

“Lasting Impact”
7 Powerful Conversations That Will Help Your Church Grow
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In the future, the churches that grow will be the churches whose leaders courageously hold the most honest conversations and then take action. Churches that fail to release high-capacity leaders will struggle with growth. The most accessed subject on my blog is church attendance and growth. It’s the subject everyone wants to know about but no one wants to talk honestly about publicly.

When our church is growing, it’s easy to think we can do nothing wrong. And when we’re not growing, it’s easy to feel as if we do nothing right. Neither is healthy. So if the subject becomes emotional or unhealthy, come back to that central point.

It’s about the mission. The love of Jesus was designed to spill far beyond the walls of the church, not be contained within them. Just because some people might want a church to grow because of ego does not mean all growth is bad.

As a rule, I believe that healthy things grow. Sometimes things aren’t as mysterious as we make them out to be. There are traceable patterns in stagnant and declining churches as well as in healthy, growing churches.

What follows is a list of ten things that might be holding your church back from realizing the potential of its mission.

1. You’re in conflict. As long as you’re conflicted, you’ll have difficulty growing.
2. You’re more in love with the past than you are with the future. When leaders are more in love with the past than they are with the future, the end is near. If your church is a museum of 1950 or even 2012, the likelihood of reaching the next generation diminishes with every passing day.
3. You’re not that awesome to be around. If people truly don’t want to be around you, don’t let the reason be because you haven’t let Christ reshape your character or social skills.
4. You’re focused on yourself. Too many churches are focused on their wants, preferences, and perceived needs.
5. You think culture is the enemy. It is extremely difficult to impact people you don’t actually like.
6. You’re afraid to risk what is for the sake of what might be. The greatest enemy of your future success is your current success.

7. You can't make a decision. Effective churches develop governance that is nimble; is aligned around a common mission, vision, and strategy; trusts staff to accomplish the mission; and has minimal congregational involvement in decision making.

8. You talk more than you act. Most church leaders I know (staff and boards) overthink and underact. A B-plus plan brilliantly executed beats an A-plus plan that never gets implemented, every single time.

9. You don't think there's anything wrong with your church. Church leaders who think there's nothing wrong are on their way to soon having not much more to lead than a stalled-out club for the already convinced.

10. You're more focused on growth than you are on God.

Here are changes you can make.

1. Structure bigger to grow bigger!

The Barna Group reports that the average Protestant church size in America is 89 adults. Sixty percent of Protestant churches have fewer than 100 adults in attendance. Only 2 percent have more than 1,000 adults attending. You know why most churches still don't push past the 200 mark in attendance? It's because they organize, behave, lead, and structure themselves like small organizations.

If you want to grow bigger, you need to structure bigger. What can you do to position yourself for growth? There are three moves you can make that will help.

2. Rethink the pastor's role. In most small congregations, the pastor is the primary caregiver. The pastoral care model of church leadership simply doesn't scale. One answer to this dilemma is to teach people to care for each other in groups.

Many pastors I know are people-pleasers by nature. Not wanting to disappoint people fuels conflict within leaders. Develop a strategy. Be clear on how you will accomplish your mission, and don't rest until the mission, vision, and strategy reside in every single volunteer and leader. Let leaders lead. Holding a seat of leadership without having the gift of leadership is a strategy for stagnation and dysfunction.

3. Empower your volunteers. Volunteers that merely do as they are told out of a sense of duty will never contribute like those who own the vision, mission, and strategy and have been given the authority to lead. Once you have identified true leaders, and once you're clear on your mission, vision, and strategy, you need to release people to accomplish it.

Try to do it all yourself, and you will burn out, leave, or simply be ineffective. Stop micromanaging. If you need permission every time you need to buy paper towels or

repaint an office, you have a governance issue. Empower the team to accomplish the mission and vision, and get out of the way of day-to-day management.

4. **Simplify your programming.** Killing some long-standing programs and replacing them with a few targeted ministries that would help us best accomplish our mission. Now, although I lead a much bigger church of one thousand weekly attenders, I'm out only half a dozen nights a month or less (including small group). Muster the courage to cut some good programs; good is the enemy of great. They're stagnant or dying because they're not connecting with people and effectively fulfilling their mission.

How to make things worse

Never resolve your underlying problems. As we got healthier inwardly, we grew outwardly. It's just that God's grace is no substitute for using your mind and heart to engage the issues of leadership that are before you.

I've found four questions in particular are helpful when your church stops growing.

1. Is our sense of mission white hot?
2. Has our strategy or approach become dated?
3. Are we on top of the constant change in our culture?
4. Are we focused on unchurched people or on ourselves?

In every decision, focus on who you want to reach, not on who you want to keep. You're good with questions. You're honest about your struggles. You have easy, obvious, strategic, and helpful steps for new people. Most churches simply have randomly assembled programs that lead nowhere in particular. You are flexible and adaptable.

Three Causes of Decline

1. Internal dysfunction that is sapping the community of its life, such as conflict; wrong people in wrong places; unrealistic expectations of staff, boards, and volunteers.
2. Structural issues, such as boards that micromanage or pastoral care being vested in one or a handful of leaders.
3. An inward focus that refuses to acknowledge the need to change to be effective with outsiders

Everywhere I go I talk to pastors who are experiencing the same thing: people who attend church are attending less often. This is true of rapidly growing churches, megachurches, midsized churches, and Bible churches. It's a massive cultural shift. Attendance is a sign of something deeper that every church leader is going to have to wrestle with over the next few years.

Why are even committed attenders attending less often?

There are at least eleven reasons.

1. Greater Affluence
2. Increased Focus on Kids' Activities affluent parents are choosing sports over church.
3. More Travel
4. A 24-7 Culture
5. Blended and Single-Parent Families
6. Online Options. Churches with a strong online presence have seen it negatively impact physical attendance
7. The Cultural Disappearance of Guilt
8. Self-Directed Spirituality. Another characteristic of the postmodern mind is a declining trust of and reliance on institutions.
9. Failure to See a Direct Benefit. Either way, failure to see a direct benefit always results in declining engagement.
10. Valuing attendance over engagement. At our church, I find our most engaged people—people who serve, give, invite, and who are in a community group—are our most frequent attenders. More and more as a leader, I value engagement over attendance.
11. A Massive Culture Shift. Change is unkind to the unprepared, so prepare.

Characteristics of today's unchurched person

They don't all have big "problems." Most are spiritual. You can't call them back to something they never knew. Many have tried church, even a little, but left. They want you to be Christian. They're intelligent, so speak to that. They hate hypocrisy. They love transparency. People admire your strengths, but they identify with your weaknesses. They invite their friends if they like what they're discovering. Their spiritual growth trajectory varies dramatically

Developing a better approach to infrequent attenders and unchurched people

What follows are different approaches and some new strategies that can help us bridge the gap as we move from a Christian era into a post-Christian era.

- Show empathy. If you start judging people for not seeing it your way, you will almost certainly turn them off.
- Separate the mission from the method. As Andy Stanley says, “What you celebrate gets repeated.” Elevate personal relationships. A growing church that organizes everything around groups will always be more effective than a church that doesn’t.
- Love people.
- Create a culture of serving.
- Prioritize kids and teens.
- Create an irresistible experience.
- Create an awesome online presence. At Connexus, 70 percent or more of giving happens online.
- Offer offline surprises.
- Start measuring outputs. What if you helped your attenders be the church, not just go to church?

Health doesn’t just happen in leadership. In fact, the demands of leadership will push you toward unhealth.

How do you know you’re burning out as a leader?

1. Your motivation is fading.
2. Your main emotion is numbness.
3. People drain you. And while solitude is a gift from God, isolation isn’t.
4. Little things make you disproportionately angry. Disproportionate emotions of any sort are often a sign something is awry.
5. You’re becoming cynical.
6. Your productivity is dropping.
7. You’re self-medicating.
8. You usually either practice self-care as a leader or you end up self-medicating. Overeating. Food is the drug of choice for many Christian leaders.

9. Working more. All work and no play doesn't just make you dull; it makes you disobedient.
10. Gossip.
11. Spending.
12. Under-the-radar substance abuse. Christian leaders can fall into the classic pattern of turning to a substance rather than turning to God for relief.
13. You don't laugh anymore.
14. Sleep and time off no longer refuel you.

Perry Noble so rightly pointed out that overwork is the most rewarded addiction in our culture. He said, "We can get so addicted to positive things said about us, it can push us into thinking, 'Oh my gosh, the world can't live without me. Overwork combined with success can eventually lead to an adrenaline rush addiction.

A fully charged leader can accomplish more than a partially charged leader, every time." The only way you will ever last in ministry over the long haul is to stay spiritually, emotionally, physically, and mentally healthy. When you carve out time to take care of yourself, you'll always be in a better position to take care of others.

While there may be nothing truly novel in these ten options, when you practice them they have a staggeringly positive impact on your personal health and well-being.

1. A great daily time with God:
2. Exercise:
3. A healthy diet:
4. Proper sleep: Take naps. I really think sleep is one of the most underrated leadership secret weapons there is.
5. Intentional white space in your calendar:
6. Healthy friendships:
7. Margin:
8. Hobbies:
9. Family time:

10. Coaching and counseling:

I know at the end of your life, you will be so much better for pursuing the path of self-care rather than the path of self-medication. Eventually leaders who don't care for themselves end up out of leadership or ineffective in it. As a team or church board, it's important to create a healthy climate in which people can be honest about how they're really doing. Create a safe place for people to talk without fear of judgment.

Workaholism is the most rewarded addiction in our country.

The church will always be a volunteer organization with at best a limited number of paid staff who equip and lead volunteers in fulfilling the mission of the church. Too often, churches settle for a mediocre volunteer culture. Higher-capacity leaders stay away. They simply don't want to be a part of poorly led teams.

The result is that church leaders can't find enough great leaders who can attract other capable leaders; And yet the very people who attract other capable leaders, don't drop balls, love a challenge, and regularly over-perform stay away from the team because of how it's led.

Develop great, healthy answers to these five questions, and volunteers are far more likely to stick around.

1. Are the relationships around here healthy? All grace, so issues are never dealt with, or all truth, so people get hurt. Many people love the mission of the organization they work for; they just can't stand the personal politics and dysfunction. Talk to people you disagree with, not about them.

2. Will serving help me grow spiritually?

3. Am I just a means to an end?

4. Will you help me develop the skills I need? A friend of mine who has visited a lot of churches and nonprofits recently told me that—as well-intentioned as leaders are—the vast majority of organizations are, in his view, poorly run. That's a tragedy. The church should be the best in the world at recruiting, training, and releasing people into ministry and their calling. A good heart just needs to be supplemented with a good skill set.

5. So, am I signing up for life?

Reasons high-capacity people leave your team

- **The Challenge Isn't Big Enough.** Give your biggest challenges to your best leaders.
- **Your Vision, Mission, and Strategy Are Fuzzy.** Without clear vision, volunteering ends up being about filling a slot, meeting a need, or doing your duty.
- **You're Disorganized.** Disorganization is epidemic among church leaders and nonprofits. The more organized you are (on time, prepared, other holes plugged), the more your volunteers will be able to excel at what you've asked them to do
- **You Let People Off the Hook Too Easily** You're Not Giving them enough personal Attention Unless you're intentional, you'll end up spending most of your time with your most problematic people and the least amount of time with your highest-performing people.
- **You Don't Have Enough Other High-Capacity** volunteers around them. Treat Volunteers the way you want to be treated. None are leaving more quickly than millennials— young adults under the age of thirty.

How to reverse the trend of young people drifting from the faith.

Form Intergenerational Relationships

If age-specific environments are the only experiences churches offer, students grow up spiritually and relationally impoverished. Perhaps the most effective way to partner the generations is through serving. Giving and Receiving Grace Churches that show grace to teens do better than churches that don't.

Being open and saying you make mistakes can go a long way in creating a meaningful dialogue. The Barna Group has done a particularly good job of tracking the attitudes of both churched and unchurched millennials toward the church.

A 2014 study cited (among others) five compelling reasons church engagement and attendance continue to decline among millennials.

1. The church is irrelevant, the leaders are hypocritical, and leaders have experienced too much moral failure. If you want to attract and keep millennials, it's critical that you foster a culture of integrity, authenticity, and grace.

2. God is missing in the church. In our consumer-driven culture that applauds individually tailored experiences, what if the real paucity is that we have lost a sense of what true maturity and the experience of God is?

3. Legitimate doubt is prohibited.

4. People aren't learning about God. It's also vital for preachers and communicators to be clear about what they want to happen in people's lives when people leave.²⁶

5. They're not finding community. Nobody should be able to out-community the local church. No matter how big or awesome the weekends might be (and they can be awesome), small group is where life change happens most deeply.

Are megachurches universally healthy? No. But neither are many small churches.

There's kind of a trend fatigue or indifference happening.

What is needed now more than ever is church leaders willing to pioneer, to go deep into a culture that keeps changing to reach people who are increasingly resistant.

Here are five keys I see to a future of greater impact with millennials.

1. Authentic Leadership and Connection. Unchurched people and younger adults and teens are looking for authentic leadership and authentic connection.

2. An Elevated Sense of Mission

3. Hope

4. Elevated Community

5. Experimentation. But the truth is that your method (your strategy, your approach, your plan) is not sacred; the mission is sacred.

In a business context, Andy Molinsky calls this characteristic of certain leaders and organizations "global dexterity." The ability to adapt behaviors across cultures without losing who you are in the process.

While there are dozens of trends impacting the culture, the trends that follow are what I would call "*organizational sleepers*."

These are the ones that, at least in my view, church leaders are most likely to ignore when gathered around a leadership table.

1. Online as the new default.

2. WiFi and smartphones. Dialogue. Increasingly a church without conversation is a church without converts.

3. Loyalty. Brand loyalty is low.

4. Lack of guilt. Are you still using guilt to motivate people?

5. Declining trust in authority. Trust is earned slowly and lost instantly.

6. Declining trust in institutions. Most people will opt for self-directed spirituality over institutionally led spirituality

7. Personalized, eclectic spirituality. How do you embrace where they start but encourage them not to finish there?

8. Desire for greater purpose. Millennials will not stay long at work or causes that have little greater meaning or purpose.

9. Personal mission. If your church doesn't have a burning sense of purpose and vision, you look lame compared to the average twenty-two-year-old. How is your vision motivating people who have vision?

10 The death of cash and checks. Is most of your giving happening online? Why not?

11. Live, simultaneous viewing is dying. Will once on Sunday seem strange?

Relationships and mission will be more powerful than singing and speaking. Churches that elevate relationship, both for new attenders and regular attenders, will see far more effectiveness in the future than churches that don't. If all you do is sing and speak on Sunday, it will become harder and harder to gather a crowd. Watching is becoming personal, individual, and portable. It's an opportunity for people to access your content the same way they access other content.

Accessing your messages will become more personal, individual, and portable. Embrace it. I realize that this sometimes means people will watch online rather than attend, but it's also a great way to spread the message more quickly than otherwise. Mission-driven, mission-focused, and relationally rich churches will draw in people longing for something bigger and more significant than themselves. There's a market for binge watching.

Make sure your content is accessible in the easiest forms possible for people to access. Great stories are alive and valued. People will pay for something they don't use, until one day, they won't.

If you are simply trying to attract people to a one-hour event that people increasingly don't attend, you will always struggle. People will support something they don't attend until one day, they won't. A church that has a white hot sense of mission will almost always have the resources it needs to do what the church is called to do.

Focus on your mission. Focus on your purpose. Call people to something greater than themselves. Future large churches will likely become large not because they necessarily gather thousands in one space, but because they gather thousands through dozens of smaller gatherings under some form of shared leadership. More church staff will come from the marketplace rather than seminaries. Rethinking theological education is critical.

Churches that love their model more than the mission will die. Companies that show innovation around the mission (Apple, Samsung) will always beat companies that remain devoted to the method (Kodak). Consumer Christianity will die and a more selfless discipleship will emerge. Sundays will become more about what we give than what we get. Rather than a gathering of the already convinced, churches that remain will be decidedly outsider focused.

Words will be supplemented with deeds. Attendance will no longer drive engagement; engagement will drive attendance. Leaders who value attendance over engagement will see declining attendance.

Simplified ministries will complement people's lives, not compete with people's lives. Churches that focus their energies on the few things the church can uniquely do best will emerge as the most effective churches moving forward. Online church will supplement the journey but not become the journey, because the church at its fullest will always gather, online church will supplement the journey.

In the same way you purchase almost nothing without reading online reviews or rarely visit a restaurant without checking it out online first, a church's online presence will be a first home for people and, for many, will lead to a personal connection with Christ and ultimately the gathered church. Online relationships will be valued as real relationships.

Churches that haven't ventured much beyond a website are going to miss the boat. The honest truth is, most churches, people, and organizations struggle with change. Typically, people change when the pain associated with the status quo becomes greater than the pain associated with change. If the change inside the church isn't equal to or greater than the change outside our walls, greater irrelevance is inevitable.

History belongs to the innovators. It belongs to the leaders who dared to dream, to try things no one else was trying, to experiment, to push the boundaries of what everyone else believed was possible.

Refocus the church's language and encourage people to talk about what was happening outside of the church walls rather than only what was happening inside the congregation. Seek affirmation among the people God sent you to minister to, not the people who weren't going to 'get it' anyway." Opposition to change is inevitable and unavoidable. I want our church to grow. I just don't want it to change.

Tell the truth. Most church leaders will tilt toward love and compromise truth. Sometimes great leadership is as simple as pointing out the truth that nobody else wants to talk about. Plot trajectory. Ban delusional talk. Get an outside view. Offer constant feedback.

Draw a line and call it what it is. But drawing a line and calling things what they are is critical to obtaining clarity. Most leaders intuitively focus on the what and the how, neglecting the why. That's the mistake. And here's why that's a bad idea.

What and how are inherently divisive. Why, on the other hand, unites people. Leaders who relentlessly refocus on the why are always the most effective leaders. The people you'll reach will likely far outnumber the people you lose Express Desires, Not Demands.

The more you explain the why, the more people will be open to the what and the how. Public loyalty buys you private leverage. Leaders who take the time to process the bigger issues tend to have growing churches.