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Blow Ups or Grow Ups: Strategic Issues for Turnaround Churches

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**BLOW UPS OR GROW UPS: STRATEGIC ISSUES FOR
TURNAROUND CHURCHES**

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Kent R. Hunter

abstract

This article addresses the theological and strategic issues affecting current turnaround churches in North America. In at least two scenarios, pastors can either “blow up” or “grow up” their church. The difference lies in the way change is introduced. Dr. Hunter explains that the biblical model of repentance, or *metanoia*, is always focused on turning towards God. To refocus the church’s mission on discipleship and away from the cultural drift, an understanding of the three most common church change strategies is essential. This discussion includes an analysis of the transition, extension, and organic models, along with an illustration of what constitutes church health.

The word for turnaround in the New Testament is *metanoia*. Several years ago, Leonard Sweet in his book *SoulTsunami* wrote, “. . . [church] leaders need to be turned around (that is, *metanoia*) artists. But it is God who affects the turnarounds. Religious leadership is less about turning around or turning ahead and more about turning toward God.”

In John 5:19, Jesus said to his disciples, “I only do what I see the Father doing.” For me and my colleagues at Church Doctor Ministries (and, perhaps, also

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for you), that makes us God watchers. In the wonderful explanation of Henry
Blackaby, instead of dreaming and scheming some approach to ministry, and then
praying like crazy for God to bless it, we should find where God is blessing and
join him there. Move where God is moving.

We have been doing that over the last several years, working and watching God
turn around churches in remarkable ways in England and on the continent of
Europe. It is fairly clear to me that God is working in Europe about twenty years
ahead of how he is working in North America. To be more specific, Canada is
about five to seven years ahead of the U.S. By watching trends and looking at how
God is moving, it is noticeable today that a growing revival is occurring on the
continent of Europe and, just a couple of years before that, in England. About five
years ago, this same type of renewal movement started to show up in places
around Canada. If this pattern continues, and our God watching is accurate about
the twenty-year lag time, we could be on the precipice of a great move of God here
in the United States.

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This would make sense to God watchers who are familiar with 1 and 2 Kings
and 1 and 2 Chronicles. Both of these reflections of the same history provide a
snapshot of several generations of God followers. The snapshot provided there
reflects a roller coaster of spirituality. Although this is somewhat oversimplified, it
goes a little bit like this: people are faithful to God and live a life in response to
God. Then, there is significant drift away from God. This occurs over a long period
of time. As this occurs, life deteriorates in the land. Civilization begins the process
of dry rot. When it reaches bottom, it could be said that God got their attention.
They have finally had enough. Even those second- or third-generation nonbelievers
were beginning to say, “We can’t go on this way. This isn’t working out so well.” On
the resistance receptivity axis, they move way to the right. Then certain things
happen, usually stimulated by God’s leaders. Prophets speak, the faithful turn
others back to God, and in this climate of receptivity, there is a resurgence of
commitment to the God of the angel armies. This is followed by a significant
amount of time when all seems to be peaceful and well in the land. Then, the
process of deterioration begins, people fall away from God, the environment gets
corrupted, and the roller coaster hits bottom. The time of receptivity is almost at
hand once again. This cycle repeats itself throughout 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2
Chronicles, and you would think anyone who has read these books would surely be
clear about how we should live and honor God. Unfortunately, this pattern persists
down through the centuries.

A look at Europe twenty years ago indicates they were at the height—or the
depth, depending on one’s perception—of secularization. Our friend Peter Brierley

Hunter: Blow Ups or Grow Ups: Strategic Issues for Turnaround Churches was predicting that even by a few years ago, around the early years of this century, the Anglican church would run out of people. Not money. Not buildings. Just people. Interestingly, not all but much of the jumpstart of revival, or renewal, has come out of the Anglican church and has now rapidly spread to many other churches throughout England and on the continent.

Fast forward to North America. I do not think I have to rehearse too much the dismal situation within our country and certain milestones like 9/11, Enron, the Wall Street meltdown, and the government gridlock. When church people are interviewed in a consultation setting, there is a sense that believers have a strong hunger for hope. Even when speaking to those who are second- or third-generation people far from God, it is clear they are dismayed about the future. People often comment, "If our country continues the way it is, this is not going to be a very happy place for my grandchildren." Social Security will be gone. Morality will be a non-issue. Crime will escalate. Drugs are rampant. The family is disintegrating. The list could go on.

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About seven years ago, our consultants began to hear something we have never heard before in our thirty-seven-year history of consulting churches. At first it was new but minimal, and with each year, it has persistently increased. A consultant to churches can very rapidly spot a fringe member of a church who is consumer oriented and has a long history of church hopping. This is an easy diagnosis. What we found that was different is an increasing number of people who are loyal to the church, committed to the pastor, love the Lord, tithe, are mission oriented, evangelistically committed, and Great Commission passionate. In the confines of a closed room, with an outside consultant promising total confidentiality, we began to hear these stalwart members of the church say something we had not heard so much before: "I just feel in my gut that our church could do better. I just believe we could have a greater impact on our community. We do so many things well; it just seems like we should be able to touch more people for Jesus Christ." We began investigating this and have concluded that these increasing numbers of people, who are in nearly every church, are those who have what we call "holy discontent" or "spiritual restlessness." These are not complainers. These are not people who if they do not get their way are going to head down the road to the next church. These are loyalists. We believe they are the results of a move of God, a touch of the Holy Spirit. They are what we call "spiritual entrepreneurs" or, in movement terms, "early adopters." One interesting characteristic about this reality is that they are so loyal to the church that they never have this conversation except in a confidential interview with a consultant or with their spouse at home. They would not speak it in public around the church

because they feel that it would undermine the morale of the congregation and be misread as criticism. These loyal people are not vocal critics in the congregation, so they remain publicly silent. That means they do not realize there are other people in their church who have been touched in the same way. One of those people might be the senior pastor, who is also silent, except only in the confines and privacy of his home with a spouse. Consequently, most churches do not gather these people together, because they do not know they exist. Each person is isolated and feels like he is the only one. This is a coming move of God, out of sight and just under the table. In our work with churches, particularly in the *Healthy Churches Thrive!* Spiritual Pilgrimage, for obvious reasons, we do not gather these people together in a church and call them the committee of holy discontent or the board of spiritual restlessness. We do have a name for their gathering, however, and that is the Vision Community. They may or may not include leaders on the board or everyone on the staff. God works in strange ways. The Holy Spirit blows like the wind, where he will.

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In the big picture of this possible coming movement, missiologists often speak about a revival in a land that was previously churched. Prior to a revival in the land, something happens in the church. Missiologists called it an awakening. In the 1700s, one time in U.S. history was significant enough to make the history books. John Wesley, who God used in a mighty way in England, traveled to the U.S., and what followed was recorded as the Great Awakening. Prior to revival in the land, there is an awakening in the church. Today, we might call it a “wake-up call.”

As I share this, I want us to think in terms of a turnaround, as a move of God, and a spiritual awakening. In our research and efforts with churches, we have sensed, particularly over the last ten years, that the biblical, spiritual health of a church is the key for Great Commission effectiveness. It is the heart and soul of a turnaround church. I must admit, as a sold-out student of Dr. Donald McGavran and the Church Growth Movement, this was a major step of new understanding for me. What we found in churches everywhere is it is a major, counterintuitive leap for most pastors and church people.

Presuppose with me that in many basic areas, unproductive churches have experienced a significant drift from the New Testament culture. This represents a major roadblock that diminishes what God wants to accomplish through the local church.

This presupposition is that the drift, at a core level, almost entirely shapes our actions. It presupposes that if New Testament culture were reinvigorated into a church, by God’s grace, we would experience a turnaround and see similar

Hunter: Blow Ups or Grow Ups: Strategic Issues for Turnaround Churches discipleship growth to that which was experienced in the first century. In many ways, there is a parallel observation that can be made for what God is doing in China today and what has happened in flashpoints at various times and in various places in Africa, South America, South Korea, as well as the awakening in England and on the continent of Europe.

While Church Doctor Ministries still provides a thorough consultation ministry for churches that want half the equation, we have developed a twenty-four month spiritual pilgrimage for congregations and church leaders who have the insight and passion to develop a healthy church. This is why we call this twenty-four month spiritual pilgrimage *Healthy Churches Thrive!*

It is a challenge for congregations to consider, primarily because when people ask what you do for twenty-four months, thinking program—from an institutional perspective—the answer is “nothing.” It is not about what you do. In fact, most churches do too much. They are overloaded with doing. We do not believe in works righteousness for salvation, but we practice ecclesiastical self-righteousness in all the doing we do, in contrast to the spiritual formation of who we are. Consequently, it is a challenge, at least at first, for those in churches to consider spending twenty-four months primarily focusing on who we are and who we become. Jesus experienced the same reaction of disbelief, as he called people to spiritual formation—discipleship—and the religious people of the day totally freaked out.

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Just recently, Patrick Lencioni published a significant book called *The Advantage*. He calls this breakthrough the centerpiece of his career, and I agree. Of course I would agree, because this book significantly validates our commitment at Church Doctor Ministries to bring together the best practices of church consulting with the spiritual health issues that are actually *more* vital to Great Commission effectiveness—at least in our perception and, I would add, also Patrick Lencioni’s.

While consultation recommendations that move people to action are important and continue to make a great difference in churches, they are, in the balance of two elements in the equation, the least important.

I began writing about this in the book *The Future Is Now: How God is Moving in the 21st Century*. Just recently, I have followed that with the book *Re•gen•er•a•tion: A Spiritual Journey*. We are finding that as church leaders read this and consider this movement approach to churches, they begin to resonate, on a spiritual level, to the possibility of a Christian movement within their church.

To borrow Lencioni’s terminology, there are two areas that lead to effectiveness in organizations: 1) smart and 2) healthy. In my perception, much of the consulting

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we have done focuses on smart decisions. This does help churches. Outside
intervention is here to stay and makes a great contribution. This is true for business
consulting as well as church consulting.

However, the healthy dimension calls for a redevelopment of culture. In the
church, this would be called New Testament culture.

From Lencioni's paradigm, the smart side of the two-dimensional equation
includes what many consultants tackle very well in consultation efforts: 1) strategy,
2) marketing, 3) finance, and 4) terminology. Admittedly, many good church
consultants go beyond this, providing recommendations that lead to
personal/spiritual renewal, discipleship growth, etc. However, most
recommendations focus on "what you do" and are, therefore, on the programmatic
end of the spectrum. They are valuable help for churches, and we have seen results
that energize people for the kingdom in our work in Church Doctor Ministries for
over three decades on six continents.

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However, starting ten years ago, we began a massive effort to look at church
health as an added, major component. Lencioni, in his recent release of *The
Advantage* (which I highly recommend), is an independent confirmation of this
approach. From his business consulting perspective, Lencioni focuses on several
categories under this second dimension, which he calls "healthy." The categories in
this dimension include 1) minimal politics, 2) minimal confusion, 3) high morale,
4) high productivity, and 5) low turnover.

Lencioni's paradigm does not fit church life exactly. However, since we have
been working with the healthy church concept for the last decade, it was relatively
easy to superimpose the approach to turnaround churches, focused on health, over
the same paradigm. While it does not fit exactly, I have borrowed Lencioni's
template and translated what we have learned about a spiritual pilgrimage like
Healthy Churches Thrive!

1. Minimal politics. This includes reconstructing a biblical church governance
(decision-making process). It focuses on low control/high accountability. It
includes a culture of biblical correction (Mt 18). It provides for an
environment of speaking the truth in a spirit of love (Eph 4:15). It focuses
on leading from the center of God's will. It capitalizes on a John 5:19 bias
to action-oriented decisions (we at Church Doctor Ministries call this the
affirm-and-build model). Also, in this area 1. 1. of "minimal politics,"
anyone who leads anything is in an accountability group.
2. Minimal confusion. This includes a clearly articulated philosophy of
ministry. At the urging of both Lyle Schaller and Rick Warren, I have

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written about philosophy of ministry in the book *Your Church Has*

Personality, which has become sort of a classic. (By classic, I mean no one else has bothered to write about it.) In addition to a philosophy of ministry is also a well-articulated Great Commission-centered mission. Also among minimal confusion there is a commitment to leadership-centered vision casting. It includes an environment that fosters clear, abundant communication. In addition, it continually builds, through spiritual formation, a New Testament culture in five areas: values, beliefs, attitudes, priorities, and worldviews.

3. High morale. High morale in churches includes several areas. Churches are encouraged to celebrate victories, giving the honor and praise to God. This means, also, practicing testimonies at every level, at every opportunity, asking people to share, “What is God doing in your life?” It also means having fun, which includes developing an environment of joy and enjoyment. It includes designing worship with a 70% praise element—even in funerals.
4. High productivity. This includes measuring every ministry, action, and proposed idea through the kingdom lens of results based on love for God/love for others (the summary of the commandments), making disciples (the Commission, Mt 28:19–20), and relational witnessing (the strategy, Ac 1:8). It also includes defining your mission field as the sum total of unbelievers in the relational networks of every person in the church. It means the leaders continually foster a culture of biblical stewardship, the 1. 2. management of resources on personal and corporate levels, for the congregation. It includes creating the environment of discipleship multiplication, which becomes part of the DNA of every single member of the church. It focuses on the practice of inside-out mission, including the attractional model 25% and maximizing the outreach model, or missional model, 75% (instead of focusing only on taking people to church, the greater focus is taking church to people. This has the additional, major component of diminishing the importance of the church building.) High productivity also includes developing an environment in which life-long spiritual growth is the new normal (the New Testament normal).
5. Low turnover of leaders. Focusing on anyone who has influence in the church as a leader, this includes the removal of term limits. It means leaders are disciplined, never elected. Anyone in any ministry is disciplined into

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that ministry, which abolishes 1. 3. volunteerism. It re-establishes the high bar of the divine calling in anything we do for God, in or through our church. It uses the biblical, operational system of spiritual gifts and the five-fold ministry specialization for every Christian in the congregation (Eph 4). It fosters a discipling culture for every person at every level. A balance exists between academic download and on-the-job discipling, using the Leadership Square as an equipping approach. It encourages the wisdom of the 360-degree leadership, spending 50% of leadership energy on personal development.

This is a brief overview of the approach to spiritual health. I could not finish without addressing the issue of the implementation strategy. This is in response to the question, "How is this implemented?" Basically three models are in use, as I see it among churches. The first one is the transition model. For years, Dan Southerland, who wrote the book *Transitioning*, conducted conferences on how to transition a church. His approach, admittedly, is the most popular used today. It is the model in which leaders are trained at some specialty shop or in some conference. They catch the vision for the Great Commission and then return to superimpose it upon their church. In my perception, many Christians have a faith-based culture. They believe in Jesus, trust in his saving work on the cross, and will go to heaven when they die. Between now and then, though, they will be of no missional good to anybody. They just don't get it. There are other Christians who get it. They've seen the light. They've caught the vision. They understand the Great Commission. They get excited and become people of the Christian culture who also have the missional culture. In my perception, to superimpose this on Grandma Schmidt, who loves the Lord and loves her church, is contrary to what the apostles learned in the first apostolic conference in Acts 15. I have talked to strong leaders who have a Great Commission heart and vision, who have decided to superimpose a mission culture upon a church come hell or high water. I even pressed some high-profile leaders on how that approach can be justified. The reason is that in church after church, and anyone who has consulted churches has seen this, people feel run out of the church. It starts by feeling like they are a second-class Christian. They feel rejected by their pastor, who is definitely on a mission. Ultimately, they feel rejected by their church, which is becoming a missional church whatever it takes. Some go to other churches, but some, like Grandma Schmidt, feel rejected by God. It is my theological conviction that no Christian has the right to do that. One strong leader I interviewed said about people who leave the church, "I'm an apostle. I can't be concerned about collateral damage." Personally, I have never

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Hunter: Blow Ups or Grow Ups: Strategic Issues for Turnaround Churches thought of people for whom Christ died as collateral damage. It is likely you might challenge my perception and theology on this point. Why? Because the transition model—the top-down, forced model, the motivation by law instead of Gospel—is the most popular approach in churches today. The result is the blowup of many churches.

It was the short-term approach that was used by the apostle Paul when he started going into the synagogues and seeking the God fearers. After being run out of town on several occasions, jailed, beaten, and a few other unpleasanties, the New Testament convert matures to preaching in the streets, to finding those people who are receptive, and bringing them together to form the New Testament body of Christ, the people of the New Covenant. This is the second choice for turnaround churches. I call it the extension model. It is the model which begins with those people who are now ready. Who might they be? Today, they are the people of holy discontent. This is not top-down leadership. This is a bottom-up movement within the church. It begins with them. They focus not on rearranging the furniture but on spiritual formation. As they grow and get excited, they invite people in their own social networks within the church into a learning community. If those people are receptive, they choose to grow. They are not superimposed upon, but they take a step toward growth. Our experience with *Healthy Churches Thrive!* is when that learning community, which begins with a Vision Community of early adopters or spiritual entrepreneurs, moves to the sixth ring (like a pebble in a pond), someone one day wakes up and says, “You know, our church is really different.” Christianity is a movement, and this approach is a movement within the church. It honors people at the speed of their willingness to change. This follows the model of Jesus.

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The third possibility for turnaround churches is the strategy of the organic model. Neil Cole, in his book *The Organic Church*, has dealt with this at length. This is starting a new ministry, new church, or new worship service *with new people* that is an extension of the church but organic in its separation from the church.

In my perception, as we look at turnaround churches, health is a huge issue. A smart church, just like a smart business, can still fail. A church can do a lot of things right, and it can still be plateaued and ineffective in bringing the kingdom to its community. A healthy church can grow smarter. A church that is locked into being a smart church without focusing on health will not become healthy. As Patrick Lencioni points out brilliantly in his book *The Advantage*, this is a key to turnaround churches. The strategy with the least amount of casualties, stress, and the best stewardship for Great Commission effectiveness is the extension model and the creative model.

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Kent Hunter leads Church Doctor Ministries. He has served as a pastor in Michigan, Indiana, and South Australia. Kent has written 30 books on church health and vitality. Over the last 35 years, he has provided on-site assessment consultation and coaching to over 1,000 churches in 67 denominations, fellowships, and movements. Kent received his M.Div from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, a Ph.D. from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and a D.Min Missions degree from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Kent says his reason for being on this earth is to help Christians and churches become more effective for the Great Commission. Kent and his wife, Janet, have two grown children, Laura and Jonathan.