I met Jim, and I still only know just enough to be dangerous when I drop in the chemistry department on campus for conversation. But I know that carbon molecules exposed to extreme



“Failure and challenge refine us in ways that success and ease simply cannot. The key is to realize that failure does not have to be final.”

pressure and very high temperature deep within the mantle of the earth can form diamond crystals. I always found that process of transformation so interesting.

Jim taught me that diamonds are the hardest known substance and are among the greatest conductors of heat on earth. They have the highest melting point of anything we’ve discovered—somewhere between 4,000 and 7,000 degrees (F). They have the densest atomic configuration of any mineral, and they are transparent over the greatest number of wavelengths. These unique qualities are why diamonds are so precious and valued around the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, these desirable and beneficial qualities develop only through an intense process. If there were no pressure, the carbon would form graphite—a common substance not nearly as brilliant or impressive as diamonds. It is the unique combination of intense pressure and high temperature that produces the diamond crystal.^{iv} And the particulars of each diamond’s experience are what distinguish one from another, with varying degrees of color and clarity.

The same is true for each of us. Failure and challenge refine us in ways that success and ease simply cannot. Virtually every person who successfully navigates the most important hinge moments of life experiences some form of misses and disappointments along the way. The key is to recognize that failure does not have to be final.

In Philippians 3, Paul admonishes the Philippians to “press on

toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called” us heavenward in Christ Jesus. That requires us to convert our challenges and disappointments and move forward so that we, like those carbon molecules that have been pressed and refined, might shine brilliantly like a diamond—not in spite of the pressures we have experienced but because of them.

I wish failure wasn’t such an integral part of my own leadership journey. Like all of us, I work hard to put on a good face and to publicly present things in a way that make detours and crashes appear as if they were always part of the intended journey. But in reality, I have had more than my share of mess-ups and mistakes, and those crucible experiences have shaped me deeply. I talked earlier about the profound difficulties I experienced at Gordon. What I did not mention is the entire scrutiny on Gordon’s traditional sexual ethic caught the media’s attention only after I signed a letter to President Obama, along with several other Christian leaders, urging him to keep in place an executive order that President Bush had instituted back in 2002.^v

I cannot tell you how many times I have wondered how my life would have been different if I had never signed that letter. I do not second-guess the content of what the letter said, and I had the support of my Board’s Executive Committee when I signed on to it. But would I be associated with the LGBTQ debate in the evangelical church if I had never signed the letter? Could my presidency have stayed

away from all of those issues if I had not signed my name? I will never know.

What I do know is that the pressure from that whole situation has remade me as a leader. I am a different person having experienced the high temperature of the media spotlight and the public scrutiny. As just one example, let me mention one moment when I understood the importance of stewarding power with grace and kindness.

I decided to have a call with our local Congressman. He had been on the Gordon campus many times, and I knew that he was a liberal Democrat and so was never fully at ease with Gordon's conservative theology. But he knew us, and he knew me, so I assumed he would give us the benefit of the doubt.

He had the call on speaker-phone, so I assumed there were others listening in on the conversation. I related that the articles in the newspaper really did not describe who Gordon was or our nuanced and pastoral approach we took with students around issues of human sexuality. I suppose I was looking for some form of support from him; after all, he was my elected official as well.

After about ten minutes, he interrupted and said, "I'm going to stop you right there, Mr. President." Now, I had never been called "Mr. President" in my life. I did not know what he would say next.

"You need to know that I find your position detestable and despicable. I am going to make it my priority to either get you to change your position, or we're going to

fundamentally alter your business model." It was a threat unlike any I had ever heard. He was basically threatening to remove our tax-exempt status and/or make it impossible for students to apply federal student financial aid to study at Gordon. Either way, it would have a devastating effect on our institution.

I hung up the phone, and my hand was shaking. I had never felt so intimidated, so vulnerable, so bullied in all of my life. Reflecting on that episode, I think I have become more attentive to how carefully we have to speak when we are in leadership. There is a reason that the way of Jesus is the way of the servant. We do not ever need to yell; just by our position, people are nervous and a little scared, even if they do not act like it. Usually, they are coming to us for help or protection or encouragement. In those rare times when we have to deliver a word of correction or disagreement, we should think carefully about our tone and our content. It all becomes part of the way that people experience us as leaders, for good or for bad.

How can your own crucible experiences be deployed for greater good? After all, we are admonished, like the Philippians, to press forward, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.

* * *

Third, I take great comfort in the message of Philippians 4 where Paul says, in essence, do not worry about anything but pray about

“There is a reason that the way of Jesus is the way of the servant.”



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everything. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Early on in my presidential career, I had a very major donor who was quite difficult. He was wildly successful in real estate, and he had not had a boss or a banker in over fifty years. So he was used to calling the shots. I was a young, inexperienced president, and I think he saw me as “his boy” in some ways. He would call me, sometimes three or four times a day, to talk about the university’s future and his hopes and dreams for my presidency. He was an important donor to the institution, and I craved his approval. I wanted to be seen as a leader who could woo and retain big supporters, and I was feeling insecure because of my inexperience in this area. So his approval meant a lot.

A few months into the role, he called me with a request. It was quite detailed, and I was not sure that we could do what he was

asking, but I told him I would look into it, which I did. It turned out that his request was going to run afoul of some legal and tax issues, so I called him back to politely turn him down. I prayed a good bit before making the call, feeling pretty anxious. It would be my first time to tell him “no.” Just to be certain, I conferred with the board chair, who agreed that we could not do as the donor was asking. That gave me some confidence to make the call.

To say that the conversation went badly would be an understatement. He was livid. He yelled at me for ten minutes, barely coming up for air. His protests were so emotional and powerful that I realized, pretty quickly, that my pushback must have been the right thing to do. Why else would he be so exercised about something that was relatively small dollars compared to his wealth?

He is one who holds grudges forever, and that conversation broke our relationship permanently. There was no making up. In a matter of a few minutes, I went

from being the golden boy to this person’s enemy. He would spend the next several years trying to get me fired or to make my life so miserable that I would resign. I have never experienced anything like it, before or since.

Around the same time, I was reading an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. It was about a transformational gift of \$400 million that came to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, just outside of Albany.^{vi} I was struck by how life-altering such a gift would be for a school like Gordon. And just moments after having that thought, Philippians 4:6 came to mind—do not worry about anything but pray about everything.

I decided that I would pray for a transformational gift to come to Gordon, one that would make this major donor, who had become such a thorn in my flesh, pale in comparison. For some reason, this idea of praying for a transformational gift stayed with me, and before long, it had been a month or



so that I had been praying for this nearly every day.

Now, I cannot say that I instantly had the faith and confidence that God would bring some kind of gift like this to us, but over time, I resolved in my heart to pray for a transformational donor to come into my life. This became a regular prayer request for quite some time. I would go and meet someone and think, “Could you be the transformational donor I have been praying for?” And I would soon learn that, in fact, they were not. I would plan an ask for a big gift and, on occasion, I would even tell the other person that I had been praying that the Lord would move the heart for someone to make a transformational gift. Pretty soon, however, I would hear their response and realize that they were not the transformational donor I was hoping for.

I cannot say that I made this the centerpiece of my prayer life as president, but it continued to be in my prayers very regularly for years. Then one day, I got the call.

I was driving in my car, and I saw a man’s name on my caller ID. We had developed a budding friendship over the last few years, and he and his wife had made a modest gift of \$10,000 for something, which was followed a year or two later with a gift of about \$250,000. But he rarely initiated contact, and he had only been on campus once.

“Michael,” he said, “we’ve been thinking about our future and our

desire to do something in support of Christian education. Maybe it would be part of our estate, or maybe sooner. We don’t have anything in mind in particular, but we wondered if Gordon might be interested. It would represent something big, at least for us.”

Now, I knew this family was wealthy, but I can honestly say at this moment, I had no idea how well off they were. And I did not want to get my hopes up, so I decided to prod a little further before saying much.

“Well, I know ‘big’ can mean different things to different people,” I replied while I continued driving down the highway. “What are you thinking along these lines?”

He cleared his throat and then said, “We were thinking we might do \$100 million.”

At this point, I came close to crashing the vehicle.

“That certainly qualifies as big in my book,” I told him. “To be honest, I am speechless. I am overwhelmed. Tell me more. Tell me more about your thought process.”

And for the next few minutes, he recounted his family’s journey of business success, philanthropy, and increasing exposure to Gordon. I did not tell him at the time, but the early connection Rebecca and I formed with him and his wife started very close to the first time I felt led to pray for a transformational gift, almost four years earlier.

That specific phone conversation led to many discussions over

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“Every day, we get the chance to carry out a noble mission of preparing the next generation to serve the Lord in their respective callings.”

the next couple of years. In 2017, we announced \$25 million coming from this anonymous family in support of a new honors program. In 2019, we were able to announce that they had increased that to \$75 million and decided to make it unrestricted. And at the conclusion of the fundraising campaign that coincided with the end of my time at Gordon, we were able to announce an additional \$40 million estate commitment, taking their total gift to \$115 million, the largest gift commitment ever made to a school like Gordon.^{vii}

I share this story in part to demonstrate how very little I did other than pray. It came as a pure gift to me and my institution. I did not craft a compelling proposal or make a big ask. I did not send the wife roses, nor did I curate special memories for the family. Pretty much the only thing I did consistently was pray, and I did not even pray for them by name or with any inkling that they would become the answer to that prayer. I simply tried to follow the admonition of Philippians 4—do not worry about anything, but pray about everything.

* * *

Leading a Christian institution can be such meaningful work. Every day, we get the chance to carry out a noble mission of preparing the next generation to serve the Lord in their respective callings. We are invited to steward some of the most important institutional carriers of the Christian Gospel. In no other organizational context

is the Gospel invoked because of its relevance for everything from architecture to zoology, and we get to serve students who are primed to sort through the big questions of life during their time on our campuses.

There are, of course, hard joys along the way—necessary endings, difficult conversations, and tough decisions, but ours is a God who sustains us in and through them all. It has been a joy and privilege to be with you through the Hester lectures. I leave you with Paul’s parting words to his beloved church at Philippi: “May God meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. The grace of the Lord be with you all. Amen.”

ⁱ Gardner, John W. *Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society*. Harper & Row, 1964.

ⁱⁱ “James Tour.” *Rice University Chemistry*. <https://profiles.rice.edu/faculty/james-tour>

ⁱⁱⁱ Nesse, William D. *Introduction to Mineralogy*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

^{iv} Nesse, William D. *Introduction to Mineralogy*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

^v President Bush. Executive Order 13279: Equal Protection of the Laws for Faith, December 12, 2002.

^{vi} Arenson, Karen. “For Rensselaer Polytechnic, a Record-Setting Gift With No Strings Attached.” *New York Times*, March 13, 2001.

^{vii} Shellnutt, Kate. “Gordon College Receives Record \$75.5 Million Donation.” *Christianity Today*, 4 Oct. 2019.