

# TRUSTWORTHY LEADERSHIP: THE FOUNDATION FOR THRIVING IN CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the critical role of trust in ethical leadership within faith-based higher education, a sector currently facing a crisis of trust, particularly between faculty and administration. It examines the internal and external pressures impacting higher education, including faculty burnout and the faculty–administration divide, exacerbated by differing perspectives on power and organizational culture. The paper introduces “trustworthy leadership,” a model integrating organizational trust factors (competence, honesty, care, reliability, identification), servant leadership, transformational leadership, and Christian values (truthfulness, humility, love). Grounded in a quantitative study demonstrating a strong correlation between a culture of trust and a thriving faculty, this paper argues that cultivating trustworthy leadership is essential for the flourishing of faculty members and administrators in faith-based colleges and universities. The paper concludes with practical strategies related to shared governance, faculty development, hiring processes, institutional planning, and support for underrepresented faculty, to foster trustworthy leadership and rebuild trust within these institutions.*

Keywords: trust, leadership, faculty, Christian higher education

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## INTRODUCTION

Without question, trust is a critical component of ethical leadership. Several leadership books and articles address the importance of trust for cohesive teamwork and sustained organizational success over time.<sup>1</sup> However, few theoretical models include or emphasize trustworthiness as a vital component of effective leadership.

My leadership context, faith-based higher education, is facing a crisis of trust. In the current milieu, negativity, suspicion, and fear are more likely to characterize university employee interactions than collaboration, engagement, and joy. This reality is especially true of the relationship between faculty and administration. Trustworthy leadership—a developing concept that integrates organizational trust factors, servant and transformational leadership theories, and traditional Christian values—is needed to repair divisions within the university and promote the thriving of faculty and administrators, ultimately contributing to the flourishing of academic communities.

## HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY

The list of external problems facing higher education is endless. The higher education sector is a microcosm of our BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, and Incomprehensible) world. Public perception, inconsistent government funding, inequitable (often unclear) outcomes, and numerous economic factors create stress for college administrators and characterize higher education as a volatile industry. Internally, the list of challenges is comparable in their scope and complexity. These challenges are highlighted by faculty burnout, financial instability, and a deepening divide between faculty and administration.

### **Faculty burnout**

Recent changes and challenges to higher education have critically affected faculty members and their well-being. The global pandemic highlighted many challenges facing university faculty. Systemic inequalities, increased workloads,

<sup>1</sup> R.A. Heifetz – M. Linsky: *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002; P. Lencioni: *The advantage: Why organizational health trumps everything else in business*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012; J.M. Kouzes – B.Z. Posner: *Learning leadership: The five fundamentals of becoming an exemplary leader*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2016.

and weakened faculty governance structures have led to greater stress levels and feelings of isolation and fragmentation from the rest of the institution.<sup>2</sup>

Faculty members at Christian colleges and universities in the United States face many of these same challenges but also experience additional stressors unique to the faith-based sector, such as an expectation for mentoring and faith integration.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, the highly polarized political landscape has resulted in several high-profile faculty dismissals, leaving many remaining faculty members wondering if academic freedom still exists and experiencing fear and insecurity about the future.<sup>4</sup>

### **Divide between faculty and administration**

The polarization in mainstream culture is mirrored in the academy, best expressed through the fragile relationship between faculty and administration. Faculty and administration frequently conflict around nuanced ideological, theological, and financial issues, although both align with the educational mission and a shared desire to increase institutional health.<sup>5</sup> Many of the published articles focus on the different values and perspectives that faculty and administration develop due to their differing goals within the institution.<sup>6</sup> Although I believe much of the conflict stems from a lack of trust, a brief overview of the differences in organizational culture is pertinent to the subject of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> K. R. McClure – A.H. Fryar: ‘The great faculty disengagement’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 January 2022, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-great-faculty-disengagement> (accessed 22 January 2022).

<sup>3</sup> A. Noble: ‘A professor’s perspective: Why Christian colleges emphasize mentorship’, *Christianity Today*, 25 January 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/partners/higher-education/professors-perspective-mentorship.html> (accessed 19 March 2023).

<sup>4</sup> J. Dunn: ‘An angry debate over Critical Race Theory splits Christian colleges’, *Newsweek*, 14 February, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/angry-debate-over-critical-race-theory-splits-christian-colleges-1678626> (accessed 5 March 2022); R. Dobkin: ‘Conservative campuses are facing cancel culture problems’, *Newsweek*, 4 August, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/christian-college-university-professor-conservative-1928037> (accessed 1 September 2024).

<sup>5</sup> J.L. Bess – J.R. Dee: *Bridging the divide between faculty and administration: A guide to understanding conflict in the academy*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> W.H. Bergquist – K. Pawlak: *Engaging the six cultures of the academy: Revised and expanded edition of the four cultures of the academy*. 2nd edn. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008; L.G. Bolman – J.V. Gallos: *Reframing academic leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

*Academic Cultures*

Colleges have been described as organized anarchies,<sup>7</sup> or bifurcated organizations<sup>8</sup> because there is some ambiguity around the purpose and goals of higher education and the role each person plays in achieving those goals.<sup>9</sup> Bergquist and Pawlak<sup>10</sup> described higher education as comprising various interrelated cultures—collegial, managerial, developmental, advocacy, virtual, and tangible. Most traditional faculty members are part of the collegial culture, and most administrators are in the organizational culture. Understanding and appreciating the perspectives of each culture can “reduce the pervasive anxiety”<sup>11</sup> associated with navigating various challenges and functions in the institution.

Using a similar construct, Bolman and Gallos,<sup>12</sup> described varied approaches as *frames* that capture people’s distinctive ways of thinking and behaving in the institution. Higher education comprises four primary frames: structural/machine, human resource/family, political/jungle, and symbolic/theater.<sup>13</sup> Academic and administrative leaders tend to view organizations through very different frames, with the faculty viewing the institution as a jungle to be navigated with shrewdness and political skill and administrators framing the university as a machine to be managed with structure and policies.

Conceptualizing the faculty–administration divide with these cultures or frames provides insight into the conflict experienced in most universities. Administrators, who are primarily part of the managerial culture with a structural/machine frame, are focused on efficiently and effectively monitoring the college or university’s resources, including the human resources of faculty members. They tend to view the curriculum as the intellectual property of the college to be efficiently delivered to students and they approach problems with an emphasis on data, technology, and fiscal responsibility. Meanwhile, most faculty members operate in the collegial culture and experience institutional life through the political/jungle or human resource/family frame. Faculty members value differences, express their disciplinary expertise, and integrate teaching and research. They view the institution as a jungle to be negotiated politically (often in faculty governance and committees) or a family in which

<sup>7</sup> M.D. Cohen – J.G. March: *Leadership and ambiguity: The American college president*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> P.M. Blau: *The organization of academic work*. Wiley, 1973.

<sup>9</sup> R.M. Hendrickson et al.: *Academic leadership and governance of higher education: A guide for trustees, leaders, and aspiring leaders of two- and four-year institutions*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2012, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/grace-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3037633> (accessed 9 January 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Bergquist – Pawlak: *Engaging the six cultures of the academy*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Bolman – Gallos: *Reframing academic leadership*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

to relate (practicing collegiality and teamwork with other faculty members). Faculty members deeply value autonomy and their freedom to choose what and how they teach and research, so any regulation, observation, or interruption tends to be perceived as a potential threat to their autonomy and academic freedom.

### *Perspectives on Power*

Another consideration for understanding the origins of the divide between faculty and administration is their understanding of power. Power is inherent, though often unmentioned, in any discussion of leadership.<sup>14</sup> Kellerman<sup>15</sup> argues that power dynamics have shifted from leaders to followers over the past fifty years. In this shift, followers demand more from their leaders, and leaders are obliged to meet those demands.

Further, there may be philosophical differences in understanding power. Crouch<sup>16</sup> notes that academics, particularly those in the humanities and social sciences, have taken new notice of power dynamics in institutions, influenced heavily by Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche. This new emphasis on power suggests that power is at work in every human interaction, mainly as an invisible control mechanism. Crouch posits that academics may overemphasize power at the expense of more compelling virtues such as creativity and love. Might the shift in power from positional leaders to followers and academic thinkers' renewed suspicion of power intensify the conflict between faculty and administrators?

### FACULTY THRIVING

My interest in trustworthy leadership stems from the findings of my dissertation project, a qualitative study identifying the predictors of faculty thriving among full-time faculty members at Christian colleges and universities in the United States. A *culture of trust* emerged as the most significant contributor to the variation in faculty thriving, having the largest direct and total effects.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> P.G. Northouse: *Leadership: Theory and practice*. Seventh Edition. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2015.

<sup>15</sup> B. Kellerman: *The end of leadership*. New York, NY: Harper Business, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> A. Crouch: *Playing God: Redeeming the gift of power*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> A.T. Crabtree: *Pathways to thriving in Christian college and university faculty*, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. Ph.D./HE. Azusa Pacific University, 2024, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2915898340/abstract/A702D4A0C4464C03PQ/1> (accessed 22 January 2024).

## Thriving Defined

Faculty Thriving is a valid framework for understanding faculty functioning and well-being and is theoretically grounded in positive psychology.<sup>18</sup> Unlike research focusing on a particular facet of the faculty experience, such as satisfaction, engagement, or productivity, faculty thriving is a holistic model integrating interpersonal, intrapersonal, and institutional aspects. Faculty thriving is measured by the Faculty Thriving Quotient and comprises five factors, each addressing an essential relationship within the faculty experience.<sup>19</sup>

- Meaningful Engagement describes a faculty member's relationship with their work and role. The meaningful engagement scale measures the degree to which their research, teaching, and service provide them with a sense of accomplishment and joy.
- Student Impact addresses faculty members' relationships with their students. The student impact scale measures whether faculty members believe they are making a difference and influencing students.
- Relational Support pertains to faculty members' relationships with their colleagues. On this scale, there is an emphasis on feeling valued and on the friendships developed through these interactions.
- Affirmed Value measures the faculty member's relationship with their supervisor. This scale is primarily descriptive of the affirmation and feedback they receive from their dean or department chair.
- Institutional Affinity describes the faculty member's relationship with their institution. Affinity to the institution is measured by their sense of belonging and desire to remain in that particular environment.

## Culture of Trust

Prior to this study, the impact of trust in higher education had not been empirically researched; however, it was regularly theorized as essential for institutional success.<sup>20</sup> This study has conclusively demonstrated the importance of trust in promoting faculty well-being and optimal functioning. The

<sup>18</sup> T.K. Martinez: *The development and validation of the Faculty Thriving Quotient*. Azusa Pacific University, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> L.A. Schreiner – T.K. Martinez: *The Faculty Thriving Quotient*. Psychometric Instrument. Azusa Pacific University, 2019; Crabtree: *Pathways to thriving in Christian college and university faculty*.

<sup>20</sup> M.L. Pope: 'A conceptual framework of faculty trust and participation in governance', *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2004 (127), 75–84, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/he.157>; W.G. Tierney: *Trust and the public good: Examining the cultural conditions of academic work*. Peter Lang, 2006.

culture of trust scale comprised 12 survey items measuring levels of trust between faculty and administration and faculty perceptions of competence, collaboration, integrity, effective communication, and support from administrative leaders. Faculty members who scored high on this scale believed their administrators were committed to their well-being and felt their opinions mattered, giving them a voice in institutional decision-making.

A culture of trust emerged as the most significant direct predictor of faculty thriving, accounting for 55% of the variance in this outcome. It had the strongest direct effect and was twice as influential as the next most significant predictor. Additionally, a culture of trust indirectly contributed 8% to faculty thriving by influencing faculty perceptions of integrity in the hiring and onboarding process. In other words, faculty members who perceived a culture of trust were more likely to believe that the hiring and onboarding process was fair and transparent.

## TRUSTWORTHY LEADERSHIP

Among my preferred definitions of trust is one from Charles Feltman, “choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person’s actions”.<sup>21</sup> Stickel,<sup>22</sup> and Sucher and Gupta<sup>23</sup> give similar definitions, which stress the presence of vulnerability in trusting others. Conceptualizing trust as an exercise in risk and vulnerability acknowledges the power of the relationship between leaders and subordinates. Trusting someone to lead you or the organization you are invested in risks your safety and livelihood. On the other side of the leadership transaction, leaders make their reputation and vision for the organization vulnerable to the actions of their employees.

To overcome the general suspicion of leaders, the distrust of organizations, and the specific leadership challenges within the higher education sector, a new leadership paradigm is needed. Trustworthy leadership is here conceptualized as a set of leadership behaviors and qualities, motivated by timeless ethical principles, and undertaken from a posture of vulnerability to others. These leadership behaviors and qualities have been empirically proven to increase trust throughout research on organizational trust.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Feltman: *The thin book of trust: An essential primer for building trust at work*. Second edition. Bend, OR: Thin Book Publishing Co., 2021, 9.

<sup>22</sup> D. Stickel: *Building trust: Exceptional leadership in an uncertain world*. Nashville, Tennessee: Forefront Books, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Sandra J. Sucher – Shalene Gupta: *The Power of Trust: How Companies Build It, Lose It, Regain It*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2021.

## Organizational Trust

Research on organizational trust has observed consistent trust factors in varied cultures and industries. Although most of this research has come from corporate contexts, the need for trust and the principles of trust apply to leadership in other contexts as well, including higher education.

In the literature, organizational trust is conceptualized by the leader's ability to consistently demonstrate competence, honesty, and care, coupled with an institutional culture of reliable values and expectations. This paper will focus on the categories identified by Shockley-Zalabak et al.<sup>24</sup> However, a summary of trust constructs illustrates the general congruence between many frameworks and scales.

*Table 1. Trust constructs*

| Theory/<br>Scale                  | Trust<br>in orga-<br>niza-<br>tional<br>crisis<br><br>Mishra<br>(1996), | Anteced-<br>ents of<br>trust<br><br>Pirson and<br>Malhotra<br>(2007), | Organiza-<br>tional<br>Trust<br>Index<br><br>Shock-<br>ley-Zalabak<br>et al. (2010) | Compo-<br>nents of<br>trustwor-<br>thiness<br><br>Kharouf et<br>al. (2015) | Dis-<br>tinc-<br>tions of<br>Trust<br><br>Felt-<br>man<br>(2021) | Quali-<br>ties of<br>Trust-<br>worthi-<br>ness<br><br>Stickel<br>(2022) |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Leadership<br>compe-<br>tence     | Com-<br>petence                                                         | Perceived<br>compe-<br>tency and<br>integrity                         | Competent                                                                           | Compe-<br>tence                                                            | Com-<br>petence                                                  | Ability                                                                 |
| Leadership<br>honesty             | Open-<br>ness                                                           | Transpar-<br>ency                                                     | Open and<br>honest                                                                  | Communi-<br>cation                                                         | Sincer-<br>ity                                                   |                                                                         |
| Leadership<br>care                | Benev-<br>olence                                                        | Benevo-<br>lence                                                      | Concerned                                                                           | Benevo-<br>lence                                                           | Care                                                             | Bene-<br>volence                                                        |
| Institu-<br>tional<br>reliability | Reli-<br>ability                                                        | Repeated<br>and consis-<br>tent inter-<br>actions                     | Reliable                                                                            | Integrity                                                                  | Reli-<br>ability                                                 | Integ-<br>rity                                                          |
| Institu-<br>tional<br>values      |                                                                         | Identifica-<br>tion                                                   | Identifica-<br>tion                                                                 | Shared<br>values                                                           |                                                                  |                                                                         |
| Other<br>compo-<br>nents          |                                                                         |                                                                       |                                                                                     | Consis-<br>tency                                                           |                                                                  |                                                                         |

<sup>24</sup> P. Shockley-Zalabak et al.: *Building the high-trust organization: Strategies for supporting five key dimensions of trust*. San Francisco: IABC/Jossey-Bass, 2010.



These factors can be applied to higher education and its relationships. Furthermore, these components provide a road map for the leadership approach needed to promote unity and collaboration between faculty and administration.

### *Competence*

Competence is “the ability of the organization through its leadership, strategy, decisions, quality, and capabilities to meet the challenges of its environment”.<sup>25</sup> Competence is measured through results; trust is developed as the members achieve organizational objectives. Reaching a high level of trust in universities would require administrators and faculty to believe the other is competent to do their work in pursuit of shared goals and the institutional mission.

### *Openness and Honesty*

Openness and honesty refer to the credibility built through effective communication. As emphasized by organizational culture expert Edgar Schein,<sup>26</sup> full and open communication is crucial for organizational health. In open and honest organizations, transparent communication is embraced at all levels.

While openness and honesty are vital in any organization, they can be particularly challenging in colleges and universities due to the diverse cultures and perspectives within the academy.<sup>27</sup> However, faith-based institutions may have a relative advantage. A study by Egan et al.<sup>28</sup> found that faculty members at religious colleges and universities were more likely to perceive their administrations as being open about policies and receptive to faculty concerns than were faculty members at nonreligious and public institutions.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>26</sup> Edgar Schein: *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th edn., San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> A. Kezar: ‘What is more important to effective governance: Relationships, trust, and leadership, or structures and formal processes?’, *New Directions for Higher Education*, 127, 2004, 35–46, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/he.154>; C. Hoppes – K. Holley: ‘Organizational trust in times of challenge: The impact on faculty and administrators’, *Innovative Higher Education*, 39(3), 2014, 201–216, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-013-9275-y>; H. Kharouf – H. Sekhon – S.K. Roy: ‘The components of trustworthiness for higher education: a transnational perspective’, *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(7), 2015, 1239–1255, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.881352>

<sup>28</sup> Gerard Egan et al.: *The Skilled Helper. A Problem-Management and Opportunity-Development Approach to Helping*, 2014.

### *Concern for Employees/Stakeholders*

The third factor is a concern for employees, demonstrated by “the perception and reality of top management wanting to communicate regularly with employees and exhibiting a willingness to hear and act on employee concerns”.<sup>29</sup> Concern for employees is demonstrated through effective communication, as is the second factor. However, concern is also conveyed by employment practices and initiatives that value employee welfare. Other trust frameworks have referred to this concept as benevolence.<sup>30</sup> In higher education, concern shown by administrators to the faculty is often demonstrated in policies designed to improve the work-life balance and compensation and reward structures.<sup>31</sup>

### *Reliability*

Reliability is “a steadiness in behavior that builds the trust necessary for uncertain times”.<sup>32</sup> Leaders demonstrate reliability when they keep commitments and are consistent in their values and actions. Bowman<sup>33</sup> described a commitment by faculty and administration to a reliable follow-through and taking responsibility when failing to keep a promise of simple professionalism in academia, which is necessary to rebuild the broken trust in most universities.

### *Identification*

The final factor of organizational trust is identification, “the connection between the organization and individual employees most often based on core values”.<sup>34</sup> Bowman expressed this sentiment as it relates to colleges and universities: “In a culture based on trust, relationships are aligned through core values, a noble

<sup>29</sup> Shockley-Zalabak et al.: *Building the high-trust organization*, 34–35.

<sup>30</sup> A.K. Mishra: ‘Organizational responses to crisis: The centrality of trust’, in R.M. Kramer – T.R. Tyler (eds.): *Trust in organizations: Frontiers of theory and research*. SAGE, 1996, 261–287; M. Tschannen-Moran – W.K. Hoy: ‘A multidisciplinary analysis of the nature, meaning, and measurement of trust’, *Review of Educational Research*, 70(4), 2000, 547–593, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543070004547>

<sup>31</sup> Z. Sabagh – N.C. Hall – A. Saroyan: ‘Antecedents, correlates and consequences of faculty burnout’, *Educational Research*, 60(2), 2018, 131–156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2018.1461573>; B.H. Roos – C.C. Borkoski: ‘Attending to the teacher in the teaching: Prioritizing faculty well-being’, *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups*, 6(4), 2021, 831–840, [https://doi.org/10.1044/2021\\_PERSP-21-00006](https://doi.org/10.1044/2021_PERSP-21-00006)

<sup>32</sup> Shockley-Zalabak et al.: *Building the high-trust organization*, 37.

<sup>33</sup> R. Bowman: ‘The Need to Trust and to Trust More Wisely in Academe’, *Education*, 132(4), 2012, 907–914.

<sup>34</sup> Shockley-Zalabak et al.: *Building the high-trust organization*, 40.

cause, and a generosity of spirit”.<sup>35</sup> This factor is also similar to the concept of *institutional integrity*, described by Braxton et al. as “when a college or university remains true to its espoused mission and goals”.<sup>36</sup> Attention to this trust factor is particularly salient during organizational change, when perceptions of shifting values or a drifting mission may deepen distrust and suspicion between faculty and administrators.<sup>37</sup>

## RELEVANT LEADERSHIP THEORY

### Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf founded the servant leadership movement during a successful corporate and academic career. He believed leadership should be motivated by a desire to serve others rather than by a pursuit of personal success or prestige. Further, those desiring to become servant leaders will place themselves under systems of accountability to ensure that their motivations remain focused on others.

Many of the qualities and skills of servant leadership align with those of organizational trust. These include acceptance and care for others, communication that emphasizes listening, and a correlation between professed values and actions.<sup>38</sup> Above all, the servant leadership model deflects leadership outcomes to pursue organizational outcomes for the benefit of others.

### Transformational Leadership

Transformational Leadership is the leadership theory that best threads the needle between role model and idol in that it requires the charisma and communication skills of a visionary (idol) and the character and relational skills of a mentor (role model). The four elements of transformational leadership are presented as four Is:

- Inspirational motivation: Forming a shared vision with clear goals and expectations.
- Idealized influence: Leading with character, charisma, and clear values.

<sup>35</sup> Bowman: *The Need to Trust*, 907

<sup>36</sup> J.M. Braxton et al.: *Rethinking college student retention*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014, 88.

<sup>37</sup> J. Tagg: ‘Why does the faculty resist change?’, *Change*, 44(1), 2012, 6–15, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2012.635987>

<sup>38</sup> R.K. Greenleaf – L.C. Spears: *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. 25th anniversary edn. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2002.

- Intellectual stimulation: Growth and change through creativity, curiosity, and risk-taking.
- Individualized consideration: Developing followers' potential through support and relationships.

Transformational leadership begins with a deep value of people, leading to cooperative efforts of change and growth to accomplish the vision. The four Is contain many parallels to the components of trust: shared vision and values, communicating clear expectations, integrity and identification of shared values, curiosity and risk-taking, and looking to develop their followers' potential.

### BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES OF TRUSTWORTHY LEADERSHIP

Trustworthy leadership is closely related to faith-based values and disciplines. Those seeking to build a culture of trust will find relevant instruction in the Christian scriptures and principles of ethical leadership, such as truthfulness, humility, and love.

Truthfulness—open and honest communication—is a foundational value of Christian practice. Paul admonishes the Ephesians, “Speak the truth to one another, with love. In this way, we will help each other grow stronger and become more like Christ.” And a few verses later, “Each of you must put aside falsehood and speak truthfully to each other.” Trustworthy leaders are truth-tellers, fostering expectations of candid conversations and open disclosure of information.

Humility—as an antidote to the pervasive sin of pride—is at the heart of Christian virtue. Again, Paul, in that beautiful passage in Philippians 2, encourages believers to follow the example of Jesus and “do nothing out of selfish ambition but to value others above themselves” in humility. Trustworthy leaders put the needs of the organization and the people entrusted to their leadership above their own desires.

Love—best exhibited through acts of service—is described in 1 Corinthians 13:13 as the greatest of the virtues. In the New Testament, believers are often instructed to love others by serving them. For example, Paul says in Galatians 5:13 that “You were called to be free. But do not use your freedom as an excuse to indulge your flesh; serve one another through love.” And Jesus in John 15:12 states that “My command is this: Love one another as I have loved you.”

The night he was betrayed and arrested, Jesus exemplified each of these biblical principles. He honestly told his followers about the hardships that were soon to come (John 12–16), humbly submitted his desires to his Father's will (Luke 22:42), served his disciples—including the one who was about to betray him—by washing their feet (John 13), and prayed that all the world would know that God loved them as God loved him.

## TRUSTWORTHY PRACTICES FOR CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

In light of organizational trust research, relevant leadership theory, and biblical principles, several trustworthy leadership practices are recommended. Each is intended to create opportunities for building vulnerability-based trust between administrators and faculty.

### **Building shared decision-making (shared governance) on trust**

With an understanding of what trust requires (honest communication, competency and confidence in leaders, an open ear to faculty voices, and a commitment to care), administrators and faculty must mutually commit to shared governance processes and procedures that provide better communication and enable more feedback without the fear of retaliation or termination. Structures and policies that ensure collaboration on decisions that affect faculty members must be established and followed. When disagreements about the process arise, mutually agreed upon arbitrators should be engaged to mediate disputes and provide guidance.

### **Trustworthy leadership integrated into faculty development**

Inviting more administrators to faculty development could build relational bridges between the administration and the faculty. Ideas include interdisciplinary dialogues, peer-to-peer learning and job shadowing, retreats, and service initiatives. The conversations in and around these learning experiences would build empathy and understanding between the two groups. In Christian colleges, providing faculty and administration with space and opportunity for reflective and collective worship and prayer experiences could also build trust.

### **Transparency in all hiring processes**

In faculty recruitment, it is crucial to avoid making exaggerated or empty promises that could mislead potential hires. Additionally, meaningful faculty involvement in staff and administration hiring, and particularly in that of the presidential, can significantly enhance the recruitment process and contribute to a thriving work environment.

### **Meaningful faculty involvement in institutional planning**

Faculty engagement in planning must be genuine, not symbolic or performative. By valuing and incorporating their insights, one can build trust and increase well-being among the faculty, demonstrating their importance to the institution's growth. Because clear communication is a two-way process, the faculty should also intentionally share departmental or school-level plans and program review results with senior administrators.

### **Intentional support of underrepresented faculty members**

Supporting historically underrepresented and underserved faculty members, specifically women and faculty of color, could build a more equitable campus environment and foster greater trust among all faculty. Administrators and academic leaders who are culturally aware and responsive can advocate for specific practices that improve the experiences of faculty of color. Initiatives such as funding for personal and professional development, course release for programs that promote diverse scholarship, and regular invitations to share their perspectives and ideas with leadership would celebrate multicultural teaching and learning, and acknowledge the cultural wealth that minority students and employees contribute to the university. This may increase trust between faculty and administration.

## **CONCLUSION**

Trustworthy leadership is a developing concept that has been contextually considered only in my American, faith-based, higher education setting. However, the principles emerging from organizational trust, servant leadership, and transformational leadership theories can be applied in all leadership settings. I hope this introductory reflection on this topic will challenge readers to become more trustworthy leaders and to be more willing to risk vulnerability by trusting the leaders God has placed over them.

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