

Praise for *Leading by Faith*

Jim leads and writes with the heart of Jesus. Humility, kindness, and leadership clarity for Kingdom-expanding purposes jumps off every page of *Leading by Faith*. Jim's chapter on the power of partnership should be read and integrated into the life of every leader in Christ's church, including me! Enjoy this engaging and highly applicable read!

PASTOR TIM AHLMAN, LEADER OF THE UNITE LEADERSHIP COLLECTIVE

Jim delivers what he promises—a personal leadership journey—that skillfully weaves his vibrant faith and remarkable expertise into a stimulating, practical, and invaluable book. There is room for this hands-on leadership book in your library if you are an emerging leader seeking inspiration, a seasoned leader searching for reflection, an inquisitive leader desiring know-how, or a faithful follower craving to encourage the leaders around you. As a friend for nearly three decades, this is the real and vintage Jim Sanft!

REV. DR. BRIAN L. FRIEDRICH, PRESIDENT, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, ST. PAUL

Jim does a great job of making a practical application to leadership from the eyes of a veteran leader. He reminds us all, especially leaders, that we “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7), a principle all Christian leaders must remember and implement. Jim keeps our eyes focused on Christ and His will.

REV. DR. JAMISON J. HARDY, PRESIDENT AND BISHOP, ENGLISH DISTRICT, LCMS

Jim Sanft has written the definitive how-to leadership manual for both emerging and experienced leaders within our church, which is all of us. Through the telling of his own leadership story, Sanft adroitly allows the reader to unpack and enhance his or her own leadership journey. Sanft educates on how God has uniquely called and equipped each of us and provides a road map to assist us as we daily strive to serve those He has placed in our path.

DR. KURT SENSKE, AUTHOR, *THE CEO AND THE BOARD:
THE ART OF NONPROFIT GOVERNANCE AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE*

Jim Sanft offers a personal journey of leadership with honest and experienced reflections from his own life. *Leading by Faith* has relatable stories that embody deep leadership insights and is a strong witness to Jim's faith values, which have shaped

his leadership style. His journey inspires readers to listen and learn as they navigate their own leadership journey, enriched by their faith. Seasoned with pearls from the Scriptures, *Leading by Faith* is filled with humble wisdom and practical insights from a qualified leader, coach, and mentor. It is a wonderful resource for all Christian leaders.

REV. DR. GREGORY S. WALTON,
PRESIDENT EMERITUS, LCMS FLORIDA-GEORGIA DISTRICT;
VICE PRESIDENT, GRACE PLACE WELLNESS, LUTHERAN CHURCH EXTENSION FUND

Jim Sanft is a key leader of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and a true gift to the church and a credit to his family. He humbly portrays his leadership journey and helps his reader consider new thoughts, challenge old premises, and follow the course God has laid out. Jim beautifully uses Scripture to make his points and leads his reader to think first through the lens of the Gospel and then to the leadership journey. I'm grateful to recommend this book, and I think Jim has done great work. No question his father would be so proud of Jim's work!

REV. DR. TIMOTHY M. KLINKENBERG,
SENIOR PASTOR, ST. JOHN'S LUTHERAN CHURCH, ORANGE, CALIFORNIA

As a Concordia Plan Services board member, I can testify that Jim Sanft is the exemplar of Christian leadership. Each page of his book will validate God's unique plan for his journey, and it will motivate yours. You will be blessed by his testimony and his genuine humility. God owns it all, and we are but stewards, driven by faith to deliver excellent outcomes.

JON BOECHE, PRESIDENT AND OWNER, CHILLWORKS, INC., SEMINOLE, FLORIDA

In *Leading by Faith*, Jim highlights the importance of our faith in our individual leadership journeys, providing great insights and personal experiences that transcend any business environment. It's a wonderful read that will leave you with multiple nuggets to apply to your leadership faith walk.

RICHARD ROBERTSON, RETIRED PRESIDENT AND CEO,
LUTHERAN CHURCH EXTENSION FUND

Leading by Faith is a must-read for Christian leaders! It not only reveals the secret of successful leadership but also illustrates how it can be applied to your own leadership journey. I've had the genuine privilege of witnessing how Jim Sanft has consistently leaned on his faith in God and Jesus over the past twelve years while serving on the Concordia Plan Services board. In this book, Jim succinctly outlines how he has done it while drawing insightful parallels to Scripture.

ROBERT P. LESKO, PARTNER, PIERSON FERDINAND, LLP

LEADING *by* FAITH

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Practical Insights
for Christian Leaders

JAMES F. SANFT



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Dedication

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It is an honor and privilege to dedicate this book to my father, Gerald Sanft. My dad has been an example of a faithful and godly husband, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. He was at the side of my sainted mother as she battled cancer and is now on a journey with my stepmom as they navigate together the challenges of getting older.

As I write this dedication, he is sitting across the room engaged in his daily devotion—praying aloud Luther’s Morning Prayer and reciting Psalm 23. Largely shunning technology, he relies solely on his own version of a GPS—“God’s Plan of Salvation”—revealed to us in God’s Word!

To really understand my dad, you need to go back to his childhood. Growing up, he was an avid outdoorsman. He loved to hunt, fish, trap, and explore. Although he grew up within the city limits of St. Paul, Minnesota, adventure could be found a short distance from his back door during the 1940s. The wooded bluffs that separated upper and lower tiers of society were directly behind his house. Those bluffs were teeming with wildlife. The wetlands of the Minnesota River valley were not far off. They served as a constant source of adventure for a modern-day Huck Finn. School and, later, work were merely distractions from the wilderness that ever called.

His passion for the outdoors took him to northern Minnesota to work at a resort during the summer. When his chores were completed for the day, he was free to go fishing.

This same passion for the wilderness carried over to his service for our country. He enlisted in the US Air Force and served as a survival instructor in the arctic tundra of Alaska.

He received his own survival training at the former Stead Air Force Base in the Sierra Nevada mountains outside of Reno, Nevada. There he proved his mettle and earned the opportunity to lead and teach others.

In Alaska, he taught Air Force pilots and air crews how to survive off the land with whatever they might have with them as they escaped their damaged aircraft. His students were often pilots, meaning they were officers, and he was not. In the field, however, he was the one in charge, regardless of rank.

Survival training taught my dad to be innovative and resourceful, building upon skills he developed during the adventures of his youth. As a kid, he learned to set traps and configure snares to catch small game. Those trapping skills translated to life-saving measures in the arctic wilderness.

My dad also taught his students to be innovative and resourceful. He showed them that all that was needed to survive was around them. Although they might not see them at first glance, the means to survive were there. It took awareness, creativity, and ingenuity. It took perseverance. Survival in those conditions required mental and physical toughness.

I have never known my dad to focus on what he did not have. We did not know it as kids, but our family didn't have a lot. However, we never lacked anything that was needed. At times, my parents worked multiple jobs—my mom as a nurse and my dad picking up evening and weekend shifts making pizzas at a local restaurant. By the grace of God, we always had enough.

My dad taught those pilots to survive on what the land provided. Likewise, he lived life making the most of what God had given him. And, like the apostle Paul, he learned to be content in his circumstances.

To this day, I do not think that he sees how his example has influenced my leadership journey. Perhaps this dedication will help.

His dogged determination, mental and physical toughness, ingenuity, and creativity all shaped me into the leader I am today. The love and care he showed for his family and friends is a model to me to this day.

My area of expertise is not in the arctic wilderness. Instead, God has called me to serve a large, complex nonprofit that cares for tens of thousands of church workers and their families.

My world is very different from that of my dad. I have always enjoyed being outdoors, and I still do. Some of my most cherished

childhood memories involve times in the Northwoods of Minnesota with him. But my calling is not to those woods. The wilderness continues to beckon me, but only as a visitor. My calling and my place are elsewhere.

I thank God that my dad raised me to be the man, husband, father, grandfather, and leader that I am. My hope is that in some way he can see a bit of himself in me and in my leadership journey.

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:7 that “we walk by faith, not by sight.” This is a wonderful description of my dad’s journey through life, and it is one of the foundational lessons he gave to me.

Thank you, Dad.

To God alone be the glory.

Introduction

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Leadership is a journey. It is not a vacation trip, that is for sure. It is not a quest with some holy grail to be grasped. There is no well-defined destination or end state for your journey. There is nothing you can plug in to Apple Maps or Waze to get real-time, turn-by-turn instructions.

But neither is your leadership journey just wandering in the desert for forty years. The journey has purpose. There are objectives to be achieved along the way. There will be successes, and there will be failures.

In life, and particularly for leaders, the road ahead is not always clear. The apostle Paul provides this encouragement:

So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight.

(2 CORINTHIANS 5:6–7)

And so, we go through life walking by faith, not by sight. As Christian leaders, we likewise lead by faith, not by sight. Do not take from this that I shun strategic planning—or even nonstrategic planning! Rather, I think about these words from Proverbs 16:9: “The heart of a man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.”

Coming out of high school, I had great plans for my life. I went to Concordia University Nebraska (then Concordia Teachers College), with the goal of becoming a Lutheran schoolteacher. I had planned my way, but God established my steps.

God’s hand in my life is so clear as I look back over the path that my journey has taken. Rarely could I see it at the time as I was walking by faith. But today, it is evident that God was with me and guiding me all along the way.

So it is for you, and so it will be for you. Wherever you may be on your own leadership journey, God is the one establishing your steps.

As Christian leaders, we can go forward with boldness and confidence in ways that nonbelievers simply cannot. As believers, we get to lead by faith! We lead boldly, knowing that God has called us to this time and this place to serve His purpose.

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**WHEREVER YOU MAY BE
ON YOUR OWN LEADERSHIP
JOURNEY, GOD IS THE ONE
ESTABLISHING YOUR STEPS.**
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There are many definitions of what a leader is or what leadership is. This book will not attempt to answer those questions.

This book does not provide any sort of formula for leadership. It does not provide a checklist or ten steps for effective leadership.

Perhaps ultimate definitions or foolproof formulas exist, but I seriously doubt it.

Leadership journeys are personal—deeply personal. Your journey is yours alone.

This book is about my journey. It contains stories and insights from my own experiences. I have not walked your path. I cannot give you specific directions or steps to take on your journey, nor can anyone else. You are going to have to figure it out on your own. But don't worry, God is with you as your guide!

Therein may lie the crux of the matter: as a leader, you have to figure things out. You have been called to your position to get things done, to achieve results, and to deliver outcomes. You are the one who is accountable.

So then, why write a book about my leadership journey? And probably more important, why should you read a book about someone else's journey? If leadership journeys are personal and unique, why waste the time?

As we learn from King Solomon, there really is nothing new under the sun. Although our journeys are not identical, there may be similarities. The insights I offer will not be an exact template for action, and what I have discovered on my journey may not be applicable to yours. But I encourage you to take nuggets here and there and put them to use as you build out your framework for leadership.

Adapt and adopt practices as you deem appropriate for your circumstances. Build upon and improve upon my experiences. Be a better leader than I have been!

My goal is twofold: I want to provide an example of what one leadership journey has looked like. And I want to provide encouragement for you on your own leadership journey.

I have been blessed to be associated with many great leaders in my career. Whether they know it or not, they have helped to shape and form me as a leader. They have been encouragers and mentors. They have been gifts sent by God to help me on my leadership journey.

Our church body has incredible men and women serving in official capacities and many more serving in unofficial roles. It has been an honor to serve with and to support all of them in their ministries.

My journey has allowed me to come to know talented business leaders in St. Louis and across the country. I have learned so much about leadership in both for-profit and nonprofit business contexts.

In my role, I get to work closely with my counterparts from other denominations—all gifted leaders who care for the workers and serve the ministries of their church bodies. These men and women are pillars within their respective faith communities. They have taught me much.

I have had opportunities to sit down with US senators and members of the US House of Representatives. I have had dinner with a member of the president's cabinet. I have met with a speaker of the house. I have been in the office of the vice president of the United States (but unfortunately, he had to stand us up due to an emerging crisis). It has been an overwhelming experience to walk the halls on Capitol Hill and to be welcomed by these political leaders. I am humbled to know that they want to hear from me.

Why in the world did God choose me to serve Him and His church in this time and place? The first thing that comes to mind is that God has a sense of humor!

One thing is for sure: if God can use me, then He certainly can and will use you! He knows the plans that He has for you. He has called you to serve and to lead. It is exciting and frightening all at the same time!

Through it all, we know that He promises to never leave us or forsake us.

We can confidently lead by faith!

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**IF GOD CAN USE ME, THEN
HE CERTAINLY CAN AND WILL USE YOU!**

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PART 1

Setting the Record Straight

In 2008, when I started my time as president and CEO of Concordia Plan Services, I had an incredible advantage: I had been the right-hand man, so to speak, for my predecessor. Serving as Chief Operating Officer gave me incredible insight into many aspects of running the organization.

Despite all that I witnessed from that second-in-command seat, however, there were many parts of the job that I failed to fully comprehend.

There were so many things I did not know. And there were many things I thought I knew that turned out to not be so.

Mark Twain is thought to have said, “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.”

I thought I knew what being a CEO was all about. How could I not? I had been as close as possible to that top seat!

But truth be told, I had made that mistake before. There was a time before I was married when I thought I knew what being a husband was all about. And before I had kids, I thought I knew what being a father was all about. Once I got into those roles, however, it was a whole other story!

My dad told me that being a father was the most important job I would ever have and that it would be the one I was least prepared to take on. How right he was!

But as Twain quipped, it is not what we don’t know that gets us into trouble. Those things we “know” for certain that simply are not true—those are the things that can get us into tough situations.

There are a lot of perceptions about CEOs, presidents, and other leaders. There are perceptions about pastors. There are perceptions about principals. There are perceptions about boards and board chairs.

Until you serve in one of those roles and take on the responsibilities and accountability that come with it, you really have no idea what all that role entails.

For leaders, emerging leaders, and those who aspire to be leaders, it is important to recognize that many of our perceptions may not be true at all.

In part 1 of this book, I want to tackle some common misperceptions about leaders, the role of leaders, and the nature of leadership.

Now, this list in no way represents all the things I failed to fully understand or misunderstood going into my tenure as CEO. When I think about all I have learned along the way, or perhaps when I think of all that I did not know when I started out as CEO, it is remarkable that the board determined that I was the best candidate to fill the position.

As leaders, we must recognize that there are many things we do not know. And we must have the humility to accept the fact that some things we think are true are, in fact, *not* true. Twain warned of the dangers that come when pride and rigidity chain us to untrue things.

As we move forward through the rest of this book, I want to make sure there is clarity over an important yet often overlooked aspect of leadership: leadership journeys are personal. You come into your role with your unique skills and experiences. Your journey will not be the same as mine. The learnings in the chapters that follow may or may not apply, but I pray that in each one you find some insight that challenges and expands your thinking and understanding of your own journey.

The WINDSHIELD FALLACY

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If you are reading a book on leadership, I would guess that you are on LinkedIn. I am on the platform and check it frequently to see what people have posted. My time there is passive rather than active, meaning that I am not a contributor or commenter. Perhaps one day I will develop that routine. But I do like to go out and see what gets posted and reposted.

You can find some really useful information out there, whether from someone's original content or reposts of published articles. There is also some questionable material out there. Certainly not to the extent of what might be on Facebook, but some less than reputable or reliable information does make its way onto the LinkedIn platform.

It is fairly simple to post and to read material, but it is not always easy to discern its quality, accuracy, or depth. Unless you are an expert in a particular area, you might just accept what is presented as fact. Outlandish material is pretty easy to spot. What is dangerous, however, is the material that seems reasonable, or perhaps close to being true, especially when it fits your personal narrative.

Another danger is material that is true in a sense but leaves out the whole truth or fails to contain only the truth. Many political careers have been built on such messaging.

Leadership quotes often appear on LinkedIn. Most of these quotations come from well-known and established leaders, and some come from people I have never heard of (which does not

mean they are not famous or experts). Some quotes stand on their own, whereas others are clearly taken out of context.

As with all information on social media, leadership quotes need to be thoughtfully considered before they are applied. Something may sound good on the surface but become a bit more challenging when we think through all its ramifications.

Social media, not to mention modern news cycles, thrive on the short attention spans that plague so much of our society. Sound bites rule the day. Opinions can be swayed quickly by a pithy statement that seems true at first glance. Such statements are read and accepted as truth, and the reader hurries on to the next story.

The Fallacy

There is a quote that has been widely attributed to the late general and secretary of state Colin Powell that takes on different forms but in essence states, “Always focus on the front windshield and not the rearview mirror.”¹ Although seemingly inspirational and motivating, it is wrong. And not just a little wrong. For leaders, it is completely and dangerously wrong. And for Christian leaders especially, it is even more dangerous because it could lead us to think we are in the place of God.

Now, I am pretty sure no expert or book-writing consultant would advise a first-time author to challenge the wisdom of a great national hero. Especially one who was a highly decorated general and well-respected foreign diplomat. But here we go.

On the surface, it seems hard to argue with the statement. Leaders, like drivers, must always be looking and thinking ahead. Leaders help envision a future state for the organization or the group that they lead. They paint a picture of the future that is motivating, exciting, and engaging. All of that is true. So why am I so down on the quote?

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1 See, for example, Jessica Sager, “50 Colin Powell Quotes to Remember the Soldier, Leader and Man America Lost,” *Parade*, October 18, 2021, <https://parade.com/1280254/jessicasager/colin-powell-quotes/>.

Let me clarify that I am not telling leaders to focus on the rearview mirror instead. That would be equally foolish and dangerous. There is a proper time and place for the rearview mirror, which I will get into later, but it can never be the area of focus for a leader.

With all due respect to the late general and secretary of state, the idea that a leader must always focus on the front windshield may be inspiring, but it is misguided at best and potentially destructive at worst.

When we break down the implications of this quote, aspiring leaders might be led to believe that if they always focus on the front windshield they will, like a person driving a car, have

clarity regarding what lies ahead. With that clarity, then, the leader can expertly guide the organization safely down the road to its final destination.

But humans can never know the future. And therein lies the fallacy of this quote and the danger for leaders.

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The future is completely unknowable unless revealed to us by our all-knowing and all-powerful God! What I know and am certain of regarding the future is only what God has revealed to us through Scripture. I know that my Redeemer lives and that He will return again in glory. With respect to things on this side of eternity, the future is unknown.

Of course, a leader needs to be future focused and forward thinking. This is an essential responsibility of leadership. But to suggest that the leader can see and understand what lies ahead—like the driver of a car—and thus successfully guide an organization or team to some envisioned end state brings great risk not only to the leader but also to those they lead.

Role Confusion

If I start to believe that as a leader I can see and fully understand what is out ahead of me, I have put myself in the place of the One who *does* know and see what lies ahead. When I put myself into the driver's seat, thinking that I can lead with full clarity and conviction, I put myself in the role of God. I risk building my own tower of Babel.

As a leader, I am a steward or a manager of what is entrusted to my care. I am not the Master.

The steward still must make decisions and take prudent action in pursuit of desired outcomes. The steward is called and empowered by the will and pleasure of the Master and is bound by His constraints.

As Christian leaders, we lead by faith, not by sight. I cannot see what is coming ahead, but I trust in the One who fully knows and sees, the One who has called me to lead in this time and place.

With that said, I am not suggesting that leaders should not be thinking and planning ahead. That is an essential part of our responsibilities as leaders. We are still called to make plans. We are to consider risks and potential scenarios.

As we make our plans, we must also think about contingencies. We attempt to anticipate how, where, and when our plans may not succeed. We think ahead to how we may need to adjust the plan as the conditions warrant. We are nimble and flexible. We remain confident and resolute, yet humble and adaptable. We never stop observing and learning. We apply the learning and adjust as the situation demands. But it is irresponsible to believe that we can know for certain what is coming.

The illusion of certainty also breeds overconfidence and arrogance. There is a spiritual danger as the relationship between us

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and our God and Creator is reversed. There is also real danger to the organization and the people we have been called to lead.

Sound extreme? A couple of examples come to mind. No doubt you can come up with your own. General George Custer, for example, was absolutely certain that he had the full and accurate view out the front of his windshield. Likewise, the captain of the Titanic was certain of what he saw and knew to be true as he captained a ship that supposedly not even God Himself could sink.

Maybe your decisions are not a matter of life and death like the examples above, but such overconfidence can still cause devastation for others. Companies fail. Jobs are eliminated. Investments are lost. Careers of others are ruined. Relationships are severed. The list goes on.

When leaders put themselves in the place of God and believe they can see and fully understand the future, the damage goes well beyond the leader.

Where We Should Look

Enough law for the moment. Let's come at this from a point of grace: there is no windshield for us to look out that will provide a perfect (or even sufficient) picture of what is coming. What

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**AS CHRISTIAN LEADERS,
WE GO FORWARD WITH
FAITH AND CONFIDENCE.**
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lies ahead of us is known only by God. And we take comfort in the fact that what lies ahead is fully known by our Creator and Redeemer! Therefore, we lead by faith, not by sight.

Imperfect and incomplete knowledge of the future does not prevent us from moving forward. As Christian leaders, we go forward with faith and confidence. Consider how God's words to Joshua provide encouragement to us today:

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, "Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go

over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. . . . Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. . . . Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” (JOSHUA 1:1–2, 5–7, 9)

Let’s put this into context. Joshua was part of the advance team that went into the Promised Land to provide intelligence on what the people of Israel would encounter. The reports came back that the land was plentiful but the current occupants were formidable.

Joshua witnessed those challenges firsthand, yet implored Moses and the people to move quickly and take the land. He knew that if God was with them they would ultimately prevail.

Joshua, as an emerging leader, wanted to move forward in faith!

Decades later, God spoke the words above to the new chosen leader of His people. I take great comfort and encouragement in them today, and it is God’s encouragement to you as well: Be strong. Be courageous. The Lord your God is with you wherever you go!

The Side Windows

Having considered the windshield part of this quote, let’s address some other significant problems. To suggest that the leader look out only the front windshield negates the valuable information to be seen through the side windows and the rearview mirror.

As young drivers, we were taught to primarily focus on the front window. But we were also encouraged to periodically look