



Larry M. Goodpaster

# Exercising the Mind for Spiritual Leadership

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on leadership or organizational  
strategies, am I willing to let it  
challenge my own character and  
leadership style?*

*I want to have my soul stirred  
and to be encouraged by the  
spiritual journeys of others.*

*Reading expands, alters, or  
confirms theology, and helps my  
faith become active in love  
(Galatians 5:6).*

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narrative that may help  
communicate the Great Story  
of God's love to the people of  
this time.*

There is no substitute for reading broadly, deeply, and regularly. By exercising the mind, stretching the spirit, and nourishing the soul, we prepare ourselves to provide the spiritual leadership needed in a world desperate for a vital word of hope and direction. Reading helps us connect God's Word (both written and Incarnate) with our world.

As people of the Methodist movement, this is part of our heritage. "From the beginning, Wesley had placed a premium on encouraging his preachers and people to read, and literacy remained an important part of the Methodist experience in America. Like Wesley, Asbury and his colleagues believed strongly in the power of the written word. If a preacher claimed 'I have no taste for reading,' the 1784 Discipline advised him to 'Contract a Taste for it by Use, or return to your Trade.'" <sup>1</sup>

John Wesley's editing of The Christian Library was a broad listing of recommended reading that included the pietistic writers of his time as well as several Patristic authors. Such a list suggests to us that while he may have described himself as a "man of one book," Wesley was also committed to reading a wide variety of books. In fact, Richard Heitzenrater points out that "the book list appended to the Wesleyan publications in 1757 included one hundred fifty-three items." <sup>2</sup>

In his 1756 "Address to Clergy," Wesley catalogs the subjects necessary for one who is to preach in the Methodist movement. The list is impressive and comprehensive, and includes knowledge of Scripture (and the original languages)

as well as history, philosophy, geometry, and many other subjects. Wesley wrote: "Ought not a Minister to have, First, understanding, a clear apprehension, a sound judgment, and a capacity of reasoning with some closeness? Is not this necessary in an high degree for the work of the ministry? ... Is it not highly expedient that a guide of souls should have likewise some liveliness and readiness of thought?" <sup>3</sup>

Long before I was confronted by the admonitions of John Wesley, I had cultivated a love for reading. As a young person through high school I read the stories of Mark Twain, the plays of William Shakespeare, and the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. College introduced me to Faulkner, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald, along with Aristotle, Augustine, Tillich, and Barth. Such reading and study brought me insights that gradually expanded my horizons and deepened my faith.

Good reading challenges the intellect. When reading I strive to learn something new and fresh that will refocus my work and enhance my skills. I approach reading with a posture of questioning. For instance, I recently read three books on the history and development of early American Methodism. What, if anything, could I learn that might be transferable to our own time? Or when I study the latest writings on leadership or organizational strategies, am I willing to let it challenge my own character and leadership style? What does Jim Collins or Ken Blanchard or Bill George have to offer that will change my way of leading in these next decades?

Good reading should stimulate the heart and inspire the spirit. I want to have

my soul stirred and to be encouraged by the spiritual journeys of others. From Bernard of Clairvaux to Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen, my spiritual life is nurtured by insights that deepen my relationship with Jesus Christ. I inherit some of their accumulated spiritual wealth by reading their words.

In this way, reading becomes transformative. That was my experience when I was first exposed to writers such as Wesley and Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer. Reading expands, alters, or confirms theology, and helps my faith become active in love (Galatians 5:6). My understanding and appropriation of the faith is being clarified as I enter into conversation with an author. Again, I read inquisitively: How is my theology being shaped or reshaped by this book? How does that idea impact my thinking? Is it within the gracious limits of the Christian faith handed down through two millennia?

There is also an important place for reading that entertains. Reading fiction provides a welcome respite from the stresses of daily ministry. Writers such as James Michener, P. D. James, Anne Tyler,

and John Grisham invite me to enter an imaginative world for a brief period of time. From them I learn something about the way to create a narrative that may help communicate the Great Story of God's love to the people of this time. Through them I catch a glimpse of the human condition, and am often surprised by an experience of grace in the midst of the dialog and relationships.

**I keep a rather modest goal of reading at least two books each month, along with various journals and magazines.** On a quarterly basis, I send out a list of the books I have been reading, along with a brief comment on what I have gleaned from them. The most frequently asked question I get after distributing that list is about time. **With all the demands that are part of a pastor's life, how can we find time to read that much?** To this FAQ, I generally respond with three words: discipline, commitment, and priority.

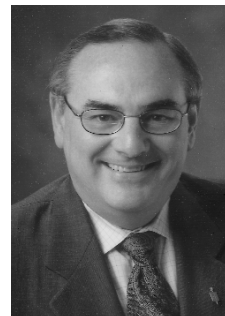
One final word is essential. With Wesley I would emphasize that reading Scripture is first and primary, and must be if we are to serve and lead faithfully. It is the first book

I pick up in the early morning. It is the book I return to often during the course of the day. It is the foundational source of all that inspires and nourishes my life. Give me the one book! But give me hundreds of others that help tell, interpret, and apply the Great Story of the Bible in ways that will touch my heart and the hearts of people in this time and place. □

<sup>1</sup> *Taking Heaven by Storm*, John H. Wigger, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001, page 72.

<sup>2</sup> *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, Richard P. Heitzenrater, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, page 197.

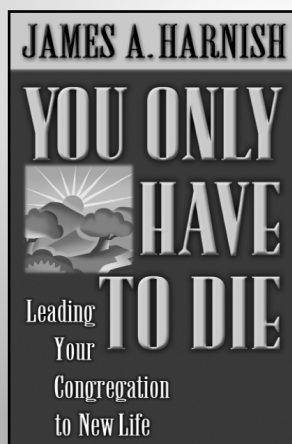
<sup>3</sup> *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 10, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002 (Reprint of the 1872 edition), pages 481-482.



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# You only have to die

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