

3 Ways to Rewire Our Local Churches

My maternal grandfather grew up poor in rural southern Kentucky, and after finishing the eighth grade, he went to work like most of his friends. For much of his adult life he was a poor milk truck delivery driver who could barely make ends meet for his family. But about halfway through his life he had an idea for a business and launched Willoughby Communications, a company that salvaged used telecommunications equipment and resold it to companies that needed to update their equipment but couldn't afford the newest, hottest fiber-optic systems on the market.

His idea worked. He wound up traveling to almost every state, doing business with small- to medium-size companies and eventually reached his lifelong dream of earning a million dollars. His ingenuity and entrepreneurial passion paid off.

My grandfather's business was successful, but the reason behind its success also reveals much about why the church struggles today. If my grandfather were dealing in church methodologies instead of telecommunications equipment, he could have made a fortune among Western church leaders. Why? Because he made money helping companies update just enough to stay alive but not enough to compete in their rapidly changing markets. The companies with whom he did business knew they needed new wiring but usually weren't willing to risk going all the way to completely modernize.

Sound familiar?

We Have a Wiring Problem

We have a wiring problem in evangelicalism. We have the right message, but we're struggling to connect to the culture. For a couple of decades the church sought to change merely its

external practices in the hopes of attracting the nonbelieving world. We updated our music styles, retranslated the Bible dozens of times, and offered a more come-as-you-are atmosphere in our weekend services.

But our real problem is deeper. It's our inner wiring.

- **We're wired for building institutions.** Learning from the business world has done wonders for the church. We produce more skilled leaders. We're organized for more structured growth. We manage money better and advertise and promote our events with greater clarity.

The downside is that we wind up protecting the organization and feeding the machine. Churches often find themselves too big to risk failure, too far along to change directions and too institutional to get in the dirt with broken humanity. Obviously churches ought to do the very best they can to manage their growth and streamline their systems for effectiveness, but if we're no longer willing to take the risks we took years earlier because of potential failure, we need to rewire our thinking. What are we really protecting? And what's the opportunity cost of doing so?

- **We're wired for mass communication.** The advent of radio and television changed everything for the church. In fact, the church was an early adopter of mass broadcast technologies. Some of the longest-lasting radio and television programs in existence are broadcasts of church services. But with the social media revolution has come a resulting shift to interpersonal conversation—rather than mass broadcast—as the primary vehicle for transferring ideas. The church struggles to rejoin the conversation happening now between individuals.

One of the struggles in this regard is that mass communication seems easier. Though it costs much more than spreading a life-

changing message socially, it's also far easier to sit in an office and send messages over the airwaves, via direct mail, or over the Internet without actually interacting with individual people. The more we can reach, the better, right? Perhaps, but failing to engage with individuals among the masses will spell the death of many churches.

- **We're wired for program-based ministry.** Many churches subscribe to the bad idea that if we just do more, meet more and offer more, growth is inevitable. The result is a ministry for everyone and everyone in a ministry. Even in churches of a few dozen faithful volunteers, we tend to exhaust people with the number of ministry programs we like to list in our brochures. There isn't anything wrong with specialized ministries, but there is danger in cluttering the pathway to spiritual maturity with distractions.

Relational churches, on the other hand, de-emphasize programs and crazy, event-filled schedules and instead focus on a process to grow people as followers of Christ. These churches avoid giving the impression that to become spiritually mature, people need to attend three worship services, two Bible studies, a committee meeting and a potluck each week. Instead, they gather on the weekend for corporate worship, scatter during the week in small groups of some kind, and spend the rest of their time living out the values of disciples serving the world for Jesus' sake and taking Jesus to a world desperately in need.

- **We're wired for protecting the status quo.** Our human nature craves to be liked, to have the approval of others, and to generally keep everyone happy. When personal preferences trump our missional mandate from Jesus, we fail to ask, "How can we reach our community?" Instead, we ask, "How can we reach our community and still make sure this is a comfortable place for our longtime faithful members?" History proves, however,

that it's impossible to change the world and protect the status quo at the same time.

Companies that fail to adopt new technologies will be swallowed up by the competition, but they often must make significant organizational and personnel changes to make it happen, which causes friction and challenges the status quo. Across the land are hundreds of large church buildings or former church buildings where a congregation held on to tradition and accepted the status quo instead of embracing and adjusting to their communities in terms of culture and ethnicity. But protecting the status quo is a death sentence.

- **We're wired for combating the culture.** Society always has moral issues that need addressing, but the church often creates an us-versus-them atmosphere about these issues, which kills the conversation that could take place about the gospel. Churches often fight political battles without caring for wounded people. We protest abortion without ministering to women at the crossroads of an unexpected pregnancy. We fight the gambling lobby but don't offer solutions for people who struggle with gambling addictions. Perhaps what we need is an us-for-them mentality that values all souls enough to listen to the viewpoints of others. Anytime the church declares war against the unchurched culture, everyone loses.

It's Time for an Upgrade

I'll never forget the first computer I ever owned. It was a Packard Bell, and when we bought it from Sears, it came with a whopping two megabytes of RAM. Of course, we would never need all that speed, but we didn't want to have to upgrade for a decade or two. And even though the hard drive was adequate, we knew we could store extra data on double-sided floppy disks, providing a computing capacity that would preserve us well into the next century.

A year later we spent \$200 to upgrade the RAM from two to four megabytes. And in two more years it was scrap metal.

We've learned in the last decade or so to expect our equipment to be quickly obsolete. We know when we plunk down cash for a new cellphone, the newer model will be available and cheaper in just a few months. It's been said that in the business world, whoever has the best technology wins. I'm not sure that's universally true, but it definitely has some merit.

In the world of church communications we have a terrible tendency to lag behind in our adoption of technology. This hasn't always been the case, as I've already illustrated with the church's rapid adoption of radio and TV mediums. But because of certain stigmas about the Internet ("It's a youth thing," "It opens a Pandora's box of immorality," "It breeds narcissism"), we're a bit behind the curve. Obviously we don't need to jump into any cultural innovations blindly, but a healthy awareness and timely embrace of new communications capabilities are essential to effectively getting the gospel out in the present generation.

So how do we upgrade our evangelistic wiring?

1) We need to plug into God's power.

This might seem basic, but it's too often overlooked. In many pockets of evangelicalism we've settled for what we can produce in our own power. It's entirely possible to build a growing, successful organization with the right amount of money, talented leaders and skill for marketing. This isn't a wholesale indictment of churches that possess these qualities, but rather a warning against trusting in these qualities apart from God's blessing. When we really value God's power, prayer becomes the priority over performance.

Don't make the mistake of forging ahead into a new method of carrying out a personal or corporate mission without seeking

the blessing of the One who owns the mission. Before you do anything, spend time praying for God's clear direction as you seek to develop new ways of communicating the gospel.

2) We need to learn to speak human again.

In 2000, three years before Myspace existed and four years before Facebook entered the world, some amazingly insightful guys wrote *The Cluetrain Manifesto*. They saw the social web coming before it arrived. In the preamble to their 95 theses, they wrote these words to "the people of earth":

"A powerful global conversation has begun. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed. As a direct result, markets are getting smarter—and getting smarter faster than most companies.

"These markets are conversations. Their members communicate in language that is natural, open, honest, direct, funny, and often shocking. Whether by explaining or complaining, joking or serious, the human voice is unmistakably genuine. Most corporations, on the other hand, only know how to talk in the soothing, humorless monotone of the mission statement, marketing brochure, and your-call-is-important-to-us busy signal. ... But learning to speak in a human voice is not some trick, nor will corporations convince us they are human with lip service about 'listening to customers.' They will only sound human when they empower real human beings to speak on their behalf."

Now, go back and read that quote again but replace the words *companies* and *corporations* with the word churches. It's a bit chilling. As long as we are determined to keep our churchy wiring, we will fail to connect with our culture. And as long as we keep our grip on our programmatic, ritualistic, institutionalized version of the church, we will fail to capture the hearts of the hurting desperately in need of

relationship.

Jesus was wildly popular among the common people of Israel because He refused to keep the Pharisees happy by dressing the part of the religious leader. He became human, spoke human, hurt as a human and touched humanity in every respect. We should do the same.

3) We need to lead proactively.

Reactive leadership is killing us. When Jesus declared the “powers of hell will not conquer” the church He built, He wasn’t kidding around (Matt. 16:18, NLT). We have nothing to fear—the ultimate victory is already won. So why, then, do we hide in our bunkers waiting for the next cultural battle to come along? Why do we try to start saving our churches only when they are almost dead? And why do we attempt to understand technology and innovation only when it seems safe to do so?

It’s time to go on offense. By “offense,” I am not attempting to invoke a military image. I’m simply saying it’s time for the church step up and lead, which requires tremendous courage. It means going first and being an example to others.

I get that this is hard. I really do. When I was a student at Western Kentucky University, I saw this play out in the speech communication classes I took. Every time we came to a spot in the curriculum that required class members to give a speech, the question from the professor would inevitably come: “Who would like to go first?” Then came the long pause, during which students shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

The one who goes first has to break the ice and make mistakes without the benefit of seeing others figure it out first. Going first is not our natural inclination, but in a world in need of restoration and in a constant state of cultural flux, it’s really time. The alternative just isn’t an option anymore. Faulty wiring restricts the flow of God’s power through us. Even worse, bad wiring can be rather destructive

to the church, spelling our eventual death if we don't assess and adapt our approach and our language to each new generation.

It's time to lead. It's time to do some rewiring.

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