

More Ministries Handing Over Operations to Corporate Leaders

Not every ministry leader is willing to be candid about the sluggish economy and its direct impact on the church. But Mark Walker, a fourth-generation Pentecostal pastor, likely represents many church leaders when he refers to the past four years as “the most challenging” he’s seen in his lifetime.

The biggest contributing factor? Unemployment. North Georgia, where Walker has served for 21 years as senior pastor of Mount Paran North Church of God, in the Atlanta suburb of Marietta, has been one of the hardest-hit areas in the nation since 2008. A number of veteran small-business owners who attend Mount Paran have had to shut their doors. Others, concerned about Obamacare, realize that if they opt out of the health-care mandate because of religious convictions, they will have to pay a tax—which means laying off staff.

Walker is all-too-familiar with such layoffs. For the first time in its 25-year history, Mount Paran recently had to trim its staff.

“Any time there was an economic hiccup in the past, we cut budget—but we never had to lay off people,” Walker says. “It has challenged every ounce of leadership, business and biblical skill I have—and beyond—to try to make it work.”

As churches and nonprofit ministries nationwide have grown exponentially, so too have the challenges, which today often include legal, human resource and technology issues. As a result, many pastors and ministry leaders are recruiting trained business professionals—like Walker, who holds a doctorate in organizational leadership and spent the first several years of his career working in business—to help guide

them and provide the expertise they lack.

And it's created a point of convergence, as a growing number of corporate executives are willing to lay down their stock options and use their skills to benefit the work of God in the world.

When Business Meets the Pulpit

When Bishop Harry Jackson Jr. earned his MBA in the 1980s, few MBA grads specialized in nonprofit work. For himself, Jackson set his sights on sales and marketing—and with a degree from Harvard, the sky was the limit.

While serving as the national sales and marketing manager for one of Corning Glass Works' divisions, Jackson started a Bible study in his home that unexpectedly grew into a church, which he led bivocationally for four years. But then, with a second child on the way, Jackson's wife, Michele, approached him about his demanding schedule. It was time to choose: business or full-time ministry.

By staying in the corporate world, Jackson could have amassed a fortune. But he accepted the call to the pastorate instead, which he says "revolutionized" his life because it forced him to walk by faith.

"I dropped from a huge salary down to whatever 100-something people could pay me in a fledgling work," he says.

Jackson's Ivy-League education didn't go to waste, as he began using many of his business skills in ministry, starting with market segmentation. In the predominantly white church he pastored in upstate New York, Jackson emphasized evangelism—and the church grew. In 1988, he was called to Hope Christian Church, just outside Washington, D.C., and it became known—and popular—for its Hosanna! Integrity-style worship instead of traditional black gospel.

Applying his business sense to the pastorate, Jackson says “mission drift” can occur in churches when pastors try to meet every need rather than focus on the areas where they’re called, just as businesses go astray when diversifying their brand to the point of dilution.

“I’ve had opportunities where resources were offered that would be distractions,” Jackson says. “If we go outside the areas where we’re called, we can get ourselves in trouble with the Lord and move outside our skills.”

Experience Both Timely and Valuable

Named one of the 50 most influential leaders in the U.S. glass industry, Jack Hoey, now chief operating officer of Seacoast Church, a 12,000-member congregation based in Mount Pleasant, S.C., previously served as president and CEO of Coastal Glass Distributors in Charlotte. After selling his business, he was asked by Greg Surratt, senior pastor of Seacoast, to share his business expertise on matters concerning the church—an invitation that led Surratt to invite Hoey the following year to come on board and implement his suggested changes.

“I feel like I’ve been able to really help move staff who were in roles that didn’t fit them so well,” Hoey says.

When Seacoast’s human resources director retired a year ago, Hoey took over most of the director’s responsibilities, which has given him the opportunity to coach and mentor the staff.

Today he manages the staff, finances, facilities and security at Seacoast. And although Hoey’s corporate experience was tied to a completely different industry than the work he does now, his experience managing an organization of more than 100 people serves him—and Seacoast—well today.

In Arlington, Texas, experience as a facilities and services manager at Amoco Corporation helps Joseph Davis streamline the day-to-day business operations of High Point Church—a critical

skill, given the lean staff of 28 that serves a congregation of 3,500 people. As the church's associate pastor, Davis helps High Point manage its finances responsibly by outsourcing service providers—everything from accounting to facility services—and relying heavily on volunteers.

"It definitely impacts the bottom line and improves efficiencies," Davis says.

When Nathan Buss began attending Substance Church in Minneapolis, Minn., its membership ran about 200. Today, the church has blossomed to 2,100 members and serves four campuses, none of which the church owns. Accordingly, as the finance administrator of the church today, one of Buss' future responsibilities will be to locate land or a building at an existing site that Substance Church can purchase. With 10 years of commercial real estate experience and an MBA under his belt, Buss is well-suited for the task.

And at the Rock Church in San Diego, Calif., which draws about 12,000 people a week under the leadership of Miles McPherson, James Lawrence is the newly appointed chief of staff and innovation. When Lawrence joined the church full-time in 2010, the executive team consisted of nine people; now, it has been reduced to four.

Lawrence, who was instrumental in putting together a finance committee "to make sure we have a solid financial reporting structure that interfaces with our auditor and executive team," he says, has utilized every ounce of leadership experience he accrued over 15 years—first as the founder of GrepNet, a software engineering company that developed the first commercial in-memory database technology, and then as co-founder of Mogiv, a mobile and cloud-based giving technology for churches—to make the difficult decisions that are par for the course when leading a church in these lean economic times. Like Jackson, Lawrence believes leadership—whether in ministry or in the marketplace—is

critical in the church today.

Revitalization at Nonprofit Ministries

Just as churches desperately need skilled business leaders, particularly in today's tough times, so do nonprofit ministries—and many CEOs and corporate executives who have gained skills in cutthroat environments are eager to leave the secular world for the “sacred.”

One such leader is Jonathan Reckford, CEO of Habitat for Humanity International. Reckford began his career at Goldman Sachs in New York but soon discovered his role there didn't align with his personal values. So in 1986, he applied for a number of fellowships and was awarded the Henry Luce Scholarship, which led him to spend a year in Seoul, Korea, where he worked in marketing for the Olympic Organizing Committee and coached the Korean rowing team.

Upon his return, Reckford began an MBA program at Stanford University, focusing on public and nonprofit management. “The slight surprise was that I came out of school thinking I ought to work in the private sector first and then take those skills across,” he says. Reckford served in executive and management roles at Marriott, the Walt Disney Company, Circuit City and Best Buy.

Following a trip to India, Reckford was intent on directly serving the poor, but there was to be a long waiting period before a door opened for him in the nonprofit world. In the meantime, he rolled up his sleeves and volunteered at his church, Christ Presbyterian, in Edina, Minn., which soon led to a full-time job as executive pastor.

A couple years later, a recruiter who had previously called Reckford about for-profit jobs, contacted him out of the blue about Habitat for Humanity.

“It was the kind of role that met all of my hopes, in terms of

service,” Reckford says.

And all the corporate experience Reckford gathered over the years served him well in his new, auspicious role. The breadth of Habitat’s work is enormous. The organization has 1,553 independent chapters or affiliates in the United States and works in 80 countries. About 700 staff members serve the global umbrella organization, and more than 1 million volunteers helped with projects in 2012.

Even in a tough economy, Reckford says Habitat has quadrupled the number of families they have been able to help each year since 2005. Since taking the helm at Habitat, Reckford has implemented housing microfinance, which influences banks to create home improvement loans for low-income families. The organization has also focused more of its attention on helping families rebuild their homes after a disaster.

Like Habitat for Humanity, Bible League International has made major shifts in recent years to become more effective and efficient—a goal they’ve been able to achieve under the leadership of Robert Frank, who brought to the organization in 2009 a rich 30-year history working with large international corporations. With an MBA in international business development, Frank grew his understanding of diverse cultures and economies in his work outside the United States with the apparel division of Fruit of the Loom. At Rawlings Sporting Goods, he served as part of the IPO team that took the company public.

Upon joining the Bible League, Frank brought his global experience and business sensibilities to bear, first by restructuring the organization through decentralizing and then by moving operations to locations nearer the various divisional offices. For instance, the Asia-Pacific office is now run from Sydney, Australia, instead of Chicago.

While U.S. and European markets are waning, the economies in

other countries are booming, Frank notes. As a result, the Bible League plans to boost its development efforts outside the United States, where the church also tends to be thriving and there is real growth potential.

Spiritual at Its Root

When Tim Tiller came to Jewish Voice Ministries in 2010 after serving as president of Multi-Systems, Inc., a leading provider of technology to the hotel industry, his learning curve was steep. Immersing himself in a new industry that specialized in multimedia and fundraising posed challenging enough—but he also discovered other delicate, complex issues in a ministry setting.

Though working at Jewish Voice is a dream for Tiller, he is realistic about some of the hurdles.

“I realize that because I’m working for the Lord, the enemy would do anything he could to bring me or the ministry down,” he says.

Accordingly, Tiller has initiated spiritual warfare training for new staff. “I really see the enemy working double-time in ministry now,” he says. “We tell staff, ‘You’re joining a Jewish evangelistic ministry, and because of that, you are likely going to be under attack spiritually.’”

Indeed, there is something bigger at stake for those involved in nonprofit ministry, notes Tony Meggs, who served in management posts at American Express before heading up a health-care-sharing organization called Christian Care Ministry. “We carry the banner of Jesus Christ. Everything we do has to be worthy of that name,” he says. “Ministry needs credible, godly leadership—people who live their lives with integrity. If we really want to affect culture and win people ... we need to present to them godly men and women who can lead and be people they can trust and follow.”

From his vantage point at Substance Church, Buss can quickly point out the similarities and differences between the church and corporate worlds. In business, he says, the focus is on the bottom line and making money. In a church, managing the money properly is important, “but your ultimate goal is the people and saving the lost.”

Davis echoes this point. “I have fiduciary responsibilities to fulfill [at High Point Church], but God is the one who brings in the people. It’s His kingdom.”

With God as the true leader of these churches and nonprofits, its stewards sometimes find themselves being led to unexpected pastures—especially in this downturn economy. For instance, Mount Paran launched a new campus in Canton, about 20 miles north of Marietta, in January 2012. The church held its first official service with a team of about 200 people and is “financially holding its own,” says Walker. “During such trying economic times, it sounds absolutely asinine to open a new campus, but we felt like it is what God wanted us to do.”

This type of ministry decision is perhaps where the “faith dynamic,” as Jackson calls it, comes into play. “God provides the resources when we don’t understand how we can possibly do it at all,” he says.

Ultimately, it takes a balance of faith and wisdom earned by experience. Frank, commenting on the challenge of working for a nonprofit, says there can be a tendency for people to lead with their hearts, not with their heads.

“You’ve got to do both,” he says. “You have to have passion for what you do, but the decisions you make at the top affect the health of the organization.”

And what lights up these leaders more than anything are the lives they see changed in the places they’re called to serve. Davis says the greatest joy of his job is seeing people walk down the aisle week after week, accepting the invitation to

follow Jesus. “When they are standing at the altar with tears streaming down their face and you know they have really had an encounter with God,” he says, “it makes all of the other challenges and opportunities we face worth it.”

Carol Chapman Stertz *is a Dallas-based journalist who has served at two local nonprofits over the past 16 years.*