

2nd Opinion: Musical Chairs and leaders of dying organizations

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"I don't want the ship to go down on my watch."

These words have been uttered, or perhaps muttered under the breath, by many pastors and organizational leaders who have found themselves at the helm of dying institutions. They are laden with guilt and shame and anxiety. And yet they should indicate the ship was listing before the current leader got there.



Mark Wingfield Remember the children's game called Musical Chairs? All the players merrily walk in a circle around a group of chairs, knowing full well there will not be a chair for one of them when the music stops. Is it the failure of the player left standing that creates this unfortunate circumstances? No. They simply end up in the wrong place at the right time. There is nothing they can do to manufacture an extra chair out of thin air.

Most of the time, when pastors or leaders of nonprofit agencies find themselves at the helm of a sinking ship, the fatal blow has been struck long before they arrived at the helm. Few churches die suddenly. And few

nonprofits die suddenly, unless they depend upon a single source of funding that dries up.

Yes, there are exceptional cases where leaders seemingly manufacture extra chairs out of nothing, righting and repairing the ship just before it goes under. But those are the exceptions.

Americans love the idealistic notion every lost cause is worthy of redemption, every dying church ought to be saved, every failing nonprofit deserves a rebirth into newness of life. We do love a good comeback story.

Maybe there's a good reason

And yet, many dying organizations are dying for good reason: Times changed, people moved, interest waned, leadership was lacking, funding dried up, a series of bad decisions could not be undone, a once-important need no longer exists, or others are doing the same work better or more efficiently.

Being the last person at the helm could be a place of honor more than shame if the leader thinks creatively. In fact, more blame ought to be placed on previous leaders who started the death spiral but left without sounding the alarm or offering new solutions.

The leader who is left at the end, more times than not, is like the child standing without a chair when the music stops playing. It's not their fault. But how they choose to respond may demonstrate more about their leadership than anything.

There are ways to guide an organization's ship to its end with honor. The first step is to acknowledge the ship is, in fact, going down. This is the hardest part. Good leaders know the end is inevitable, even if they know it will happen on their watch. Good leaders work toward good outcomes even in death, rather than hoping to pass the wheel to someone else just in the

nick of time.

We see this played out increasingly with pastors and lay leaders who are brave enough to acknowledge the churches they serve have fought the good fight, run their course with joy and cannot reclaim the glory days of times gone by.

Make a plan, bless others

When you know you're dying, you have time to craft an estate plan, to make the most of your assets, to bless others, to seed the future. That sure beats doing nothing while the ship slowly slips under the waves.

The difference in leadership styles may be summed up with a mash-up between the words of Ecclesiastes and the words of the serenity prayer: To everything there is a season; a time to be born and a time to die. God, grant us the serenity to know the difference.

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