

Transforming a Network of Churches By Gary Taitinger

I've spent about one-third of my life in churches of 25-65 people in rural Canada. I spent the other two-thirds of my life leading a church in Canada that grew from 300 to just under 3,000 in attendance in one of our Canadian metros. For over 30 years, I led the staff, board, and congregation in an Edmonton church guided by God's Great Commission grace.

We cast vision to be relentlessly outbound to help Canadians move from curious, to convinced, to committed Christian faith. I eventually led a succession plan to hand over the church to one of my staff, resigned, and moved on. The church has continued on the same healthy trajectory.

I was subsequently elected to be a district superintendent in that area 6 years ago. At that point, I was faced with a challenge more complex than leading the individual growing church from which I had come. Our challenge was the same one faced by most evangelical denominations today: in a district of about 120 churches, only 18% were growing and 82% were plateaued or declining.

The first thing I needed to discern was that biblically and providentially, God can not only turn a *church* around, but that he will turn *movements* around. My challenge was to take what God had taught me in the local church relative to developing ministry fruitfulness in the current secular Canadian context, and to stir that faith in a network of churches to reverse the trend of a well-intended but largely flatlined network of congregations.

You know, as a catalytic, called, and anointed church overseer in our denomination's polity, I was seen as in charge of leading that church, and I assure you that leading a growing church over a 35-year period was actually much easier than trying to lead a network of 120 self-governing churches spread over 750,000 square miles. Nevertheless, now, after six years, we have gone from 18% of churches growing to 60% of our churches experiencing incremental growth.

Here are some of the challenges that I've walked through in getting to where we are now.

Our denomination is a Biblicist, revivalist, encounter-based denomination.

Our default is to believe that if you will be faithful to God's calling, he will supernaturally revive and build his church, and you just need to faithfully show up and be godly.

The truth was and is that we can't save a single soul. All growth is by miracle, and we can't do anything to advance the church but by the grace of God. However, in the Great

Commission, God chose to accommodate himself to working through anointed, dedicated and gifted leaders to expand his church around the world. One of the things I continuously struggle to clarify in our group is that without God, we can't; and without us, God won't.

I was going to tell you the four things that we did to go from 18% growing to 60% growing in six years. But as useful as that might be, I've decided to instead focus on the one thing that determines whether an organization does those four things or not.

There's a British sailors' phrase called "lash oneself to the mast." It pictures the scene of a captain having had himself tied to the mast to avoid any possibility of abandoning the post of duty, whether because of seduction, danger, or any other kind of compromise. Tied to the mast, there's the captain shouting orders, explosions on the left, explosions on the right, cannonballs whizzing by, waves crashing over the decks. He's modeling to the crew an irrevocable pledge to one's life to the cause.

The sentiment is, we either win this war or we go down with the ship while trying. The secret of it all. You see, a proven training program for church turnaround is merely the second most important thing in reversing the trend of decline in a movement. The first and most important—the greatest determining factor—is that someone in denominational governance sees the critical necessity of reversing the trend, believes God for the miracle, prays, consecrates, and uses their biblical authority to immediately bring it about—"ties themselves to the mast," so to speak. Some leader needs to persistently and redundantly communicate that with all of their passion, governance, authority, and budgetary influence until a majority of the churches begin to implement the truths of fruitfulness. Then we will see the trend reversed.

It is God's will, but without the buy-in of regional church governance overseers, the best turnaround methodologies will only be adopted by 10-15% of your churches, because that's about the ratio of resident catalytic leaders you have in your network. And that's not a weakness. Rather, God just wants us to be more interdependent than that.

So the key to intercepting the trend is by prophetic leaders binding themselves to the mast of the sinking ship, determining either to go down with it or succeed in inspiring, enabling, and equipping the broad company of pastors under their influence to make church fruitfulness a reality. The great distraction is to equate other laudable goals as consolation for unfruitfulness. Like, "Look what else we've done in our finances, or in our theology, or we've deepened discipleship practices or our organization order in some way," when the fact is that we are not incrementally reaping an increasing proportion of the harvest in our communities compared to last year.

As important as pastors are, they are not the critical link in turning a network around. I led the largest church in our movement over a protracted period of time, but that amazing church didn't turn our denomination or our district around. Rather, the effective

turnaround agent is the middle judicatory denominational visionary that accepts the prophetic onus to bring trend reversal about or die trying.

Would you join me in prayer?

Heavenly Father, I pray that all who hear it—local church pastors and those who oversee networks of churches—will see their place and their role. I pray for faith to believe that you can turn around a whole network, a whole denomination. I pray that we'll see and embrace our respective roles in the local church, regardless of our current leadership position or ability levels.

Help us to pursue relentlessly those things which the Great Commission directs us to do. Give courage, wisdom, and insight to the leaders of church networks, whether they are denominational or regional leaders. Help them to see the cruciality of their “tying themselves to the mast,” so to speak, to advance and advocate and influence their network for the good of people and the glory of God. Reverse the trend of plateau and decline, we pray. Give us courage, give us faith, give us wisdom, and at the time of the Lord's return, may we hear, “Well done, good and faithful servants,” because we reaped the harvest that you raised up. We pray this in the strong name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Gary Taitinger is the Superintendent of the Alberta & Northwest Territories District of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC). He has pastored at a large suburban church in Edmonton for 35 years, but most of the rest of his life has been in small rural churches.

In 2013, he led a coalition of churches from 25 different denominations that carried out province wide evangelization, where 30,000 people attended Alpha courses. Currently he is part of the PAOC 2020 Revitalization Group.

At the end of 2015 Gary coordinated a succession transition that enabled him to partner with Alpha Canada in enlisting cross denominational coalitions in Canada's largest cities for a nationwide evangelization called invitecanada.

He was elected to the General Executive of the PAOC at General Conference 2016. Currently, as the ABNWT District Superintendent, 'vitalizing churches' is his OBT (One Big Thing) – “capable leaders + healthy churches = incremental growth”.