

When Christian Legends Leave

The death of Apple co-founder Steve Jobs has made me think more and more about how organizations transition from strong, charismatic leaders.

Looking at how companies transitioned from men like Walt Disney, Sam Walton, Bill Gates and now Steve Jobs has many implications for nonprofit and ministry organizations as well. Right now, the Christian community is experiencing a huge period of transitions from founders of extraordinarily large ministries. Men like Bill Bright, Jerry Falwell and Oral Roberts have passed away, and others like Robert Schuller, Pat Robertson, Paul Crouch Sr., James Dobson, Billy Graham and many others are either retiring or in semi-retirement.

So far, the scorecard on how many of these organizations are doing isn't very good. Rakesh Khurana, professor at Harvard Business School has said: "The difference between a cult and a religion is that one outlasts the founder." The truth is that in business as well as ministry, most organizations simply don't survive the loss of a powerful, compelling founder.

No matter how you feel about these and other large Christian organizations, they have much to teach us about transitions. While most are struggling and many are failing, there are a few bright spots. While you'd never wish it on anyone, there's evidence that organizations whose founding leaders pass away unexpectedly actually have an advantage, because the transition is forced. In other organizations, the leader keeps a grip too long, never allowing the next generation leader to become established.

Whatever the case, a successful transition is often what turns an organization from a one-hit wonder into a long term success.

Perhaps there's something to be learned as we watch how Apple

begins that process.