

PILOTING CHURCH

Helping Your Congregation Take Flight

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To Ann, who always knew I would fly

and

*to the team at the Center for Progressive Renewal, past and present,
who said yes to the adventure of "building the plane while flying it."*

Preface

This book is a combination of two great passions: leadership and flying. I was lucky enough to grow up with an uncle, James V. Corr, who was a fighter pilot in World War II. When he left the military for a career in the business world, he purchased a small single-engine Bonanza plane. It was in this plane that my love of flying was born.

Some of my earliest memories are of us climbing into the cockpit of the plane, careful to step only on the parts of the wing that could handle our weight as we slid into place. My uncle would go in first, situating himself in the pilot's seat. I would follow in the copilot seat, strapping myself in and readying myself for flight. His particular plane didn't have air conditioning and, in the Atlanta summer heat, the best we could do was open a tiny window in the side windshield and pray for a gust of air and a quick take off.

We would call to the tower: "Peachtree Ground, this is 711 Golf Sierra, at the Clairemont ramp, VFR for the northeast, with information Tango." We would wait to hear their response: "Roger 711 Golf Sierra, taxi via Bravo and Alpha to runway 3L for takeoff." Off we would go.

Few experiences prepare you for the first time you pull to the end of the runway. First, you line up on the centerline and then push the throttle forward. Slowly, your speed accelerates until you find your body pressed back against the seat and your eyes glued to the runway ahead. You watch your speed—45 knots, 50 knots, 55 knots—and then, suddenly, *it* happens: the beautiful combination of airspeed and wing angle create the lift you need to soar into the sky. It's like magic.

To this day, when I board massive 777 jumbo jets and fly across the country, I marvel at the science and art that is air flight. How can something so massive and so heavy fly seemingly effortlessly through the air, carrying us safely from one part of the world to another? I understand the four fundamentals of flight—thrust, drag, gravity and lift—and still I am in awe.

Leadership, when done well, creates the same sense of awe. Leadership is a unique art that comes from a careful balance of native instinct, self-discipline, and learned skills. When a church, organization, or team is led well, it can soar.

I have benefited from opportunities to step into a number of executive leadership roles very early in my life. I don't pretend to have this figured out, but I am learning that my two great passions—leadership and flying—have shared lessons that have strengthened my contribution to and engagement in both areas.

To date, I have cofounded and led five churches, businesses, or nonprofits. So far, all but one has been successful in meeting their missional and financial goals. While I still continue to lead some of these efforts, I am also finding much of my time is spent coaching others as they begin or further invest in their own endeavors. Most of my clients are pastors, nonprofit leaders, or denominational executives, all of whom are asking adaptive questions about the changes they need to lead their congregations or constituents through in this fast-paced, globally connected, ever-changing world.

My clients are very smart people, with a variety of backgrounds, who dream of making a positive difference in communities all across the country. They increasingly recognize that something significant is at stake in their work. All of them acknowledge that the work they are doing in their communities and on the national scale can either lead to a more just, generous, and peaceful world, or can end up a missed opportunity to help in this moment of great human transformation.

That is why I'm writing this book.

Right now, we need a real conversation about what effective leaders can do to create environments and systems that lead to human transformation. One of my favorite modern philosophers, a woman named Jean Houston, said in a presentation I attended some years ago, "The great challenge of our age is that we have developed the capacity to destroy ourselves without the wisdom to know not to do so." Today, our world faces crises on an unprecedented scale. We are destroying our planet through an endless consumerist culture that, as it turns out, is also killing our souls. We have developed our weapons of war to the level that we can destroy our world with the touch of a button. Global wealth distribution is creating a new class of the "haves" and the "have-nots" unprecedented in our country's history. Our community infrastructures—schools, hospitals, citizen groups, faith communities—are struggling to survive decreases in funding while also losing participation because, in part, we are all working 60+ hours a week to make ends meet. We are living in unsustainable ways, running on the treadmill of an unsustainable system, consuming our beautiful planet at unsustainable and unjust rates.

If ever there was a moment for a new cultural vision spoken and modeled by a new generation of leaders, this is that moment. May you be such a leader.

Henry Ford is quoted as saying, "Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right."¹ I am on a mission to convince you that *your* leadership can make a difference in bold and great ways. After all, greatness is not something out of reach that only a few will ever attain. Greatness comes when you do what you love and do it greatly.

It is time to fly!

¹ See https://www.faa.gov/data_research/aviation_data_statistics/civil_airmen_statistics.

Chapter One

Decide You Want to Fly

Checklist

- Talk to people who are pilots; you should know what you are getting into
- Accept that your leadership matters...and will come at a cost and great joy
- Show up every day, without fail, ready to engage
- Give it everything you've got
- Don't get too committed to the outcome

“Courage does not consist of the absence of fear. Courage, rather, is the mastering of that fear: feeling the fear and going forward anyway.”

—Carey D. Lohrenz,

U.S. Navy's First Female F-14 Tomcat Fighter Pilot

I knew from the time I was a little girl that I wanted to be a pilot. Sitting in the copilot seat of my uncle's Beechcraft Bonanza, far too short to see over the instrument panel, I studied the gas pressure gauges and tracked our flight on the old paper maps. We had a stopwatch taped to the pilot yoke and tracked our flight legs based on estimated times that we should arrive at each point. It was magic for me! Between those experiences and

a few viewings of the “infamous” movie *Top Gun*, I knew that I was called to the skies.

I also knew that I wanted to make the world a better place. A few months ago, I stumbled upon a picture of my childhood bedroom. Most teenagers would have posters plastering their bedroom walls of the latest popular band or teen heartthrob. I had pictures of starving children in the African Sahara Desert and polluted rivers killing massive populations of fish in China. From a young age, I was concerned about the ways the world was broken. I wanted to dedicate what energy I could to make it all a bit better. So, in addition to being a pilot, I also knew that I wanted to be a pastor, believing the church was a great pathway to make the change in the world that I wanted to see. But as it is for many people, knowing what I wanted to do and figuring out a way to do it were two very different things.

The first challenge I faced as a young woman was that I didn’t know any women who were pilots. Today, sadly, women still only make up 5 percent of the general aviation community. That means that out of all 454,000 licensed pilots in the United States, only 23,000 are women.¹ We’ve seen only a slight increase in the number of female pilots in the past 30 years. While I was told as a child that I could be anything that I wanted to be, I now recognize that because my imagination was limited by what I was seeing (or *not* seeing) in my world, I never seriously considered becoming a professional pilot. That changed for me, *slowly*, after I spent years on the road traveling on planes to and from conferences. I would see female pilots in the airport and something buried deep within would jolt to life, like a literal shock to my body. One day I was walking through the terminal in Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in Atlanta, and I remember seeing a female pilot and thinking, “I know you. I recognize what drives you because it drives me too. You are most alive when you are in the air.” The minute I found the courage to say that to myself, I didn’t care that only a handful of women become pilots. I knew I was going to become one more.

Flying has taught me more lessons about life and leadership than I could have imagined. I’ve come to realize that what we do together in our congregations, organizations, and businesses can be strengthened by what I have learned in managing a cockpit of an airplane and navigating safely in flight. In fact, I’d like to suggest that if you are a congregational leader, lay or ordained, you are also made to fly. You may not be flying an actual plane, but you are directing the flight of a congregation, organization, family, or business simply by your participation in it. Your leadership matters.

Measuring Risk

When people hear that I am a pilot, they sometimes assume I am a risk-taker and an adrenaline junkie. They often say, “Wow, you must be a little

crazy. I could never do that.” What they don’t realize is that, experientially, for me it’s the exact opposite. Being a pilot taught me to manage risks because there is more at stake. The minute I approach the plane for my preflight, I am focused, disciplined, and fully present. I don’t skip steps in my checklists. I double-check my calculations. I trust my training and my instincts. I take far fewer risks in my cockpit than I ever would walking down the street. I am a good pilot *precisely because I manage risk*.

Leadership will feel risky because it is the art of creating something that has never existed or doing something that has never been done. No one has ever renewed your congregation at this moment in history with the resources at your disposal. No one has ever tried to start a new ministry in your town, with your vision and with the people you have gathered. It might feel like a bigger risk than you can manage, but here is the key: do your homework, don’t cut corners, trust your training. That is how you lead with excellence.

Take Responsibility for Your Possibility

Do you remember the story of Nehemiah, the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes? He visited Jerusalem and, seeing the walls of Jerusalem lying in ruins, decided that he needed to rebuild them. Can you imagine? He was the guy who tasted the food before the king to make sure it wasn’t poisoned. He was not a mason. He didn’t have formal training in wall-building. No one told him that the walls needed to be rebuilt and then gave him the task to do it. He saw that it needed to be done and took responsibility for making it happen. That’s leadership.

It wasn’t easy. He had to convince the king to let him go, organize the investors, disarm the militia, recruit the workers, convince the townspeople, and mobilize the support teams. I’m sure he had moments of doubt and wondered if he had lost his mind. But he took responsibility for their collective possibility. He knew that, with the help of so many others, he could rebuild that wall.

What if your congregation and its membership had extraordinary untapped potential within its walls? What if you actually *could* change the world...or at least your community? In congregations I work with across the nation, there are members who are exceptionally talented and well-connected professionals in their “day jobs.” They are influencing our national policy, teaching our children, leading our cities, serving as CEOs and vice presidents of our Fortune 500 companies, changing the culture as technology innovators, caring for people as HR professionals, leading as project managers...so many talented people who work in fields that shape our world. But when they come to church, *rarely* are they asked to bring what they know and do in their professional fields into the mission of the church. Rarely are they asked to consider how their contribution to their

industries can create a more just and generous world. Why? What could be possible if we did?

Millard Fuller was a lay member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). He had a deep love for the church, but he never considered it a career path for himself. His passions were around business, economics, and law. By the time he was in his early twenties, he was already well on his way to a successful life. He was newly married and had recently completed his business and law degrees in Alabama. He was a self-made millionaire by the time he was 29 years old. But Millard and his wife Linda wanted to make a bigger difference for people in the world. They had become friends with Clarence Jordan, the founder of Koinonia Farms in southern Georgia, and decided to move there to be part of that intentional Christian community.

Millard and Linda began building simple, decent houses for low-income families in their community using volunteer labor and donations, and requiring repayment only of the cost of the materials used. No interest was charged, as it is with traditional mortgages, and no profit was made. The model proved sustainable and soon they formed a new organization called Habitat for Humanity. Millard went to the national offices of many of the major denominations at that time. His pitch was: "What if you became known as the Church that housed people?" No denominations took him up on the partnership. Millard then began courting a famous volunteer, President Jimmy Carter, whose affiliation took Habitat for Humanity from being a small NGO in southern Georgia to an international organization that has housed over a million people in 100 countries.

Millard and Linda Fuller were lay leaders with a vision for living out their Christian life at a grand scale. Their faith community gave them the space to test their concepts, but, ultimately, Millard and Linda had to decide they were going to take responsibility for bringing this vision into reality.

In aviation, we use the acronym D.E.C.I.D.E to frame critical pilot decisions:

- D-** Detect that the action is necessary;
- E-** Estimate the significance of the action;
- C-** Choose a desirable outcome;
- I-** Identify actions needed to achieve the chosen option;
- D-** Do the necessary action to achieve change;
- E-** Evaluate the effects of the action.

Taking responsibility for your possibility means that you *DECIDE* to do something about a challenge or opportunity. You choose to lead. Millard

and Linda Fuller led us all forward in making the world a more just and generous place. Imagine if more denominations and churches had gotten behind them earlier. The Fullers taught us a valuable lesson: if we are willing to lean on the entirety of our gifts and collaborate broadly with others for the sake of a larger vision, there isn't a community challenge that we can't take on.

You're Getting Somewhere...

Early in my first congregation, I had the benefit of working with an executive from IBM who was committed to helping me level up my leadership. He accompanied me to a meeting with our leadership team during which we would be discussing a big decision we were facing about our future, and I was responsible for articulating a vision that could help us move forward. It was a big deal. A lot was at stake. And...I blew it. While my words were clear, my energy was passive. I failed to tap into the full potential of my influence. I let louder voices (literally) have more influence than they deserved. I passed over opportunities to advance the conversation. In the end, we came to a decision that was a faded copy of what I knew we were capable of as a team.

As we walked out of that meeting, I knew I had failed. I had prepared for that meeting, but walked in and choked. My coach, who was a tall 6'4" bald guy, turned to me in the parking lot and put his hands on my shoulders. Looking down into my eyes, he said, "Cameron, do you know what a giraffe is?" I looked at him, confused. He continued, "A giraffe is a horse designed by a committee. You just created a great big giraffe in there." He was right. I knew I would have to fix it. But he went on to say something that has stayed with me all this time. He said, "Remember this, Cameron. Everyone gets somewhere in life. The rare person gets somewhere on purpose." He was inviting me to be crystal clear in my vision for where we were going, and then be courageous enough to pilot us in that direction.

It's good wisdom for your congregation as well. Your congregation is going somewhere. It's spending lots of time and money on staffing, buildings, ministries, and community impact. The question is, are you going somewhere on purpose? Are you clear about the difference you are making and the difference you want to make? Are you measuring what matters? Are you shaping the kind of community, the kind of world, you want to see 10, 20, or 50 years from now?

Your leadership is what makes the difference. You are the pilot of that plane. You are in control in this one critical way: you have extraordinary influence over your church living fully into its potential. You can influence the size of your collective dreams. You can change your congregation's priorities by shaping the budget. You can expand your congregation's influence by promoting community partnerships. More critically, you

don't need to be the pastor to have this influence. The kind of leadership that I am talking about and invested in cultivating in your church isn't dependent upon institutional authority. You are a leader when you choose to lead. You don't need permission.

Why Not You?

Carey Lohrenz is the US Navy's first female F-14 Tomcat fighter pilot. Growing up, she remembers playing with her father's old silk maps from his time flying in the Marine Corps in Vietnam. Even as a little girl, she knew she wanted to be a pilot. She also knew that she would need a huge dose of courage to make that happen. Being a female fighter pilot in the 1990s was simply unheard of. She didn't tell many people about her dreams in high school and college, but she was clear about where she was going.

In her book, *Fearless Leadership: High Performance Lessons from the Flight Deck* she talks about watching colleagues and fellow aviators fail to make the cut. She writes, "Pursuing leadership is highly a personal decision, and I've seen many people back away from great leadership opportunities, spouting lines like 'I'm not sure I'm ready' and 'I just think it's too soon' and 'I still have some growing to do.' These statements, though masquerading as neutral, are actually quite negative. They almost always mask insecurity and a desire to avoid the challenges that come with leadership. These statements are the fear talking—and it's saying self-defeating things."²

That voice of fear, saying all kinds of self-defeating things, has grabbed the ears of too many leaders in our congregations and denominations. I'm not sure when that started happening or why. Today, I find us dreaming such small dreams about the potential of our congregations. Likely because we are living through decades of decline and deconstruction, we perhaps have become convinced that what we have to offer doesn't matter. We are heroes if we can just keep our doors open. Or, maybe we are overwhelmed by the larger needs in our communities and don't know where to start with our dwindling resources. Whatever the story might be that we are telling ourselves, we are currently living in a time when our national, regional, and sometimes local congregational settings are too often dreaming small dreams.

I don't understand why.

Lohrenz quotes Dharmesh Shah, the cofounder and chief technology officer for HubSpot, who pointed out in a blog posting that a key leadership quality of effective leaders is to think: "Why *not* me?"³

Exactly! Why *not* you? Why *not* your church? Why *not* all of us making a difference for the sake of a more just and generous world?

Our communities need your congregations to lead in creating more loving neighbors, more generous civil servants, and more businesses offering meaningful employment. In fact, I can't think of a reason that

we need so many churches in this world *unless* each of these churches is relentlessly committed to raising the standard of life for people living around them. If we are going to obsess about Sunday attendance and giving (institutional maintenance), we should also obsess about graduation rates, employment rates, and crime rates (community transformation).

Jesus taught us that sacred human life is fully integrated—our internal spiritual formation is tied to our external actions. Do you remember the stories of Jesus teaching all day to crowds who were so hungry to hear what he was saying that they ran out of food and stayed to hear him anyway? He knew both kinds of hunger mattered. He told his disciples to share their food; in the end, everyone had enough to eat. He did this more than once. His disciples grew frustrated. They didn't understand why they had to care about the physical well-being of these people. But Jesus reminded them that compassion is the path of discipleship, basically explaining: "We are one global family, all in this together." So, he said to the disciples, "What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?"⁴

It might be possible that many congregations have gotten everything they wanted—the big fancy buildings, the accomplished clergy, the fun programs—and lost their very souls. Maybe your congregation is experiencing this, trying to remember why you exist as part of a larger story of transformation beyond institutional maintenance. All is not lost, if you are courageous enough to own your reality and act on it now.

You and your congregation can decide to come together to decide what difference you want to make in the world. When it feels too big, or too expensive, or like it should be someone else's responsibility, I want you to pause and ask, "Why *not* me?" My guess is that you are the leader we've been waiting for.

Sure It's Scary...So What?

When I stand on the stage in front of a group, I often ask one question: "What would you do if you were brave?" What would those in the audience do as individuals, as churches, as denominations if they knew they couldn't fail? What would be the biggest, boldest, and most faithful contribution they could make to the world we are creating together?

This question is hard for most of us. It's too abstract and too grandiose. Most of the time, people feel inspired and deflated at the same time. "Being brave" feels as if we should have some amazing coming of age story or some heroic tale of overcoming impending death in the face of every imaginable obstacle. I've now decided that this is how we hide. If bravery must look Hollywood worthy, then we can comfortably tell ourselves that the brave life is out of our reach. It's not meant to be.

Here is what bravery looks like: bravery is creativity in action.

Bravery is feeling all of the fear of change, of trying something new, of embracing new ideas, of exploring new terrain, of preaching new sermons, of embracing new relationships, of accepting new jobs, of singing new songs, of living in new places, of saying goodbye to what was and *still* making that change and embracing what can be.

Bravery is about taking the next best step, whatever that may be.

I know your fear because it is mine too. In fact, most of my coaching work with pastors and leaders involves confronting the fears that keep them paralyzed from acting on their greatest potential. Let's name a few:

- ...You're afraid people will figure out you have no idea what you are doing.
- ...You're afraid you aren't smart enough or creative enough or original enough.
- ...You're afraid people will question your right to lead them.
- ...You're afraid you will run out of money and be poor and destitute, living on the street.
- ...You're afraid people will see through your "act."
- ...You're afraid your leaders will think you're stupid.
- ...You're afraid people will reject your ministry and not come to church.
- ...You're afraid people will judge your weight.
- ...You're afraid your children will grow up hating church.
- ...You're afraid your children will grow up hating you.
- ...You're afraid your friends will gossip about you.
- ...You're afraid your work isn't good enough.
- ...You're afraid your ambition is arrogant.
- ...You're afraid your dreams are silly.
- ...You're afraid you are wasting your life.
- ...You're afraid your family will disown you if you tell them who you truly love.
- ...You're afraid you will lose your job if you are honest about your wavering faith.
- ...You're afraid you are not producing enough.
- ...You're afraid you are not organized enough.
- ...You're afraid you are too old.
- ...You're afraid it's too late.
- ...You're afraid your best effort won't be good enough.

- ...You're afraid if you commit to something it might not be as good as what could come next.
- ...You're afraid your denomination is dying and none of this matters.
- ...You're afraid no one wants to hear what you have to say.
- ...You're afraid you don't have anything to say worth hearing.
- ...You're afraid...

I get it. We all get it. We all struggle with doubt, fear, and negative self-talk that threatens to kill the creative bravery within every one of us. So, before we go any further, let's deal with this.

Hear me: You're scared. So what? What is the worst thing that could possibly happen? What is the worst, most horrible outcome that you can imagine? Now, think about the best and most wonderful outcome. What does that look like and feel like? What is a moderate outcome, one in which you don't save the world but you don't die either? Can you sense that? Do you see it?

Now, feel all of the feelings. Let them run through you. And then move on. Feelings are physical experiences that last about 90 seconds in our bodies. They are chemical reactions that drive hormonal changes in our bodies. If you let the *feelings of fear* pass through you without triggering you, you return to a place of balance and deeper wisdom. You can take the next best step from this space, the space beyond fear-filled feelings.

Because fear immobilizes our power and impact, fear is probably the greatest stumbling block to God's work in the world. It might manifest in fear of change, a fear of killing your church, a fear of being ridiculed, a fear of death, a fear of failure, or maybe even fear of success. Fear makes us "hold on" when all signs tell us that we should "let go." This is the problem with fear: it prevents us from letting go of what "is" so that something new might come.

So, feel the fear. But never let it stop you. Never let it make your decisions for you. Too much is at stake in your offering of your fullest self to a world that really needs you to show up.

A Personal Practice: Vision Board

When I was in my early twenties, I began a practice that has literally changed my life. I read an article by psychologist and coach Dr. Martha Beck about creating a "vision board."⁵ The idea is simple: look online or in magazines and find pictures that speak to the kind of life you want to lead/see/embody in the coming year. Print or cut those pictures out and paste them on a poster board. You can also create a collage on your computer and then print out a single sheet. Then, put that board or printed sheet in a prominent place where you see it every day.

I created my first vision board when I was twenty-two. I was married and transitioning as a pastor and denominational leader into an entirely new denomination. I was also working in the for-profit sector and trying to figure out what I really wanted to do with my life. I was a *young* woman working in systems historically dominated by older white men. I was Southern, joining a denomination based in New England. I was absurdly entrepreneurial, trying to work in deeply institutional systems. It was a lot.

I sat down at the beginning of each year and dreamed about what could be possible. I added a picture of a church because I wanted to serve as a pastor in a local congregation. I added a picture of a business because I also wanted to run a company. I added a picture of an airplane because I wanted to fly and see the world. I added a picture of my family because I wanted to be a good wife, mother, sister, niece, and daughter. I added a picture of the United Nations because I wanted to work on major world problems through major global systems. I added a picture of a woman who was physically fit because I wanted to take care of my body. I added...well, you get the point.

Every day, I looked at the vision of my possible life. Every day, I believed just a little more that I could be, do, and have those things that I dreamed of. Every day, I trusted that my hopes would be stronger than my fears.

Your turn: Thinking about the next 12 months of your life...

Name three people you think of as brave and explain why. (What have they done? What drove them?)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Name three experiences you want to have. Go big here.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Name three professional goals you want to accomplish.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Name three personal goals you want to accomplish.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Name three people you want to meet who could help you accomplish your goals.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Now that you have a sense of where you want to go, it's time to start taking steps to get there. We will get to how to do that soon. For now, all you need to think about is, "What is my next best step?" You don't need to know *all* of the steps. You just need to know the *next* one. What is it? Now, go do it!

A Congregational Practice: Impact Board

Make a list of all the activities that you all have led or participated in as a congregation this past year. Use lots of Post-It notes (just because they are awesome), and stick all the activities on a wall. Now, step back and ask these questions about each: *What difference did it make? How did it change your community? How did it help you all grow into more loving people?*

Next, let's understand the value of your collective leadership. On a flip chart, list each activity and estimate the number of hours each volunteer dedicated to each particular project/ministry/action. Add all those up into one huge number. Then multiply that number by \$7.25 (the current nationally mandated minimum wage in the United States).

Example: Total Volunteer Hours (8,000) x Minimum Wage (\$7.25)
= \$58,000

That number is the cash value of the investment you as a congregation have made to your church and your community. Did you know? I bet in your case, it's a big number. I hope you celebrate it. You are making a real difference in the world. Keep it up!

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. What is your congregation doing that you think matters? What difference is it making?
2. What are you as a congregation afraid to do?
3. How would you define the values of your church?
4. What needs to be done in your community that no one is doing?
5. Imagine that it is five years from today. What would you like to be able to say about your leadership in your congregation? What can it count on you to contribute? What is holding your congregation back?

¹ See https://www.faa.gov/data_research/aviation_data_statistics/civil_airmen_statistics.

² Carey D. Lohrenz, *Fearless Leadership: High Performance Lessons from the Flight Deck* (Austin, Texas: Greenleaf Books, 2014), 25.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mark 8:36–37, *The Message*.

⁵ Martha Beck, “How To Make A Vision Board: Find Your Life Ambition,” Martha Beck blog, <https://marthabeck.com/tag/vision-board/> .