Want to grow your church? Watch out for these pitfalls, Part 2

December 14, 2020

In [Part 1](#), I discussed stagnation and decline in the American church and what some churches are doing to combat it. I also shared three of seven pitfalls of church growth.

Here, I will wrap up the seven pitfalls of church growth based on the seven pitfalls to sustainable growth within companies outlined by Bill George in his book on corporate leadership titled *[Authentic Leadership](#)*.

4. Failure to recognize technology and marker changes

In September 2000, Blockbuster video CEO John Antico met with Netflix co-founders Marc Randolph and Reed Hastings. In that meeting, Randolph and Hastings [offered to sell Netflix](#) to Blockbuster for $50 million. Antico turned down the deal. Antico saw a bright future for Blockbuster, but that future did not include an online presence or platform. In 2010, Blockbuster filed for bankruptcy, and Netflix is [currently worth](#) around $194 billion.

This story perfectly illustrates George's fourth potential pitfall. Companies that "become wedded to the technology that has led to their success" end up "[missing] the emerging technology that will supplant their products because it appears trivial to them."

Companies must keep one eye on the horizon and one on the frontier to see changes in trends and markets. Otherwise, they will become a Blockbuster

in a Netflix world.

Our churches exist in a context and a culture, usually several overlapping contexts and cultures. These contexts and cultures are constantly changing, challenging our churches to adapt. If churches' leaders fail to see and understand changes in context and culture, then the inevitable consequence will be continual marginalization.

As church leaders, we must learn to incarnate the mission of the church within its context and culture. We always must be learning how to live Christ into the culture.

Many times, the upcoming generation is suited best to lead in this incarnational way. In *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*, the authors call on leaders to be intentional about giving away their "keys" to younger generations. By keys, the authors mean "the capabilities, power, and access" leaders possess.

"If you are willing to entrust your keys to young people," they write," they will trust you with their ears, their energies, their creativity, and even their friends."

In turn, our next generation will help the church see the changes occurring within our culture and context.

5. Changing strategy without changing culture

"Many growth companies, sensing changes in their markets, adapt their strategies to changing market conditions, but fail to change their organization's culture," George writes.

A company cannot, for example, decide their future is internet sales but

still resource, market, speak a language, and hire and train employees as if their future is brick-and-mortar stores.

Church leaders can fail to change culture, because they fail to understand properly the culture of their particular local church. Therefore, church leaders continually change strategy instead of changing culture.

Churches, like ethnicities and nations, have a culture. Churches have a way they do things, a language they speak, and an overall story that defines their collective life together. If a leader fails to understand these and other key points of culture, changes in strategy won't last or be effective.

How can church leaders address culture? One of Timothy Keller's observations in [Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City](#) helps us understand how.

According to Keller, culture changes when multiple groups of people work together to solve a problem or serve in a new way.

Sometimes a church leader can match community needs to church cultural strength. Leaders can ask: "What is the strength of the culture already in place? And where is a community need that can be addressed through that strength?"

Where a disconnect exists between community need and church culture, the church culture must change. A church cannot merely sit on the sidelines until a need arises that matches the culture already in place.

Changing the culture takes networking the whole church across ministries and ages to work together toward change. This process can be slow and challenging. Culture, Keller writes: "doesn't change easily or without a fight. But it can, in the end, be changed."

6. Going outside your core competencies

Hopefully, every business has a reason for existing. This reason for existing probably aligns with the purpose for which the business was created in the first place. If the company has been able to remain in business, this purpose most likely is its core competency. When a company goes outside its core competency, George believes it sets itself up for crisis and failure.

Not every church has to be the best at everything, but every church does something best. Out of all the ministries within a church, there is something a church does better than others. Perhaps it is evangelism, Sunday school or small groups, or visiting people in a nursing home. Whatever the church does best we can think of as its core competency.

In the same way companies leave their core competencies to try to compete in new markers, churches can leave their core competencies to compete with the church down the street. When a church leader sees a "competing" church having success, the temptation is to copy whatever is successful—even if it falls outside the church's core competency.

Church leaders need to lead their churches to be who they are and not try to be who they are not.

7. Counting on acquisitions for growth

George notes some companies become "dependent upon acquisitions for growth." By acquisitions, George means purchasing other companies or product lines. This can be dangerous, because a company "that relies entirely on acquisitions runs a real danger of making the wrong purchase or paying too much for a new target."

Company spending on purchases can lead to a shortage of funds "required for internal growth." If a company overpays on a purchase that ends up underperforming, it has the potential to be catastrophic if the company has failed to invest in their internal growth.

This author has never heard of a church buying members, but there are churches that rely solely on numerical additions of those moving from one church to another, while failing to invest internally in transformation leading to new believers in Christ.

As with a company, a church that targets numerical additions via "church hopping" probably is not investing in teaching evangelism or making disciples. Therefore, the church is failing to be who God has called it to be.

As a church leader, I know you want your church to grow as men, women and children hear and respond to the message of the gospel. As our churches seek to follow God into a new year, we must remember it is God, through Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, who causes the church to grow. The church is God's church, after all.

As we join with God through preaching, ministry, outreach and discipleship, let's keep our eyes open and watch out for these pitfalls, so we do not create barriers to the growth God desires for his church.

Ryan Vanderland is senior pastor at First Baptist Church in Electra. This article is adapted from "Pitfalls and Prophetic Imagination" by Vanderland. The views expressed are those solely of the author.