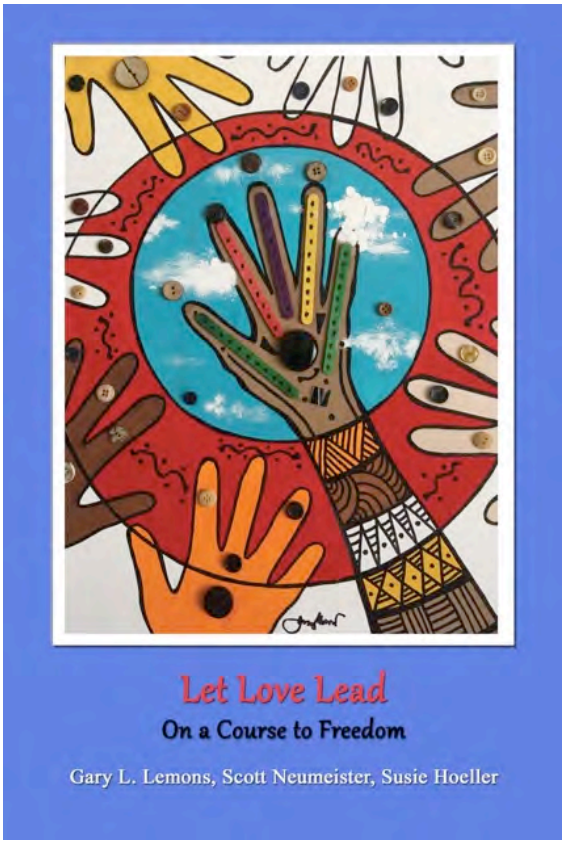

Let Love Lead is a visionary book that inspires with its stories of college students coming to personal transformation, liberation, and healing.

Let Love Lead on a Course to Freedom

By Gary L. Lemons PhD, Scott Neumeister PhD & Susie L. Hoeller

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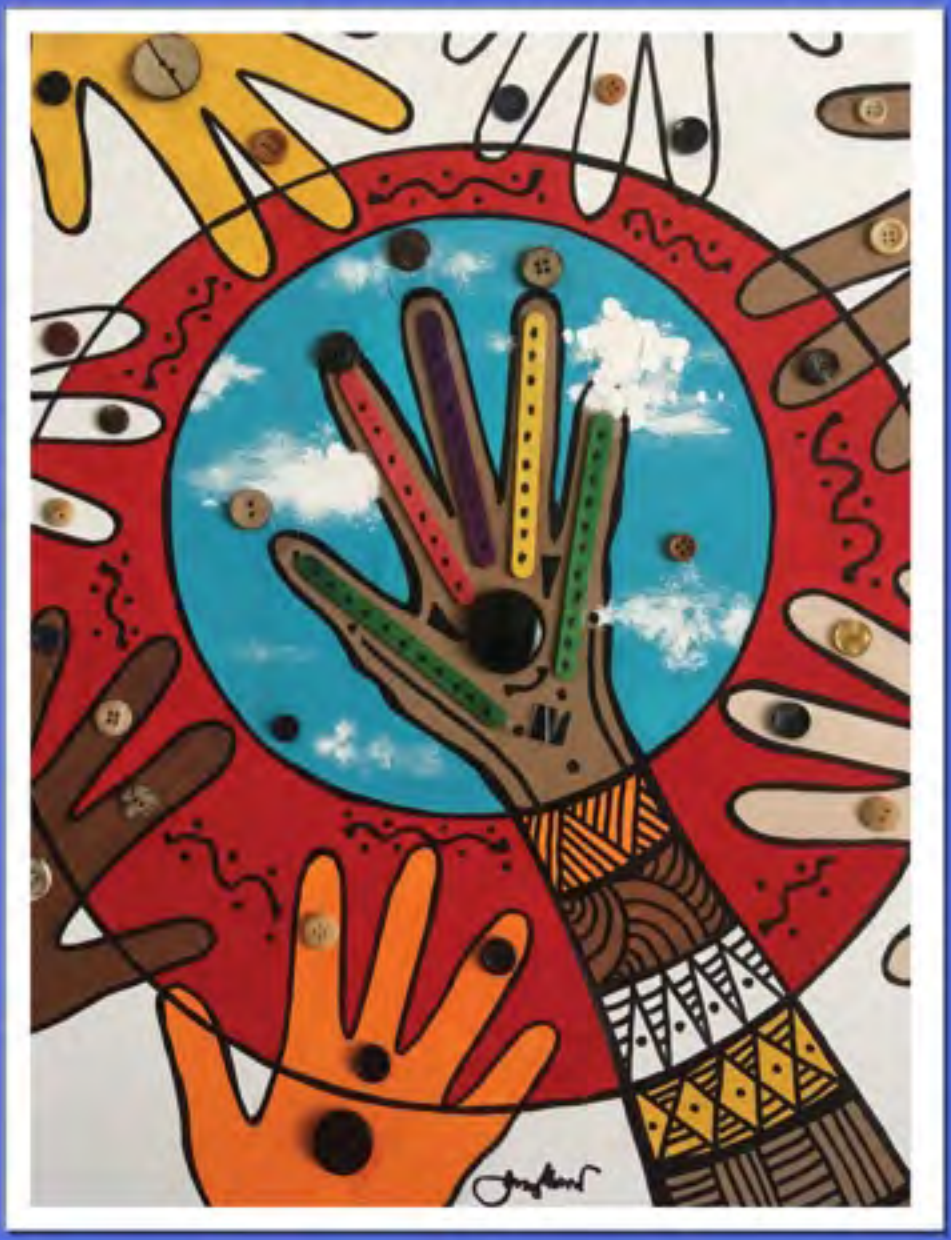

Let Love Lead

On a Course to Freedom

Gary L. Lemons, Scott Neumeister, Susie Hoeller

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So I am giving you a new commandment:
that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, so too you should love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love among yourselves.

Jesus, quoted in *The Single Gospel: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John Consolidated into a Single Narrative,* Neil Averitt

Chapter 12

Seated in the Circle of Love

Gary L. Lemons, Scott Neumeister, and Susie Hoeller

> "So where do we go from here?" you ask. "Now what? . . . How? What are our seven steps to equality? How do we make other people believe it? How do we change things for women in our church and in the world? What shall we do?"…Begin here: right at the feet of Jesus. Look to Love, and yes, our Jesus—he will guide you in your steps, one after another, in these small ways until you come at last to love the whole world.
>
> Sarah Bessey, "Intimate Insurgency," *Jesus Feminist: An Invitation to Revisit the Bible's View of Women*

> **Womanist**:…Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female…Not a separatist …Traditionally universal, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.
>
> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983)

Loving: From Concept to Pedagogical Practice—Gary's Closing Thoughts

Conceptually, as co-authors of *Let Love Lead on a Course to Freedom: A Study of "The Bible as Literature*," Susie, Scott, and I embarked upon a collaborative journey recounting our experiences together as we labored to compose this book. We have written about our engaging, life-changing encounters with students and each other during the semesters I taught "The Bible as Literature" course, and we have documented the inspirational depth of its self-liberating classroom dialogues—across differences of gender, race, ethnicity, culture(s), sexualities, generation, and abilities. At the core of them—as we read, reviewed, and shared with each other students' writings from each semester—we would come to discover the profound thematic agency of *love* as a guiding moral, ethical, and social principle consistently expressed in writings students produced in the course.

Moreover, considering the biblical and literary implications of the book's title, I will always remember the enlightening conversation Scott and I had about it. One evening after class while he and I were walking to our cars parked on campus, as we discussed the vision for the book (to be co-authored by me, him, and Susie), he suddenly suggested we should think about the phrase—"let love lead" as a possible main title. It resonated deeply in my mind, even as we parted. I knew in that moment, this was the one. Yet it would be the phrasing for a subtitle that I would labor over and over again—interconnecting my pedagogical practice to Scott's visionary thinking. Finally, it came to me. Scott's idea of one submitting to the guiding power of love—as a conceptual agent of self-transformation—could simply be worded in a subtitle relating it to the journey the students and I had embarked upon in the "course" of our study of the Bible together in the classroom.

In the "Postscript" of my first book, *Black Male Outsider, a Memoir: Teaching as a Feminist Man*, I have a section titled "Teaching on the Margin and Loving." There I make the claim that

black feminist pedagogy sustains, renews, and transforms space(s) for decolonization:

> For me, becoming a "professor" of feminism [teaching a course focused on the Bible as literature] has been about a personal life-sustaining journey toward self-love. I have learned to love myself again as a black male who has *chosen* to remain on the margin . . . I have determined to free myself from the bounds of patriarchy. (229)

As the visionary foundation for my pedagogical practice over the course of time, I have insisted that my students sit in a circle during our class meetings. Most classrooms in which I have taught (except for small graduate classes) have desks arranged in traditional rows. While this format works to mark the visual standpoint of the professor—situated at the front of the room—it focuses attention on the intellectual and authoritative power of this individual. Literally *and* symbolically, this format reinscribes and perpetuates institutionalized stereotypes of "professorship." Having written about my college teaching strategies over two decades, I have consistently labored to transform the classroom. Students literally become the center of what I think the space should look like. Rather than featuring my intellectual expertise (through lecturing), I purposely situate my intellectual standpoint in an all-inclusive, knowledge-building platform.

Creating a "face-to-face" seating arrangement in the classroom for a learning space promoting interactive dialogue between students and myself leads, I strategically become a part of the seating circle. At the beginning of each semester (after our first class meeting), I request that in our next session students assist me in arranging the desks in a circular setting. Once this task is accomplished, I sit in the circle with them. In this physical re-arrangement—not only is everyone's face clearly visible (to every person in the room), each one's voice is audibly empowered. The classroom is thus renewed and transformed. Personally, my three years of teaching "The Bible as Literature" was life-changing. Having embraced bell hooks' concept of "engaged pedagogy," rooted in an interactive student-teacher relationship, I

have remained committed to her vision of it. hooks shares its transformative implications:

> Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we [professors] refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging student to take risks. (*Teaching to Transgress,* 21)

Not all my students were completely comfortable sitting in a circle. It made some of them more visible than they actually desired to be. Having to look at someone directly "face-to-face"—especially for "shy" students—was a potential issue that I would have to *engage*. Key to hooks' idea of empowered teaching is the critical importance of being "vulnerable" in the classroom. I absolutely agree. This is precisely where my transformation of the classroom seating lives. Here I not only challenge my students to be open but myself as well. It's all about risk-taking.

Seated together in a circle format each class session in "The Bible as Literature"—my students and I not only conversed about intersections between genders but collectively we faced each other's issues *inter*related to race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, cultures, and abilities. My pedagogical aim in the strategic employment of feminist/womanist thought in the study of the Bible as literature is to bridge theory and practice for "higher" education. Students came to know the critical importance of intersectional thinking.

In reality (as I have shared throughout *Let Love Lead*), when I first began teaching the life of Jesus in a feminist context, I clearly knew this would be a risk. Opening up about my pro-feminist and womanist positionality in the college classroom has always been about my taking a risk. Who would believe my story? This has always been a personal, political, and pedagogical issue for me. Yet when I determined to reject patriarchal and masculinist thinking as a black man, teaching for the first time at the New School University in 1994, the classroom became a critical site to put my life on the line of vulnerability. Sharing my struggle to become an advocate for women's rights called into question all that I grew up believing what

a man should be. Telling my students the story about "how I made it over" (sexist *and* racist myths and stereotypes), I aim to enable them to open up. In this way, our interactive dialogue in the circle setting is life-changing for many students. For male students (who are most often gender "minorities" in my classes), such a space provides them the opportunity to engage openly in conversations related to manhood and masculinity.

In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*, bell hooks states, "It is not true that men are unwilling to change. It is true that many men are afraid to change. It is true that masses of men have not even begun to look at the ways that patriarchy keeps them from knowing themselves, from being in touch with their feelings, from loving. To know love, men must be able to let go the will to dominance. They must be able to choose life over death. They must be willing to change" (xvii). As a black man continually calling into question ideas of patriarchy (in and outside black/communities of color), I take to heart hooks' notion that "men must be able to let go the will to dominance," if we are to comprehend the life-saving power of love. The circle seating arranged classroom offers an all-inclusive space where male students can feel free to let go the fear of being vulnerable. Rather than being perceived as weak or less "manly"—male students can comprehend the freedom of self-actualization connected one's "willing[ness] to change." This idea resides at the center of my conceptual design for a liberatory classroom *re*-arrangement. As hooks notes in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*: "Professors who embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students providing them with ways of knowing that enhances their capacity to live full and deeply" (22). I say let the student-teacher circle remain unbroken. In it, students have "enhance[d my] capacity to let love lead more "full[y] and deeply."

The Way Ahead Is In—Scott's Closing Thoughts

As I reflect on my writing for *Let Love Lead*, my experience working with Gary and Susie, and getting to know the students in

"The Bible as Literature," I cannot help but feel encouragement for the future. I see even more powerfully than when I first engaged with my colleagues and these undergraduates the efficacy of the autocritographical approach to merge standard, knowledge-based education with personal transformation, liberation, and healing within the English classroom. Back in 1995, in the middle of a career in information technology, I received my initial "calling" to be a teacher. A few years later, I took an interest in energy body work, and in an introductory course, I accepted another calling: to be a healer in any capacity I could. Not until 2009, five years after switching careers into teaching and two years after starting graduate school, did I encounter the perfect fusion of teaching and healing within Gary's "Feminist Theory" course, powered by autocritography. I began my own self-recovery process in that class, which was to extend throughout my graduate school years and continues to this day. I also started to implement autocritography as a strategy in my own classrooms—first at a middle school and eventually at the University of South Florida. While spiritual themes weave through many of the texts I have taught, I have never engaged my students as deeply in a work of holy writ as Gary has in "The Bible as Literature." Having witnessed the evidence of its power to "care for the soul," as Thomas Moore titles his book, I am inspired by the potential use of this vision of "higher education" as a means of sustaining and spreading the teaching/healing project to which I have allied myself.

A question arose as Gary, Susie, and I sat together discussing how we wanted to conclude the book, and it serves as the guide for my closing words—where do we go from here? The question evokes the obvious meanings of "How do we carry this work into the future?" and "What direction do we ultimately want our readers to take with them after reading our book?" Of course, the standard "direction" answers arose in my head: ahead, onward, and upward. Looking at our gathering into the small circle around Gary's table, however, a deeper, more intuitive answer emerged: inward. I began recollecting how powerful Gary's pedagogical technique is that he mentions above, in which his students—both undergraduate and graduate—sit in a circle for class, rather than the standard instructor up front/all

students facing forward. Moreover, I thought about the autocritographical work of reader response itself and how it requires the merging of analytical thinking with inward-facing, self-reflective memory work. I therefore struck upon the two ways that going *in*, both into the circle of visible community and into our inner community of personal thoughts, feelings, and memories, is actually the way *forward*.

I recall with absolute clarity the evening (Dr.) Lemons and I first met: the opening meeting of his graduate "Feminist Theory" course in 2009. The University of South Florida facilities planners had placed our class in a small, semi-circular auditorium with ascending levels and fixed tables. Despite the fact that we students fit into this space, it did not "fit" Gary's vision of how our classroom community would work. He adamantly stressed to us that we had to "see" each other, and that intra-classroom, face-to-face dialogue was a lynchpin of his course. Our professor subsequently was able to arrange a different room for the rest of the semester, and we afterwards met in a space with individual chair/desks that could be arranged into a circle. Paradoxically, the room we moved into was not a good "fit" for student-to-chair ratio. It had seats for about forty students, and our small group of fifteen was dwarfed by the empty chairs around the edges of the room. For the university, it would have been more "efficient" to hold our class in a smaller classroom. Not for *efficiency* but for *community*, Gary had gone the extra mile—and I use that term with knowing reference to Matthew 5:4—to help create a community within the circle.

Although other graduate classes at USF did tend to operate in conference-style formats, Gary's insistence on being able to sit in a circle, even in his undergraduate courses, has true progressive underpinnings versus the efficiency reasons for those classroom setups. He is following the example and theoretical wisdom of one of his own mentors, bell hooks. "I still remember the excitement I felt," hooks recalls in *Teaching to Transgress*, "when I took my first class where the teacher wanted to change how we sat, where we moved from sitting in rows to a circle where we could look at each other. That forced us to recognize one another's presence" (146). Another

presence-recognizing technique Gary employs is his insistence that students refer to each other by name when responding in dialogue. He reinforces this in his undergraduate courses at intervals during the first part of the semester by having "name quizzes"—in which each student must write down all the others' names—to sharpen the importance of their memorization. By facing faces and using names, Gary's students are not simply reproducing the isolation of normal classrooms, big or small; they are taking their "seat at the table," and Gary, following the title of another book by bell hooks, is teaching community.

Concomitant with her idea of the circle enabling recognition of all the others in the classroom, hooks also emphasizes that the instructor thereby decenters her/himself, initially just in a visual way—I was looking at peers far more often than the sole professor in that "Feminist Theory" classroom. But even more than just the line of sight factor, traditional seating organization reinforces classroom talk happening mostly as teacher to students as a group, student to teacher, or teacher in response to single student. In this scenario, even when one student may be responding to what another student has offered aloud, the response tends to be more aimed *at* the instructor than *to* the original speaker. The circle format tends to eliminate this construction of the power of speaking as mediated through the instructor. Gary further distances himself from classroom focus by only rarely speaking in a lecture mode and most often becoming one more voice in the dialogue propelled by students reading their autocritographical pieces aloud and getting feedback. Knowledge, therefore, becomes constructed, not dispersed, in a decentered classroom such as this—a space where the direction, as my theme is here in my concluding remarks, is "in."

Both the physical setup and the professor relinquishing the power center promote making the "invisible" student visible. On this point, I recall the words Ralph Ellison uses in his introduction to *The Invisible Man*: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me . . .When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me" (3). I find that in the traditional classroom

arrangement, all desks facing the instructor means that the human "surroundings" in the room, the other students, tend to become background to the "front and center" figure. The circle structure is a physical arrangement to create recognition. The fact that students read aloud then dialogue about their often very personal responses using each other's names empowers—or has hooks states, "forces"—even more intimate and personal visibility and recognition. By students facing inward, both in the physical/circular sense and the self-reflective writing shared within the circle, they grow in their humanity via one of the truest embodiments of what it means to study within the humanities.

This motif of seeing and visibility fits right into the discussion of "The Bible as Literature," especially as a theme of Jesus' ministry in the Gospels. Especially with women, as Sarah Bessey illustrates in *Jesus Feminist*, but also with other marginalized groups, Jesus went out of his way to "see" otherwise invisible people. For example, his breaking of double taboo to speak to the water-seeker at the well—both a Samaritan and a woman—in John 4 is one of the prime examples of his turning the invisible visible. Moreover, Jesus in multiple gospels not only scolds his disciples for trying to prevent children ("little ones" both in size and societal importance) from coming to him but also brings a child before his followers (and in Mark 9, hugs him) to illustrate childlike faith. When the humble centurion sends friends to ask Jesus to transmit healing to his servant from a distance, Jesus takes that moment to make the invisible Roman visible, announcing to the crowd, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel" (*New International Version*, Luke 7.9). This instance is even more remarkable because natives of Israel would have hated and marginalized such a person, as part of an occupying force. Still, Jesus makes him visible at the core of his statement as an exemplar of faith, even to Israel's embarrassment. The prophet Isaiah foresaw the future messiah's life work of making visible the humble while de-emphasizing the proud, declaring in metaphor, "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low" (*New International Version*, Isa. 40.4). In this sense, a pedagogy that helps

equalize the classroom as much as possible aligns with this messianic pursuit.

This theme of visibility, as well as the barriers to it, not only operates in the era of Christ; the Old Testament has such moments as well. When God calls to Moses out of the burning bush, sending him on the mission to win freedom for his fellow Hebrews, Moses attempts to become invisible: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (*New International Version*, Ex. 3:11). The angel calls Gideon to deliver Israel from Midian, and Gideon's response echoes the invisibility-begging of Moses: "Pardon me, my lord,…but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in the family" (*New International Version*, Judg. 6:15). Even David prays to the Lord in 1 Chronicles 17:16, "Who am I, LORD God, and what is my family, that you have brought me thus far?" But even more than this self-imposed invisibility, David encountered others who tried to prevent his "seat at the table," most vividly in the story of his encounter with Goliath. When David hears of Goliath's defiance of the Israelite army, the shepherd boy asks about the reward for killing the giant. "Why have you come down here?", David's brother Eliab scolds him for even inquiring, "And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the desert? I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is." To this scorn David counters, "Can't I even speak?" (*New International Version*, 1 Sam. 17:28-29). Saul treats David afterwards in a similar, discouraging manner. Ultimately, though, we know of the works of Moses, Gideon, and David. These figures who either felt unworthy or powerless to participate in a community or were discouraged from communal participation all left lasting legacies. Thus, both Old and New Testaments offer visions of individuals becoming visible, being invited to "the table," and making a difference for the better.

I hope, along with Gary and Susie, that *Let Love Lead* can be a text that inspires with its stories of students coming to personal transformation, liberation, and healing. Also, and especially for teachers or group leaders, I hope that many aspects of how "The Bible as Literature" course operated serve as a model for an efficacious

method of facilitating the "higher education" I spoke of above. As I am writing this on Martin Luther King, Jr., day, I use his words to amplify the power of love as the highest educator: "I have decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love…He who loves has the key that unlocks to the meaning of ultimate reality" King delivered these words in a speech whose title echoes the theme of this conclusion: "Where Do We Go from Here?" The best way *forward*, in my opinion, it to turn *inward* in love, both to those around us within the circle of whatever communal bonds we share and to our own experiences and memories that resonate with the stories of our humanity that transcend difference. While our differences cannot and should not be erased, we can assiduously seek to strengthen the "tie that binds our hearts our hearts in Christian love," as the old hymn goes. This loving bond is the goal of this course that we three authors have written about and that, we hope, can be reproduced in locations we could never personally reach. With an eye to the themes and wisdom that resonate across the ages and with a loving openheartedness to connecting to both literary individuals and individuals "within the circle" of the reading group, reading the Bible as literature can indeed embody a fundamental act of love.

Life-Changing Love—Susie's Closing Thoughts

It all seems so clear to me now. Is it just because I turned sixty-five this past July 2018 and can now be on Medicare instead of individual health insurance, with my monthly health care costs cut by 80%. Since sixty-five is the new forty-five, I have no plans to retire!

But making this life milestone is not the reason for my sudden burst of clarity. Here is the explanation about what is clear—what I am speaking about.

All my life, since my parents raised my brothers and me as Christians, I have known that Jesus commands us to love God and love my neighbor as myself. But in having to deal with nasty people in business, as neighbors and on the roads, I always found it impossible to love my neighbor as myself. I could love my family and my friends but not everyone around me. I know that Jesus said that

even sinners love their friends. I know I am a sinner and can never perfectly imitate Christ. It is impossible. Even Peter, John and James fell asleep in the garden of Gethsemane while Jesus was praying to be spared the Cross.

In working with Gary and Scott on this book, I finally realized that if I could learn to "let love lead" me then I would be on the road to *freedom* from sin's power and guilt. Letting love lead means I would be able to substitute kindness for judgment and caring for indifference.

I have learned from Gary's students how to lessen pride and increase humility. As the class speaker on more than one occasion, I had walked in with a prideful attitude that I was there to impart my wisdom to them.

I know that Gary's students learned something from my presentations and from reading my book *Lean on Jesus.* But what I had not expected was how much I would end up learning from them—not just from their questions in class and class but in reading their papers about my book and *Jesus Feminist*. In their papers, the students expose their fears, their weaknesses, their struggles and their hopes. They bare their souls to the reader.

I learned from the students who were complimentary and from a small number who were critical of something I wrote. It was a great experience for me.

Pride is a huge problem for many highly educated people—it is too easy to look down on others with less education and life experience and dismiss them. I will never do that again . . . (as Canadians say) "for sure."

I saw firsthand how Gary's teaching methods can revolutionize learning by creating a circle of students who care about and trust each other. Learning is not a solitary pursuit. Learning is not the mastery of facts and figures alone. Learning is not the accumulation of grades, degrees and academic awards. It is not competing against other students; it is collaborating with them.

Letting love lead is the course to freedom for all of us—freedom from fear, freedom from sin.

The experience of collaborating with Gary and Scott on this book has been a life-changing experience for me. I never was in class with Scott, as we were separate guest speakers. I have had the privilege of his company at our planning meetings held at Gary's circular kitchen table. A beautiful table that Gary made with his own hands. Just like Jesus was a carpenter.

I use the term *life-changing* because I now understand why letting love lead puts us on the course to freedom:

> You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (*New International Version*, Gal. 5.13-14).

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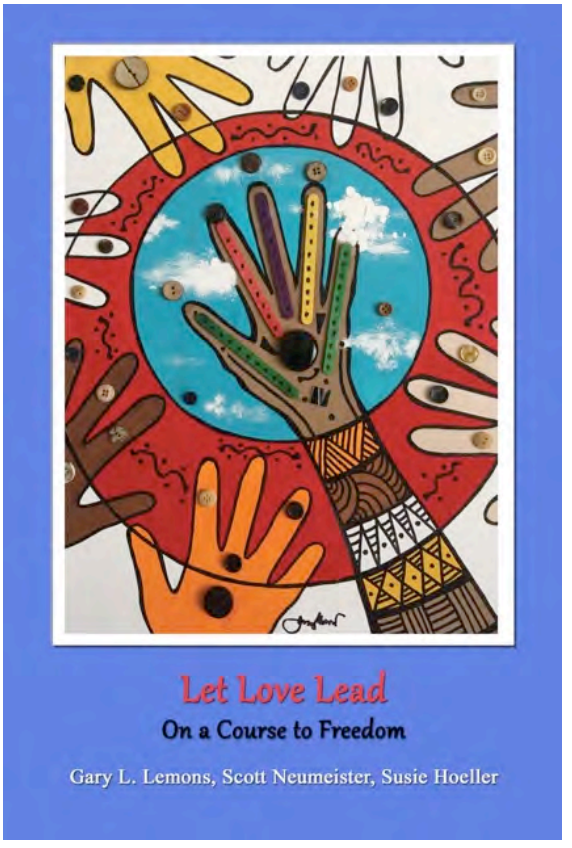

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