

Getting a horse—or church—to move

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I fancy myself a cowboy. I grew up, for a time, on a 100-acre ranch in South Texas. We had cattle and a few other animals here and there. Seldom any horses though. It was my Uncle Leslie who was the great horseman. I loved visiting his home just on the other side of Poteet because it was always filled with horses. At one point, Uncle Leslie even raised a champion that won best cattle working horse in Texas.

When I was 13, my uncle gave me a horse of my own to break. I was immersed in a *Lord of the Rings* book at the time; so, I called him Shadowfax, the name of Gandalf's horse. I thought breaking a horse would be fun and easy, but it turned out to be one of the hardest things I have ever attempted.

Getting a horse to move is hard

First, Shadowfax was a biter. Every time I put him in the pen, right as I was exiting the gate, he would sneak up behind me and bite my shoulder. My other uncle, Allen, told me how to put an end to the biting. He said I should fill my hand with cayenne pepper and shove it in the horse's mouth and nose when he tried to bite. I tried but was never fast enough. By the time I turned around, he was on the other side of the pen.

Second, Shadowfax wouldn't let me lead him anywhere. During the times I managed to wrestle a bit and bridle on him, he wouldn't move with me. I could pull and pull until my arm came out of socket—which he probably would have found amusing—but that horse wouldn't budge. Uncle Leslie finally told me the secret to getting a horse to follow.

How to get a horse to move

“Just start walking, and he will follow,” Uncle Leslie said.

“That’s it?” I asked incredulously.

“That’s it,” he said.

The mistake I was making was always facing Shadowfax and trying to walk backward. Either that or I was trying to shove him from behind. Hey, I never said I was a *good* cowboy.

So, out I went for another round with Shadowfax. I placed the bit and bridle on him, grabbed the reins, and—as casual as you can imagine—I turned and started walking. It took a few attempts, but wouldn’t you know it, the horse started to move. All I had to do was start walking in the right direction.

How not to get a horse—or church—to move

Leading a church often feels a whole lot like trying to work with a horse. A horse I’m familiar with. The harder question I now face is, “How do you get a church to move?” I wish Uncle Leslie had the secret to that.

I guess I could try beating them until they move. I once witnessed a cowboy beating his horse, trying to make it move by sheer force of will. As we observed this cowboy, my uncle leaned over and whispered, “I don’t ever want to see you treat a horse that way.”

It works for horses and churches sometimes. However, I wonder if they are only moving out of fear and anxiety rather than love and passion.

A pastor I know recently was fired for treating his church this way. He tried

beating them into radical missional living. Membership dwindled and dwindled until they had enough. As soon as the opportunity presented itself, they cut him loose.

Other pastors make the same mistake I was making with Shadowfax. They pull and pull on the reins until they are blue in the face. I know another pastor—a really good one—who also was fired recently simply because he was trying to lead the church in a new direction, a direction that would have saved them. It was a church that liked to bite. Come to find out, they had fired several of their former pastors, as well.

Churches and horses tend to dig their heels in at even the hint of a bit and bridle. Pull all you want. Eventually, you'll just wind up getting bit.

Maybe Uncle Leslie's advice is helpful to more than just horses. I wonder if it plays out in a congregation, as well. Maybe the secret to getting a church to move is just to start walking in the right direction and let God handle the rest.

Direction matters when moving churches—and horses

Over the past several years, I have come to believe who I am as a person is more important than the strategies I employ. I believe who I am as a follower of Jesus Christ is the most important thing I can be and do for my congregation. I am only a vessel, a conduit of God's word, but if the vessel cracked how can it hold the water of life for anyone to get a drink? How can a severed conduit pass along power? If my witness—the very core of who I am—is not consistent with my Lord and King, then I am not doing my job very well.

At some point, pastors need to be more concerned with their own holiness

and righteousness than with the book they are reading, what conference they are attending or what evangelism strategy they are employing to reach people. All of those things are good things. God knows I love my books and conferences and strategizing.

But ultimately, the best thing I can do for my church is to start walking in the right direction.

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