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### Leadership Skills and Strategies, and Their Effect on Processing Change in Light of the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church Building Project

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ABSTRACT

LEADERSHIP SKILLS AND STRATEGIES, AND  
THEIR EFFECT ON PROCESSING CHANGE IN  
LIGHT OF THE GRAND PRAIRIE SEVENTH-  
DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH BUILDING  
PROJECT

by

Danail G. Tchakarov

Adviser: Tom Evans

## ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Professional Dissertation

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: LEADERSHIP SKILLS AND STRATEGIES, AND THEIR EFFECT ON PROCESSING CHANGE IN LIGHT OF THE GRAND PRAIRIE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH BUILDING PROJECT

Name of researcher: Danail G. Tchakarov

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Date completed: May 2022

### Problem

The Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church is one of the oldest Seventh-day Adventist congregations in the state of Texas, and as such has given birth to numerous other congregations. Over time, however, the makeup of the surrounding community slowly changed and no longer reflected that of the church. Because of language, cultural, and socioeconomic differences, the church was slowly becoming irrelevant and incapable to minister to its immediate community. The building was 57 years old and in dire need of repairs. Adding to the challenge was the fact that the 1.88-acre property was completely surrounded by other properties; space for social activities and parking was

extremely limited, preventing future growth. A change of location was desperately needed for the church to fulfill its God-given mission.

### Method

Various leadership skills and strategies based on biblical models were employed as change was initiated and processed. Regular meetings with church leaders and with the larger church body were conducted to assess the effectiveness of such change, and appropriate adjustments were made. Ultimately, this process was God-led and inspired, and it was His divine wisdom that guided the application of these skills and strategies.

### Results

After 14 years of God-led incremental and consistent change, in 2019, the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church moved to its new location at 4125 Lake Ridge Parkway in Grand Prairie, Texas. As a result, attendance doubled. Over this process of change, total local giving steadily grew, and tripled during the year of completion. Community-wide initiatives were well attended, not only by local church members but also by people from the local community. Through the process, the church congregation experienced a new birth and was fundamentally revitalized in every aspect of life.

### Conclusion

Change is at the very foundation of life, and leaders are called by God to assist Him in transforming one life at a time. Leading change is a partnership between God and humans. While God is supreme in this partnership, He still expects and encourages the human partners to master their God-given potential while continuing to learn new skills and creating new strategies.

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A Professional Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

by

Danail Tchakarov

May 2022

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“Consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God” (1 Corinthians 1:26–29).

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## CHAPTER 1

### PROJECT INTRODUCTION

Change is an ever-present reality in the fast-paced world that surrounds the Christian church. Unfortunately, the church in general is too hesitant to consider change as a credible vehicle for personal growth and kingdom expansion. A vast majority of churches believe that change is equivalent to compromising their identity and employ all their energy and time to shield themselves from such change. Sadly, many pastors accommodate congregations in their effort to “remaining true” to their way of life and ministry from their former glory days. This ultimately leads to dysfunctional, sick, and eventually deceased congregations. (Nelson & Appel, 2000)

For the Christian church to remain alive, change must be a constant reality. For an effective change to take place, pastors must embrace their God-given calling and responsibility and serve as agents of change. It is imperative for them to see the church as a living organism that must continually move forward in order to remain vibrant and true to its mission and calling. As pastors prepare for this sacred calling, they are well-advised to invest concerted and intentional effort into developing and acquiring new skills and devising new strategies in order to prepare adequately for the long and challenging journey of processing change. Pastor leaders must be lifelong learners. They must experience change in their own lives in order to facilitate change in the church.

This chapter first describes a ministry context in which the challenges of processing change are addressed in a specific way. Second, it provides an overview of the development of the project by presenting a theological reflection, a review of relevant literature, and a description of implementation of leadership skills and strategies. Then it suggests definitions of technical terms that are central to this study.

### **Description of the Ministry Context**

The Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church is a multicultural community of faith. While the church is relatively small, it represents the beginning of the Seventh-day Adventist Church witness in Texas in 1892. Throughout the following years, the church experienced many changes. One of the most significant changes was the church's decision to relocate in 2005. After beginning my work as a pastor at the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church on January 1, 2005, I recognized God's call to initiate and process this particular change. This is also the context for this project. I completed my ministry at the Grand Prairie Church on June 30, 2019.

The Grand Prairie Church is located in the city of Grand Prairie, Texas. The physical location of the church at the time of my assignment was 418 East Tarrant Road, Grand Prairie, Texas, 75050. In 2005, the average church attendance on Saturday morning was about 100 people, with 300 members on the church books. The city of Grand Prairie is part of the larger community of the Dallas/Fort Worth Metropolitan Area, which has a population of more than seven million. Grand Prairie is very much affected by the dynamics of the surrounding cities. Between 2005 and 2019, the city's population nearly doubled, making it one of the fastest growing cities in the United States.



## **Statement of the Problem**

The Grand Prairie Church has been mission-oriented for its 100-plus years of existence. It has given birth to multiple churches in the area: the Arlington Seventh-day Adventist Church and the DeSoto Seventh-day Adventist Church, to name only two. Shortly after my arrival at the Grand Prairie Church in 2005, I began to realize that the immediate community had fundamentally changed while the church had remained the same. Members did not live in the community surrounding the church as they did in the past. The majority lived farther out, requiring more than a twenty-minute drive. Grand Prairie church had become a commuter church.

A significant challenge stemmed from the cultural and language differences between the church and the immediate community. A vast number of Hispanics had moved to the community while the church population remained largely Caucasian. Several months after my arrival, I experienced firsthand the disconnect between our church and the community. We were going from door to door to pray for the people in our neighborhood when I realized that the majority of the people we visited did not understand what we were attempting to communicate.

Also, there was a great disparity between the makeup of the church congregation and that of the immediate community. The church was unsuccessful in its mission field with only one outcome if it stayed in its current place: deterioration and ultimate death. Looking back, I recognize that it was God's leading that prompted me to see the need for the relocation of the church in a community where it could continue to be a beacon of light. To do so required change of seismic proportions, which at the time I only faintly realized.

## **Statement of the Task**

The task of this project was to first bring authentic awareness to the congregation of the current state of affairs, simultaneously creating urgency. Second, to present affordable and attractive options in terms of location and setting. Third, to develop a realistic vision that was owned and supported by the congregation. Fourth, to begin to implement the vision and process the transition from the well-known and much-loved present to the unknown and full-of-surprises future. Fifth, to navigate the pitfalls and roadblocks and sustain the excitement and passion throughout the journey. Sixth, to help the congregation discover God's bigger vision for the church through the relocation and construction process.

## **Delimitation of the Project**

This project is limited to the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church building project journey. Although many of the principles are universal, in no way do the lessons learned, the conclusions drawn, and the strategies applied, represent a universal manual for other churches to implement.

## **Description of the Project Process**

The project process included a theological reflection, a review of recent relevant literature, implementation of leadership skills and strategies, evaluation and documentation of the outcome, and communication of lessons learned.

### **Theological Reflection**

I have chosen to base my theological reflection on two excellent biblical examples of leading change through employing leadership skills and strategies. The first one is the

life and ministry of Jesus. The second one is Nehemiah's experience rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. My choice of the first example was motivated by my long-time fascination with how Jesus managed to sail through the rough waters of Jewish culture and traditions for three and a half years. He was not particularly troubled by the Jewish leaders' constant opposition, and He rebuffed, avoided, or deflected their every attempt to corner Him. Without a doubt, Jesus had mastered leadership skills and strategies that enabled Him to navigate the muddy waters of prejudice and hypocrisy.

The story of Nehemiah rebuilding the wall was a natural choice, since it fit perfectly into the narrative of the Grand Prairie Church building project. Both stories provide a fascinating insight into the simple skills and strategies that helped lead to fundamental and lifelong change in their respective communities through the powerful guidance of the Holy Spirit.

#### Review of Literature

In my literature review, I attempted to research and evaluate three primary sources: Seventh-day Adventist sources, non-Adventist Christian sources, and secular sources. I discovered that most sources generally agreed on approaches, strategies, and the implementation of skills in leading change regardless of the context. I also discovered that many of these leadership skills and strategies are neutral in nature and can be successfully employed in religious as well as in secular settings. Even though some of the literature identified a logical sequence of steps in processing change, in my literature review I have attempted to create the sequence that I discovered worked best in my immediate setting and made most sense based on my particular challenges. I do not claim that this order of application of strategies and skills will be applicable and fitting in every

congregational transition and change. I suspect that the authors of the literature I reviewed have outlined these steps based on their own personal settings and prior experience. Spiritual, personal, and corporate change is a very personal matter and requires divine guidance to be processed successfully. Interestingly but not surprisingly, it appears that the majority of the religious authors recognize the fundamental role of the Holy Spirit in that process.

### Implementation of the Intervention

I recognize that the implementation of the intervention in the building project of the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church was outside of my control in terms of duration. It was a 14-year project, which required a comprehensive approach. At the beginning of this journey, I was unaware of the full extent of the picture God was about to paint for His people in the Grand Prairie Church. I did not completely recognize my role as an agent of change. God had an enormous vision but chose to reveal it in increments.

What I passionately desired in the early days of my ministry at the Grand Prairie Church was to build a new house of worship for the local congregation. The building was in dire need of constant repairs and somehow created the impression of a congregation that was in decline. I had the passion and the dream but did not have adequate preparation. As time progressed, I recognized the need to receive better understanding and to develop better skills in order to be able to process change in the best possible way. I engaged in a two-year course entitled “Focusing Leaders” that helped me recognize the need for a clear personal and corporate vision as well as the drive to undertake the tedious process of change. Later, in January 2010, I decided to pursue a Doctor of Ministry in

Leadership degree (an opportunity offered to pastors by the Texas Conference). The classes and reading materials were invaluable in my personal development as a leader-servant while I was assisting God in leading congregational change. I was able to adjust my approach and strategies during that time because of interaction with literature that contained practical leadership principles. I am convinced that my education was not accidental but a vital part in processing change, not only in the life of the congregation but also in my personal life.

I cannot overemphasize the critical importance of God being the leader in charge of any change, whether corporate or personal. The implementation of the leadership skills and strategies was God-led.

#### Evaluation and Lessons Learned

The last chapter of this project focuses on evaluating the process and describing the lessons learned from that process. In 2020, almost a year has passed since the completion of the building project, but I recognize that I still do not fully comprehend the extent of what happened in the life of the Grand Prairie Church congregation as well as in my personal life. As events and experiences of this project are assembled and described, a picture of divine proportions emerges. Vision and change must always be God-sized. If we can create, grasp, explain, and implement on our own, God is most likely not in the picture of transformation. In the final chapter, I will evaluate the effect of the building project on local giving, on church attendance, and on ministry outreach and inreach. In short, the conclusion is that a healthy, God-driven change brings life and vibrancy to every aspect of a congregation. God's providence transforms the very core of the church and recreates its identity.

## **Definition of Terms**

Every attempt has been made to define and explain key and frequently used terms. The following list is a concise guide to assure clarity and uniformity in understanding the most important terms used in this project.

*Agents of change* – Individuals in leadership who embrace God’s calling to assist Him in congregational transformation.

*Congregational change* – Permanent, God-driven transformation affecting the entire body of believers.

*Implementation* – The practical step-by-step application of the plan of action under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit.

*Leadership skills* – Natural or acquired interpersonal abilities employed in the process of change and congregational transformation.

*Leadership strategies* – A detailed road map and plan of action that gives the picture of the future a real dimension and assures others that the leader deserves to be trusted.

*Vision* – A picture of the future that gives people enough reasons they should strive to create that future.

## **Summary**

This short introduction is designed to, first, point to the enormous challenges the majority of Christian congregations in general, and Seventh-day Adventist congregations in particular, face if they choose to remain frozen in time and space. Second, to demonstrate through the lens of the Grand Prairie Church building project the ultimate rewards awaiting those who choose to submit to the transforming and changing power of

God. Third, to detail the spiritual, literary, and practical aspects of the journey of faith as experienced by the local congregation and pastor. Fourth, to draw practical lessons and to encourage other leaders to take the gigantic step of faith and become partners with God in the life transformation of their congregations.

It is my prayer and hope that this incredible journey with God will be a catalyst for others to brave the currents of change and follow the call of God.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

This chapter examines principles leaders can employ to lead their congregations through a transformational change. First, we will examine Jesus's understanding and philosophy of leadership based on the narrative of the Gospels. Careful attention will be given to Jesus's political and administrative skills necessary for every leader who attempts to fulfill his calling to lead a transformational change. This will be done in the context of the Jewish political landscape at the time of Jesus. Second, we will concentrate on Nehemiah's personal approach in leading a rapid rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

#### **Jesus' Understanding/Philosophy of Leadership**

Throughout the Gospels, it becomes obvious that Jesus based His philosophy of leadership on His deep conviction that every leader should first become a servant. One of the clearest presentations of His understanding of Christian leadership was given to two of His closest disciples, James and John. As a part of His innermost circle, He gave them the privilege of witnessing His glory on the mount of transfiguration (Luke 9:28–36), and He would later take them to support Him during the most agonizing hours of His life (Mark 14:32–42). But then, prompted by their personal leadership ambitions, their mother asked for an audience with Jesus. “The mother, coveting with them the place of honor in this kingdom for her sons, asked” (White, 1941, p. 541), “Command that in



Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left” (Matt 20:21).

This was quite a request directed to a man whose only earthly possessions were the clothes on His body! But Jesus did not allow this mother’s apparent demonstration of faith in His divine identity to cloud His philosophy of spiritual leadership. He politely but firmly clarified that in His kingdom, positions of power never equal true leadership. He exclaimed and made one of the most profound statements in His ministry concerning Christian leaders: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matt 20:25–28). Jesus was unequivocal that authentic Christian leaders should never strive for, or even consider, positions of power. This should never be the goal and the ultimate prize. White (1941a) agrees that position “is not earned, nor is it received through an arbitrary bestowal. It is the result of character” (p. 543).

According to Jesus, the only qualification necessary to lead is to have a desire to serve. In the eyes of Jesus, the bigger the servant, the greater the leader. In this example, Jesus emphatically pointed to the fundamental difference between secular philosophy and the divine understanding of leadership. “Christ was establishing a kingdom on different principles” (White, 1940, p. 550). De Pree (1989) agrees: “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor” (p. 11).

The secular mind seeks the position of power, influence, and control while neglecting the needs of those who reside below. Leaders with such a mindset see the crowd around them as a current stepping stone and a future subservient. According to White (1940), “The higher classes were to think, decide, enjoy and rule; the lower were to obey and serve” (p. 550). Secular leaders are oblivious to those who struggle and require attention. Their single goal is to establish a permanent position of power and secure the service of others. For these leaders, the individual never matters while the lures of power are the ultimate prize.

Jesus stated that this is the order of the day in the secular world but was adamant that this should never be the reality in His church. On the contrary, He said, the goal should be to climb down. Jesus recognized that this is not the natural inclination of the human heart and pointed out that we must be intentional in our attempt to step onto a significantly lower level than those who surround us, ready to minister to their needs. According to Jesus, recognition and position should not be sought because they are not only irrelevant but also become, if valued and pursued, harmful and eventually deadly (See Mark 8:36).

At the end of His short presentation, Jesus drew the attention of His audience to His own life and example. If anyone deserved a kingly position of power requiring the service of others, it was Him. And yet Jesus maintained that the reason He came was simply to serve, well knowing that in doing so He would ultimately lose His life. His philosophy of leadership was based solely on serving others regardless of the cost. He knew that sin had twisted the human heart to the extent that the natural inclination with which He created man to live for and serve others, was replaced with the evil propensity

to seek and demand service from others. For three and a half years Jesus attempted to change that paradigm among His closest followers only to realize just before His death that they were still eagerly seeking earthly positions of power (See Luke 22:24).

Jesus knew full well that His church would never escape the powerful influence of the secular understanding of leadership. He recognized that His church had been, was, and would be, infiltrated and permeated by the humanistic quest for power. He witnessed quite often during His ministry the gigantic clash of these diametrically opposite world views of leadership in the Church. And ultimately Jesus had to face the sad reality of interacting with spiritual leaders whose greatest interest was to protect their positions of power and influence and to secure service from others. Any indication of threat to their authority brought out the essence of their true nature.

### **Background of the Jewish Political Landscape**

In the beginning of His ministry, as Jesus presented a completely different concept of kingdom, values, and principles, Luke wrote that the religious establishment began to intensely explore avenues to damage and ultimately stop this young, uneducated Teacher of Nazareth. “When He left there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile and to question Him closely on many subjects, plotting against Him to catch Him in something He might say” (Luke 11:53, 54). They knew that if Jesus were left unattended and unchallenged, what they had achieved with vigorous effort would be lost in a short period of time. They could not imagine that they would ever lose their lofty positions of respect and influence and that people would stop serving and following them. They were convinced that power rightfully belonged to them. As it would be described

later, they labored tirelessly to create ways and to devise plans to discredit Jesus and to present Him as a delusional maniac.

After the resurrection of Lazarus, their “hatred . . . against Him was intensified” (White, 1940, p. 537) and they realized that their approach had to drastically change, admitting that if Jesus continued to draw the crowds, soon they would be kings without a kingdom and leaders without followers. “Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, ‘What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation’ (John 11:47, 48). They came short of admitting the true reason why they wanted to stop Him, but their intention was clear. “But a certain one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish’” (John 11:49, 50).

For those in power, it is always “expedient” that those who threaten their position are eliminated. Maclaren (1887) points that “the selfish consideration of our own interests will make us as blind as bats to the most radiant beauty of truth, and to Christ himself, if the recognition of Him and His message seems to threaten any of these” (p. X). The well-being and progress of the people is never considered; their needs are ignored. Any change in the hallways of power is never welcomed. Abundant energy and attention is dedicated to preserving and protecting positions of authority and control.

If all this were a description of the secular Roman government and order, Jesus never would have attempted to draw the attention of His audience to the current state of

the Jewish religious leadership. And yet this was a description of the official spiritual leaders of His chosen nation. These were the ones who were given the greatest light. God had revealed to them the grand plan of salvation, and they had the solemn responsibility to present it to others. But they slowly lost sight of this grand privilege. The mission to reach out to the whole world with the full knowledge of God as the Creator and Redeemer was sacrificed on the altars of ambition and hunger for power. Their sole reason for existence became their quest to secure and preserve their lofty status and positions. Power struggles became the norm of the day as the winds of secular philosophy permeated their understanding of leadership and governance.

Jesus had to face His church—who had lost their leaders when their leaders lost their mission—with a new expression of leadership. In His pursuit to fulfill the mission of His Father, Jesus encountered a form of religious leadership that had adopted a secular worldview of government. That presented Jesus with a challenge. He had to create bridges that would allow Him to demonstrate a new understanding of Christian leadership before the religious establishment of the day turned entirely against Him.

He outlined His ministry strategy in His instruction to His disciples prior to their first missionary trip: “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16). Jesus used two images from the animal world to illustrate His ministry approach. He would not give up or compromise the divine values. However, He would take great care in His delivery and presentation. Every word, every story, every picture He painted, would be carefully thought-out and wisely conveyed in an attempt to minimize any opposition to the truth. His followers in turn “are to see through the devices of evil men, without practicing those devices

themselves” (Nichol, 1980, p. 377). Commenting on Matthew 10:16, White (1944) counsels, “Do not arouse the malignity of the enemy by making denunciatory speeches. Thus you will close doors against the entrance of truth. . . . Restrain all harsh expressions. In word and deed be wise unto salvation” (p. 313).

As we read the Gospel stories, we can clearly recognize that in pursuing His mission, Jesus employed a full array of verbal skills, literary devices, and relational approaches. He was often unpredictable and quite careful in His responses when confronted by His enemies. And despite their best efforts, they were unable to bring a solid case against Him, even to the very end. At His trial before the Sanhedrin, no two witnesses presented the same charges against Him. Jesus accomplished His mission because He remained faithful to His underlying principles of communication with the surrounding world and with the religious establishment in particular: “Shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16).

The rest of this section will examine Jesus’s biblical leadership approach in His interaction with the secular, humanistic philosophy of leadership of the religious leaders of the official church.

### **Biblical Leadership Approach to Change**

#### **Shrewd as Serpents**

From the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus realized that His mission would not be popular with the official leaders of the Jewish nation, since He would challenge the very essence of their leadership philosophy. Their desire for power and control collided with the principles of servant leadership that Jesus so clearly portrayed in His life. In order to advance His mission, Jesus needed to exercise great caution and give

careful attention to His manner and approach. He had to face the sad reality that even as He made a marked difference in the lives of people, His efforts would be discredited and the final outcome questioned. “Thus His work in preaching the gospel would be hindered” (White, 1940, p. 264). White (1940) pointed to this fact as the reason for His strict charge to the man He healed from leprosy: “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest” (Mark 1:44).

Jesus’s request was quickly forgotten and soon everyone knew not only about the miracle but also about the Miracle Maker. “But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas” (Mark 1:45). Jesus knew that if He remained publicly visible, His new and fragile ministry may quickly draw the organized assault of the Pharisaic community. With that in mind, He chose to disappear and thus “for a time to cease His labors” (White, 1940). In His request and later reaction, Jesus attempted to shield His ministry from attacks while its foundation was still “under construction.” Jesus stressed that a wise leader would not jeopardize the future of his mission by succumbing to the temptation of free publicity.

This was also clearly portrayed early in His ministry when John the Baptist’s disciples approached Him and asked Him for His true identity. “Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, ‘Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?’” (Matt 11:2, 3). To this clear question Jesus chose to give an unconventional and elusive response: “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel

preached to them” (Matt 11:4, 5). Jesus evaded the question and challenged the disciples of John to give an account of what they had seen as the answer.

Jesus did not want to make a direct statement of His identity at the beginning of His mission, realizing that this could quickly end, or at least hamper, His Father’s plan. According to Jesus, a wise Christian leader needs to weigh the consequences of revealing his identity and mission too early. Jesus resisted the temptation to make a direct and clear statement and to use cheap publicity to advance His mission.

As Jesus continued to develop His ministry, He chose to package the deep truths of God in stories called parables. Jesus created these narratives with examples from real life to lead His listeners to a deeper knowledge of self without directly pointing to their shortcomings and sinful practices. “He spoke many things to them in parables. . . . To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 13:3, 11).

These parables were also designed to impress the truth about the perilous condition of the religious leaders of the day without directly pointing the finger at them. “He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt” (Luke 18:9). Jesus wisely used a non-confrontational approach to reveal their wretched self-righteousness. He knew that He would create an unnecessary conflict and miss the opportunity to deliver the truth without facing prejudice. Their pride was not directly challenged; therefore, they had a window of opportunity to consider the truth and draw the conclusions, allowing the Holy Spirit to prepare the heart when truth and true condition collided. Jesus highlighted the fact that spiritual leaders can accomplish much more using this approach. As Jesus worked with the religious leadership of His day, He put much effort and thought into helping them see



the truth before they had a chance to reject it. White (1941b) stressed that had He not veiled the truth in parables, “they would not have listened to His words, and would speedily have put an end to His ministry” (p. 22).

Jesus also used parables to answer direct accusations that were hurled at Him, namely that He did not “treat the publicans and sinners with the indifference they deserved” (p. 185). “All the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’ So He told them this parable” (Luke 15:1–3). Jesus rarely argued with His accusers, trying to convince them that He was right and that His mission was just. Commenting on this parable, White (1941b) stressed that Jesus did not respond “openly, lest it should close their hearts against Him;” (p. 192). He knew that a direct approach would escalate tension, so He chose once again to respond with stories emphasizing that just because someone speaks the truth does not mean it should always be spoken directly. Jesus chose to help people see themselves in stories instead of in arguments (White, 1941b).

Quite often Jesus faced questions from the Pharisees and Sadducees, who demanded straight answers. And yet He rarely answered directly. In some instances, He answered with another question.

“Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ‘Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.’ And He answered and said to them, ‘Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?’” (Matt 15:2, 3). “Jesus made no attempt to defend Himself or His disciples. He made no reference to the

charges against Him” (White, 1940, p. 396). He chose not to answer; instead He asked a direct and stirring question. Jesus made it clear that just because we are asked a pointed question does not mean we have to give a direct answer. He masterfully turned the tables, and the questioned became the questioner.

Another time, the Pharisees asked Him directly, “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” (Matt 21:23). White (1940) contended that “they expected Him to claim that His authority was from God” (p. 593), thus hoping they would catch Him blaspheming. Jesus recognized their intention and met them with a question of His own, making “His reply to them conditional on their answering this question” (p. 593). “I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things” (Matt 21:24). Jesus knew they would never answer His question; therefore, He would never have to answer theirs. “And answering Jesus, they said, ‘We do not know.’ He also said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things’” (Matt 21:27). Instead of catching Him blaspheming, “scribes, priests, and rulers were all silenced” (p. 594).

Immediately following this brief exchange, Jesus used two parables to evoke an unintentional self-evaluation from the religious establishment without any sense of danger on their part. It is almost comical how completely they were drawn in by Jesus’s story and how quickly they answered His question on the heels of His refusal to answer theirs. He began the story with, “But what do you think?” (Matt 21:28) and gave the parable of the two sons who were invited to help their father in his vineyard. The first one refused but ended up going, and the second one initially agreed but never went. Commenting on this parable, White (1941b) pointed out that “by the two sons are

represented two classes of people” (p. 276). The character of the son who said he would go but did not, revealed “the character of the Pharisees” (p. 276). When Jesus ended the parable and asked, “Which of the two did the will of his father?” (Matt 21:31), “forgetting themselves, the Pharisees answered, ‘the first.’ This they said without realizing that they were pronouncing sentence against themselves” (p. 276). As if that were not enough, Jesus pushed on with the parable of the unfaithful vine-growers (Matt 21:33–41). When He finished, they responded to His question with passion “without considering the relation of the subject to themselves” (p. 294): “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end” (Matt 21:41). Jesus had skillfully led them to a critical moment when “unwittingly they had pronounced their own doom” (p. 295). These encounters between Jesus and the religious leaders demonstrate His skill in using parables to bring His listeners to transparent self-evaluation and self-condemnation without creating opposition.

Toward the end of His ministry, as the Pharisees intensified their attempts to trap Him by asking bizarre questions, Jesus put a stop to it. After responding to their inquiries, He presented them with a question. “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?” (Matt 22:42). A simple question with a simple answer—or so they thought—and “a chorus of voices answered, ‘The Son of David’” (White, 1940, p. 608). Then He asked them another question concerning David addressing Him as Lord. As Jesus finished quoting Scripture, “no one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question” (Matt 22:46). Jesus had mastered the art of employing questions as a powerful tool to confront attacks, while leading to powerful

spiritual truths, leaving His enemies defenseless and retreating. Jesus knew how effective questions can be if used correctly.

When Peter was confronted by a Roman tax collector and asked if Jesus paid the temple tax, Peter responded affirmatively. Later, Jesus told Peter to pay it, explaining to him that while He was under no obligation to pay the tax, He did not want to create a cause for the religious leaders to reject Him and thus close the avenue to their hearts. “However, so that we do not offend them, go to the sea and throw in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for you and Me” (Matt 17:27). Jesus knew what was significant and what carried little importance. He chose His battles and never allowed little things to distract anyone from receiving heart changing truths. Jesus did things He did not have to do in order to keep the door for His enemies open and the hearts of his followers willing.

Another example of His approach to the detractors of His mission took place at the end of His ministry when He was confronted by His brothers. “Being older than Jesus, they felt that He should be under their dictation” (White, 2015, p. 60). They mockingly challenged Him to go and “show off” at the Passover. “Leave here and go into Judea, so that Your disciples also may see Your works which You are doing” (John 7:3). Jesus responded that He would not go because His time had not yet come. But soon after, John tells us that after His brothers headed to the Passover celebration, Jesus did the opposite of what He said He would do. “Having said these things to them, He stayed in Galilee. But when His brothers had gone up to the feast, then He Himself also went up, not publicly, but as if, in secret” (John 7:9, 10). When His brothers told Him to go, He simply told them that His time had not yet come, even though He was planning on going.

Some have argued that Jesus outright lied to them, but a closer look reveals that Jesus wanted to create the element of surprise. White argued that eventually “all were surprised at his presence” (White, 1940, p. 452).

In order to fulfill His mission, Jesus had to use caution to avoid exposing His plans, for this “would have aroused the authorities against Him” (1940, p. 452). He skillfully created a sense of unpredictability in everyone present at the feast. When He entered the temple in the middle of the feast, “all wondered at the dignity and courage of His bearing in the midst of powerful enemies who were thirsting for His life” (p. 452). Thus, Jesus consistently refused to disclose His plans and be manipulated by anyone. He grasped onto His Father’s will and timing as rules of His life, and He would not let go.

Another simple yet powerful example of Jesus’s leadership skill is observed in the familiar story of Him feeding the multitude that came to listen to Him (See Matt 14:14–21; John 6:1–14). At the end of a long day, Jesus challenged His disciples to do the impossible: “They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat!” (Matthew 14:16). And if that were not enough, he turned to Philip and asked, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?” (John 6:5). White, commenting on Philip’s response, (White, 1942) wrote that “Philip looked over the sea of heads and thought how impossible it would be to provide food for so great a company” (p. 45). Philip knew that it will take a small fortune to feed everyone and quickly pointed to his financial limitations (See John 6:7). It appears that the request of Jesus confronted their own limitations and set the proper stage for what He was about to do. In doing so, Jesus eliminated all confusion as to who would perform the miracle and who would assist. Discussing this story further, White (1972) pointed out that the disciples recognized that

they “were the channel of communication between Christ and the people” and that “Christ is the great Center, the Source of all strength” (White, 2019, p. 223). Jesus gently but skillfully brought them to the realization of their full limitations and revealed their need for absolute trust in the power of God to do even the impossible (Matt 14:15 –18).

When Jesus drove the merchants from the temple, at the beginning of His ministry (John 2:13–16) and at the end (Luke 19:45, 46), He demonstrated a masterful tactic. Knowing the religious elite stood behind the industry of buying and selling at the temple, He did not directly attack any of them. Instead, He drove out their proxies, thus indirectly attacking the religious establishment. They quickly deciphered the message but were powerless to argue that His actions were contrary to Scripture.

As we consider these and other similar stories in the life of Jesus, it is clear that He was closely guided by two fundamental principles as He related with the crowds and especially with the religious leaders: “shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves” (See Matt 10:16.) His meekness, calmness, and love did not prevent Him from employing various approaches in order to remove obstacles, create bridges, and establish conditions in order to fulfill His mission. He knew that if He presented divine truths openly, His mission would have been quickly cut off. He never compromised the Truth, but He took great effort to neutralize His opposition and communicate the love of God to everyone in His presence.

Jesus had mastered the art of administrative skills and shrewdness. And because of His biblical understanding of leadership, these natural skills were employed to foster and complete His divine mission. These same skills in the hands of His enemies became distracting and devastating.

Jesus recognized that wisdom, shrewdness, and interpersonal skills must be part of the mission in order for it to be completed successfully. He encouraged His followers to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves while completing the Great Commission and serving the world around them. He encouraged them to follow in His footsteps and make the best of every opportunity presented to them.

### **Nehemiah**

Nehemiah is another powerful example of a servant-leader. The work of Nehemiah in leading the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem can be observed in four progressive stages. The first stage encompasses the call from God and Nehemiah's spiritual and emotional preparation for the completion of the mission. The second stage covers his interaction and heartfelt plea to the Persian monarch to grant him permission to restore the city of his forefathers. The third stage emphasizes his groundwork in preparing himself and the people of Judea for the task of rebuilding the wall. The fourth stage follows the fifty-two days of building the wall and the leadership challenges it presented in regard to inspiring and leading the people of Judah while resisting the internal and external opposition. As Nehemiah proceeded through these four stages, he often emphasized that he followed the call and direction of God as he led his countrymen through this overwhelmingly exhausting rebuilding project.

#### **Call and Preparation**

The first stage in Nehemiah's journey contains God's call and Nehemiah's subsequent preparation for his ultimate mission. According to Nehemiah himself, he occupied a position of influence and honor in the Persian court. He was a close and trusted confidant of the king of Persia, and as such he was appointed to the position of a

cupbearer (See Neh 1:11b.) While Nehemiah never turned back to his family roots, White (1943) contended that he “did not forget his God nor his people” (p. 628). When his brother Hanani and “some men from Judah came” (Neh 1:2), he immediately inquired about the state of those returning from the exile, and about the city of Jerusalem. What he heard wrenched his heart: “The remnant . . . are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire” (Neh 1:3).

Nehemiah was completely overwhelmed, and his reaction revealed the depth of his love for God’s chosen people and their city. “I sat down and wept and mourned for days” (Neh 1:4). The prayer that followed was a revelation of his true allegiance (Neh 1:5–11). Nehemiah’s reaction and prayer demonstrates precisely why God placed a call on his life. Before skills and qualification God looks at the longings of the heart. White (1943) wrote that “with deepest interest his heart turned toward Jerusalem; his hopes and joys were bound up with her prosperity” (p. 628). The call of God came to Nehemiah as a result of his heartfelt desire for the well-being of God’s people and city. The days he took to fast and pray “before the God of heaven” (Neh 1:4) helped him sense the calling that God was placing in his life. He recognized that he was “prepared by his residence in the Persian court for the work to which he was to be called” (p. 628). God never calls those He has not prepared.

The weight of the call came crushing down, but as he prayed, “his faith and courage grew strong” and “a holy purpose formed in his mind” (p. 629). Nehemiah began his prayer as a broken man and ended it with resolve and a conviction of his calling. While he prayed, a plan of action formed in his mind, and he recognized that the current crisis called for swift action. Communion with God through prayer not only gives a



leader conviction of the call from God but also allows for His Spirit to form a clear understanding and develop a plan of action. The cupbearer had become an agent of change and restoration. The story of Nehemiah emphasizes that a spiritual leader should never undertake a change unless through prayer and communion with God a call has been placed and a clear direction and plan of action has been revealed. Skill and education alone will never carry a permanent and life altering change. God never calls those He has not prepared.

### A Divine Timing

An important quality of transformational leadership is the ability of a leader to wait for God's timing in fulfilling a particular mission. God is the only one who knows when circumstances and people are ripe for change, and by allowing Him to set up the timing, leaders ensure that change will be positive and lasting.

Apparently, God knew that Nehemiah was not the only one needing preparation. The heart of the king needed to be prepared, as well as the hearts of the exiles of Judah. White (1943) wrote that for "four months Nehemiah waited for a favorable opportunity to present his request to the king" (p. 630). Here we discover a vital lesson for any leader called for God's service. God has perfect timing for every mission in our lives. He may call us for a specific purpose, but if we attempt to do it quickly and impatiently, we will most certainly fail.

When the appointed time came, God created the perfect opportunity. "Why is your face sad? (Neh 2:2) the king asked Nehemiah. Nehemiah knew how crucial his answer was. Instead of talking about himself, he laid open his burden. "The city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire" (Neh

2:3). Nehemiah did not know how his conversation with the king would end. But then God gave a cue that this was the time to present his request. “What would you request?” (Neh 2:4) the king asked. Nehemiah no doubt had rehearsed his speech, but at this moment he did not trust himself, so he admitted, “I prayed to the God of heaven” (Neh 2:4). Commenting on this text, White (1943) pointed out that “in that brief prayer Nehemiah pressed into the presence of the King of Kings and won to his side a power that can turn hearts as the rivers of waters are turned” (p. 631). During that short prayer, he “gathered courage to tell Artaxerxes of his desire to be released for a time from his duties at the court, and he asked for authority to build up the waste places of Jerusalem” (p. 632).

The king’s answer was so resounding that all Nehemiah could say was that “the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me” (Neh 2:8). Having secured the favor of the king but foreseeing the many perils of his mission, he decided to request from Artaxerxes “royal letters to the governors of the provinces.” This would “give dignity and authority to his mission” and have those “privileges . . . clearly defined” (p. 633). A wise, Spirit-filled leader discerns the future and prepares for the challenges along the way. Nehemiah knew that his authority would be challenged and his mission questioned, so he made thorough preparation for his journey.

As a part of his request from the king, Nehemiah added that it would be of tremendous help if the king would write a letter requesting the assistance of the “keeper of the king’s forest” in providing material for the rebuilding of the city (Neh 2:8). In doing so, Nehemiah demonstrated that he had given a “careful consideration” and had devised “well-matured plans” in order to carry on his mission (p. 634). Nehemiah

possessed not only passion and purpose but took the necessary time to develop under the direction of God a well-thought plan of action. Nehemiah clearly “did not depend upon uncertainty” (p. 634).

Discussing his initial preparation, White (1943, p. 633) added an interesting detail to the story. She stated that before he left, Nehemiah decided to keep the true nature of his journey a secret, even from his countrymen. A true spiritual leader should know when to speak and when to remain silent in order to prevent an early opposition to his mission. A leader can experience divine timing only when God has prepared the hearts of the leader and the people for a transformation. God is the only one who knows when that preparation has taken place. By allowing Him to determine that timing, a wise leader ensures the success of his mission.

#### Groundwork

An essential phase of the process of change is the initial study, preparation, and groundwork that a wise leader will do. A careful study of the circumstances and interpersonal dynamics of the people he is about to lead will give him an inside look at possible pitfalls in his mission. It is no surprise that after his arrival, “Nehemiah continued to exercise the same caution and prudence that had hitherto marked his course (White, 1943, p. 636). Fearing opposition from the surrounding nations, “he concealed the nature of his mission from them until a study of the situation should enable him to form his plans” (p. 636). After three days (Neh 2:11), allowing everyone to be at ease, he decided to begin the preparatory work. “And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem . . .

inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire” (Neh 2:12, 13).

Nehemiah knew that he would need some close, trusted men, “whom he knew to be worthy of confidence” (White, 1943, p. 636). Nehemiah created a small committee of passionate, trusted, and committed people with the help of whom he would lay the foundation for the success of the mission. The people of his inner circle knew the terrain and the topography of the city and could help him assess the situation with ease. Choosing the darkness of night pointed to his desire to still keep the purpose of his journey secret. Even “the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done” (Neh 2:16). As a prudent leader, Nehemiah did not want to rely on secondhand information.

After returning from his secret mission, “the remainder of the night he spent in prayer; for he knew that the morning would call for earnest effort to arouse and unite his dispirited and divided countrymen” (Whited, 1943, p. 636). Knowing the magnitude of the work and the dysfunctional state of mind of his countrymen, his only source of strength and wisdom was God. During this intense process, Nehemiah constantly sought God’s wisdom and guidance while doing his part in completing the mission.

Nehemiah had in his possession “a royal commission requiring the inhabitants to cooperate with him in rebuilding the walls of the city, but he did not depend upon the exercise of authority” (p. 637) and attempted to excite them for the work that was required. As he began to speak on the following day, his groundwork in surveying the city gave him weight as he spoke to them with detail and accuracy. His countrymen felt that they could trust him, and that inspired them. He shared with them “how the hand of

my God had been favorable to” him (Neh 2:18) and assured them that God had been standing behind this project from the very beginning. This gave validity and authority to what he was about to ask them to do. Inspired, they quickly caught the vision, and when the call came to “arise and build” (Neh 2:18), “the appeal went straight to their hearts” (White, 1943, p. 638).

The commitment was made because “Nehemiah’s whole soul was in the enterprise he had undertaken. His hope, his energy, his enthusiasm, his determination, were contagious, inspiring others with the same high courage and lofty purpose” (White, 1943, p. 638). Because of his initial study, preparation, and groundwork, Nehemiah was able to inspire faith and win the trust of his countrymen. They were impressed by not only his excitement and devotion but also his complete understanding of the task at hand.

### Rebuilding the Wall

Nehemiah knew the importance of the spiritual influencers buying into the project. His message to the crowd was designed first to stir up and challenge the hearts of the men who “could do much to advance or hinder the work” (White, 1943, p. 638). But as the words touched their hearts, they were “among the first to catch Nehemiah’s spirit of zeal and earnestness” (p. 638). The reaction was an immediate one. “Then Eliashib the high priest arose with his brothers the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors” (Neh 3:1). Their response to the call of Nehemiah was contagious, and soon the entire assembly followed their example (See Neh 3:2–32).

Nehemiah recognized his limitations and quickly delegated the work to “men of ability and influence” who “organized the various classes of citizens into companies,

each leader making himself responsible for the erection of a certain part of the wall” (p. 639). But Nehemiah did not feel that his work was done.

White (1943) stressed that “with tireless vigilance he superintended the building, directing the workmen, noting the hindrances, and providing for emergencies. Along the whole extent of that three miles of wall his influence was constantly felt” (p. 639). That assured everyone that their leader was fully committed to the mission. A true leader recognizes his limitations and delegates the various parts of the work but continues to be the driving engine through his influence, work ethic, continual presence, and words of encouragement. Nehemiah knew that obstacles would soon arise, and he did not waste any time to move the work forward and assure the workers of their success.

Sure enough, opposition arose from within and without that “endeavored to destroy the courage of the Jews” (White, 1943, p. 642), but that “seemed only to inspire Nehemiah with firmer determination and to arouse him to greater watchfulness” (p. 643). He quickly adjusted to the threats the enemies were posing. “Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took their load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon” (Neh 4:17). He expected opposition, and he was prepared strategically to face the danger.

Above all, he constantly reminded his countrymen that their only shield of protection and source of strength was God. His cry, “Our God will fight for us” (Neh 4:20), resounded in their ears throughout the day as they continued the work of rebuilding. Nehemiah had a clear sense of his calling and did not waste any time with the opposition. “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down” (Neh 5:3). Nothing could divert his attention. As the opposition intensified, “calmly and unselfishly he went

forward in his service for the people, never slackening his efforts or allowing his interest to grow less” (White, 1943, p. 658). His commitment was unwavering, his focus unflinching. During the fifty-two days of rebuilding the wall, Nehemiah did not remove his clothes nor lay down his weapon.

Despite the greatest opposition and multiple challenges along the way, “the wall was completed . . . in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God” (Neh 6:15, 16). This is the mark of the work of a spiritual servant-leader: When the mission is completed, everyone—including the staunchest enemies—recognize that it was accomplished as a direct result of God’s mighty power and wisdom.

The story of Nehemiah demonstrates the enormous positive change that God can bring through a leader who is spiritually committed, mentally prepared, and emotionally available for the call of God. Nehemiah did not leave his mission to chance, hoping that God would somehow figure it all out. He faithfully performed his part and ultimately became an agent of change, reestablishing the nation of Israel as a political entity and a spiritual center of influence. The example of Nehemiah teaches us that God can and will accomplish much through leaders who make themselves fully available, surrendering themselves to the perfect and ultimate will of God. Such leaders live a life of purpose and are able to make impact with eternal consequences.

The lives and ministry of Jesus and Jeremiah present a clear example of introducing and employing leaderships skills and strategies while developing and furthering their God-given mission. Both refused to compromise their principles and

moral convictions yet skillfully navigated the traitorous waters of their respective political, cultural and religious settings. Despite of the overwhelming opposition they both were able to successfully accomplish their God-inspired vision. The next chapter demonstrates through various literary sources the need of employing leadership skills and strategies to lead congregational change.



## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Acquiring and developing leadership skills and strategies is at the very core of initiating and fostering significant congregational change. Unfortunately, “the leadership skills that most pastors have been taught or have ‘caught’ are generally inadequate for this challenge. . . . An additional set of skills is required to initiate and sustain transformation. . . . Leaders play a critical role in acquiring these new skills” (Herrington, Bonem, & Furr, 2000, p. 92). Maxwell (1998) goes a step further and argues that “the ability to lead is really a collection of skills, nearly all of which can be learned and improved” (p. 25). Relying on formal education and natural abilities carry the leader’s effort to lead change only so far before his or her limitations become obvious and detrimental. As Bennis and Nanus (1985) note, “it’s the capacity to develop and improve their skills that distinguished leaders from their followers” (p. 72). Significant changes in ministry require continual learning and growth.

The literature reviewed for this study follows an extensive set of skills and strategies needed to process change with the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church before, during, and after this building project. First, it discusses the issue of change and the challenges it presents for the congregation. Second, it focuses on the personal preparation that the leader needs to experience, as well as the corporate preparation before the preliminary work begins. Third, it describes the process of vision developing

and casting for the building project. Fourth, it examines the implementation of the vision for constructing a new building. Fifth, it assesses and summarizes the essence of the journey of change.

## **Change**

### **Why Change**

In this section, I examine why change is necessary for a congregation. I also point out the challenges that such change may entail. Barna (1998) reports a curious statistic: “Our culture completely reinvents itself every three to five years” (p. 8). And he challenges the Christian churches to embrace change at the same rate. Nelson and Appel (2000) paint even starker picture: “The sad reality is that with each generation, the American church is becoming less effective” (p. 3). “As many as 85 percent of churches are plateaued or declining. Only 1 percent are growing primarily because of reaching the lost, which means that 14 to 19 percent are growing because of transfer growth from the declining congregations” (p. 2). Rainer (2014), after years of performing autopsies on deceased churches, argues that only 10% of all churches are really healthy, and that the rest are either showing symptoms of sickness (40 percent), very sick (40 percent), or dying (10 percent).

Why change? From the above studies, it becomes evident that if a congregation chooses to avoid, refuse, or even fight change, it will eventually pay with its life. Maxwell (1998) says it succinctly: “Change is the price of progress” (p. 147). If a church wants to remain not only alive but healthy and vibrant, it must continue to change. It is a matter of life and death.

## Why Churches Do Not Like Change

Christian leaders have given many reasons why churches do not embrace change. Nelson and Appel (2000) suggest five major roadblocks that prevent churches from changing. First, many churches see their role as the gatekeeper of their denominational traditions and guardian of the “sacred” ancient milestones. Second, church culture by and large dictates how congregations operate, and rational decisions are often subjected to emotional considerations. Third, since churches are nonprofit organizations, many are not guided by and do not evaluate their success by clear and measurable outcomes. Fourth, too often the people who join a church congregation do so in order to escape an overwhelmingly fast-changing world, seeking only relief and stability for themselves. Fifth, churches often are led by ministers who see themselves as teachers and counselors and not as leaders.

The majority of churchgoers admit they would like to be part of a journey of progress and betterment of their community of faith but are unwilling to make major investments. Regrettably, as Quinn (1996) points out, “This strategy simply does not work. The land of excellence is safely guarded from unworthy intruders. At the gates stand two fearsome sentries—risk and learning. The keys to entrance are faith and courage” (p. 165). What complicates matters, according to Wilson (2010), is the fact that “the vast majority of people, however, are risk averse, especially when a transition may alter their role, which is a major part of their identity. Change puts the two things they cherish most at risk: their reputation and their relationships” (pp. 66-67). It is difficult to underestimate how much threat the process of change presents to people’s lives. Even though leaders would make their best guess, ultimately, they “don’t know if the change is

right or not” (Stevens, 2015, p. 178). It is quite understandable why people in general and churches in particular are uneasy about and suspicious of change. Yet change is possible. The next section discusses the importance and need for personal preparation for those who will be leading change.

## **Personal Preparation**

### *Agents of Change*

It is impossible for any change to take place without an agent of change. Through much research, Barna (1998), contends that “church managers abound, but leaders are needed when change is required” (p. 36). Sadly, “only 5 percent of pastors identify leadership in their gift mix” (Nelson & Appel, 2000, p. 45). Nevertheless, studies show that “the new direction is largely born in the heart of the pastor” (p. 24) leader, and therefore, he has “to be the main person to sell and drive it” (p. 24). The pastor leaders do not rely on their natural gifts and charisma. Their competitive drive has developed a desire and passion for lifelong learning, which in turn has produced new skills and increased their levels of knowledge, and in the process have multiplied and sharpened their leadership skills. Ultimately, they have become better leaders with a deeper desire to lead and navigate through a more complex world of change (Kotter, 2012).

Leaders who are lifelong learners develop habits that place them on the road to continual success. The following five habits are the most important they can develop and nurture. First, lifelong learners do not hesitate to take risks. They are always willing to get out of their comfort zone and are well aware that they may experience failure as well as success. Second, lifelong learners humbly and honestly reflect on their failures as well as their successes and use these experiences as an opportunity to further their self-

education. Third, lifelong learners are actively seeking the input, opinion, and feedback of others, expecting to always learn something from anyone. They never make the assumption that they have all the answers. Fourth, lifelong learners are excellent listeners. They always listen with open minds to what others have to say about their actions and decisions. They crave an honest and direct feedback, knowing that without such, it would be impossible for true learning to take place. Fifth, lifelong learners are always open to new ideas and never think there is nothing new under the sun. They continually keep an open mind for new horizons and have a deep sense of mission (Kotter, 2012). According to Kotter (2012), “The very best lifelong learners and leaders . . . seem to have high standards, ambitious goals, and a real sense of mission in their lives. Such goals and aspirations spur them on, put their accomplishments in a humbling perspective, and help them endure the short-term pain associated with growth” (p. 192). Authentic agents of change are humble lifelong learners who consider every moment of their lives as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to better themselves and sharpen their leadership skills.

### Personal Spiritual Preparation

Before initiating any change, a Christian leader must devote time and effort to undergo a spiritual preparation. Peter Scazzero (2010) pointedly writes that one of the greatest challenges for a Christian leader is to manage oneself. He continues, “Cultivating an intentional life with our Lord Jesus requires intentionally focused time—for silence, prayer, meditation on Scripture, and reading” (p. 206). And then he made one of the most profound statements, claiming that when our “life *with* God is not sufficient to sustain our work *for* God, we too will find ourselves struggling with our integrity” (p. 206). In other

words, a leader's efforts to change the community of faith will be futile if those efforts are not regularly nourished by a deep personal walk with God.

Any personal preparation must include spending significant and regular time looking for God's direction for the leader's personal life and calling. At the same time, the leader must commit to a consistent self-assessment in order to gain a real understanding of his own capabilities and shortcomings as well. Having an accountability partner will enhance the process of self-assessment and will remove the blind spots that prevent the leader from accurately evaluating himself. As unresolved problems begin to emerge, the leader should address those promptly and acknowledge the areas in his life that need restoration. Often, that requires one to confess and ask for forgiveness in order for true spiritual and emotional healing to take place (Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem & James Furr, 2000).

Above all, leadership requires humility. Kouzes and Posner (2007) argue that "humility is the only way to resolve the conflicts and contradictions of leadership" (p. 347). Russell (2000) rightfully adds that "the key to leading with both purity and sincerity is a spirit of *genuine* humility" (p. 78, emphasis mine). The foundation for personal spiritual preparation and for leading a transformational congregational change is the spirit of genuine humility. History shows that "people will follow a humble leader anywhere" (Stevens, 2015, p. 223).

### Leadership Skills and Strategies

Leadership skills and strategies can be learned and mastered in order to increase the effectiveness to lead. Maxwell (1998) argues that "leadership ability is the lid that determines a person's level of effectiveness" (p. 4). Every leader has a certain capacity

that serves as a lid and prevents the person from reaching a higher level of success. Maxwell (1998) insists though, that if a leader desires to reach a higher level of effectiveness, he needs “to raise the lid—one way or the other” (p. 2). Herrington et al. (2000) agree that “with time and dedicated effort, leadership skills can be learned” (p. 99) and that the lid of one’s abilities can be significantly elevated. I will review two areas of leadership skills and strategies: communicational and relational.

### **Communication Skills**

Communication skills are fundamental for the success of any leader who attempts to lead change. However, such skills are often applied in organizations but rarely in church settings. The use of good communication would build the body of believers and allow for developing better transparency.

There are several practices that would greatly enhance the atmosphere of change:

First, the leader must use the language of “I” instead of “You,” describing his own feelings and understandings instead of pointing to the congregation and addressing their shortcomings.

Second, when a leader recognizes that there is a difference in the points of view between him and the people, he must seek to clarify their position before disagreeing with them.

Third, the delivery of the information must be done with an even tone of voice without much emotion involved. The congregation might perceive passion as anger and become resistant to the information presented (Herrington et al., 2000).

Fourth, instead of delivering only information, the leader will employ questions to spurn a debate and challenge people to think. Stevens (2015) contends that “asking

questions may be one of the least talked about secret weapons of a great leader. In fact, I believe it may be one of the most undeveloped skills in leadership. . . . Pastors are the worst offenders” (p. 132). Peter Drucker agrees that “the leader of the past was a person who knew how to tell. The leader of the future will be a person who knows how to ask” (as cited in Goldsmith, 1997, p. 227). A humble leader knows how to ask the right questions, communicating to his audience that he is truly interested in learning the answer, admitting that he does not know enough. His question will be open-ended and will allow the possibility of real discovery and will show a desire to share and give credit (Cohen, 2009).

Fifth, a leader will engage the congregation in a dialogue, the purpose of which will be to go beyond any one individual’s understanding. Senge (1990) points out that “in dialogue, an individual offers his or her perspective or assumptions for examination by the group. The object of the dialogue is to allow others to see what you see and why you see it, not to convince them” (p. 241).

Sixth, in discussing empathic listening, Covey (1989) argues that “empathic listening is so powerful because it gives you accurate data to work with. Instead of projecting your own autobiography and assuming thoughts, feeling, motives, and interpretation, you’re dealing with the reality inside another person’s head and heart. You’re listening to understand” (p. 241). Effective listening can be effective only if there is a genuine desire to learn.

Seventh, the “Five Whys” approach is a powerful diagnostic tool that helps leaders move from simply presenting an issue to actually leading the congregation to a significantly deeper level of understanding. This approach involves leaders identifying a



problem and then asking, “Why is this happening?” After five rounds of asking “why” a few challenges will usually surface as the main underlying sources of the problem. (Ross, 1994, pp. 108–112).

Eighth, a leader may ask someone to observe a meeting that he or she holds and count the times that he or she says “I” versus “We.” To be successful in his communication, the leader must use the first-person plural much more often than the first person singular (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Ninth, the leader should always make it a habit of expressing gratitude by saying, “Thank you.” “After all, when you thank people for helping you, you’re admitting that you needed help in the first place—which is one way to pinpoint your deficiencies” (Goldsmith, 2007, p. 159).

Tenth, caring leaders are always thoughtful and able to personalize recognitions, “knowing enough about another person to answer the question, ‘What could I do to make this a memorable experience so that he always remembers how important his contributions are?’” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 300).

Eleventh, stories are much better suited in completing the objective of teaching, motivating, and leading people to change than are PowerPoint presentation slides. Well-shared stories carry the ability to touch the heart of people and to excite them for the future (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 327).

### **Relational Skills and Strategies**

Relational skills and strategies are critical for the ultimate success of any leader seeking change. There are many relational skills and strategies employed in leadership, but this study will point out only thirteen of those.

First and foremost, a leader should never create the impression that he or she values the ideas and the outcome more than he values the individuals in the process of change (Nelson & Appel, 2000).

Second, a leader should create a permission-giving culture that encourages people within the congregation to take initiative and risks and that allows them to experiment and fail.

Third, a leader must know when to pause and when to encourage the process to go forward.

Fourth, an effective leader knows how to help people connect the new vision of the future with the main aspects of the congregation's heritage, emphasizing that he or she respects and values the core beliefs and pillars of the congregation.

Fifth, every change creates an abundance of tension. The wise leader will be able to detect the level of creative tension that the congregation can tolerate before it begins to resist.

Sixth, leaders will recognize that congregational change will not take place if people simply comply with the new vision. Instead, they will work toward deeper commitment and ownership to the shared vision by all who participate. (Herrington et al., 2000).

Seventh, for any leader, "the single most powerful personal skill in mastering mental models is the capacity of self-disclosure. Your ability to look deeply within, to understand your strengths and weaknesses, and to know the impact that life experience has on your worldview is a powerful tool" (Herrington et al., p. 117).

Eighth, leaders will recognize the importance of critical thinking by taking a fresh look at any challenge, enabling them to isolate themselves from previous assumptions and limitations they might have had in the past.

Ninth, caring leaders will create a safe environment for those who are part of the process of change and will give them genuine permission to raise questions, challenge perceptions, and explore other viable options (Herrington et al., p. 124).

Tenth, Senge (1990) observes that “dialogue can occur only when a group of people see each other as colleagues in mutual quest for deeper insight and clarity” (p. 245). Participants in the process of change must see each other as equals.

Eleventh, Maxwell (1998) contends that “followers need leaders able to effectively navigate for them” (p. 38). Leaders must have the ability to change the course and steer the ship in the right direction, but in order to do so they must know that the secret is taking time to prepare (p. 42).

Twelfth, the best leaders are able to bring out the very best of their followers. They discern not only ways to do so but the real potential of everyone in the group. They treat everyone with high expectations because they know that people often act only according to what is expected from them (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Thirteenth, a leader should be able to develop an alternative scenario. Kouzes and Posner (2007) argue that “people simply cannot lead and can’t make a difference unless they have a choice. If someone has no freedom of choice and can only act in ways prescribed by the organization” (p. 255), they will soon lose enthusiasm and become complacent. Authentic leaders dedicate time and energy to developing these leadership skills and strategies in order to create the best environment for change.

## Self-discovery

Another essential step that a successful leader must take in order to prepare for leading change is the step of self-discovery and understanding. In order to do so, Nouwen (1996) stresses that leaders must realize first that “no two lives are the same. We often compare our lives with those of others, trying to decide whether we are better or worse off, but such comparisons do not help us much. We have to live our life, not someone else’s” (p. 31). The key to self-discovery and self-understanding is for leaders to realize that they are unique, which means that they have particular strengths and limitations. Only when leaders recognize and admit that their limitations as well as their strengths are God-given gifts, true maturity in life will be reached and they will “joyfully live within their God-given limits” (Scazzero, 2010, p. 148). Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky (2009) go even further in their observation that leaders must be the first to create a culture of learning by displaying their own incompetence. “Acknowledge what you do not know, or explicitly try on a new role where everyone knows you are new to that effort” (p. 287). Without honest self-discovery, the road to success in leading change will be filled with self-inflicted roadblocks.

## Motives for Change

Leaders must also determine their true motives for initiating change. “The brutal fact is that about 70 percent of all initiatives fail” (Beer & Nohria, 2011, p. 137). In order for spiritual leaders to be successful in initiating and leading change, they must intentionally seek the will of God because He is the head of the church, and ultimately, He will be responsible for the final outcome. Nelson and Appel (2000) are emphatic that leaders should not institute change unless they are absolutely sure that God has called

them to do so (p. 316). “Transformation is a process of bringing the church into alignment with God’s unique vision. . . . It cannot be accomplished without God and it should not be attempted as a solo enterprise of the pastor. . . . The change process ultimately revolves around the clear discernment and articulation of God’s vision for the congregation” (Herrington et al, 2000, pp. 30, 40, 48).

Leaders must recognize that a transformational change is all about God and never about themselves. Cladis (1999) concludes, “In the Bible we see people and whole faith communities motivated and inspired by a clear vision from God. . . . They believed that God was behind the mission, and so they followed the one who articulated *God’s* call” (pp. 50, 51).

#### Change is a Process

Leaders must also recognize that “change is a process” (Stevens, 2015, p. 180). “Change rarely happens quickly. . . . An effective change agent needs to seek change over the long haul,” because he is aware that God is in the business of changing lives. As leaders recognize the long-term commitment change requires, they can begin to find the right pace for the congregation (Herrington et al., 2000, pp. 93, 119). They sense they are on God’s timing and that they should tune up to His rhythm. Why is change a process? Change is ultimately about learning. It is about the process of inner transformation more than it is about the final destination. (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 2011). It is about the work that God is attempting to perform in the life of the leader and his congregation. The never-ending process of change is the only true constant of a Christian leader.

### Discernment of the Current Conditions

Before even considering change, leaders should take adequate time to discern the current conditions of their congregation. “Each congregation is a unique combination of people at a particular place in time. . . . Change leaders should always start with a clear understanding of their congregation, its unique culture, and environment” (Herrington et al., 2000, p. 149). Many leaders fail quickly in processing change because they do not take time to understand their congregation and its current settings and needs. They believe that just because they paint a grand picture of the future, their constituents will follow at once. The current structures and procedures must be identified and considered and an honest evaluation must be done as to how those relate to the future vision of the church (p. 75). Pastors will save themselves many headaches if they take the proper time to discern the current conditions and evaluate the vision in the light of those conditions.

### Discover the Right Timing for Change

It is critical for leaders to discover the right time to begin the process of change as Jeremiah did. Good leaders will recognize the perfect time, knowing that doing the right thing at the right time will almost always bring success. “When the right leader and the right timing come together, incredible things happen” (Maxwell, 1998, p. 238). When a change initiative is implemented too quickly or too slowly, it usually gets stuck. There is always ripeness about change. If leaders move too fast or wait too long, they usually miss the window of opportunity. If leaders are too fearful, they let the chance for change rot. On the other hand, if leaders are too strong and quick to act, they push for change before the opportunity has ripened (Nelson & Appel, 2000, p. 60). Both extremes demonstrate

poor timing and usually derail the process of change. Discerning leaders will discover the right timing to initiate the process of change.

### Creating Personal Relationships

If leaders take the process of change seriously, they must take their personal relationships with those who follow seriously. As Bell (2014) aptly states, “Leadership is a relational process” (p. 343). He stresses that “leadership is not a solo journey. Leadership is an activity engaged in as one within a community, not standing outside or over a community. We are one with the community in the process of leadership” (p. 355). Leaders who understand and prioritize their relationship with the individuals in their congregation will be able to successfully navigate through change. The stronger the relationship between the leaders and followers, the more they will be willing to follow. The simple truth is that people are willing to go on a journey with someone with whom they can get along and trust. Leaders should never underestimate the power of investing and developing relationships with those they are about to ask to follow them (Maxwell, 1998, pp. 102, 108, 147). Bolsinger (2018) agrees that “the ability to innovate, to be creative, to consider new options, to ‘shift habits, beliefs or values’ requires ‘a sturdy, trustworthy space’ fashioned out of *healthy relationships*” (p. 65). Zepeda and Lanoue (2021) go even further and argue that “the primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another” (p. 98). Leadership is a relationship, and people would be much more excited to embrace change if the one leading it has developed a personal relationship with them first (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 321). Creating deep meaningful personal relationship with those who

follow will be the greatest asset for every leader who leads change. The natural outcome of a genuine relationship will be trust.

### Building Trust

Maxwell (2007) is emphatic that “trust is the foundation of leadership” (p. 61). When trust is broken, leaders surrender their ability to lead. If trust is broken, it is impossible for leaders to continue to lead and influence others. Trust is the very foundation of leadership (pp. 62, 65).

How do leaders build trust? Kouzes and Posner (2007) counsel that the leader should “be the first to trust. Building trust is a process that begins when one party is willing to risk being the first to open up, being the first to show vulnerability, and being the first to let go of control. Demonstrate your trust in others before asking for trust from them” (p. 227). Trust also grows when leaders keep their promises and are faithful to their commitments. Leaders must be earnest, completely transparent, and do exactly what they say they are going to do, in order to win people’s trust (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1996, p. 109). Leaders do not build trust by simply talking about it. They build it by achieving tangible results, always with integrity and in a way that demonstrates that they respect people more than they respect results (Shaw, 1997, pp. 46–54). Trust is also an essential element in team building. When trust is present, leaders will be able to build teamwork. At the same time, if trust is missing, it would be impossible to create a winning team (Kotter, 2012, pp. 62, 63). Every leader will experience challenges during the process of change, but when people trust him, they will be willing to go with him on a journey during those difficult moments, even if they do not agree with everything he suggests. Trust will carry the relationship during the stormy waters of change and will create a



safety net for the leader (Nelson & Appel, 2000, p. 239). It is impossible for leaders to lead and navigate in the muddy waters of change without trust.

### Spiritual Preparation for the Congregation

Leaders must dedicate an ample amount of time to the spiritual preparation of the congregation, before even mentioning the subject of change. There are three major avenues that will greatly strengthen and enrich people spiritually: prayer, spiritual nurturing, and uplifting biblical values. Any change will surely create a major spiritual warfare, and a community of faith should never underestimate the power of prayer in times of significant stress and transition. Second, change inevitably creates a high level of stress and often diminishes the emotional energy of a church. In order to prepare for the time of transition, leaders should intentionally raise the level of spiritual nurturing, helping people come closer to each other spiritually and emotionally. Third, leaders must base their desire for improvement on solid biblical values and ministry essentials, ultimately attempting to change the current culture for Christ (Nelson & Appel, 2000, pp. 60, 209, 210). Unless people see how change will elevate and enhance their relationship with God, they will be hesitant to undertake any steps in the desired direction. The congregation must be spiritually prepared to be able to effectively process change.

### Making a Case for Change

It is imperative for a leader to make an adequate case for change. This will create the springboard for change in the minds of the congregation. Before leaders even begin to make a case for change, they need to perform an extensive congregational assessment. People should be given an opportunity to provide their own perception of current reality. Having an accurate self-assessment and disruption of current reality by the congregation,

will be a basic building block for the future. After collecting and processing the information, leaders will do well to make the information readily available to the congregation and will take the time to relate the major findings in detail (Herrington et al., 2000, pp. 38, 39). Members must know what other members think about current realities and culture.

As people receive a proper understanding of their self-assessment study, another meeting must be called where the leader must present the congregation with the essential existential questions: Why are we as a church in existence? What is our calling and mission? What is important for our identity as a part of God's movement on this earth? Are we relevant to ourselves and the community? (Nelson & Appel, 2000, p. 22).

As the answers of these questions become apparent, leaders must begin to create and sustain creative tension. According to Herrington et al. (2020), "creative tension occurs when a compelling vision of the future and a clear picture of current reality are held in continuous juxtaposition. What drives change? . . . Change is driven when a significant gap exists between a vision of the future that people sincerely desire to achieve and a clear sense that they are not achieving that vision. . . . This is the point at which they are experiencing creative tension. The discipline to generate and sustain this driving force is indispensable for change leaders" (p. 97). How does a leader generate such tension? Tension is generated when the people are able to observe the gulf between current reality and future vision. Unless members see a sharp difference between the two, tensions will not take place. Once tension is generated, it also must be sustained. Change leaders must maintain the tension alive as a force for change. Long-term transformation cannot take place if tension is not maintained (p. 101).

As soon as creative tension is generated, leaders must create the sense of urgency, which is absolutely vital in the process of congregational transformation. When used adequately, urgency can be a powerful driving force that makes churches willing to accept change and to challenge well established cultural norms (Herrington et al., pp. 34–36). Kotter (2012) contends that “creating a strong sense of urgency usually demands bold or even risky actions that we normally associate with good leadership” (p. 45). If leaders maintain their spiritual connection with God and draw continual guidance from Him, their risky efforts will not derail the process of change. The urgency that has been created will spur the congregation to action (p. 37).

When making the case for change, there are several specific steps that need to be taken. First, people should not be fearful of too many details, because they can deal with only so much stress and change at a time. Second, leaders must begin with describing the need and then discuss the solutions. Third, benefits must be emphasized, and they must outweigh the pain of the process of change. Fourth, leaders should not deny the presence of challenges but should continue to emphasize the benefits of transformation. Fifth, people need to recognize that the goal is within their reach and that it is something real and achievable. Sixth, leaders must communicate the benefits of change with passion and conviction and attempt to create a momentum. Seventh, people’s fears must be acknowledged, but an extra effort should be made to build their faith. Faith is the vaccine against fear. They need to see that their God is bigger than the giants of the land (Nelson & Appel, 2000, pp. 135, 136). These practical steps will greatly assist leaders in making their case for change. During that process, James O’Toole (1995) argues that leaders should never attempt to push their congregation but must be always leading by the pull of

inspiring values (p. 11). People like to follow a dream that inspires. Making a case for change must inspire and stir into action. Once a personal preparation has been completed, leaders can move on to creating and shaping the vision for the community of faith.

## **Vision**

### Vision is Key

Having a clear vision for ministry is the key that distinguishes growing churches from dying churches. While evaluating growing healthy churches, as well as those that were plateauing and declining, Barna (1991) discovered that one of the main differences between them was the existence of authentic vision for ministry. Nanus (1992) agrees that “there is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared” (p. 186). Every congregation must undertake the task of articulating clearly what is the call that God has placed on them to be and to do. They must discover the vision that God has for their spiritual journey (Cladis, 1999).

### What is a Vision?

Kotter (2012) calls a vision “a picture of the future” that contains some “implicit or explicit commentary on why people should strive to create that future” (p. 71). He points out that a good vision addresses three important purposes. First, it clarifies the general direction for transformational change. Second, it mobilizes people to take action in a specific direction. Third, it helps coordinate the actions of different people in a remarkably fast and efficient way (p. 71). Nanus (1992) calls vision a “realistic, credible, attractive future” for an organization and an “articulation of a destination toward which

(p. 8) an organization should point. This future in a significant way is better, more desirable, and more successful than is the present reality. Vision is a picture of a better future.

### Characteristics of True Vision

The following is a list of the many characteristics of a true vision. First, a true vision is always God-size; it is big and overwhelming and requires God's power to succeed. Second, true vision is a product of the heart and is designed to touch the hearts of people and move them forward. Third, it paints a visual picture of a dream outcome. Fourth, it provides a clear way out of today's reality and creates a spark and excitement. Fifth, true vision is always full of hope and a better tomorrow. Sixth, true vision invites people to unite around a common cause. Seventh, true vision always provides God's direction and not that of the leader or the congregation. Eighth, it is powerful (Nelson & Appel, 2000). Ninth, true vision is "open ended enough to allow for individual initiative and for changing conditions" (Kotter, 2012).

There are multiple characteristics of a true vision, but above all, a powerful and authentic vision will always originate from God (Herrington et al., 2000). Then, according to Theodore Levitt (1986), an organization will need a leader who is driven onward by a vision of grandeur, a vision that can inspire followers to eagerly join a transformational movement. True vision originates from God and is planted in the heart of a leader who has the inner preparation and burning desire to take the people of God on to the next level of their spiritual journey.

Authentic, God-inspired vision always paints the big picture of the direction the congregation is going and lays down a general path of how it will get there.

## Groundwork Before Communicating the Vision

### **Inspiring Key People and Opinion Leaders**

Before a leader goes public with a new vision and initiative, he needs to recruit enough support to keep the process of transformation alive once the action begins (Heifetz et al., 2009). For any new and significant idea to be accepted by the congregation, a critical mass of the opinion leaders must be on board, since they will be the ones to persuade the rest of the church to either accept or reject the suggested change. Ignoring these leaders will be fatal for the future of any vision. Leaders will do well to use casual meetings at coffee shops, in homes, and in church parking lots to gather the support of those leaders. Failure to take the needed time and effort to enlist their goodwill, will derail the initiative (Nelson & Appel, 2000).

### **Creating a Team**

A first step toward communicating a new vision plan will be the creation of a team. It is vital for a leader to recognize that “leadership is not a solo act, it’s a team effort” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 223). Lone ranger leaders will soon discover that they can’t do it all and will eventually be forced to either seek help or abandon the initiative. They “need to understand that by working together” as a team “they will be able to accomplish something that no one can accomplish on their own” (p. 238).

Who should be on the team? Katzenbach and Smith (2009) define a team as a “small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable” (p. 8). They should have a positional power in the congregation, expertise in the area of change, established credibility with others, and proven leadership abilities.

People with big egos, though very intelligent, motivated, and productive, must be avoided at all costs when putting together a team. “Smart change agents seem to be skilled at spotting these people and keeping them off the team. If that’s impossible, capable leaders watch and manage these folks very carefully” (Kotter, 2012, p. 62).

Once the team is created, the leader should give responsibility to every team member, along with authority to lead. Giving them authority means allowing them to make decisions without asking someone else for permission. Empowered, every team member will see himself as a vital cog in the process of change. Discussing the leadership style of advertising legend Wieden, Taylor, and LaBarre (2006) point to his job description as to “walk in stupid every day” (as cited in Stevens, 2015, p. 128), meaning to keep challenging the team and himself to search out for new ideas, outside influences, and fresh perspectives to challenges. Many leaders walk every day as if they know everything. But the humble leader recognizes that he does not know it all. He does not stop asking questions. He is willing to listen to every team member because he knows there is nothing that would encourage his team more than to know that he is genuinely listening to them. Heath and Heath (2007) put it this way: “Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. Our knowledge has ‘cursed’ us” (p. 20). Recognizing the pitfall of knowledge, Stevens (2015) quotes Bryan Singer: “I surround myself with people who understand me and aren’t afraid to tell me when I am straying. They’re not sycophants, they’re friends.” This would require an immense effort on the part of the leader and a large measure of humility. Another important area where a leader must invest time and money is in building a culture in which team members have fun while working, recognizing that this is not just an assignment but a journey with

friends (Stevens, 2015). Building a healthy and robust team is absolutely vital for the success of the initiative.

### **Creating a Strategy**

Next, the leader and his team begin to create a strategy. Kotter (2012) points out that “strategy provides both a logic and a first level of detail to show how a vision can be accomplished” (p. 78). It is the road map to success. Henry Mintzberg (1994) provides an adequate description of how organizational strategies evolve. He points out that some teams and leaders choose to plan their actions in details and then follow their plan, which usually results in an actual strategy. Other teams and leaders build a realized strategy, but they do so by acting over and over in certain ways. By doing so, a consistent approach is evolved over time, instead of being planned in advance, and that then becomes their strategy. Herrington et al. (2020) argue that “effective change leaders should recognize their own biases toward order or chaos and should lead their congregations to incorporate the benefits of both” (p. 96). No matter which approach is chosen, leader and team members must take the time to devise a strategy, a plan of action.

### **Creating a Communication Plan**

With every big change, leaders need to create a plan of communication. Answers to the following questions must be given: Who should be told first? Who should be told next? Who would be offended if they find out about the proposed change from someone other than the leader?

Discussing communication planning, Stevens (2015) gives the following sequence of communication: senior leadership team; board member; entire staff; key leaders, influencers, and stakeholders; other invested volunteers; entire congregation. The



meetings with the first four groups are the so-called “meetings before the meetings,” when information is disseminated in a way that will prevent people of influence and authority to derail the official meeting when the vision is communicated to the entire congregation. These meetings will address concerns, answer questions, and give an opportunity for the leaders of the church to take the time and analyze the new vision. These initial meetings must be sequenced in the right order in order to alleviate hurt feelings and unnecessary tension. A good communication plan can be an excellent springboard for preparing the ground for the communication of the vision to the entire church. Sadly, “More leaders mess up because of bad communication than because of bad decisions” (p. 203).

### **Communicating the Vision**

Communicating the vision to the entire congregation is the moment when the vision is officially born. Cladis (1999) argues that “leaders cast a vision that unites people around a cause” and insists that “it is absolutely critical . . . for a leader or leadership team to articulate the vision of the work group, give it sharp focus, and rally resources toward meeting that goal” (p. 55). Communication is really a part of the uninterrupted extension of a vision development (Herrington et al., 2000). Kotter (2012) estimates that under-communicating the vision is one of the most common mistakes that are made by congregations that are attempting to undertake the process of transformational change. In order to avoid such danger, Warren (1995) urges leaders to restate the vision and purpose “every twenty-six days to keep the church moving in the right direction” (p. 111).

There are several key elements of effectively communicating the vision. First, communicating the vision must be simple, without any jargon and technical terms.

Second, the use of metaphors, analogies, and examples is absolutely vital to help create a vibrant verbal picture. Third, people learn in different ways, so different forms of communication must be employed. Fourth, the new ideas will remain new if people do not hear them often. Therefore, they need to be repeated again and again until they sink deep into people's minds. Fifth, leaders must lead by example, and their behavior needs to personify the vision they are casting. Sixth, adequate time needs to be taken to explain seeming inconsistencies, otherwise they will undermine all communication. Seventh, people must be allowed to interact. It must be a two-way communication. Eighth, the new information needs to be presented at an appropriate rate at which it can be properly absorbed. Ninth, above all, the effective communication of the vision depends on the credibility of the leader's vision. Can people believe in it? (Kotter, 2012; Herrington et al., 2000; Malphurs, 2002).

Robbins and Finley (1996) are adamant that "leadership is defined in part by the ability to get people to agree both in present danger and on a vision of the future that will enable them to overcome those dangers" (p. 89). If a leader is able to communicate and present a powerful, compelling, exciting, and dynamic vision, he will be able to begin a powerful movement for change.

### Groundwork Before Implementation of the Vision

#### **Aligning Existing Ministries With the Vision**

Leaders must make a deliberate effort to align existing ministries of the church with the new vision. Without it, leaders and members of these ministries will soon lose enthusiasm, realizing they have nothing to contribute to the new direction. However, creating that alignment is not a one-time event. It must be intentionally and regularly

pursued (Herrington et al., 2000). Kotter (2012) is right to argue that “when the big, built-in, hard-wired incentives and processes are seriously at odds with the new vision” (p. 115), leaders must address them directly and defuse the tension that has been created. Time that is invested in aligning existing ministries with the new vision is never wasted.

### **Listing and Addressing Concerns of Various Groups and Dissenters**

Leaders should listen to and consider all opinions expressed concerning a new vision. It is true that they naturally listen to people who generally agree with them. They gravitate to those who think alike. However, this can prove to be a serious weakness and could ultimately distance them from various groups that have expressed different views and ideas. As Nelson and Appel (2000) note, “Every organization has various circles of influence within it. Bringing about effective church improvement means identifying these social circles, knowing who is in them, and addressing the various concerns of these people groups” (p. 61).

Leaders must make an effort to listen to these groups, even if they are raising a voice of dissent. According to Heifetz et al. (2009), dissenters “have the uncanny capacity for asking the really tough key question that you have been unwilling to face up to yourself or that others have been unwilling to raise” (p. 145). Unfortunately, in many organizations, such groups of people get pushed away, silenced, or even removed all together. Such actions cripple the ability of the organization to be objective and may blind the leader’s eyesight for legitimate weaknesses and challenges in the new vision. Listening and addressing their concerns will serve as a litmus test for the shared vision.

## Implementing the Vision

As soon as the preliminary work is done, leaders can move toward implementation of the vision. That requires three important skills: systems thinking, planning, and managing. The “fist” skill, systems thinking, provides an answer to the question: “What should be done to move toward the vision?” This skill simply enables leaders to identify the highest-leverage points for implementation based on a holistic view of the congregation and the vision. The second skill, planning, provides an answer to the question: “How are we going to do it?” This skill “determines the concrete steps that should be taken and the related resource requirements.” The third skill, managing, provides an answer to the question: “How can we ensure that we are making progress?” This skill provides a thorough follow-through and “requires commitment, passion, and a clear understanding of the vision” (Herrington et al., 2020, pp. 76–78).

### Additional Steps for Implementation of the Vision

Additional steps must be taken to ensure the successful implementation of the vision. First, it is absolutely essential for the leader to have a clear understanding of what areas of the vision have priorities—as Covey (1989) calls it, “*putting first things first*” (p. 148). Thoughtfulness and intentionality are required to implement these priorities and to know what changes to push at the beginning of the process and what changes to introduce over time (Nelson & Appel, 2000). The introduction, especially of a big change, must be done incrementally. If the leader is looking for a significant change, he needs to start with baby steps. As time goes by, he may “push the envelope” but must be alert and quick to respond when the congregation shows signs of uneasiness (p. 72). Second, every new initiative needs to be treated as an experiment. People are less resistant to a short-term

experiment than they are to a ‘permanent’ change” (Herrington et al., 2020, p. 79). To them, “an experiment signals that the leaders do not claim to have all the answers” (p. 80) and are willing to change direction and approach if things do not work. Third, as implementation of the vision begins, “leaders need to take the time to match responsibilities with the spiritual gifts, interests, skills, and experience of members” (p. 83). Fourth, a support system must be created for the change leaders responsible for the new initiative “as action plans are implemented” (p. 84).

### Empowering Members

Involving members in the actual process of change ensures that people are given ownership of the project and are part of the decision making (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Maxwell (1998) argued that “the people’s capacity to achieve is determined by their leader’s ability to empower” (p 126). Indeed, “the empowerment leadership model shifts away from ‘position power’” to “where all people are given leadership roles so they can contribute to their fullest capacity” (McFarland, Senn, & Childress 1993). By doing so, as strange as it may sound, leaders do not lose authority but gain more of it instead (Maxwell, 1998). On the other hand, people begin to resist change if they do not have the opportunity to give sufficient input and are left on the sidelines of the new initiative (Sirkin, Keenan, & Jackson, 2011).

One of the most fascinating examples of empowering everyone to be part of the implementation is the so-called “Toyota Way.” In his book, *How Toyota Became Number One*, David Magee (2007) writes about his astonishment at the structure and functionality of the Toyota car manufacturing company. He told the story of Convis, one of the general managers of Toyota. When Convis became one of the leading managers at the Toyota

headquarters, he was challenged by his superiors to keep an open mind and be willing to learn from the people for whom he was responsible. He had to leave his ego out of the equation and be willing to personally follow the same procedures that every other employee did: “go and see,” so he could personally determine the facts and ensure that the best decisions were made. When Convis would meet with Toyota’s formidable 26-member board of directors in Japan, he continued to experience *nemawashi*, a practice where preliminary work was done and everyone was involved in the discussion to seek input, information, and support for a proposal of change that would effectively affect them. David wrote that in those senior meetings, questions were presented “in the humble way of Toyota” (p. 178), while the participants were encouraged to avoid conjecture, hearsay, and unsubstantiated opinion but be prepared to present the real facts or be willing to go back to the source for more research. At Toyota, everyone is challenged to find the answer (Magee, 2007).

Fourteen years after the publishing of this book, Toyota Corporation is still the number-one car manufacturer in the world. Empowering members of an organization or a church will not only transform its inner dynamics but also change its destiny permanently. Leaders who are willing to let their authority go will discover “the power of many” and experience transformation above their wildest expectations.

### Always Keep the Big Picture

One of the greatest temptations of a leader is to get distracted and start focusing on the trivial irritations of the journey. He must always remember to keep the big picture before his congregation and avoid the pitfalls of the minutiae (Nelson & Appel, 2000). Maxwell (1998) is convinced that “the greatest success comes only when you focus your

people on what really matters” (p. 182). Kouzes and Posner (2007) agree that “emphasizing the big picture, and the long term, is crucial in helping people deal with short-term setbacks. . . . By emphasizing the ultimate goal, leaders strengthen team members’ resolve” (p. 233) and do not allow these team members to focus on the trivial. Leaders will save themselves a lot of headache if they continually keep the big picture before their congregation.

### Dealing With Conflict

The natural inclination of most leaders is to avoid conflict at all cost. However, according to Nelson and Appel (2000) “conflict is a part of any healthy relationship. Where no conflict exists,” the authors write,

people are either walked on or controlled. Conflict is about working through different opinions and ideas. Practicing love requires working through conflict, even if it results in agreeing to disagree. To let conflict go without addressing it often means sabotaging the change effort. (p. 61)

Peters (1987) concurs that successful leaders “will deal proactively with chaos, will look at the chaos per se as the source of market advantage, not as a problem to be got around” (p. 31). Bolton, calls it “a dangerous opportunity” (p. 207). On an emotional level it may present some perils but if harnessed correctly it has great possibilities to bring some important benefits. Interestingly, Leas and Kittlaus (1977), warn that in most cases avoiding conflict creates more problems than it solves. They argue that when attempting to avoid conflicts, people will naturally “use energy to get away from the offending issues or person every time they appear” (p. 127).

Willimon (2002) brings a different perspective and points that “dealing openly with conflict is an affirmation that the issues are worth fighting over and that we can resolve our differences without destroying one another” (p. 189).

At the same time, good leaders will not initiate conflict for the conflict sake. Leaders should be well aware that during such times their character will be revealed and their emotional spiritual baggage exposed (Nelson & Appeal, 2000). A wise leader will take this as an opportunity to heal the old wounds that have been undermining change (Bridges, 1991). So, what are the steps to confront, manage, and process conflict?

First, the very best thing that a leader ought to do during times of conflict and stress is to pray for those on his team or congregation. “Good spiritual leaders lift their teammates to God as a part of their leading” (Nelson & Appeal, 2000). They must also take the time to get away if tension emerges and dedicate some time to personal renewal and reflection (Herrington et al., 2000).

After spending adequate time for spiritual preparation, the leader must bring sufficient awareness of the problem. Without a clear recognition of the problem, it will be impossible to manage the conflict. The leader must be concrete when communicating the issue in order to be able to develop a plan to resolve the conflict (Leas & Kittlaus, 1977).

Robert Bonthius (1971) suggests developing a good problem statement that states the concern in one complete indicative sentence. The sentence should contain at least three of the following items, or preferably all four: Who, What, To Whom, When or Where.

After creating a problem statement, the best solution usually would be to have an honest dialogue. Many times, “guilt, political considerations, and concerns over short-term results prevent people from having these honest discussions.” Consequently, when “others see that these people are not being confronted, they become discouraged” (Kotter 2012).



Speed B. Leas (1997) identifies six styles for managing creative tension: persuading; compelling; avoiding/ignoring; fleeing/accommodating; collaboration; negotiating/supporting. Leaders must work hard at living in harmony with people and reflecting the mercies of God to others, but they should also not be afraid to ask people to leave the team if they intentionally are pulling others down through negativity or sarcasm. A leader should not gossip about the conflicts with others and be aware that others are constantly watching his attitude and approach to resolving the issues (Bolton, 1986).

Leaders must take time and spiritually prepare for conflicts and appreciate the opportunity that God gives them through these conflicts to initiate and sustain personal and collective growth. When properly addressed and resolved, conflicts will prove to be a powerful instrument in moving forward the process of change.

### Conducting Meetings

Conducting regular meetings is essential for successful implementation of the new vision. Leaders must look at these as an opportunity to reassess, to reconnect, and to continue to inspire the congregation to move forward. Stevens (2015) states that this is the time when the leader can connect with the people he enjoys, talk about things he is passionate about, and make a tangible impact on his team members. Many leaders look at meetings as a necessary evil, but successful leaders insist that meetings, if approached and conducted properly, can become powerful sources of progress.

So, what should leaders do to make meetings enjoyable and meaningful? Stevens (2015) suggests a few insightful ideas: First, “do not overpack your agenda, and don’t underestimate the importance of relational connection time.” Second, “know who is

leading the meeting and what you are planning to accomplish by the time you adjourn. Write your goal(s) for the meeting on the top of the agenda.” Third, “when possible, send the agenda out ahead of time. Give people a chance to contribute.” Fourth, “end the meeting with a “who will do what by when” list and distribute this immediately following the meeting” (pp. 125, 126).

Andy Stanley (2006) gives similar ideas for conducting a meeting: First, he notes, “pull members into the discussion.” Second, he advises not to interrupt a debate but to listen. “Some of you are peacemakers and try to smooth everything out,” Stanley writes. “This doesn’t help. Fan the flame of conflict. If you have great leaders on your team, they will be highly opinionated and very persuasive. You need to have an environment where things can be debated and you are fine with it.” Third, “do not attempt to resolve tension—it wouldn’t really be resolved.” Fourth, “when you sense someone isn’t listening but only waiting to talk, address it.” Fifth, “keep the discussions focused.” Sixth, “when a sensitive subject is going to be discussed, give those who may feel threatened a heads-up.”

Conducting meetings, therefore, is an art and requires extensive planning and significant effort. There are some additional steps that should be taken when conducting meetings, and these will be discussed below.

### **Addressing People Patiently**

Many leaders assume that just because they have a clear understanding of the direction and process of implementation for the vision, everyone present at the meeting does too. This however is not true. Leaders therefore need to be patient with those who are slow to understand or those who have a new idea and simply do not see it the same

way (Nelson & Appel, 2000). The one who leads must intentionally increase his sensitivity to the concerns of others (Herrington et al., 2000).

### **Reassessing Reality and Providing Update**

Reassessing current reality and providing new information to the congregation is also critical (Herrington et al., p. 41). People expect that the one in charge of the meeting will address new changes or challenges that have come along the way. Great leaders will also provide solutions that would address and resolve the new realities.

### **Admitting and Owning Mistakes**

The hardest challenge for leaders is to admit they may be wrong. However, their credibility will be significantly strengthened when they have the humility to admit their wrongs and to ask for forgiveness (p. 22). According to Heifetz and Linsky (2011), leaders should own their mistakes and acknowledge their “responsibility for whatever problems the organization currently faces” (p. 107). On the positive side, Stevens (2015), argues that “mistakes are part of learning” and that if a leader is afraid of making mistakes, he “should not be a leader” (pp. 221, 223). Similarly, Cladis (1999) notes that the leader should make such “failures your teachers.” As he put it: “Learn from them what you need to know about your style of ministry and about the kinds of people you do and do not get along with, and reflect on what you need from coworkers to feel safe and secure. Process your failures in such a way that you can talk freely about them and demonstrate their educational benefits” (pp. 155, 156). A humble leader will take the opportunity at meetings and will honestly talk about his mistakes—admitting and owning them and demonstrating the desire to learn from them.

## **Listening and Watching for Feedback**

Herrington et al., (2000) claim that “every action a congregation takes (or does not take) can be a source of feedback for the change leader. Such information describes where the church is on the journey toward its vision. Good information is a critical building block for transformation. Feedback can be active (what people say and do) or passive (what people don’t say and don’t do)” (p. 155). People need to sense that their voice counts and their vote matters. If a leader truly seeks and listens to the advice of people, he will be able to achieve extraordinary things (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

## **Encouraging Others to Openly Share Their Feelings**

Every process of transition is painful and naturally creates an environment of confusion and insecurity, of feeling lost, even in the healthiest environments. A wise leader should allow and create the safest environment during meetings to give an opportunity for people to get things off their chest, while reassuring them that their feelings and emotions are natural (Nelson & Appel, 2000). By allowing people to feel free to have frank conversations about their true feelings, leaders will be able to establish meaningful and healthy relationships, and thus they will motivate people to accept change as positive.

## **Recounting God’s Leading in the Past**

Another important step to consider is to recount God’s leading in the past. During times of trials and crisis while processing change, leaders should remember the greatest antidote to fear—recalling God’s leading in the past. “The most powerful way” for a leader “to address the doubts of those who question the innovation is to tell stories of

lives” that have been “positively affected by the ideas implemented.” It is hard for anyone to argue with testimonies (p. 296). Real success stories where the primary emphasis is always on what God has done will create excitement and will help people see hope.

### **Continuing to Recast the Vision**

Every meeting should be used to continue to recast the vision. Heifetz et al. (2009) suggest that when people lose touch with their purpose, they are losing the capacity to find meaning in their life. So, it is absolutely vital that they connect their everyday life with their sense of purpose. In order to do so, leaders should never allow for a vision “to grow stale or be forgotten. . . . A church’s vision . . . should be treated as a living document. . . . Recasting the vision is best done through periodic assessments with the vision community” (Herrington et al., 2000, p. 155).

### **Celebrating Small Victories**

Celebrating short-term wins keeps people moving forward (Nelson & Appel, 2000). Kotter (2012) is emphatic that “running a transformation effort without serious attention to short-term wins is extremely risky” (p. 123). In order for a leader to sustain his effort over the long haul, he needs to continue to put emphasis on short-term results. This will build his credibility and will demonstrate to people that he is not willing to abandon current needs for the ultimate dream. A good short-term win has at least three components: First, it is visible and most people can see it for themselves. Second, it is unambiguous and there is little that people can question. Third, it is directly related to the change effort.

According to Kotter (2012), celebrating short-term wins during meetings will, first, show “that sacrifices are worth it. “Wins greatly help justify the short-term costs involved” (p. 126). Second, short-term wins give “a pat on the back: After a lot of hard work, positive feedback builds morale and motivation.” Third, they help “fine-tune” the vision and general strategies: “Short-term wins give the guiding coalition concrete data on the viability of their ideas.” Fourth, short term victories “undermine cynics and self-serving resisters: Clear improvements in performance make it difficult for people to block needed change.” Fifth, considering short-term wins “keeps bosses on board: Provides those higher in the hierarchy with evidence that the transformation is on track.” Sixth, they “build momentum: Turns neutrals into supporters, reluctant supporters into active helpers” (p. 127). The celebration of short-term wins is vital in making sure that visible results bring enough credibility to the transformation effort.

Conducting meaningful and exciting meetings is paramount for the successful implementation of the vision. By investing the time and effort in such meetings, leaders will prepare the congregation to adequately process change during the time between meetings.

## Character of Leaders

### **Sacrifice**

Maxwell (1998) states that “the true nature of leadership is real sacrifice” (p. 188). He continues, arguing that “sacrifice is a constant in leadership. It is an ongoing process, not a one-time payment” (p. 188). Continual sacrifice means that a leader must give up his right to think about himself. It is impossible for a leader to achieve success

without sacrifices. The more responsibility and the higher the level of leadership, the greater the sacrifice that is required. To go up, leaders must give up.

### **Excellence**

Russell (2000) argues that “mediocrity breeds indifference, but quality attracts” (p. 112). It is hard and often impossible to convince people to change if leaders are not fully invested or at least do everything with an average effort. When people see that “something is done with excellence” (p. 113) though, they are inspired and want to share it with others. That is the reason, according to Stevens (2015), that when leaders are attempting to create a positive culture to unify the congregation in vision and purpose, they want to attract to their team people who are 100 percent in. Excellence breeds confidence and excitement in the leader’s ability to lead.

### **Loving People Above All**

Most leaders are very much task oriented and have the tendencies to value the ultimate goal more than the people with whom they are on a journey. Nelson and Appel (2000) wrote, “Elevating love above any other agenda is paramount” (p. 79). “When relationships become secondary to changes, we run the risk of distorting the biblical principle of love (p. 61). Kouzes and Posner (2007) contend that “leadership is not an affair of the head. Leadership is an affair of the heart” (p. 351). Love sustains the leader above everything else and is most lasting. The presence of love gives people a reason to feel respected and appreciated and makes their involvement in the transition meaningful (Cladis, 1999). Above all, leaders must love people. This is the foundation for success in any organization or setting.

### It is Never About the Final Destination

Often, leaders concentrate their entire time, strength, and efforts on the final outcome of change, and yet the process of change is what really matters. Nelson and Appel (2000) suggest that leaders should “work hard at not letting the outcome of change take priority over the process of change” (p. 91). Ultimately, the goal for a community of faith “is not just to go through times of personal and community change, but to grow through them” (p. 90). Leaders should allow the inevitable challenges and trials that accompany change to break and transform them, so their capacity for God will increase. The ultimate goal is not simply to get from one place to the other but to accomplish it by “deepening our love for each other as well as personally growing in our relationship with God” (p. 91). Miller (2013) argues that “leadership is not about what you do nearly as much as it is about who you are becoming—the heart of leadership is a matter of the heart” (p. 112). At the end of every cycle of change in the life of the leader, the greatest change needs to be in his personal life and in the life of his congregation.

### Giving All the Glory to God

The greatest temptation of a successful leader is to take all or some of the credit to himself. Nelson and Appel (2000) counsel that “leaders need to be very careful about perceptions because perceptions are real. Careful word selection, giving verbal credit to God and elevating biblical values are all crucial to how people perceive” (p. 123) them. Pride is a lurking temptation, especially when leaders are able to successfully bring the process of change to completion. Their personal relationship with God must be strong and alive in order to avoid the pitfall of taking the glory to themselves. There is nothing worse for a leader than to get to the finish line and allow people to give him all the praise.



All the glory and credit belong to God. True lasting success is possible only with Him and through Him.

### Celebrating Victories

Leaders must take the time to complete the final step of processing change—they must celebrate victories. Adequate time should be taken to celebrate these high moments with “the whole church” (p. 300). By celebrating victories, leaders show appreciation to the vision community and other team leaders who have made extraordinary contributions. Celebration is not just about the people who have invested their lives, effort, and resources, but it is “an opportunity to recognize God’s provision and his hand in the process” (Herrington et al., 2000, p. 138). It is a time of joy and refreshing. It helps people recognize that it was all worth it. Money, time, and resources will never be wasted when celebrating what God has done for his church and people.

### Summary

As it has been presented in this chapter through this extensive literature review of the variety of leadership skills and strategies, every process of change requires leaders to have the ability and desire to learn. Their efforts will be futile if they rely only on their natural gifts. Leaders who have been called to bring change must continually seek direction, knowledge, and wisdom from God above all, as well as from the community of faith. The process of change is a God-given opportunity to not only move leader and congregation from one point to the next, but to transform their lives.

Change is unpopular and unpleasant, and very few congregations will naturally embrace it. It is the work of the leader to employ various skills and strategies that will create the right perception of change. Before processing change, leaders must undertake a

total personal preparation. Foremost, they need to spiritually prepare themselves and strengthen their relationship with God. In addition, the agents of change must continue to learn and improve their interpersonal skills and approach.

Leaders must take time to understand their community of faith and to seek God's vision for this community. Only when they sense that God is leading in the direction of change, they should begin to formulate an understanding of a concrete vision. As they begin to develop a vision, they must also attempt to inspire others, especially those who are the key influencers in the congregation.

As a leadership team is organized, a more specific plan of action must be developed and the vision clarified. As soon as the vision is created and the groundwork has taken place, the vision must also be effectively communicated. Leaders must be open to input and feedback and be willing to adjust the vision that they have presented. When they recognize that the people are on board, they must begin to implement the new vision.

As challenges and conflicts arise, leaders must take a positive approach and recognize these challenges as an opportunity to learn and realign the vision and people with God's vision. Regular meetings must be conducted in order to assess the progress and challenges of implementing the vision. During these meetings, people must be allowed and invited to share their true feelings and ideas. Adequate changes must be made as the journey of change continues. Throughout the whole process, leaders must remember that people matter more than goals and that love is above any transition.

When the vision becomes a reality, leaders and congregation must give all the glory and credit to God. As they celebrate this final victory, everyone must recognize that

because of God everything is possible. All change is for Him and by Him. Leaders must remember that they are only His agents, always willing to learn and grow their God-given leadership gifts, talents, and skills.

## CHAPTER 4

### IMPLEMENTATION OF LEADERSHIP SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, a brief history of the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church and the setting at the time the building project are highlighted starting in 2005. Second, the process of acquiring the land and the initial stages of planning of the building process are described. Third, the steps of the actual construction of the church building and the challenges faced are detailed. Fourth, the final stage of the building process which concluded in 2019 and the impact on the congregation are summarized.

The Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church is one of the oldest congregations in the state of Texas. Its beginnings can be traced back to the late 1870s. The congregation received its official status as a church on July 12, 1912 and subsequently celebrating its 100th birthday in October of 2012.

Immediately following its official inception as a church,

a parcel of land in Dalworth was donated by Dalworth Company for a site on which to build a new church. A committee was formed to research the site and determine if it was a suitable site for their new church. Pledges were made, donations from Dallas businesses were accepted, and a contract was awarded to Mr. Manning in nearby Grand Prairie for the building of this church. For the next one and a half years, the group continued worshiping in the old post office until their new church was completed. . . . The new church was a beautiful building for that time and was like a 'light set upon a hill' in the small community. (Belz, 2019, p. 3)

The second half of its existence as a church took place in a location bustling with life between the 1950s and 1980s at 418 East Tarrant Rd in Grand Prairie. The almost two acres of land were donated by the Scheppeler family and “with George Delk as the general contractor and leadership from Pastor Wes Spiva, work was begun. . . . The church was completed and dedicated on May 17, 1958” (Belz, p. 5). During these years, the members began to identify the building as “the church” itself. The significance of the church facility and its location became of such paramount importance that when in the late 1980s and early 1990s the city demographics began to shift to the south, the congregation remained largely indifferent. The few voices that attempted to draw the attention of the leaders of the congregation to the new wind of change did not have much success. The common perception was that “we are where we need to be.” Throughout the years, the church had prided itself on giving birth to numerous congregations, some of which have greatly surpassed its own size and membership. The Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church had established itself with a clear identity and a sense of parental status that have in turn significantly affected its view and approach to change.

At the turn of the 21st century, as more of the attending members moved farther away from the church, the voices asking for re-evaluation of the then current location increased but did not represent enough of the decision-making body of the church to initiate any substantive consideration for change.

### **Early Years**

It was no surprise that when I arrived at the Grand Prairie Church in the beginning of January 2005, I was introduced to an interesting fact. The previous year, the Church through its yearly nominating process had organized a building committee for the

purpose of exploring the possibility of relocating versus expanding the current facility. Strangely enough, that building committee never had a single meeting. Apparently, moving to another location and building a new church facility was never supposed to be a part of the discussion. Such a sentiment indicated a lack of commitment and loyalty to the Church, if not outright betrayal of the Church's identity.

In the early months of my service as a pastor, I realized that the topic of relocating the Church must be avoided if we desired and were to pursue peace and unity. People needed to realize that they mattered more than a building and location. Even though I did not have a clear understanding of the leadership skills and strategies of processing change in a church setting, unbeknownst to me, through the grace of God, I was somehow employing many of them.

Quickly, I was brought to the realization that there was a need for change but decided to do some preliminary, behind-the-scenes studies, having two objectives in mind: To conduct an honest, strictly personal, and, as far as possible, objective study of whether the church needed to relocate or stay at its current location, and to seek to discern if this was a God-driven initiative or the fruit of human perception. I decided that if during this preliminary process God presented an opportunity, I would move forward with the speed and eagerness He requires.

For about six months, I observed, listened, and studied as I gathered facts. I asked questions but refrained from making comments. After this initial time, I created a list for "personal use only" with the positive and negative sides of change.

In the column of "Why move?" I placed:

**Conflicting demographics** – The Grand Prairie Church, a predominantly English-speaking congregation, was surrounded by a large first-generation Spanish speaking Hispanic population. When the church members attempted to do door-to-door ministries, they recognized that communication was almost impossible.

**Conflicting socio-economics** – The Grand Prairie Church at that time was comprised of middle- to upper-middle-class members; the population surrounding the Church in contrast was comprised of a significant number of first-generation immigrants living on minimum wage.

**Inadequate facility** – Even though the sanctuary was more than sufficient for the congregation, the fellowship hall could accommodate only half of the attending members, thus preventing the congregation from having adequate room for social events, which contributed to crippling the relational aspect of church life.

**Inadequate parking** – During holiday programs and other special events, many of our guests would leave upon arriving at the Church, realizing that there was nowhere to park.

**No expansion possible** – The Church was located on 1.88 acres. One-third of those acres were situated on a steep slope, preventing the Church from utilizing the entire property. In addition, the Church had become surrounded by a residential neighborhood, preventing future expansion.

**Old structure** – The main building was rapidly aging and deteriorating and required constant, significant, and expensive maintenance.

**Commuting membership** – Eighty percent of the members lived fifteen minutes or more away from the Church, encouraging attendance at closer churches.

**Not enough room for Youth and Young Adult classes** – Because of a lack of space, neither of these classes had their own room; one met in the fellowship hall and one in the kitchen.

In the column of “Why stay?” I placed:

**No additional financial burden** – The Church was debt-free at the time.

**No risks and very little unknown** – Staying at its current location would minimize risks and would keep away the stress of the unknown.

**Feeling safe and secure** – This had been their home for many years, and many of them were born, raised, baptized, and married there. And even though “home” was slowly deteriorating, the emotional connection was too powerful to ignore.

As I concluded my research, it became quite obvious that if the Church decided to stay, eventually the congregation would die off. Young people and families would gravitate to churches much closer to their homes. Financial means would become scarce. And at some point, the building would become a liability for the dwindling number of older members. I had the evidence and the facts, but God needed to move first and create an opportunity for the real change to take place.

That opportunity came in June of 2005, when at our nominating committee meeting people raised the question about the functions of the building committee. I saw that as a small opening to suggest that if desired, the committee could have an exploratory meeting to discuss general options. A month later, we had our first building committee meeting in almost fifty years. At the beginning of the meeting, we stated that this was in no way an attempt for relocation. On the contrary, we all vowed that we would do a comprehensive study on remodeling and expanding our current facility versus



moving to a new location and beginning from ground zero. It took the committee close to a month to put together the findings. After organizing the information and discussing it privately with many of the leading members of the congregation, the board decided to call a business meeting to relate the information. At that first of many meetings, the facts were presented to the church family and people were allowed to freely express their concerns, fears, questions, and suggestions. A great number of the congregation were startled when they realized that remodeling the building would carry a substantial cost, and that expanding the building was impossible due to the property being almost swallowed up by the surrounding neighborhood. Along with presenting the case for relocation, I presented some of my personal findings as supporting facts that building a new church at a new location might revitalize the church and allow its members to complete their mission by being involved in meaningful ministries in their immediate community. My desire was for everyone to look beyond a new location and building to a time in the future when we would be positioned and ready for personal and numerical growth. The new facility would not be the end point but the launching pad for the transformation that God wanted to bring to the community of the city of Grand Prairie.

At the end of the meeting, I suggested that the building committee continue its research and look at available properties in order to establish a concrete price range, thus helping the Church to make a more informed decision. The Church unanimously agreed and authorized the building committee to continue its work. The opposition we all expected at that first meeting never materialized. It seemed that God had already gone ahead and prepared the hearts of the members of the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church!

No one—including myself—realized that this was the beginning of something much bigger than we could imagine. God had begun to move, but He also veiled our eyes from seeing His entire vision. Had He allowed us to see into the future, we all would have likely given up and walked away. He mercifully allowed us to see and take only one step at a time.

We contacted a former member who had a real estate license and requested that she compile a list of all available properties with more than three acres on the south side of Grand Prairie. Upon receiving the list, five of the building committee members drove around looking at these options. We initially looked at several commercial properties, but nothing seemed to fit our vague expectations. At the end of the day, we drove to see the last property on the list. The reason we made it the last one was because it was a residential property; we naturally figured that a commercial property would be more suitable for a church. The property was sitting on three acres with an older home, and we were quite impressed. The property was absolutely beautiful—heavily treed, in a prestigious neighborhood, and affordably priced. However, we quickly realized that there was a major problem. Even though located in close proximity to Interstate 20, the property was situated on a very quiet and little-known street. Why would anyone build a church there? Who would see us, and how would anyone ever find us? Who would even know that we exist? We went back home a little deflated but still determined to continue our search.

“Someone” kept taking my mind back to the residential property at 4202 Vineyard Road, and the following day I struck up a conversation with one of the neighbors, Mr. Harris. He told me that for the last forty years the city had been planning

on extending one of the major roads in Grand Prairie through this particular neighborhood and that this future road may be just a house away from this particular property. I still remember that moment—it was as if an electric current surge—it could be another forty years in the future. Eagerly driving to Grand Prairie City Hall, I was surprised and delighted to hear that the story was true. However, I was warned that there was no definite time frame for the new road to be built, that it could be another forty years before it happened. Undeterred, I committed to following this faint light of opportunity unless God showed us otherwise.

After a dynamic building committee meeting, we decided to recommend to the church body purchasing the property, which ultimately meant one thing and one thing only—relocation. During the meeting, I was very much aware that at any time a strong voice may rise and create an atmosphere of fear, apprehension, and guilt. Surprisingly, it seemed that there was no opposition. After the meeting, I began to communicate personally with the decision makers of the church and to share with them our discoveries. The goal was to alleviate any fears and answer as many questions as possible prior to the board and business meetings. During these exciting moments full of expectation and fears, I was constantly on my knees asking God to lead us. I desired Him to lead this transformational change, not only of location but of character.

At our next board meeting, after the building committee's presentation and the short discussion that followed, the church board selected a date for a business meeting to present the idea of purchasing the property located at 4202 Vineyard Road. Following the board meeting, I began to do the preparatory work by bringing people to the property and personally sharing a vision of the future with them. To my surprise, the majority of

people did not need much convincing and quickly began to be excited. When the time for the business meeting came, attendance was greater than it had ever been. I was not sure whether that was a good sign or if it signified trouble ahead. Nevertheless, I knew that God was in control and that nothing would stop His plans.

After a short devotional, I invited one of the builders in our congregation to make a short presentation on the current state of our building and its numerous needed repairs and their cost. He was much respected by the congregation for his professionalism and skills, and his assessment would not be questioned. His presentation left little doubt that the condition of the current building gave it no future. Then I invited another church leader-businessman from the congregation to share about the proposed new property and the possibilities it offered. At the end, I made a short presentation about our mission as a church and that we were far away from our mission field. I stressed that due to basic communication issues, we could not minister effectively to our neighbors. I also pointed out that a lack of space for social interaction severely limited our fellowship. During my closing remarks, I realized that people were seeing much more clearly the need for change. I did not in any way underplay the challenges we faced but continued to emphasize the benefits of change and that ultimately God is the One who would lead us through.

As the meeting was closing, someone raised his hand and asked: “So, why don’t we vote to buy the property?” I could not resist taking that as an invitation and responded: “If that is your desire as a congregation, we can vote to move forward. The property has been on the market for 243 days. It might be waiting just for us.” There was a second, and there were no questions. Considering the sensitivity of the situation and the

critical moment of our journey as a church, I suggested we vote by secret ballot, thus creating a safer place for people to express their true convictions and position.

What happened next left no doubt in my mind that God was firmly behind this invitation for a seismic change. When the final tally was read, we were all shocked. Only one individual had voted against purchasing the property. (Later I was told that the person was not against the project but was afraid that the financial demands of building a new church would jeopardize its ability to continue to support children receiving Christian education.) Such an outcome was overwhelming and completely unexpected, to say the least. Somehow, through the grace of God and extensive groundwork, people had seen the true picture in a matter of two months. It was obvious for all to see that God had been very much at work, preparing everyone's heart for change.

At the end of November 2005, we purchased the property from Christina Dowdy for \$242,000 and began to create an action plan. Little did we know that nine years would pass before we would even begin construction. Throughout this project, we realized that our ways are rarely like God's ways and that our timing was never His timing.

We hired an architect who began to work on some architectural plans, but the project did not go far. It felt like the project's quick and smooth beginning had slowed to a grind. Apparently, we were oblivious to God's bigger plans for us.

On the day of closing, after we signed the paperwork and acquired the property, I went back to check and make sure that the house was secure. While there, I saw our new neighbor, Mr. Harris, who had informed me of the proposed road extension and who owned the property between his property and ours. I decided to ask him if he would be open to selling his property to us. I had not talked to anyone from the church yet but

decided to test the water. Deep inside I believed that God desired for his church in Grand Prairie to have a prominent and visible presence and adequate space for future growth. The answer from Mr. Harris was a resounding *no*. Somehow though, I knew this was not his final answer. Meanwhile, the finance committee chair of our church, Glenn Belz, while working at the property, began to befriend Mr. Harris.

Several months later, Mr. Harris approached Glenn Belz and told him that he would sell the property in about two years. While to me that was much better than “never,” I did not want to delay our building project for two years! The bigger challenge I feared, though, was that if we had the chance to buy this additional property, we would have to incur more debt, which in turn would increase the monthly payments and might scare the congregation. I did not know how we would be able to afford servicing such large debt. But my dream of the church having that second property would not go away. I began to pray and work with key members of our congregation, presenting the endless possibility that this second property would give us. To my surprise, it seemed that “Someone” had already worked with each one of them. The vast majority of the key leaders in our church were much in favor. I felt encouraged and emboldened.

A few weeks after my conversation with Mr. Harris, he met again with Glenn Belz and told him that he would sell the property in six months. Surprisingly, or rather not, two years became six months! It was absolutely obvious that God was moving rapidly and mightily. But that was not the end. In another few weeks, Mr. Harris was ready to sell his property to us immediately. He told us that because of his wife’s rapidly declining health, he had realized he needed to move her to a place where she could receive more suitable care. But just as I was becoming euphoric, he said, “I know that the

highway is coming, and I will be asking more money for my property than what you paid for your property.” That was the very sentence I dreaded, and we all cringed. Faintly knowing what the road would do to the value of his property, we suspected it would come down to affordability that he could simply price us out. I asked sheepishly: “How much?” He replied, “\$260,000.” This was only \$18,000 more than what we paid for the initial property! I enjoy looking back at the “God moments” in my life. This was one of those moments because right then and there I knew God had been working on this project many years in advance. I was privileged to simply be a part of His leading and wisdom through the process of change at the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Now we had to start from the beginning again—building committee, church board, business meeting, all the way to the conference executive committee, in order to get to an executed contract. Personal and group meetings seemed to be endless. Sharing, convincing, understanding, recognizing, respecting, loving, supporting, and making friends for life, was part of my daily schedule, along with endless prayers for wisdom, grace, patience, and love. When the time came to vote to purchase the second property, there was not a single vote in opposition. Despite our monthly payment doubling, our church continued to move forward.

And then it seemed that everything again ground to a halt. Our first architect was no longer available, and we had to hire another one. Then the work began, but slowly. For a whole year we did not accomplish much. Unfortunately, that slowly began to erode the unity in our building committee. Some of the members expected from us to move forward quickly, and others felt we needed to move as fast as God opened the doors. At several of the meetings, tempers flared and strong words were exchanged. I realized that

a major work and soul searching needed to take place. God was calling us to surrender and was inviting us through the “perceived” delays of the project to allow Him to change us. It appeared He was more interested in molding all of us than moving forward with the building program. We as a congregation were working on a single level of change, while God was simultaneously working on various levels of transformation. As we navigated the pitfalls of human relations, we discovered that we do not lead but simply follow the One who knows the end from the beginning.

At the time when many began to ask the “why” question—it had been four years since the purchase of the first property—we received tremendous news: the city had started purchasing neighboring properties for the new highway. The forty-plus year wait was about to end. From an invisible presence in a secluded neighborhood, the church would become highly notable in the city of Grand Prairie. As we began to see the contours of the new road, we realized that a small strip of land would be left between us and the future highway. We knew that by the grace of God we needed to purchase this last piece of the puzzle if we wanted to complete the ultimate picture He envisioned for His church in Grand Prairie. So, the groundwork began all over again as we plunged through the same steps of preparation, working tirelessly to organize the congregation for this one final purchasing effort. In December of 2009, we purchased that last piece of prime real estate totaling 6.3 acres sitting on a future highway (at the time). The congregation was again in full support.

That same year we passed another monumental milestone. We had been discussing for a while the inevitability of offering our old church building for sale, but people were understandably reluctant to talk about the subject. Personally, I dreaded *that*



business meeting because I knew many people had bled and sacrificed to make the building at 418 East Tarrant Road a reality. For them the church was more than a structure. It was the place where their children grew up, graduated from school, made their commitment through baptism, and were married. Memories from their entire lives were connected with that building. Not surprisingly, some of the older members began to entertain the idea of having two churches in Grand Prairie in order to somehow preserve the past history of the church.

As we prepared for the business meeting, we met with church members to discuss the options, challenges, and pain, we recognized that we had come to the ultimate breaking point with the past. The old church building was our last connection with that past, and in order to move forward, we had to let go and never turn back. Our safety net was about to be removed.

At the business meeting we shared with the congregation the need to move forward and use the funds from the sale of our old church to offset the cost for our new building project. Strangely, there was not much discussion. When the time came to vote, we were all on edge. Could this split the church and derail the journey? When we counted the ballots, the voice of the entire church and the voice of God were perfectly aligned. It was unanimous: "Let's move forward together." We were all witnessing a clear manifestation of a divine intervention. Curiously, we were about to put our church on the market during the most forbidding times of a great recession. Yet, the miracle continued. God brought a buyer (another congregation) that offered us more than we could expect to receive for our church building. In August of 2011, we sold our church. For the first time

in our church history we had to move out of our building, become “homeless,” and rent from a non-Adventist church.

The selling of our church property presented us with one of the most difficult challenges in our process of change. The challenge was twofold. First, we had to move from a building that had been our home for 54 years. Second, we had to find a place to rent and worship. The nostalgia for our “good old” way of doing church was substantial, but even more challenging was the fact that we felt vulnerable as we searched for a facility to lease. The congregation felt like an uprooted tree that had no place to be planted. We had a huge property but could make very little use of it. After an extensive search we found an Assembly of God church that was willing to offer their space for the monthly payment of \$2,000.

Understandably, the new reality was becoming too much to swallow for some of the congregation. A new kind of groundwork was needed since we had quickly transitioned to a new level of challenges. Many hours were dedicated to theological conversations and to a constant reassurance that this situation was just a temporary one. I still remember vividly the trepidation I felt when I arrived at the new rental location the very first Sabbath. “Will anyone come today, and if any, how many?” I thought. But to my absolute surprise, the people came and kept coming for the next six years.

During these long years I would often go to God in prayer and plead and cry. “Lord why? Why so long? Why are You dragging this journey out for so many years, while we have become a laughingstock?” And yet, as time went on I began to see much more clearly that this tectonic change could not have happened over a short period of time with a church that had been set in its own ways for a century and a pastor who

needed to experience a life-changing transformation himself. God was moving at the speed of His people and had recognized our limitations. He never asked any of us for more than we could handle. During this long period of time I learned the lesson that “time” is the best friend of real, lasting change.

### **The Building Project**

Another aspect of the journey of the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church was the complex road of the construction process itself. We had to discontinue our work with two architects for various reasons before hiring our third and final architect. And yet the road did not become simpler and easier.

Very early in the process, the building committee recognized that we would not be able to build both the sanctuary and the fellowship hall because of extremely limited funds. Out of nowhere, this became a big point of contention. Should we build the sanctuary first or the fellowship hall? That immediately split the congregation across age lines. The younger generation emphasized the need to have a place where their children would socialize and play sports, while the older generation pointed to the fact that “we can’t worship in a gymnasium” and that “we need to think about God first.” Both sides, as expected, were passionate about their positions. Unfortunately, this issue threatened to derail the whole construction process from its inception. And again the groundwork began: educating, reasoning, compromising, listening, supporting, and overall demonstrating that the pastor did not have a personal agenda and that what really mattered was discovering what God wanted us to do.

As I listened to both sides, I felt God leading us in a different direction. I realized that the fear of those who supported the “sanctuary first” idea was that once we built the

fellowship hall and began to pay off the loan, we would never dare to undertake another significant construction project before we paid off our debt and thus would continue to worship in a gym and may never see a sanctuary in our lifetime. As I began to see the real motives and concerns, God began to open a new horizon before me. Through His grace and wisdom alone, I suggested a compromise that was still not completely satisfactory to everyone, and not financially feasible, but I felt that somehow God was leading us to have both the fellowship hall and the sanctuary. I had no idea what would happen at the end but believed that God would give us more than we ever deserved. The idea was to build the exterior of the entire building (sanctuary and fellowship hall) but finish the fellowship hall first. That would allow us to avoid conducting our Sabbath school classes in a gym but still have fellowship activities. To my surprise, the building committee agreed, and the board quickly supported the recommendation. I could not prove to anyone that we would be able financially to accomplish both but invited everyone including myself to trust that the One who had begun the good work would complete it.

#### Architectural Issues

Because of our previous experience with architects, this time we decided to take the name of the architect that our conference representative “strongly suggested.” The working relationship began well, but after several months the designing part of the building plans began to drag. The months became a year and then two. What added further to the delays was the fact that we hired a civil engineer (also recommended by a conference representative) who had a similarly loose approach to the timing of our project. They used those delays to ask the church for additional money. Additionally, poor communication between architect and civil engineer often resulted in costly

mistakes that ultimately trickled down through the entire building project. The situation became so grave that the church board suggested taking both the architect and civil engineer to court. Further complicating things, since both of these parties were recommended by the building consultant of the conference, we had little assistance from the conference. Since we were heavily invested financially on both sides (architecture and civil engineering), any attempt to pull out would have brought heavy monetary losses.

There were four different sides involved with the building project: local church, conference, architect, and civil engineer. The daunting challenge was to discover a way to navigate this difficult time in our process of change without jeopardizing our project and at the same time preventing the church from becoming disillusioned and indifferent.

The answer was simple—we fell to our knees. With a lot of emphasis on patience and trust in God and by pointing to the fact that ultimately God would make this happen in His time, people began to be more accepting of the current situation and delay. Meanwhile, my own character was severely tested as I attempted to describe the disappointment of the congregation to the architect and engineer without damaging our working relationship and placing it on a path of no repair. I still remember that before every conversation I had to spend a significant time in prayer asking God to give me strength and grace and to remove the negative emotions from my heart. And through His powerful divine wisdom, we were once again able to make it through these perilous times. Finally, in July of 2014, we broke ground. What a day! After nine long years, for the first time I began to see a glimpse of the finish line. But now came the most daunting of all tasks.

## Counting the Cost

The building of the church began at a time when the United States was coming out of a great recession. The state of Texas in particular was bustling with life. Construction projects began to appear in record numbers, and the shortage of general contractors became quickly evident. Consequently, the cost of materials escalated, and when we began to solicit proposals for our project, we realized that our initial budget from three years ago was enough to complete just 50 percent of the project. I still remember vividly the congregation sitting in disbelief at our business meeting wondering what direction to take. The main challenge stemmed from the fact that on the one hand we had invested significantly in our new building project, and on the other we had already sold our old church. Humanly speaking, the harsh reality was that there seemed to be no way forward or backward. Foreseeing this dilemma, I met with Daryl Belz prior to the business meeting, a member of our church with an extensive background in construction. I asked him if we (the church) could serve as our own general contractor and project managers, hiring and overseeing subcontractors and performing work ourselves wherever possible. We developed a budget and an optional proposal for the church. I intentionally did not share our conversation and plans with the congregation prior to the business meeting.

When we presented to the church the three outside construction bids, the initial shock was obvious. Then I offered an alternative option that would not be an easy and pleasant one but would allow us to at least have a chance of completing our initial plans to build a fellowship hall. I invited Daryl to give a detailed breakdown of the proposal and expected budget in the event that the church chose to serve as its own general

contractor. After a lot of soul searching and discussions, the members decided to take the challenge and undertake the day-to-day coordinating and management of the project.

Daryl Belz requested that the church hire Mike Spain to serve as a day-to-day project manager, and the church agreed. The budget for his management services was established to be \$75,000 distributed \$5,000 at a time over 15 months—the amount of time the church expected for the project to be complete. After nine long years, there was real excitement in the air. Finally, we were about to begin the long-awaited construction of our new church! Of course, there was still much trepidation and a sense of uneasiness because of the many unknowns in our financial picture, but somehow all our dreams felt real. At the end of the business meeting, we decided to have our ground-breaking ceremony on July 20, 2014.

Even though the church had undertaken the task of serving as its own general contractor, we quickly came to the realization that the cost of services and materials were escalating by the month. By human standards, it seemed we were undertaking an impossible task financially. Doubts, naturally, began to creep in again. The gap between our dream and our financial reality was too obvious for everyone. One day, not long after our business meeting, I was confronted by a few of our church leaders asking me directly, “Where will the money be coming from?” Even though I did not have the exact answer, deep inside I knew that God, who had led us for the past nine years, would not leave us in the middle of this incredible journey. My response to this question was a three-part series of sermons I was impressed to preach, entitled: “We Must Remember the Past,” “We Must Sacrifice,” and “We Must Believe.” I knew where our only source of strength lay. Through these sermons I made an intentional effort to direct the minds, concerns, and

uncertainties of the congregation to the only one who had all the solutions. God used these sermons to change the atmosphere of our church, and some mighty miracles began to happen.

With renewed enthusiasm after our ground-breaking ceremony, we began to prepare the property for construction. By October of 2014, we had most of the foundation forms ready for pouring concrete, but torrential rains forced us to delay the process for seven months. By October of 2015, the month we had expected to complete the project, we had only a foundation and parking lot. We had already paid the last installment of \$5,000 to our project manager and had no funds available to continue to keep him employed. The money we had raised ran out. The money we had borrowed from the conference also dried up, and since we had greatly exceeded our borrowing limit from the revolving fund, we could not dare to think of asking for further help from the conference. We were facing another wall and needed another divine intervention.

### A Divine Breakthrough

I still remember the day, the place, and the time, when I received the phone call. As noted so far, throughout this building project God had always defied logic and expectation. Halfway through this journey of faith I began to understand that it is truly impossible to figure out when and how He will intervene. And this time was no different.

As I was just about to climb into my car to drive home, the phone rang. It was the conference treasurer. I was not sure what the phone call was about, but I knew it was not for a word of encouragement or an offer for help. To my complete shock, I was wrong. After the initial greeting, Edwin Romero asked me point blank: “How much money do you need to finish the project?”



After collecting my thoughts and gathering my composure, I said: “\$250,000 will be enough to dry the building in.”

He responded: “I am not asking you how much to dry it in. How much do you need to finish the project and move in?”

Wondering if he had failed to look up the amount of our revolving fund debt (though very unlikely), I began to explain that we had borrowed more than five times our tithe. (At that time, the rule was that we could borrow up to three times the average of the last three years’ tithe.)

He interrupted again and said in a friendly voice: “I am not asking you how much you have borrowed. I am asking you how much you *need to borrow* in order to complete the project. We have our conference finance committee meeting this Thursday, and I would like to present your request there.”

Since this conversation was taking place just two days prior to the meeting, I exclaimed, “But I can’t have a business meeting and get an official request by the church in order for you to present it to your committee meeting!”

Knowing Edwin quite well, I knew he always followed the rules. But apparently, this was not Edwin speaking but simply the mouthpiece for Someone else. That is the only way to explain his next words. “Tell me the amount, and we will try to approve it contingent on the church requesting the funds.”

I knew that this had never happened before and would never happen again, especially when a church had borrowed so extensively already. In my desperate attempt to “convince” Edwin that this was a bad idea, I responded: “But I cannot guarantee that we will be able to make the monthly payments. Having such a loan will be suicidal for a

church with our size and giving abilities.” I knew this would definitely bring a reality check to his enthusiasm and make him reconsider his offer.

However, it was like Someone had already made up his mind, and nothing would dissuade him from changing it. He continued with a smile (I could hear it), “Just tell me how much you need, fill out the paperwork and loan request, and be here on Thursday to present the request to the conference executive committee.”

There was no doubt in my mind that God was fully and completely in charge of this conversation and the events that were about to transpire. So, I gathered my strength and mumbled: “We need another \$800,000 to finish.” Even though I knew that God was in charge, I expected to hear a pause.

But Edwin simply said, “Put that amount in the loan application and come over to the meeting on Thursday.” Then he hung up.

I was speechless. My mind began to race, trying to figure out what just happened, what needed still to happen, and what the ramifications would be. I dared to think that I was the most optimistic, upbeat, and hopeful member of the Grand Prairie Church, but even for me this was a little bit too much to process. How could we afford a loan that would require us to pay \$14,000 in monthly payments, plus have enough money for our monthly budget and building fund? I was convinced that this new loan request would be rejected the moment I presented it to the church. After all, the leaders of the Grand Prairie Church were common-sense people and quite responsible with money. To even consider taking such an additional loan would be irresponsible at the least.

However, the conversation with Edwin left me no other choice but to move forward. I quickly talked to several of the leaders of the church and explained to them

what had happened. I clarified that the conference vote was not an obligation on our part to borrow the money. As expected, the conference executive committee on Thursday November 3, 2015, voted to allow us to borrow \$800,000 in addition to our existing loan. This was another towering manifestation of God's sovereignty and power.

On November 14, 2015, we held one of our most critical church business meetings. The future of our project was hanging in the balance, and the outcome of this meeting would determine the success of this project. Recognizing the importance of this meeting, I decided to intentionally step back and allow God and the church to make the decision.

At the beginning of the meeting, I shared the story of my conversation with Edwin and of the conference meeting that followed. I explained that since I may be relocated as a pastor at the end of this building project and not be part of the paying back of the mortgage for the next 20 years, I had decided to step back during the subsequent discussion and vote. In doing so, I would allow the congregation to make a decision without any pressure or influence on my part. I asked the treasurer of the church, Fred Belz, to take over and lead the discussion and vote, and I stepped out of the meeting. I asked my immediate family to follow my example and leave the meeting as well. My goal was for the congregation to have the freedom to speak their minds and express their fears and thoughts.

After more than an hour they called us back. To my absolute surprise, the treasurer told us that they had unanimously decided to go ahead, to take the loan, and to finish the building, trusting that God would provide the money every month to service the mortgage. The simple truth is that I never expected those words coming from our

treasurer. After all, he was the last man standing, and if there was failure in making these payments, he may very easily feel responsible that he had misled the church. But he was there supporting this gigantic step of faith.

At that time, the church also had to make another difficult decision. Financially we could not afford to continue to employ Mike Spain, our project manager. The church needed to decide how to move forward. After another meeting with Daryl Belz and Glen Belz, three of us decided to volunteer our services as general contractors with the understanding that Daryl Belz would supervise the project. None of us felt comfortable doing so, but we simply had no other choice. The board graciously accepted our offer. And so, the long and winding road began. But God was not done with the miracles yet.

#### The Marvelous God of Wonders

As we began to find our way and figure out the scope of our work, God decided to show a glimpse of His dream for the Grand Prairie Church. It was a day like any other day. I was enjoying a pleasant lunch with good friends when God proved again that He was ultimately in charge of this project, despite all the obstacles. At the end of our time together, one of my friends turned to the other and asked: “Have you told him?”

My other friend responded: “No. I have not.”

Of course, that puzzled me, so I looked at both of them, intently waiting for “the news.” It had never crossed my mind what God was about to do.

Then, one of my friends turned to me and said that he had decided to provide the money for the completion of the sanctuary. I was shocked. Then I wanted to shout at the top of my lungs. God showed His power yet again, and I witnessed a part of His miraculous leading! All along, my dream had been to finish both sides—the fellowship

hall and the sanctuary. But I knew that this was just a dream. On that day, however, God told me that He would make my dream come true. I was on the top of the world. There was nothing that could have made me happier. It was a “God moment”—a moment when God allows one to come close to Him and touch Him. A moment when everything makes sense.

In January of 2016 one of our deacons, George Todd, called me one day and asked me if the church needed chairs and furniture for the new sanctuary. I said yes but also that I was not sure when we would have the sanctuary ready. Despite that, we took all the furniture he had to offer and placed them in storage.

Eleven months later, when I was told there was enough money to finish the sanctuary, it all made sense. God often approaches reality in a surprisingly unique and most amazing way! He provided the chairs and furniture first *and then* the sanctuary! (If we as humans buy the dining table before we have money to build the house, we will be considered foolish.) But the One who owns everything can afford to reverse the sequence of events and present us with amazing surprises. God is truly unpredictable.

Consequently, our strategy and approach as a church needed to completely shift in view of completing both phases. Our plan was to still complete the fellowship hall with all the classrooms, kitchen, and bathrooms first, then move in, and then concentrate on completing the sanctuary.

### Navigating to the Finish Line

The next 15 months were critical. The congregation had been eagerly anticipating the completion of the building project for a few years already while still renting from the Assembly of God church. Progress was quite visible but not fast enough. Then in the fall

of 2017, God added two key people to our team to help push us to the finish line. Dr. Larry Whitcomb and Tony Chong, both members of the Grand Prairie Church, decided to take off from their work and dedicate all their work time to helping complete the fellowship hall. The timing was perfect. As other church members recognized how close we were to completing the project, they decided to join as we pushed forward together. Finally, on March 30, 2018, together as a united team we crossed the finish line, and on March 31, 2018, we held our first Sabbath service in our new fellowship hall. This was an incredible moment of celebration. It felt unreal, almost like a dream. The place of construction for so many years had become a place of worship and a house for our God. The long journey in the wilderness had come to an end, and we were finally home.

But we could not celebrate for too long. We had to finish the second phase of our project—the sanctuary. After another frantic 15 months, on June 8, 2019, we were able to cross to the other side of our building and enter our new sanctuary. It was the grace of God on full display through the sacrificial work and giving of the entire congregation. On that day, it was clear to all that nothing “made sense.” It was all a miracle. Humanly speaking, our small church could never afford nor even dream of such a facility. We were all overwhelmed by the amazing work that God had accomplished. It was obvious we could not take credit for this miracle of God’s grace. We simply sat back and marveled at it with hearts full of gratitude. We were all part of God’s miraculous acts. The words of Paul rang through: “He who began a good work in you will perfect it” (Phil 1:6). God had been faithful and had truly finished the work. It was time to celebrate!

CHAPTER 5  
PROJECT EVALUATION, LESSONS LEARNED,  
AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Introduction**

This chapter first, focuses on analyzing and evaluating the implementation of leadership strategies and skills in processing change during the course of building a new worship facility for the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church. Second, it outlines the lessons learned during this process. And finally, it presents some closing remarks.

The implementation of these leadership strategies and skills evolved significantly over the period of 14 years; approach and emphasis were adjusted and recalibrated to create the most conducive environment for change to take place. However, the overarching conclusion is that leadership skills and strategies can take a leader only so far, even in the best case, before the leader recognizes his human limitations. Ultimately, it is the grace of God that moves upon the hearts of the congregation, ignites the flame of desire for change, and sustains that spark during the long and painful journey of faith. Permanent, life-lasting change is possible only through the direct intervention of the divine agency of the Holy Spirit working unceasingly to prepare hearts for change. This was more than evident during this entire process.

## **Project Evaluation**

In this section, the effectiveness of the leadership skills and strategies employed will be evaluated based on the analysis of several areas of church life and the statistics of tithe, attendance, and ministries.

### **Total Financial Contributions**

The growth of total yearly contributions of the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church during the last fifteen years has been significant. Just a glance at table 1 showing total yearly contributions makes a compelling argument.

In 2005, without a building project, the church giving was at \$366,926. Fourteen years later, in 2019, the year the church building project was completed, total contributions had climbed almost three times higher, at \$925,225. But these two numbers alone do not do justice to the real story. Beginning in 2006, due to the purchase of the first property, the church began to be significantly more liberal in giving. That trend continued quite impressively, even during the time of the great recession, when in 2011 it reached a new mark of \$571,732. Another significant spike in local giving was seen in 2017 when the amount reached \$767,434. The same trend of increase continued all the way up to \$925,225 in 2019. The church clearly defied any logical expectations for a trajectory of a building project. People are usually excited at the beginning, then enthusiasm quickly wanes if the building process drags on for more than a few years. Yet the Grand Prairie Church, through the grace of God, sustained impressive growth in giving over the 14 years of change.

I still remember our board meeting in early February of 2019, when we discussed the need to fundraise an additional \$150,000 in order to complete the entire project. All



of us wondered if we had exhausted the congregation’s ability to give. We were fearful that people had reached their limit and that they had no more to give. Fast-forward 10 months later, and the church had reached an all-time record of giving—an astonishing \$925,225, an amount impossible to imagine during that board meeting in February.

This story is more than just a building project story. It is a journey of total transformation of a congregation that did not see many reasons to give any more prior to 2006. It demonstrates what God can do with people who are willing to surrender and follow His vision for their spiritual lives. And yet I believe this is not the end, but just the beginning of what God is about to do financially through and for the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church congregation.

Table 1

*Total Yearly Contributions*

Year	Total Contributions (tithe, offerings, building fund)
2005	\$366,926
2006	\$501,628
2007	\$416,424
2008	\$431,256
2009	\$421,848
2010	\$418,650
2011	\$571,732
2012	\$506,431
2013	\$447,946
2014	\$541,616
2015	\$557,005
2016	\$519,283
2017	\$767,434
2018	\$681,112
2019	\$925,225

## Church Attendance

Even though attendance remained largely unchanged during the first 12 years of the building project, as Table 2 below demonstrates, immediately following March 31, 2018 (the date the congregation began to worship in the new fellowship hall), attendance began to steadily grow. The average monthly attendance until that point was between 100 and 110 people. Beginning in April of 2018, the attendance began to gradually move upward. By June 8, 2019, the weekly attendance had almost doubled. No doubt the opportunity for the congregation to have its own adequate space for spiritual, social, and ministry life, brought excitement and passion and has attracted others to join the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church family.

Curiously, some of the people who had joined the church during this time of growth had been members who were not attending on a regular basis. Through the building project and the new life that this process generated, they felt a compelling reason to become active again and be part of the movement that God had been leading during these years of change.

Table 2

*Average Monthly Attendance*

Month/Year	Average Monthly Attendance
February 2018	100
March 2018	146
April 2018	140
May 2018	129
June 2018	133
July 2018	129
August 2018	147
September 2018	135
October 2018	138
November 2018	153
December 2018	163
January 2019	156
February 2019	171
March 2019	161
April 2019	179
May 2019	153
June 2019	223
July 2019	193
August 2019	189
September 2019	191
October 2019	174
November 2019	176
December 2019	181
January 2020	186
February 2020	200

**Inreach and Outreach**

The opportunity for the congregation to have its own facility has affected its in-reach and outreach. For instance, the church struggled throughout the years to have well-attended Sabbath School classes. Many creative efforts to revitalize its services brought short-term success. However, since the congregation moved to its new facility on March 31, 2018, not only did the attendance of the existing classes improve dramatically, but three new Sabbath School classes were organized with a very impressive sustained

attendance, drawing from a pool of people who were not attending Sabbath School. This all created a very exciting challenge—the need for additional space since there were no other available classrooms. During the process of building the church, we always feared that we were building too many classrooms, but in the span of two years the congregation realized that there were *too few* classrooms. Another impressive initiative was the creation of an orchestra that involved a large number of young people who were not very involved in church life. Their excitement was obvious, and they were eager to be a part of the worship service. They added a special element to our worship services and elevated the overall level of the worship experience.

In late 2018 and early 2019, two community outreach events were organized with resounding success. The first was a Best Weigh Program designed to help people control their weight by understanding better their physiology and its function, and to teach them the basic biblical and scientific principles of healthful living. The average attendance was thirty. Quite a few people came from the community and were excited to participate in a program giving them simple and powerful tools to change the direction of their lives. The second program was a ten-week cooking class designed to be a continuation of the Best Weigh Program, teaching people how to cook foods that contribute to their healthful living. This program was even more popular than the first one, and more than sixty people attended every class, most of whom were guests of members and people from the community. The church members who attended and facilitated the classes were most encouraged and excited because they began to see the bigger vision that God had for the church in Grand Prairie. There was clear evidence that the new building facility had not only enhanced the opportunities for the congregation to do inreach and outreach, but also

brought excitement and passion in doing so. It is my personal conviction that God placed this church building to be “a light on a hill,” and through His grace it will serve many others in experiencing His love and compassion.

### **Valuable Lessons Learned**

I often wonder, *Why me, Lord?* I am convinced that God could have brought someone much more qualified to lead the construction of the new church building for the Grand Prairie Seventh-day Adventist Church. And yet He chose me. As I look back, I recognize that this was likely one of the most effective ways God could have chosen to teach me about His grace, love, and perfect will, as well as about my own limitations and myriad flaws. During this long and exhausting process, there were lessons too numerous to mention, yet some are too important to leave out. The following are some of the most critical and life-changing lessons God taught me.

#### **People Matter the Most**

People are more important than achieving any goal, no matter how noble and praiseworthy it might be. Naturally, I am an extremely self-driven individual; running the race and finishing the work is the ultimate obsession of my life. Completing the church building project had been my focal point during these 14 years, and yet God had turned my attention again and again to *the people*. It is all about the people. Buildings are important, but without a loving and compassionate group of people, these buildings are a hollow and useless space. People do matter the most.

## It Is More About the Journey

I have clearly recognized that it is more about the journey than about the final destination. I often wondered why God dragged out a project for 14 years that could have been completed in two or three. *Time wasted*, I thought. And yet I eventually realized that this was the only way I would be on my knees and seek the Lord as never before. I often picture God as a loving father who longs to spend time with His children and do things together, while His children are interested only in the final product. Every delay, roadblock, and other complication creates another opportunity for us to work together with our heavenly Father. As we interact with Him daily, we are experiencing a spiritual and relational transformation that is possible only in close and continual communion with Him. A true leader must value the journey much more than the final destination.

## Trust is Paramount

It is impossible to lead without first creating an atmosphere of trust. Trust is paramount for any significant change to take place. People will not follow a leader they do not know and trust, even if he has a divinely inspired vision. Later in my ministry for the Grand Prairie Church, I recognized that had I attempted to challenge the congregation with the full scope of the building project at the beginning, it likely would have been quickly shut down. They did not know me and could not have trusted me. In the latter years, during the actual phase of building the church, that developed trust was obvious. For example, I often used to go to the board and present subcontractors who had bid for a particular job. I would ask the board to decide which one to hire. More often than not, their response was to ask me which one I preferred. I have to admit that this put me in a rather uneasy situation, but it was obvious that the board trusted my judgment.

I have to note, however, that trust is mutual. A leader cannot do much unless he trusts his congregation as well. The more time that goes by and the more mutual trust is developed, the less likely it is that the challenges of change will break that trust.

### God Controls the Timing

Never set an arrival time! This was possibly the lesson that took me the longest to learn. Throughout the span of 14 years, I set too many dates to even remember all of them. Sadly—or maybe thankfully—not a single one materialized. As we neared the end of the project, I had completely changed my perspective on this. Whenever I was asked when I thought we would be in the new building, my answer was that since I have been wrong many times, I would not even attempt to predict. That lifted the pressure from my shoulders. I was not responsible anymore. God was. When I would set a deadline, I would do everything in my power to meet that deadline. When I was not able to meet it, I got frustrated and felt that my reputation had been damaged. Leaders should realize that they are not in charge of time. The sooner they realize that, the better. Leaders must remember that God alone controls time and timing.

### It is God's Project, Not Yours

One of the greatest temptations of every spiritual leader is to take things too personally and to live with the sense that he or she is in charge and that this is his or her project. I personally had to repeat to myself on multiple occasions that I am not in charge and that this is not my building project. And yet leaders feel the external pressure and inner temptation to think that it all depends on them and on their decision-making. I recognized that there was a fine line between taking things too personally and working as a “hired hand.” Thus, personal enthusiasm and passion must be acknowledged in the

context of God's ownership. This understanding must be continually kept before the church members too. It is not about the pastor or the leader, but it is all about God. He is in control, and every delay or roadblock has happened with His permission and knowledge. God is the ultimate leader, and the human leader is just a helper.

### God is the Only Source of Funding

The financial aspect of every building project is one of the most critical elements of change. At the beginning stages of our congregational journey of transformation, I was counting the people in the congregation who could make this project happen financially. Truly, I never approached these individuals personally and asked for their assistance. Nevertheless, I counted on their support and trusted their commitment. Interestingly enough, over some period of time God removed most of them from the scene. It was as if God was posing the uncomfortable question, "What are you going to do now, since your sources of presumed strength are gone?"

It was at that particular time that the story of George Muller, the man who organized and served multiple orphanages in England, came to my attention. One of the key elements of his experiences with God was that at the beginning of his journey, he committed that he would not seek financial help from a human being but would direct his requests only to God. And the rest is history. Considering his experience, deep in my heart I made a covenant with God that no matter what, I would not plead with anyone but Him for the financial support of our building project. After all these years, some of which have been pretty scary financially, I have to attest that God kept His word and always provided. When we came to dire situations, He was the only One to whom I turned for financial assistance. He never disappointed.



I am convinced that when a leader approaches any change, (in my context, a building project), he must seek God as the only source of financing. A leader might be able to enlist and rely on human help, but at the end there will be a temptation for all the credit to go to those individuals who had invested the money. Consequently, some may be tempted to assume it was through their finances that the project really happened. If a leader wants to avoid members of the church feeling that they own the new church building, he or she must seek God as the only source of funding.

### Creating Ownership by Involving Others

A key component in the process of change is for a leader to involve as many people from the congregation as possible. There is a fine line between having professionals doing the work and inviting volunteers from the congregation helping in the process of construction.

As an example, in the area of interior design, we attempted on several occasions to work with outside entities, but in the end, each one of those efforts failed. Finally, we decided to follow the example of Moses and ask God to lead us to the people in the congregation whom He had already prepared for this specific area. We selected a team of several people from our church, and I personally committed that I would respect and defend their authority and decisions and encourage the board to do so as well. I have to admit that sometimes my opinion differed from theirs, but if I was not asked for my opinion I resisted the temptation to share it. In the process, we developed wonderful working relationships. Ultimately, we not only had a beautiful product, but also experienced a lot of personal satisfaction that made the whole process worth it.

People get tired of being asked to contribute financially while never being involved in the decision-making process and in the implementation of those decisions. Today, many people from the Grand Prairie Church look at that building not only as a piece of real estate about which they have been praying, but as their own personal house of worship. They own it because they have invested their lives in it. I have learned that for a leader to succeed in not only processing change but also in making that change a permanent and exciting part in the life of the congregation, he must involve and empower as many people as possible as he gives up his authority and respects theirs.

#### Staying Focused on the Final Goal

One of the most important lesson I learned is that petty issues can easily derail the transformational process of a congregation. During these 14 years of transition, numerous small things could have led our focus away from our final goal. Had I allowed that, the energy of the congregation would have been spent on needless meetings and discussions. At the same time, I have learned that a leader cannot simply ignore these issues. He must address them but at the same time keep the main focus on the goal. A leader must refocus every mind to what really matters. Thus, staying focused on the final goal will alleviate many unnecessary delays and will make the process of change much smoother.

#### God Deserves the Best

Growing up in a pastor's home, I learned from an early age that God's house needs to be the very best. Nehemiah's words of reproach to the returned captives who built for themselves nice homes while allowing God's temple to be in disrepair, have always challenged me. So, very early in the building project, I purposed in my heart that the house of my God would be the very best. When the church took charge of managing

the building project, I began to push for certain changes to be made to the original plans in order to maximize the space and functionality and enhance the design and appearance of the interior and exterior of the building. I knew that this would add substantially to the cost of an already expensive project, but my passion for God's house to be the very best compelled me to press on. A simple and yet powerful lesson I learned is that God will smile at such a leader, will honor his desire, and will make the impossible possible. The cost of our upgrades would have amounted to several millions of dollars, but God moved upon the hearts of contractors and salespeople, and we were able to do everything we desired for a fraction of the cost.

Additionally, God provided money for items that were not necessarily vital for our services. A great example is the story of our sound system. From the very early stages of the building process, I dreamed of an exceptional sound system for our congregation. When the time came, we presented to the board a top-of-the-line brand, as well as the very top products for that brand. At that time, we were close to finishing our sanctuary, had run out of money again, and needed to do another fundraiser in order to finish the construction. Therefore, I expected that the exorbitantly-priced sound system I was requesting would be voted down. To my surprise, the board decided on the very top model of the BOSE sound system that is usually installed in high-end facilities. We did not have the money, but we wanted to do the very best for our God. When the time came to order the system, about four months later, we already had the money. Considering our financial struggles through the years of building our church, it was almost unbelievable to have the very latest state-of-the-art model sound system. Yet, God delighted in our desire to do the very best for Him, and He indulged us as a loving father would do. The sound

system story was just one of many such stories. If a leader truly aims to honor God with the very best, God will honor him in turn and with delight will help him achieve the desire of his heart.

### **Conclusions**

Developing and implementing leadership skills and strategies in processing change are paramount for the success of any leader. They are even more critical in the area of spiritual transformation and growth. These skills and strategies can be learned and improved if a leader deems them essential for his ministry. Successful leaders are lifelong learners. And yet true and humble spiritual leaders realize that knowledge, skills, and strategies will never be enough to bring permanent and lifelong change to a congregation. God is ultimately the author and driving force behind any permanent life-altering transformation. Without the divine vision and mandate, a leader will eventually realize that he is fighting a losing battle, even if he is successful in bringing some external change. My constant question during these 14 years was, *Lord, am I leading these people in this direction, or is it You who is truly leading them? Please show me without a shadow of a doubt that You are leading and not me.* And every time, without delay, He gave me that peace and assurance that He was the leader. I never could have made it to the finish line without that assurance and conviction.

During the years of this project, God also demonstrated that He is just as interested in the transformation of His congregation as in the transformation of the life of the leader. We as leaders need to recognize that we are subjects of change just as much as we are agents of change. The notion that the congregation needs to change but that I, the leader, am just fine, is counterbiblical and only creates a false sense of security. It is

possible that we as leaders are placed many times in circumstances requiring change because we are in most need of such change. I had fought the call of God for pastoral ministry since I was seven years old. “I will never be a pastor” was a constant phrase I used while growing up. “I will not be a pastor for the rest of my life,” I stated at multiple occasions while serving as a pastor. But during these fourteen years of transformation, God finally broke through. He was after my heart, not a building project. He could have found a more efficient person to lead and manage the construction of His church in Grand Prairie. But by calling me to lead change, He was carving change into my life and ministry. Change is always first about the leader and then about the others. Just because I am called to lead a change, I am not exempt from it. On the contrary, I probably need it the most.

I have discovered that when God calls a leader, He almost never lays out in detail the full picture and the final destination. I am convinced that if He had done so with me, I would have probably run away long ago. What God wants to achieve in us and through us is most of the time completely overwhelming. He reveals His plans and the details one step at a time. That is why faith is paramount in any process of change. We do not see much from the beginning. Even what we see might prove to be a false by-product of our imagination. Faith comes in and brings calmness when we ask and search for the next step, especially when there is no obvious answer. Many times God simply reveals a big but blurred vision of the future so the leaders can be challenged to take Him at His word and trust Him as He reveals the future step by step. I have struggled many times to stay behind and not ahead of God because I was too impatient to wait for Him to reveal what was to come next. At the same time, I have recognized that I should not use God as a

crutch, an excuse for not developing and growing the natural gifts and skills He has given me.

Leading change is a partnership between God and man, where God is supreme but He still expects and encourages the human element to master his God-given potential while continuing to learn new skills and creating new strategies. Change is at the very foundation of life, and leaders are called by God to assist Him in transforming one life at a time.

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