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## Leadership Issues for the Church [Interview with George Barna]

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## INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE BARNA

# LEADERSHIP ISSUES FOR THE CHURCH

**Shirley Freed (SF):** First of all, thanks a whole lot for coming to Andrews and for being willing to talk. I hope that your time here has been good.

**George Barna (GB):** My time here at Andrews has been great. I don't remember a time anybody or any group has made me feel more comfortable and more welcome. You're spoiling me!

**SF:** Good. Well, let's start with your journey as a researcher. How did you get into where you're at right now and where did that unfold?

**GB:** I started by managing political campaigns for people running for Congress, Governor, the state legislature and so forth. After a few campaign seasons, I realized that being a campaign manager for the rest of my life wasn't right for me; it's pretty much a burn-out occupation. As I looked at the different functions that I filled or oversaw in campaigns, it became clear that the tasks I enjoyed most were the polling and speech writing. So I returned to graduate school, got some degrees in research, political science, and urban planning. During that time I was also polling for different candidates, primarily those running for Congress. I worked at the Eagle Institute of Politics for a while, at Rutgers University, working in their survey research unit as an analyst.

Then my wife and I moved to California to get away from the cold weather and I worked at one of the larger market research firms in the country, primarily doing media research. During that time I was recruited

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by a Christian advertising and media agency located in the Chicago area. We moved back there and I developed both a direct marketing and a research division for them. That was when I began in earnest to do faith-oriented research. After four Chicago winters we decided that the Midwest was not right for me, so we moved back to southern California. I really felt that God had called me to start an organization that would do reliable research to help Christian ministries.

So we started our company in 1994, called the Barna Research Group at that time. We found out first-hand how God works when you seek to do His will. I had no clients, no money, no equipment, no staff—really nothing but this idea that God had put in my heart. And the first client we got was Disney.

**SF:** Oh, interesting.

## **I really felt that God had called me to start an organization that would do reliable research to help Christian ministries.**

**GB:** They called up out of the blue. A woman I had worked with at the big market research firm previously had since become the VP of research at Disney. She heard through the grapevine that I was back in Los Angeles. She called up and asked if I'd be interested in working with Disney. And I'm sitting there thinking, "Well, let's see, I have a mortgage to pay, car expenses, I'd like to eat this week. Uh, well, OK, I'd love to work for Disney. . . ."

That said, I came out and asked her, why me? My company isn't a real company yet, I'm just getting it off the ground and you're running research for Disney. Disney! She was very kind, though, and said the one thing she remembered about me as a researcher was that I had integrity, and she really needed a research partner whom she could trust.

I pushed her on that and she told me she had been in that job for six months, and she had spent the time interviewing the research organizations that Disney worked with. She concluded that most of them would tell her whatever she wanted to hear just to keep the business. She said she knew that I would tell her whatever the research discovered, whether

that was good news or bad. So we began working with Disney and it became a great relationship. We were their primary research organization for about seven years, working with their television division.

It was a very profitable relationship for us, and we reinvested the profits we made from that work into doing research for the church. We were able to give away a lot of the research for free, or for next to nothing. Soon we began to get ministry clients, as well, and that portion of our business began to flourish. So that's how we got started. It's one of those things that you cannot plan for. God decided to do that, and we were greatly blessed by it.

## Information can be a powerful motivator to change behavior.

**SF:** So regarding the whole concept of research, and research for the church, how do you shape your agenda? How does your agenda get shaped?

**GB:** Primarily by trying to listen to the people that we are attempting to serve. We do surveys with pastors several times a year and include questions that help us understand what they're struggling with, or curious about, or perhaps not aware of. Then we can develop research projects around those subjects.

We also do a lot of consumer surveys during the course of a year, and we'll ask them similar kinds of questions related to their faith and lifestyles. We know that information can be a powerful motivator to change behavior, or a worldview, so we try to figure out what types of information and analyses would be of the greatest value to the people that we hope to serve.

**SF:** The greatest value; let's talk about that a little bit. What do you feel has been your contribution in terms of value for the Christian church over time, or even over the entire time that you've been working, and that's how many years now?

**GB:** It has been about thirty years. I think one of the contributions has been to challenge a lot of the standard thinking about leadership, about ministry process, and about spiritual evaluation. We have tried

to get leaders in the church to not simply settle for what has always been done, and to not settle for what they might consider to be “outside the box” thinking. We’ve tried to help them understand that God has no box. So for you to say, “I’m thinking outside the box,” you’re still operating within the world’s parameters.

If you’re going to do what God has called you to do, there is no box. There are no limitations; He can do anything at any time that fits His agenda, so the box pretty much reflects our agenda, expectations, and perspectives. If we could get rid of the box, we could really be dangerous for the kingdom of God.

**SF:** Okay, so I’m wondering about specifics. When you think about what has happened during those thirty years, another piece of this really is not just the research, but how you get your research out. Let’s talk about that a bit. We all know that we can do research, and it turns into a dissertation that ends up on a library shelf. We were so excited when we started it, believing it would move people and the world was going to be a different place because we did this amazing research. And then, boom!—it ends up on a shelf. So maybe that is another piece that we should pursue. What did you do differently?

## If we could get rid of the box, we could really be dangerous for the kingdom of God.

**GB:** One of the biggest lessons that I have tried to teach all of the clients we have worked with, whether secular or Christian, is there’s a major difference between interesting information and useful information. Usually the first thing we will ask a client is, “What do you want to know?” And they’ll give us their list of questions they’d like to have answered. In response to each of those, we then ask, “Suppose we found out the answer to this question. What would you do with that information? How would it make a difference?” Often we found there is no practical application for that result. It was just a really intriguing question or might have provided a very interesting but practically useless tidbit of information. Sometimes a specific morsel of information has the capacity to generate a lot of conversation, but you can’t really

do anything of practical value with the information; there is no direct action that results from it.

Asking application-driven questions is critical to deriving meaningful data. Perhaps our “go to” question of clients is always, “We can get you the answer, but so what?” What difference would it make? If you can’t show me that it’s worth the money, the effort, the time we’re all going to put into it, then we’re probably asking the wrong questions. Instead, let’s try to dig a little bit deeper and figure out the underlying issues. Then we can work backwards from there until we identify what we need to know in order to develop potentially meaningful and helpful action steps that might emerge from such knowledge. Let’s systematically pursue what we need to know in order to change a piece of reality for the better. So that’s typically how we approach a research project. And you can’t get there by asking a single question about a topic or issue; it takes multiple questions, approaching the matter from different angles, to get deep enough to understand the matter and begin to formulate a plan for changing that particular aspect of reality.

## Asking application-driven questions is critical to deriving meaningful data.

**SF:** That’s really a good way. So let’s go into some specifics. When you think about all the research that you’ve done, are there several research studies and the dissemination of those studies that you feel really good about, in the sense that people have been able to take actions based on them and that in some ways you have changed the world? We still have that hope, right?

**GB:** Yeah, but I wouldn’t say I’ve changed anything. Hopefully God has taken the process and the product and done something special with it. I’m uncomfortable suggesting that I did anything.

I think the work that we have done related to children is among the most important pieces of research that we’ve done. For a long time, children have pretty much been overlooked or taken for granted in the church. Children are basically church bait. We dangle the bait to get the big fish to come in, the big fish being adults. And I’m really thankful that we had the opportunity to provide some research that gives a different perspective on the importance of children and the ministry

opportunities they represent. The research persuasively indicates that it is absolutely critical to minister to kids—more critical than to any other group or age segment. By the way, that’s also an area where the research radically changed me. When we began doing those studies on ministry to children, I held the conventional party line that kids were just a means to an end. The research turned my own thinking upside down.

A second area has to do with life transformation. So many ministries are struggling to figure out why all their programs are not producing true disciples. The research we conducted on how God goes about transforming our lives—the stops on the journey to wholeness, and what kind of fruit emerges when we begin to own each stop—has been life changing for some people, including me! When I think about why the church has such limited influence in American society, I think the data convincingly show that it’s because Christians are not allowing God to transform them, and thus the church is not much different from the rest of the world.

A third area that I think has been really helpful is in the area of leadership. I would argue that there has been—and continues to be—a lot of misunderstanding about what a leader is, what a leader does, and how to evaluate leadership. We’ve worked pretty hard at trying to provide a different understanding of that whole dimension. I don’t know how much has changed as a result of it. But I know that we have at least upset a lot of people through that research (Chuckling).

## **It is absolutely critical to minister to kids—more critical than to any other group or age segment.**

**SF:** Serious? Let’s get specific about that. This is for the *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*. So the connections to leadership are really important and interesting to us.

**GB:** When we started exploring leadership more deeply, I asked thousands of pastors and lay leaders what they thought leadership is. And we got an incredible range of answers. I went back to the literature to explore what the “experts” say leadership is—and found that we get that same incredible range of descriptions (Chuckling).

So we did a series of studies to look at different possibilities toward

figuring out what leadership is and the implications and potential of leadership. We found that becoming a leader is not a choice you make but a calling that God gives to you. If you start with that perspective,

## **Becoming a leader is not a choice you make but a calling that God gives to you.**

you are so far ahead of the crowd. But very few people do start there; they enter the leadership arena based on emotions and desire. They feel like they want to lead because that's where the action is, or those are the people who get the perks, or those are the individuals with power and control. Often they claim they need to lead because they have been told by others that they should lead. Well, all of that's nice, but it's generally irrelevant. The issue is not what you feel or desire or need—it's What does God say? What has He put in your heart about the nature of your gifts and your service to Him?

So calling is the starting point. But that's hardly the end of the qualifications list. Next, you cannot lead unless your character has been significantly refined by God, because leadership is about trust. If you don't have character that people can trust, you're not going to be an effective leader. If God can't trust you, He's not going to give you significant assignments. If people can't trust you, they're not going to follow you. A leader without a follower is not really a leader. So character is a big thing.

We found that the third significant area has to do with leadership competencies. We learned that there are about 15 core leadership competencies, although nobody possesses all of them. When I think about the competencies, I always laugh because, when you look at all the leadership conferences, all we focus on are the competencies. They're vital, but having these competencies alone is not enough. But, yes, you do need them: knowing how to cast vision, how to create a team, how to think strategically, how to objectively evaluate progress, and so forth.

So I think we put the cart before the horse in most of this. That explains why the vast majority of senior pastors are in positions of leadership even though they are not leaders. Some of them have not been called to lead, but because of the model that we have for church operations, they feel compelled to portray themselves as leaders. Our local church model insinuates that if you are going to get the platform, it's a



two-part deal: you can teach but you also have to lead.

Now recognize that those two—teaching and leading—are very different gifts. And based on our testing, I would contend that it is actually pretty rare to find somebody who is a called and gifted teacher and a called and gifted leader. Don't get me wrong, great leaders are always good communicators. But teaching and communicating are not necessarily one and the same. Anyway, helping people to understand the differences, and to feel good about the fact that perhaps they have been called to preach and teach, but they are not a leader, is an important distinction. Regardless of the formal job description, we each have to grasp who God made us to be, what His calling on our life is. We have to resist the temptation to distort those insights because of external expectations that are wrong.

One of the most interesting facets of our leadership research was discovering that there are four distinct leadership aptitudes. We studied this for years and realized that a leader does essentially four things: you motivate, you mobilize, you resource, and you direct people toward a shared vision. If you are a Christian leader, you would expand the “shared vision” to say “a shared vision from God that creates transformation.”

Our studies showed that nobody, no leader we have ever studied, is really superb in all four of those dimensions. As we dug deeper,

we found that each of those dimensions aligns with a markedly different leadership aptitude. Every leader whom God calls is given

## **The best leadership is team leadership.**

one of those four aptitudes. They may have some skill in aspects of the other three aptitudes, but their strength, their forte, their core is truly in that one aptitude. So you are either a directing leader, a strategic leader, a team-building leader, or an operational leader. Each of them has a different demeanor, a different mentality, a different set of skills, a different set of limitations.

Because of that reality—that every leader has one dominant leadership aptitude, and is therefore an incomplete leader, by God's design—the best leadership is team leadership. The solo practitioner who tries to be all things to all people can only take you so far. He or she is going to get burned out pretty quickly—or get stoned by the people they are trying to lead because they fail when they try to be all things to all people. No individual leader possesses all the capacity and skills needed to

lead people to the fruition of the vision.

But everything changes if you have a team of leaders, each of whom has a different aptitude. When you bring together a team of leaders who have these different capacities, they naturally compensate for each other's weaknesses and build on each other's strengths. That's what enables a group of people to really make progress; they are capably led. As part of the research we found examples of churches, parachurch ministries, and businesses that understood this intuitively, even though they may not have had the language for it or the models for it. We were able to help them see what was happening, and why they were experiencing such unusual success, and they helped us to learn how the process works in practice. So that's been great.

**SF:** That's huge. So I'm still worried about the people who are upset about the research (Chuckling). Then again, as researchers we are just messengers.

**GB:** Exactly. But I've learned that messengers get scars as one of their occupational hazards.

**SF:** And people will do whatever they choose with the things that we find. I'm still wondering how we can soften the crowd so the things we learn do find a resting place and people can actually use them for the betterment of their organization, the church, and for God's kingdom. Help me to think about that.

**GB:** I don't know that I have any great expertise in softening people. I'm from New York, and our approach is, "Hey, this is what it is. Take it or leave it. If you don't like it, that's your problem."

The way that I typically work—you saw it in my presentations yesterday, and you'll see it again this morning—is kind of like a trial lawyer. Someone who had attended a series of my presentations pointed this out to me. He said, "You are like a lawyer when you present this stuff. You build your case by presenting the problem, presenting the possible options to what caused the problem, then diving into possible solutions, and then sharing research data that shows what happened when you tested those possibilities. And then you conclude your case by identifying the best solution or outcome." I hadn't thought about it like that, but I think that's probably true. That tends to be my process. Like all good research, it is part scientific method and part art form in the

framing, analysis, and presentation.

Because if you ease up next to somebody and criticize what they are doing or how they do it, you'll have a battle on your hands because you lack credibility. It's your view against theirs. Instead of that harsh confrontational approach, if I can conduct some objective research and simply share the findings, we both win. I'm off the hook, because I used my resources to bring objective clarity to the situation, and they're better off knowing the truth of the situation. If I do the job well, they can relate to the outcomes because of how I walked them through the process from conceptualization to investigation to analysis to interpretation. They don't want to fail; every leader wants to succeed. Good research—research whose only agenda is to help people live a more godly, productive, moral life—will help them do that.

The other thing that we have to remember is that the research isn't always right, either. Sometimes we may not deliver a complete picture. Other times the data are inaccurate because we ask people to explain themselves, and they are inarticulate or have not really thought about what they're being asked to explain.

**SF:** We can only get one glimpse; we can only get a slice. And people are complex, and certainly the church is complex, and certainly God's agenda for all of us is incredibly complex, and we have just little snippets of understanding of what He really wants for us.

**GB:** And little pea brains (Chuckling).

**SF:** That's right, little pea brains. How much we can actually understand? So when we think about the future for the church, where are you currently focusing, and what do you see as really critical issues that are problematic? I like the way you contextualize your research as a problem to understand, treating it as a felt problem and helping people recognize it as a problem. Then people are searching for solutions and understanding something isn't quite right and needs to be addressed.

**GB:** Yes, at least they will pay attention to what the research finds.

**SF:** They will pay attention, yes. I think that the Christian church is in a really tight spot right now. So how do we think about where we're at, and how can you—or how are you—helping us think about that?

**GB:** One of the biggest questions I've had after 30-plus years of doing research is this: Is God still transforming lives, and if He is, where are the transformed people? And why aren't there more of them? That's one of the most recent projects that I've been doing. That research came out in a book called *Maximum Faith*. And it was an attempt to answer those questions.

The good news is, of course God is still transforming lives. But the research showed me something that I found startling, which is that essentially God has a pretty consistent journey for all of us to take. The issue of transformation is not about arriving someplace, it's about a journey toward wholeness. And what I found was essentially that there are ten stops on that journey. God doesn't force us to go any further on that journey than we're willing to go. In doing the research, I discovered that it is our disinterest in going the full distance, with all that the journey requires, that explains why the church is in such a mess. Of the ten stops on the journey, most Christians never get beyond Stop 5. People who get beyond that really start to experience the depth and the richness of the Christian experience. But we've created a situation in the Christian community and in our churches where it's acceptable to stay at Stops 4 or 5.

## **The issue of transformation is not about arriving someplace, it's about a journey toward wholeness.**

**SF:** Could you just remind me of the stops?

**GB:** Sure, but don't feel bad, I can't "remind you" because I haven't described them to you yet (Chuckling)!

**SF:** I actually think I've heard them before, something is coming to my memory, but it's fuzzy.

**GB:** Okay. Stop 1 is where we are born, and we don't know anything about sin. It's not even a concept we are familiar with. Most people don't stay there; they move on to at least the next stop. Only one percent of Americans die without having progressed from Stop 1.

Stop 2 is where we become acquainted with the idea or the concept

of sin. It's information that we absorb. I know that's a lamp, this is a couch. I know these are pants. I know that is sin. So it's just information, but we are indifferent to it. At this stage of the journey, simply knowing the definition of sin doesn't make any difference in how we live or in our worldview.

Stop 3 is where we know that information and we become concerned about its implications. We start wondering, What if there is a God who thinks sin is a problem? Would that affect my life? What if sin actually affects the way other people respond to me? Is that good or bad? What if sins I commit are negatively affecting my quality of life? And so there is this inner turmoil where the person is wrestling with the idea of sin. Does sin really exist? Is it good, bad, or indifferent? People are trying to figure it out. Most Americans, by the way, die on Stops 1, 2, or 3.

**SF:** I was wondering.

**GB:** Stop 4 is where we look at the options regarding what to do about sin. One of them is to ask Jesus to forgive us for the fact that we have committed sins, and to save us from the penalty for the sins and restore us by grace, so we ask Him to be our Savior.

Stop 5 is where, as a result of that choice, we then become part of a community of other people of like belief. We get more involved in religious activity: we read the Bible more often, pray more often, attend Christian education classes, all these kinds of things. Most Christians will die at that stop.

Stop 6 is fascinating. It's the place we've called the stop of holy discontent. People typically arrive at this stop—if they arrive here at all—between year 15 and year 31, after initially asking Christ to save them from their sins. The person becomes very frustrated with their faith, with their church, with other believers, and with everything related to Christianity. They start asking questions like, Is this all there is? Are you telling me Jesus died for this? This is the full extent of it? Did I miss something somewhere? Isn't there more? There's got to be something better than this, right? And so they go on a renewed search for meaning and depth, trying to figure out the totality of the Christian experience and specifically what they missed in the process. What is fascinating about Stop 6 is that most believers who get there do their homework—they come to realize what Stop 7 is, and rather than continue with forward progress, they return to an earlier stop on the journey.

**SF:** Because it's safer.

**GB:** Precisely. It's more comfortable, it's easier, it's known. It's not as painful because Stop 7 is brokenness. Only six percent of Americans ever get to Stop 7. Once you've gone through brokenness, being broken of sin, self, and society—the three things that really rule our lives—such that we give up those influences and truly put God on the throne of our life, and allow His agenda to come through, then we can move to Stop 8, which is a place of healing through surrender and submission. It's at Stop 8 that we abandon our own agenda in favor of God's, allow His strength to propel us forward for His purposes, and recognize that we only succeed when He is fully in control of our life.

Then we can move to Stop 9, which is a place where we have this incredibly loving, intimate connection with God. We love Him in a way that we never knew was possible. We experience His love in ways that we have heard or read about but which never really meant anything to us until we actually go through it and experience. This completely changes us: our worldview, our behavior, our emotions, our identity, our goals, our fruit.

And that enables us to get to Stop 10, which is where we have profound love and compassion and mercy for other people.

When I initially completed the data analysis and identified the stops

## **Our ultimate stop on the journey to wholeness is the ability to receive, give, enjoy, and express God's love.**

and the sequence in which they occur, I thought, "Well, I blew that. Somehow I got that wrong. God is the ultimate. God should be Stop 10. Loving people is not more important than loving God. Loving people should be Stop 9."

But I went back to a lot of the case studies, and did some more work to try to figure out what went wrong in my analysis. But I came to realize that loving people is indeed Stop 10, the final stop on the journey. Why? Because people aren't loveable. The only way we can truly love them is when it is not us, as humans, simply trying in our own strength and will to muster enough positive emotion and feelings toward others. That kind of human-based love lasts about 16 seconds. Genuine love,

lasting, life-changing love, is that which comes from God loving them through us. And that can only happen when we have that intimate love connection with Him first. We've just become His vessel for love to the world.

So the final stops on the journey are all about love. Jesus said that the most important commandments were to love God and love others. John wrote that the world will know real Christians by our love. The gathered assembly is supposed to be a community where love prevails. The Scriptures teach us that God is love, and that we are made in His image, so our ultimate stop on the journey to wholeness is the ability to receive, give, enjoy, and express God's love.

And the upshot of our growth at every stop is the fruit that we bear as a result of the experiences and wisdom we gain at that stop. Christ said that we must bear fruit, and that people will know we are His disciples by the fruit that we produce for His kingdom. I found that at each stop believers produce a different type of spiritual fruit that reflects their journey.

And that, in a nutshell, is what six years of research revealed. That's how the transformational journey seems to work in this country. But here's something else. What I've found is that everybody seems to go through those same stops. Now in different countries, the sequence of those stops may be different. For instance, take Stop 7, brokenness. In America, because we market salvation relentlessly, we promote an unbiblical form of Christianity. Think about it: How can you accept Christ as your Savior, which is Stop 4, if you haven't been broken of sin, self, and society? Answer: Only if you treat salvation as an escape from the penalty without truly altering your heart. What is it that you think you're being saved from? Basically all we are asking is, Can you give me a get-out-of-hell-free card? I'd really like that. It'd be mighty handy, because I've got a lot of hard living to do here.

You see, in other countries I've found that their faith is not so culture-bound, so the Scriptures are profound to them—they see the Bible for what it says, which is that brokenness must come first, then salvation can follow.

So that's another one of the implications of the research on transformation: Many of the people who are running around thinking they're saved may well not be. I know it's not up to me to judge them; I'm just worried that they may not be where they think they are on this journey, because they've never really experienced true brokenness.

**SF:** I think you really did get excited about that research (Chuckling). I think that is the research that right now you are feeling is very important.

**GB:** I would say it strikes me as the most important research I've been aligned with over the past 30 years. If Christians understood the findings, and took them to heart, it would radically change them as individuals, our churches as places of spiritual growth, and our culture as a means of honoring God. And if we, as followers of Christ, are not intensely focused on being transformed by God, then what's the point? This is so critical. So, yes, I do get energized about this.

**SF:** Yes, and I think back to the question, What does the church need? It's for sure that at this time of earth's history, we all sense a deep need to be changed, and we're not content.

**GB:** When you look at our culture right now, even the elections we recently had, the message that emerges is that we're as divided a country as we've been since the Civil War. What's going to restore us to unity and strength? We've got to have that common vision, a shared sense of why we should bother to wake up every morning. And that vision cannot simply be to go out and tell liberals or conservatives how wrong they are on important issues or policies or structures. The vision must focus on how we, as a nation of 315 million diverse people, can become loving servants who work together on the basis of fundamentally sound principles and morals to solve our common problems. Arguing each other into a corner isn't the answer.

**SF:** We're getting tight on time. But I really wanted to explore here a little bit the typical church pastor or church board, and their use of data in making decisions.

**GB:** They don't (Laughter)! Next question.

**SF:** So how do we really help each other to know that there is data out there to be gathered, and if people can't hire you to get the data that they think they need, how to go about getting it for themselves. Is it important to do that, or is this just a Shirley agenda? How important is it that we get data, and that we make sure we understand that people are willing to give us information, and that we don't need to be functioning in isolation from empirical data about what is going on in our places?



**GB:** There has never been an era of history where more data has been available. The Internet has essentially overwhelmed us with data, so there is a different skill that you need today than you needed in 1980. In 1980, you needed to know where to find data. Now, when you find data, how do you know if you can trust it? It would take a long conversation to unpack the answer, but you do have to be a little bit skeptical about a lot of the information that's available. When I look at data provided in magazines, newspapers, and websites, I would argue that most of that research is garbage because of how it was collected or how it was analyzed. And to know and understand that is a skill that you have to develop.

But is it worth developing? If I'm going to vote in an election, I cannot simply believe whatever a TV talking head or a newspaper editorialist tells me; they have an agenda to push, they marshal their facts, and they make their argument. It's subjective, not objective. As a leader, I want to get objective information to analyze within my context for decision-making. I don't want other people's biases coloring the information that I will use for making important decisions. One of my tasks as a leader is to gather objective data that can be useful in shaping my perspectives and arriving at the best possible choices for my people.

Unfortunately, sometimes those of us in the research and analysis field scare people off by making things more complicated than they need to be. We use language they don't understand. We develop complex arguments when a simple view can be expressed. We bury people in numbers, causing their eyes to glaze over, rather than identifying a handful of key indicators. We make research seem very complicated, when really all it is, is following a few standard rules of engagement and exploration that involves asking people questions, getting their answers, adding them together, and drawing some conclusions about what they said.

The most tenuous parts are identifying what you need to know and how to ferret that out, and the subjective interpretation of the findings within a given cultural context. As a church leader, if I'm not planning to become an expert researcher, at least I can identify a handful of researchers whose training and track record lead me to trust their work, and then follow what they discover. Even as a professional researcher, I do the same thing. There are maybe a dozen researchers or research firms that I have learned to trust. Out of the thousands of researchers out there, I've studied their practices and results, and believe they are credible. Any church leader can do that.

What would a church leader look for in choosing studies, or researchers, to trust? You have to dig in a bit to figure out what they are doing. The kinds of questions you ask have to do with their methods and motives. Were the research questions asked properly? Was the survey sample developed appropriately? Was the data collected correctly? What kind of practices and safeguards were built into the data tabulation and reporting process? What kind of spin was put on the interpretation? Those are the kind of factors I look for before I trust any other body of research or statistics.

**SF:** Maybe this is a good landing place for us. What's your sense of the impact of your organization on the Christian church? Because my perception is that you have a big impact out there. People really pay attention when you hear presentations and someone is reporting, "Well, this Barna study, or this book or whatever." People do sit up and take notice.

## **What do you do when people attach your name to stuff you had nothing to do with?**

**GB:** That's kind of you, thanks for the compliment. But here's the problem. As I have traveled around the country and attended church services, I have literally sat in churches and listened to sermons where somebody said, "According to Barna, 46 percent yada yada, and 27% did xyz, and therefore..." And I'll sit there with my jaw dropping, thinking, "What? We've never even researched that topic!" So unfortunately, I may have as much influence for things I've never researched as for the things that I have!

George Gallup and I used to talk about this a lot. What do you do when people attach your name to stuff you had nothing to do with? You can imagine how often the Gallups have had to put up with that. How do you right that wrong? The answer is: you really can't. That's sad, but we do not live in a culture that is really sold out to truth. Yeah, it's nice that people think there is some credibility in what we do, because we work really hard at trying to do it right. And doing research the right way and refusing to cut corners is a lot more expensive, I'll tell you that.

**SF:** Yes, for sure. Do you have any last thoughts as directions for your research, directions or hopes for how we would use the work that you've done, or anything along that line?

**GB:** I would love churches to take the research on transformation, and rethink their model of discipleship. The existing model tends to be information-heavy transmission. If we could instead understand the stops on the journey and help people realize where they are on the journey and motivate them to endure, what a difference that would make! Granted, we will have to alert them to the fact that transformation is going to be difficult and there are going to be hardships. You will have to sacrifice, and there will be pain as we're broken of sin, self, and society once and for all. But that is a vital part of our purpose on earth—to become the people that God made us to be.

## **People grow best not by getting more sermons but through individual mentoring by someone who is one, or maybe two, stops ahead of them on the journey.**

How wonderful it would be if churches could help people to grasp the nature of the journey, and to support and resource them along the way. We found that people grow best not by getting more sermons but through individual mentoring by someone who is one, or maybe two, stops ahead of them on the journey. Those mentors have been there. They know the obstacles. They know the hardships. They can provide realistic feedback, encouragement, ideas and resources to help people to continue to grow.

If a conventional church would facilitate that process and those kinds of relationships, and deliver the necessary resources in a timely manner, and continue to encourage people to stay on that journey, that could revolutionize Christianity in America—and consequently in the world.

**SF:** Great! Thank you so much!

**GB:** Thank you.