
KEEPING YOUR CHURCH ON COURSE

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

INTRODUCTION

How do we know if we are headed in the right direction?

In some religious circles people talk about a *call* on their life—a sense of mission and purpose, an assignment for how to direct and devote their energies. A typical “*call*” might be into medical missions work, pastoral ministry, etc. While I would never argue with anyone who spoke about a *call* on their life, I do believe that language creates two terrible misunderstandings in the minds of most followers of Jesus. First of all, it implies two classes of spiritual citizens—the few believers with a special *call*, and the many others who, without such a *call*, relegate themselves to spiritual insignificance and inactivity.

According to the Bible, all believers are *called*; in fact, the very meaning of church implies being “*called out*.” We have been *called out of darkness* (1 Peter 2:9), and *called out* from our former way of life. Jesus *called out* to people, inviting them to follow Him—out of their existing circumstances: Peter and John left their nets, Matthew his tax office. The invitation stands for everyone, “*Follow Me*.” Each of us has an equal part to play in God’s kingdom; some are eyes, others are ears, but all of us are parts of His body.

Secondly, a *call* can place too much emphasis on broad factors, like our occupation or our geographic location, and not enough emphasis on daily devotion and moment-by-moment discipleship and ministry—as though God is primarily interested in our ultimate destination/vocation. If my *calling* is to be a pastor in Santa Cruz, was I fulfilling God’s plan when I simply led student Bible studies at UCLA, working as a gardener in Bel Air 35 years ago? Can people miss their *calling*—and if they do, is that the end of their ministry effectiveness?

ALONG THE WAY

It’s the journey, *not* the destination (other than Heaven) that matters. Our *calling* is to follow Jesus, day-by-day, realizing that He will lead us differently than we would have known to go on our own,

and differently than He leads others (John 21:18-22). I think that is why Jesus' earthly itinerary was so random: *His calling* was simply to do God's will (Hebrews 10:7), and "*God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power...*" so he could go "*...about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil*" (Acts 10:38).

In no way do I wish to deprive ministers of their sense of ministry purpose, but years of serving Jesus have taught me that our ministry assignments shift with time, like the colored pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope. Frequently, the "*lost*" sense of vision/passion experienced by ministers is actually intimation, an indication that a fresh season and *new calling* is at hand; different seasons of life/ministry call for different postures and arrangements.

Therefore, attempting to define and find our "*calling*" may not be as useful as simply discovering our current, assigned-by-God, job-at-hand. Isn't that the advice of Scripture, "*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it heartily...*" (Ecclesiastes 9:10; Colossians 3:23)?

In His wisdom, the Lord has made sowing (seed) a process with multiple and distinct activities, and the ensuing harvesting methods differ according to crop—so that we will ever seek His counsel (Isaiah 28:23-29). Kingdom aircraft cannot be flown on autopilot!

Because each of us are unique beings, and likely we are at different points in our life/ministry, it is somewhat presumptuous for anyone to suggest 3-4 key points for getting your life/ministry on track (again), or to make you more successful. But if you will release me from the pressure to provide you with an exhaustive list guaranteed to make a difference, despite any other factors in your life, I will share a few thoughts with you that have been helpful to me.

BIBLICAL SUCCESS

Let's begin by redefining success in biblical terms. God told Joshua he would have success if he carefully did according to God's word (Joshua 1:8). But the promise had nothing to do with possessions, positions or accomplishments to which Joshua could one day point as proof of success; rather, it was a promise that Joshua would have greater and greater insight; he would become more circumspect in his decisions and acquire greater expertise for living/leading.

Might that insight lead to other advantages and rewards? Possibly. But the scriptural focus is not on the goods a successful person ends up with, but on the wisdom that person acquires along the way.

Biblical success is best understood as "*increasing in wisdom and stature...*" (Luke 2:52), not necessarily as growing in numbers on Sunday morning. The two are not exclusive of one another, but neither are they the same thing!

PERSONAL LEADERSHIP

Most Kingdom breakthroughs happen through us—as God, by His merciful grace uses and empowers us—as His agents in the world. That’s why it is so important to define the success of our life/ministry by starting with the immediate circle of our influence. Paul puts it this way to his young friend, Timothy:

“Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.” ~1 Timothy 4:16

I suppose there are millions of reminders we might give ourselves for staying on track with God and His purposes for our lives. I have reduced that long list to four simple admonishments to my soul. Like David instructed himself, *“Bless the Lord O my soul” (Psalms 103:1-2; 104:35)*, so I remind myself to focus on these things:

- **Make Disciples**—Develop and serve others in ways that advance them, as opposed to only thinking of yourself and your needs in Kingdom enterprise (Colossians 1:24-29). Jesus made this so simple: all you have to do is pass along the truth and lessons He has taught you through the years. It is no accident that people are so open and amenable to testimonies about how such and such has changed their lives. When you speak about what Jesus told you that changed everything, people will become His followers.
- **Deny Yourself**—Contradict your natural ways of thinking, and learn to live/minister by spiritual truth and biblical revelation (Mark 8:27-35). Your upbringing and education, your inbred instincts, your logic and reason will conspire to get you to do things that make sense! Jesus’ words and ways usually require that we go against what makes sense in the world’s terms.
- **Fulfill Your Ministry**—Function according to your unique design and Gift-Mix within the whole Church Body (Ephesians 4:11-16). You are not called to be or to do what others have been made to accomplish. Play your position. Affirm and value others’ contributions and ministries, but do not lose your uniqueness in following others’ examples of obedience.
- **Extend Grace and Kindness**—God’s mercies are over all; He is kind in all His deeds (Psalm 145), so represent Him well in how you treat people. If we’re supposed to “out do one another in love,” then leaders must outpace everyone else even more. All of us make mistakes and disappoint God, others...and ourselves. God’s covenant is foolproof; it is unbreakable. His merciful love can outlast any failure or wrongdoing. Above all else, be certain to communicate His fathomless love and affection.

PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY

The expression *philosophy of ministry* is simply a way of describing the primary approach someone takes in responding to Jesus' mandate to make disciples in all the world. What do you mean by (and think about or picture in your mind) the word ministry. Many ministers equate ministry with something done in front of people at an event, a meeting, or some other pre-arranged time. My working definition is much broader.

Your philosophy of ministry (i.e., how you think about ministry) also includes the goal for ministry. My main goal for all ministry is at least two-generational; in other words, I want people who observe or experience ministry to be able to do the same ministry to others. I want ministry to be "*performed*" by mentors, not magicians! Ministry magicians excite a crowd with remarkable feats done *here and now*, but the audience presumes that such things can only be performed by a gifted few.

Ministry mentors, on the other hand, try to pass along tricks of their trade by using ministry situations the way a master-craftsman trains an apprentice as part of his promise to the aspiring craftsman: "*Someday-you'll-have-your-own-shop!*" With time and skill, the apprentice is supposed to have the hope that he or she can do the same work as the mentor—but with a style all their own.

Ministry philosophies have implications for how we do church. For instance, the training component that I believe should be in most ministry activity explains why our counseling ministry almost always involves a small group of counselors—each at different levels of experience and accomplishment—praying for and talking with a person seeking God's wisdom for living. We rarely confine counseling to a solitary, trained counselor.

DIFFERING VALUES

Since there are many, many components to the work of the Church on Earth (occupying until Jesus returns); no one person/church can do everything, each of us adopts a set of priorities for our time, resources, focus, etc.

For example, I am more inclined toward discipling and developing new believers than I am toward winning new converts; I tend to be drawn to leaders more than to their congregations. I do much better on the front end, the start-up of ministry ventures than I do maintaining ministry that has already been established. I put far more value in one-on-one meetings with a few people than I do on large, stage-oriented meetings. Given my choice for what to establish in a new country, I would opt for 8-10 modest-size churches, rather than one large church.

I think it is more important to plant churches out from The Coastlands than it is to concentrate on growing The Coastlands into a larger church. You might say that the end-point for our ministry as a

church is to “send” people to new settings where they will be capacitated to duplicate the essential ministry they received here. That is another way to discover your philosophy of ministry: what do you measure and count? What numbers do you evaluate to see how well you are doing? Salvations, attendance, monthly income, seating-capacity of the new sanctuary, etc., are normal factoids shared among pastors in most denominations.

But those are very different considerations than the percent of regular attendees who also attend cell groups, the proportion of the congregation that has an identified service assignment each week, the ratio of tithers to non-tithers, and the number of church-planting teams or mission teams you send out each year. *Your count divulges you values.*

DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES

The fact that my *philosophy of ministry* differs from another pastor’s does not make mine right and the other pastor’s wrong. Just as there are different *ministry gift-mixes in the body*, and each one is important to the health of the whole, so, too, do different *ministry philosophies* each have their place.

But my passion to mend and send people does not easily cohabitate with a *ministry philosophy* that discourages cell groups and that wants to keep collecting “leaders” in more training classes, rather than releasing them to do what they’ve already been trained to do. I’m a fan of in-service, “*here’s how to handle the problems you are now encountering*”; more than pre-service, “*let me first teach you everything you’ll need to know training.*”

To me, the primary point of fellowship is to follow Jesus’ pattern when He said,

“I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.” ~John 17:23

We come together to (one day) go, not to stay together. I believe that the true measure of one’s ministry effectiveness is 2nd generational—not just how the people listening to me are affected, but how those listeners go forth and impact people whom I will never be privileged to address. The real proof of my parenting will be seen in my grandchildren.

I remind pastors that Jesus has a problem; He needs more workers for the harvest. As wonderful as it is for you as a minister to be an eager servant who gives your time and life for the sake of others, if you are not careful, you will unintentionally fail in your most important task—making disciples. The leaders you need and seek for your church and cell groups are not sent from Heaven; they are made on Earth. If you simply pray for more leaders, you’re missing the point.

From where should Jesus take those leaders—from another church? From among someone else's disciples?

The Gospel is a transformational message, and that means future leaders are going to resemble Peter, as he was when Jesus first stepped into his boat by the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had eyes for what Peter would become, instead of what he was. Church leaders must, likewise, orient themselves to what people have a potential of becoming with their input and mentoring.

Church leaders can also fall prey to the myth that only a few are “*called to the ministry*.” Actually, the entire church is already “*the few*,” and it makes no sense to reduce our ministry numbers even further. Since people will naturally slot toward “*least resistance*” and comfort themselves with vague thoughts of *not being called*, my responsibility as a spiritual leader ought to center around getting people to eagerly embrace their high-calling in Kingdom enterprise.

I want to balance “Stay in Jerusalem” with “*...Be My witnesses in Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth*” (Acts 1:4, 8).

PERSONAL PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES

In addition to the ministry philosophy of your church, you—as a spiritual leader—have a ministry paradigm, a set of beliefs and vantage points through which you sort decisions about how best to spend your time and effort. Each of us has a set of priorities and understandings that act like a series of mental and spiritual filters through which we process options.

Your underlying beliefs about how things work in the Kingdom and in the church world, act as prioritizing direction-givers for your ministry emphases. They are not doctrinal statements per se. I'm not talking about a *pick and choose* theology, as though you and I can decide which Bible truths we prefer to others!

For the sake of clarity, let's presume that you and another church leader share identical theology (soundly biblical, of course). You two could have differing (almost opposing) pastoral perspectives as part of your ministry philosophies. This is not about right and wrong, doctrinally pure and heretical. It's just that your church experience, mentor models, and Kingdom life have led you to form some non-negotiable beliefs about the “*right*” way to approach church leadership. Think of these as part of your culture—so internalized that you hardly speak them aloud—and yet, they shape much of what you do to be successful as a leader.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES FROM MY LEADERSHIP

That is why it is important to understand what makes up our bias in ministry. For instance, here are a few of the perspectives that are deeply etched in my psyche and that strongly influence the culture of any organization or ministry enterprise that I lead:

- Believers are intended to stream into the desert, rather than collect in lakes. I concentrate more on equipping and sending believers out into ministry, than on getting them into my church.
- Invisible, unimpressive things are usually more spiritually significant than big, noteworthy things. Since the worlds were made out of the invisible dimension, that dimension holds the key to change in the world.
- Every believer is anointed with the specialized capacity to recover and mature others. I do not accept the idea that some believers are just not “cut out for” ministry. A leader’s job is to train and engage all his or her followers in active ministry.
- Mercy ought always to triumph over judgment. I never need to remind myself to be critical or judgmental; unfortunately those tendencies come unbidden to my heart. What I always need reminding about is to be more kind and gracious. Hmmm. I would say, therefore, that it takes more spiritual maturity to exercise mercy than it does to wield criticism or condemnation.
- Disciples are selected and made on Earth, not sent from Heaven.
- True spirituality ushers in the gracious workings of God.
- Truly spiritual people have the inner strength from God to stand alone (in the face of opposition or discouragement), but they are not loners; instead, they use their strength to enable others to stand alongside them.
- Size and significance are not synonymous.
- Regardless of upbringing, pedigree or ancestors, everyone has the opportunity to become spiritually significant through their disciples and spiritual descendents.
- Small group and one-on-one discipleship settings impact people more than large-group sermons.

COMMON COASTLANDS' PHRASES AND MOTTOS

"Believe the best of and for people."

"Never do alone what you could do with another."

"Use the job to get the people done; not vice-versa."

"Clay feet are everywhere."

"Serving is one of the best ways to get healed and matured."

"All share alike, baggage or battle" (1 Samuel 30:24-25).

"Don't despise small beginnings" (1 Samuel 14:1-15).

INSTITUTIONAL DISTINCTIVES

The distinctives that cause a church to excel at its work come at least in part, from the Lord's mandate for that church. All humans share common characteristics that differentiate us from antelopes, yet we each have qualities and traits that distinguish us from the rest of our kind. In the same way, churches share enough similarities with one another to make them unlike grocery stores, but all churches do not all look alike.

The features of one church do not necessarily resemble those of another, anymore than one face or personality looks like another. A sovereign God has made each of us who and what we are by His grace—and that grace work extends to congregations as well as to people.

Who are we; what are we like as a church? It is a difficult concept to grasp, but it is made easier by first asking the questions:

- What is our primary business? What are we really trying to do as a church; what is our end purpose?
- What produces real gain for the kingdom of God and for our church? How do we measure true profitability as a congregation?

PURPOSE OF THE COASTLANDS:

Over the centuries, church has adopted different forms and structures. I'm not necessarily interested in commenting on historic patterns, or making observations about how any of our contemporaries may pattern church. Though they can be stated in many ways, the reasons why our church, The Coastlands, exists—why we bother with the hassle of “having” church week after week—are profoundly simple (but easy to lose sight of).

There are many different ways to communicate our most compelling intentions for church, and since each of them is an ongoing process—rather than a one-time event—they cannot easily be codified into a short list. However, the list that follows gives a fairly good idea of our particular aims as a church. Life in our congregation is geared to:

- Introduce people to the love and the (eternal) life of God, through Jesus Christ—exalting Jesus as Lord in worship and witness. We want to help people to know God better, and to love Him more. We remind everyone that Jesus is the only hope for a restored relationship with God.
- Disciple and train people in Kingdom principles so that they can do the same to others; teaching from the Bible, the revealed and definitive word of God. We seek to explain the principles and ways of the kingdom of God so that people can see immediate, *life-changing* implications for their lives and in the lives of others.
- Demystify the person and work of the Holy Spirit, calling on Him to aid our worship and to empower our ministry. We help people discover, understand and flourish in the spiritual gifts and ministry gift-mix God has uniquely designed for them.
- Provide an embracing context within which people can be truly known and unconditionally accepted—loving one another like the Lord loves each of us, accepting and nurturing people without pre-conditions. We try to embrace people within a living community of fellow believers who are learning to love one another as Jesus commanded.
- Honor and welcome people as vital and unique parts of the whole Body of Christ—enabling everyone to serve (minister) according to their God-intended design and capacities. We mobilize individuals into various aspects of serving—doing to others what has been done to them.

Of course, at *The Coastlands* our mission is to *love, mend, train and send people*, but the way we do that is by multiplying discipling disciples. Not only do we want to nurture and develop believers, but we also want to inspire those we disciple to disciple others. We are trying to mobilize people that mobilize people; raise up leaders who will ‘raise up’ others.

So we must ask ourselves: *What are the primary means by which discipling disciples are raised up?* By identifying and, on a system-wide basis, directing resources toward what makes us most productive we will make significant gains in accomplishing our goal.

SOME COASTLANDS' DISTINCTIVES

What are the keys to our uniqueness as a church? What do the guests see? What makes us stand out from other churches in our community? These are our ideals for church—what we would like to be “*in deed and in truth*”:

- A process church, not a production/performance oriented church; a group of senders and releasers, not collectors.
- A living body that depends on everyone being involved and working together; every part is counted on to serve people, not the church. We challenge and lead people while including them as vital change-agents in the whole process.
- A congregation, not just a weekly collection of people; or a crowd; a transparent offer of relationship and connection with other people. We try to stay focused on individuals, and treat them as more than a project.
- A Pentecostal church modeling sane and sensible spirituality. We want to reclaim vibrant Spirit-empowered ministry from the weirdness too often associated with it.
- A place where every servant is equally valued; and where anyone is encouraged to be themselves. We try to love and accept people where they are, but hold out high hope for their future.
- A loving community where you don't have to appear together or be a Christian of certain stature; it's OK to fall apart and admit it.
- A setting for one-on-one discipleship in the context of meaningful and honest relationships. We train people to touch others.

INTENTIONALLY AIMING YOUR CHURCH “ELEMENTS”

Christian leaders tend to be ambivalent about making plans because they know we are not supposed to “*worry about tomorrow... Each day has trouble enough of its own*” without worrying about the future (*Matthew 6:34*). When Jesus originally commissioned His disciples to advance the Kingdom, He sent them off without plans or provisions. Additionally, the rich farmer who sought

to make plans for his future harvest is used by Jesus as an example of a fool who missed the primacy of today (Luke 12:13-21).

The weight of Scripture—at least as it appears to the casual memory—seems to prize immediacy, spontaneity and lack of forethought at the expense of purposeful planning and consideration. Unfortunately, our perspective about things is often shaped by what we remember of the Bible, not necessarily by the whole counsel it offers that matters.

CULTIVATING THE FIELD

Actually, there are many references in Scripture to the need for wise counsel, good thinking and planning. As with most truth, this requires balance—relying on the Lord without worrying about the future *and* making war by wise counsel and deliberation.

“After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land.” ~Ecclesiastes 5:9

“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.” ~Ecclesiastes 9:10

“Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed.” ~Proverbs 15:22

“Prepare plans by consultation, and make war by wise guidance.” ~Proverbs 20:18

“So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them with his skillful hands.” ~Psalm 78:72

“But the noble man devises noble plans; and by noble plans he stands.” ~Isaiah 32:8

TWO DIMENSIONS OF PLANNING

Pastoring has two dimensions: our personal walk mentality and ministry on the one hand, and our organizational leadership role on the other. Individually, we can and should abandon ourselves to the Holy Spirit’s daily leading: simple obedience must carry the day; and it can with a single choice we make. When it comes to following the Holy Spirit’s guidance for an entire congregation, however, it isn’t quite so simple.

It is one thing for a pastor to sense the direction of the Lord; it is another thing to communicate that sense of direction to others so that they can embrace it as well. Adding to the dilemma is the need to coordinate all the movements of the whole *Body* in that direction.

Making the most of our time organizationally requires us to live intentionally—carefully (*taking accurate, deliberate, pointed and purposeful steps*) and wisely (*not rash, reckless, random or scattered*); rather than taking the hit-and-miss approach, we must “...*understand the will of the Lord*” (*Ephesians 5:15-17*). That’s the secret to directing our personal lives and our congregations. We have to understand what the will of the Lord is. What is He doing with us? How can we cooperate with Him?

Instead of planning, perhaps it would be better to talk about aiming ourselves and the elements of our church process to best participate in what the Lord is doing. We don’t really make plans as much as we subscribe to the plans God has already formed in order to give us and others a “*future and a hope*” (*Jeremiah 29:11*). We “*labor in vain*” if we try to build a house the Lord isn’t building (*Psalms 127:1*). All the good planning in the world will do nothing eternal if it is done in isolation from the plans and purposes of God. That is why I prefer to use the expression ‘strategic positioning’ instead of ‘planning.’

Strategic positioning is a way for an entire organization to get in agreement with the Lord, to say, “Yes” to Him with our church structures, systems, and programs. Individually, we are admonished to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Strategic positioning helps a church process do just that—with its vital parts.

STRATEGIC, SPIRITUAL PLANNING IS NOT...

- Coming up with plans and asking God to bless them.
- An issue of right or wrong, doctrinal purity, or normative behavior for all churches everywhere.
- A response to what has already happened, a reaction to the past.
- A logistical plan with the details of this year’s Christmas program.
- A final destination.

GUIDING SPIRITUAL INTENTIONS

The most compelling intentions for church cannot easily be codified into a short list of measurable indices (like the size of attendance or offerings). Since spiritual objectives are hard to pin down or to do (i.e., accomplish with a one-time event), they are best thought of as constant reminders and priorities that help us select one course of action over another.

Strategic Planning that is truly and fundamentally *spiritual* constantly looks for *spiritual* confirmation, “*getting two birds with one stone*.” In the various options for plans, people, or programs, we want to find overlap and synergy with these spiritual objectives. Spiritual leadership is more akin to leaning a toboggan than steering a sled. My assignment is to keep life in our congregation leaning toward:

1. Helping people who do not know God—or, at least, not well—to know Him better, and to love Him more.
2. Convincing every person that Jesus is the only avenue through whom we can have a restored relationship with God.
3. Demystifying the person and work of the Holy Spirit, calling on Him to aid our worship and to empower our ministry.
4. Focusing on the *good news* for weary people who have been languishing in the desert of legalism or rebellion.
5. Explaining the principles and ways of the kingdom of God, so that people can see immediate, life-changing implications.
6. Embracing people within a living community of fellow believers who are learning to love one another as Jesus commanded.
7. Seeing people discover, understand, and flourish in the spiritual gifts and ministry gift-mix God has uniquely designed for them.
8. Encouraging people to see the whole world and the part each of us has to play in taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth.
9. Mobilizing individuals to serve other people by doing to those people what has been done to them.