

Leading a Growing Church

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Recently I spent the day reflecting on my fumbling attempts to lead our church in growth. To say that Iâ€™ve felt unprepared for my current assignment is an understatementâ€”the Three Stooges meet Forrest Gump strikes me as a more accurate picture. While my initial list filled three pages, here are four things I wish someone told me before my boat left the dock:

Content:

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me before my boat left the dock:

Gain Altitude

A while ago I was going through one of the most difficult times I've ever experienced in ministry. I was dealing with a difficult staff relationship, an emerging land deal, financial stresses, vision clarification and a dozen or so other issues that never seem to leave a church leader's desk. I felt like a deer caught in the headlights. I had major decisions to make and couldn't find the direction I felt I needed from God. In the midst of it all, I decided to hop on a plane to California to attend a church conference. As it turned out, the plane ride itself was a divine appointment. While jetting somewhere over Oklahoma I felt God impress on my heart, "Brian, the problems you are facing are too close to you. Look out the window and notice how you can see to the horizon. When you spend time with me I'll help you gain altitude and clarity."

You wouldn't think you would have to suggest to leaders of growing churches that they need to spend time with God. Quite the contrary! Spiritual entrepreneurs are doers by nature. I hear ministers complain all the time about working too much. But honestly, I can't remember a single time I heard a minister say they pray too much. You would think it would be the other way around. As leaders we need to remember that our primary role, first and foremost, is to be a divine listener. How can we expect to know what to do next if we don't take long, leisurely walks with the Father?

This is why, no matter how grueling my schedule becomes, I've learned to block out time for long seasons of uninterrupted prayer and meditation. I find that these times are more essential to knowing what to do next than everything else I do combined. In fact, sometimes someone will ask me where I'm going as I'm walking out the door and I'll quip, "Going to gain altitude."

Make Good Decisions

The perception most people have of leaders of growing churches is that they are risk-taking nuts that throw caution to the wind and forge ahead. While that may be true of some, that's not necessarily the case for the really good ones. To the contrary, I've found the truly great church leaders out there are not great because of their personality or intelligence but because they are great decision makers. After mulling over every aspect of a decision, thinking through every possible scenario and outcome, and beating a decision to death, they'll table it and approach it again another day just to be sure. Why? They know that the margin for error is much smaller in a growing church than in one that isn't. What makes matters worse is that sometimes you don't find out how bad a decision is until it's too late.

One new church I started was going gangbusters until we received word we were getting kicked out of the school we were renting. We quickly scanned potential sites and found a storefront that we could renovate. New churches were doing this across the country with success, so I assumed we would follow suit. Two years of slumped attendance and low morale just about killed our church, and me. It was the right decision for the wrong church. I learned then and there that if I had spent just a little more time thinking through that decision we could have avoided a near-fatal leadership collision. The same will be true for you. Kingdom leaders charged with discerning the direction of a growing church must approach critical leadership decisions with great trepidation and deliberation.

Resist The Need To Fill In All The Blanks

I'll never forget sitting down with a seasoned church planter from another denomination who received my direct mail and offered to take me out to lunch for extra encouragement. I proudly laid before him my mission, vision, values, strategy, and a host of other things people told me I needed at church growth conferences. Mid-way through lunch he smiled and said, "Please don't be offended, but you remind me a lot of my four year old when she plays 'dress up' with my wife's clothing." I wasn't too thrilled with that statement at the time, but now I recognize the wisdom in what he was saying.

Most church growth books and tapes recommend you craft a well-defined philosophy of ministry before you launch out with anything new. This may sound counter-intuitive, but my suggestion is that you don't do this. Filling in all the philosophy of ministry blanks before you embark on a new venture ought to sound as strange to us as an expectant mother saying, "It's going to be a boy and he'll be six feet five, love soccer, enjoy horseback riding, marry a girl from Texas and work in a bank." Who would presume to know anything about a baby that hasn't been born yet? Why would an emerging church be any different?

The issue is contextualization. Too often we assume we know what God wants this church to become years in advance. Don't make that mistake. You don't want to create the right church for the wrong area. My suggestion is that if you are planting a church or leading an established church in growth, all you start with is a very simple mission statement. That's it. Then as you observe what really works in your context, you identify and give vocabulary to what God is doing as it emerges. Yes, as church leaders we are called to find out what God wants the team to do next. However, in my experience, it has been helpful to discover that God only shares one leg of the journey with you at a time.

Be Prepared To Pay The Price

Last year I felt a crystal clear call from God to lead our congregation through three difficult changes. I knew going into it that the changes would be immensely difficult on our church, our staff, and ultimately me. However, I was convinced these were the steps God wanted us to take to strategically move to the next stage of growth in our church. Three months after leading our church through those changes, we added 100 new people almost overnight. To me, the changes were clearly inspired and executed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, I have to say that it would have been a whole lot easier to just keep things the way they were. After services one day, while we were in the middle of those changes, I got blindsided by one critical person after another that didn't understand the need for the changes. I could sympathize with them, I hardly understood myself. The only thing I knew was I was being led by God to make them. With tears in my eyes I walked off and hid in a room and took out a pad of paper and a pen and wrote the following words:

"The reason the vast majority of churches never reach their full redemptive potential is because at every stage of growth, the point person, the person charged with rallying the troops, figures out that the price is too high. Every leader, at some point, clearly sees the price that must be paid to achieve his or her vision. At that point a decision must be made: 'Am I willing to pay that price?'"

How would you answer that question?

Brian Jones is the author of *Second Guessing God: Hanging on When You Can't See Plan* (March 2006) and the founding Senior Pastor of Christ's Church of the Valley in Collegeville, PA. More information about his writing and speaking can be found at <http://www.brianjones.com>

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