

## TURNING POINTS AND TRANSITIONS

In the church world, momentum is created by doing something new. — ANDY STANLEY

Leaders know what it feels like to have momentum in their organizations, and they've felt the emptiness and desperation of being without it. Leaders will do almost anything to have "Big Mo," but momentum doesn't just happen. It comes only to the leaders who are willing to change personally and organizationally — those who are willing to do something new, even if that means breaking with tradition and taking significant risks.

Momentum feels like a tidal wave of energy, enthusiasm, and effectiveness — and we love it! But leaders also know that *generating* momentum comes at a high price — an increased workload and, too often, confusion and heartache. Leaders must ask themselves, What price am I willing to pay to see the kingdom of God advance and lives change?

Almost a decade ago my father was the pastor of our church, and I was transitioning from my role as the youth pastor to a new role as an associate pastor. My dad is a wonderful man and a remarkable leader. But we had a problem.

Our church wasn't growing.

Actually, that's not a completely accurate statement. The two churches my father pastored had grown to nine hundred people four different times, but each time, we hit a ceiling and fell back to six hundred. When this happened the first time, we thought it was an aberration, but by the fourth time, the lights came on, and we realized something was wrong with our paradigm.

We decided to attend Dr. John C. Maxwell's conference, Challenge 1000, to see if we could learn some principles for breaking this growth barrier and move our attendance beyond that magic number of one thousand. One of the speakers at the conference was Gerald Brooks, the senior pastor of Grace Outreach Center in Plano, Texas. As I sat in the session, Gerald suddenly said something that gripped my heart: "Your church will grow only to the level of your pain threshold." That statement would have profound implications for my future, and it would forever change the way I thought about church growth.

As I considered his words, I realized that the way we were hiring our staff, designing our programs, and training our leaders worked really well—at least until we got up to nine hundred people. But we had to face the honest truth: if we continued to follow our present methods, we'd keep hitting the same ceiling again and again. I was convinced that change was necessary, but as I sat in that conference room listening to Gerald Brooks, my vision for the future was tempered by the stunning reality that change required hard decisions that would create tremendous pain for me, my family, our staff, and the lay leaders of our church.

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When the session finished, the schedule gave us some time for a break, but I realized I had some unfinished business with God. I told the others in our group that I wanted to stay behind. As the room emptied, I found a quiet corner and poured my heart out to the Lord. I

told him, "God, I'll do anything. I'll make any change you want me to make, no matter how much it costs or how much it hurts. I'll say whatever you want me to say, and I'll do what you want me to do. Lord, you love the people in our community, and many of them don't know you. Use me, God. Change me so you can use me more effectively. I don't want to just grow by having attractive services so people will come from other churches. Lord, I want to reach lost people so they are transformed by your grace. That

won't happen if we keep doing the same things in the same way we've been doing them. Our church has to change—but first, Lord, you need to change me.”

Something changed in me that day. I didn't come away with a profound strategy or a new program to implement. In fact, I didn't have a clue about the changes that needed to occur. I knew only one thing for sure, that I was committed to God and his process for my life. This process, I was beginning to realize, involved raising my pain threshold—my ability to deal with the chaos of change and make the difficult choices that had to be made—so that he could use me to touch more people with his love, forgiveness, and power. I thought about all the struggles and pain we had experienced just to stay on a plateau. We had worked hard to get where we were. There was pain involved in leading the church, even on the plateau. I decided that day that if I was going to suffer pain, it made more sense to endure the pain of growth, the pain that results from following a God-sized vision, rather than just enduring the pain involved in surviving each day.

## CALLING VERSUS COMFORT

In my interactions with church leaders across the country, I've seen a wide range of responses to God's call.

- *I'm ready; show me the way.* Many pastors and lay leaders are passionate about honoring God in all they say and do. These leaders simply need someone to point the way for them, and they'll be off and running!
- *It's good enough.* Some leaders want their churches or ministries to grow, but they don't realize that they can't grow beyond their threshold of pain. If that's what it takes, they aren't sure they're willing to pay that price. For them, a comfortable, respectable, “nice” ministry is good enough.
- *Never again.* Other leaders have been burned before when they attempted great things for God, and they're afraid that a fresh vision, growth, and change will expose them

to too much fire again. Their hearts hear God's clear call, but their fear paralyzes them.

- *Is it always this hard?* I've also talked to a number of men and women who are in the middle of major transitions. They desperately want to please God and reach people with the gospel, but they're experiencing a host of difficulties they didn't anticipate. These brave souls need someone to come alongside and tell them, "Don't be discouraged. You're doing the right thing."

No matter which description fits you and your church, I hope this book will bring you the encouragement and strategic help you need to lead through the challenges of transition.

## TRANSITIONS WE FACE

Church leaders typically experience significant transitions for two primary reasons: a vision to *expand the kingdom*, and the need to *fix problems*. In many cases, the necessity of fixing problems surfaces during a time of transition when we realize that the old systems simply can't sustain the growth we are experiencing. During these times of transition, when we begin making changes, we may find that the church continues to grow at a steady rate, experiences sporadic cycles of growth and decline, or even stops growing altogether.

When we talk about changes, we're talking about things that are directly related to the larger kingdom vision of the church. These changes can include things like adding a weekend service, changing the reporting structure of staff, building a large facility or trying to raise money for a new facility, or going from a single-site to a multisite strategy. There may be some people in the church who passionately disagree about the color of the walls in the lobby, but that's not what this book is about. We're addressing God-sized visions, kingdom purposes, and major transitions that shape the future and effectiveness of our churches.

In our fast-paced, mobile society, community demographics can change with frightening speed. One of the factors we faced a

few years ago was that we had a predominantly Anglo church, but the community had become primarily African-American and Hispanic. We had to either become a multicultural church or change locations. We decided to do both. Similarly, a hundred-year-old church twenty miles north of Atlanta had served its rural community for generations, but in the blink of an eye Alpharetta became an upscale suburb of Atlanta. If the church wanted to reach the changing audience, they had to adapt their methods (but not their message). Understanding demographics isn't significant only for the U.S. Census Bureau.

Church leaders need to grasp the makeup of their community, and just as important, they need to keep an eye on the cultural and demographic trends in surrounding neighborhoods. The effectiveness of the church's ministry depends on an accurate analysis of the community, and a changing community necessitates transitions in ministry and methods.

Church-growth organizations have identified ceilings that limit the growth of a church. Challenge 1000, for example, is a conference that specifically targets churches that need help breaking the one thousand barrier, as ours did. But churches face other ceilings that limit their growth. You may be facing a ceiling of one hundred, two hundred, five hundred, two thousand, or five thousand right now. Breaking through each of these ceilings requires insight, courage, and communication as you adjust your strategy and make the painful choices that will sustain growth.

In each significant transition, people and systems are stretched to be more and do more. We may face the hard reality that certain individuals, our existing staff structure, or one of the other systems that have developed over time have a limited capacity and cannot handle the added demands of growth. Changing charts and coming up with strategies isn't all that difficult. But these aren't just arbitrary names on an organizational chart; more often than not they are people who have become friends, who have laughed with us and cried with us through years of shared

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ministry. For many leaders, the most gut-wrenching decisions they make involve their own staff, when they realize their staff can't take the church where God wants it to go.

We may also realize that the way our staff related at one level simply doesn't work at the next level of growth. For example, as the team expands beyond six or eight people, you can't have your staff meeting in a booth at a restaurant anymore. Coordinating schedules and goals becomes more necessary—and more tedious—and the increase in communication requires more effort. When our church was fairly small, our staff meetings

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were simple: four or five friends getting together to talk about the things we cared about. However, when we grew to about twelve hundred attenders, I found I now had around fourteen people in my office for staff meetings. We were still good friends and we loved being together, but our ministries were plagued with medi-

ocrity. For a long time I refused to acknowledge that we needed to change, because our staff told each other, "We have the best staff team anywhere! We really love each other. My friends in other churches are jealous of our team because our senior pastor is so close to the rest of the staff." Who doesn't want to hear comments like that? But I found that I couldn't effectively lead and supervise fourteen ministry leaders. I was wearing myself out trying to keep up with all of them, and failing miserably. I knew that something needed to change, but it wouldn't be easy.

Inevitably, pursuing God's vision involves making changes to your staff structure, and when this happens, people on your team will face a crisis of faith. Can they trust God to transform them to be even more effective, or will they shrink back and resist the change? Unfortunately, the choice isn't always so clear. Sometimes people will agree to move into a new role for comfort's sake. They will accept the changes but will not invest themselves in the new vision and will proceed with ministry as usual. When I talked to the fourteen staff members about restructuring, at first they were

agreeable to the changes. After all, we were only talking about *hypothetical* situations. But when it came time to actually change their roles and who they would report to, they realized that only four of them would be reporting directly to me. The rest would report to one of the four new executives, people who used to be their peers. Suddenly the theoretical changes became intensely personal! Even if you are a senior leader and an outstanding communicator, it's inevitable that role transitions like this will lead to misinterpretation and questions about your motives. Turf wars

## CHANGING STAFF STRUCTURES

Larry Osborne

*North Coast Church: Vista, California*

I've faced lots of challenging leadership transitions, but none was as dicey as the transition from a casual water-cooler leadership style to a more directive executive style. It was a change I didn't want to make. I resisted as long as I could. Then one day it blew up in my face.

My preferred style is collegial. I like to hear what everyone else thinks and then make my decision. For years this pattern worked well, allowing me to build a consensus by listening to those who resisted and reframing issues in ways that they could understand and eventually buy into. As a result, most decisions felt like group decisions.

Eventually, though, the size and complexity of our staff and ministry hit a point where it was no longer possible to keep everyone in the loop. That's when the wheels came off.

The first sign that something was wrong was a radical slowdown in our speed of implementation. We had too many people in too many meetings. Every key player wanted input on every major decision. Often those who were absent when a decision was made wanted to walk through the entire process again. It drove me nuts.

The second warning sign was an increase in relational friction. A few of those who remembered the good old days balked at what they called our growing "corporateness." They missed having input on everything I decided. Some felt devalued; others were simply confused. And those who'd been around the longest liked it the least.

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It all blew up when the festering frustration of two longtime staff members broke out in an attempted coup. They assailed my character to the elders, claiming I had become aloof, arrogant, and unteachable. But the real issue was that I was no longer consulting *them* on major decisions. I was still being accountable, listening to others, and using a collegial style. Just with different folks.

My biggest mistake was not facing their growing frustration head-on. I knew they weren't happy. But I ignored it and hoped it would go away. I tried to patchwork as much of the old onto the new as I could. But it satisfied no one. The more I tried to go back and include anyone who felt they should be included, the more we moved at the speed of an arthritic snail. And reprocessing every decision a second time (for those who weren't there the first time) left me feeling like a Washington lobbyist—always trying to convince someone of something.

The turnaround began when I quit pretending that nothing had changed. Using an analogy I called “golf to football,” I pointed out to the entire staff that size always changes patterns of relationship. The old ways had worked fine when we were smaller, but our growing complexity rendered the water-cooler approach not only obsolete but also dysfunctional.

Once the new paradigm was clearly spelled out and we had a good word picture to describe it, things quickly fell back into place. The unity, laughter, and camaraderie we once had returned. A few folks who didn't like the new normal left. But everyone else signed on, and we've since moved on to new levels of ministry and growth far beyond anything we imagined.

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may develop, hurt feelings may lead to gossip, and friendships can be strained by these changes.

In addition to the challenge that transition brings to the church staff and the lay leaders, there are the added realities of stress at home. Don't underestimate the compounding effect that people's personal struggles can have during times of major transition. All change, even positive change, causes stress. In a famous study on the impact of transition, various events were assigned a numerical “life change unit” (LCU) value. To determine the weight of each event, the research team asked people of different social backgrounds to rate the degree of turmoil each event caused. Then each event was compared with getting married, which was arbitrarily

given a score of fifty. The research team was surprised to find that people across the spectrum of age, sex, social position, race, culture, and education scored events very similarly.<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, negative events and their LCU values include:

Death of a spouse	100
Divorce	73
Death of a close family member	63
Detention in jail	63
Major injury or illness	53
Being fired	47
Mortgage foreclosure	30
Trouble with boss	23

But many events commonly considered to be positive also demand significant adjustments, for instance:

Marriage	50
Marital reconciliation	45
Retirement	45
Pregnancy	40
Closing a mortgage on a new home	31
Son or daughter leaving home	29
Outstanding personal achievement	28
Start or end of education	26
Change in residence	20

These are just a few of the stresses, both positive and negative, listed in the study. Though people have different capacities for dealing with stress, when the numbers add up to fifty within six months, this number serves as a yellow warning light. These people need to pay attention to the effects of the pressure in their lives and take steps to manage their stress. And if someone experiences a total of seventy-five or more, that flashing yellow light turns red! When people endure severe levels of stress, especially for a long period of time, they risk the physical, emotional, and spiritual devastation of burnout.

Sometimes people experience multiple major stressors in a short period of time. Don't forget that the transition you are planning (or currently executing), however positive it may be, will cause stress. Take into account the reality that personal issues may compound the impact of a transition in the church. For example, in one year in our student ministry, four of our five staff experienced life-changing events. Our student pastors, Dan and Rachel Hunter, had twins after trying to get pregnant for seven years. Two other student pastors got married, and another had a baby with a severe health problem. The baby was in the hospital for six weeks, and the medical bills were astronomical. In addition to all of the chaos they were experiencing in their personal lives, their ministry grew by about two hundred and fifty students, so they had to recruit and train more adult volunteers. Except for the baby's health problems, all of these stresses were largely positive. But all of these changes, happening in such a short amount of time, produced overwhelming stress for our student ministry leaders. With their LCU values already off the chart, even the smallest changes we made in the church seemed overwhelming to them.

## THRIVING THROUGH TRANSITIONS

As I write about the burden of stress we face as a part of our normal lives—and think about the added strain that transition brings—I can easily feel overwhelmed. Is change really worth it? Isn't it enough just to survive each day? I believe there are several keys that will enable leaders to do more than survive. It is possible to *thrive* in the midst of transition. To do this, though, you'll need to have a clear vision of God's calling, excellent communication, relationships of affirmation and authenticity, and tenacity.

### **A Clear Vision of God's Calling**

The needs of lost people in our community call out to me, and we face a steep hill to climb to meet those needs more effectively. It would be a lot easier to settle for a nice, acceptable ministry, but God hasn't called us to comfort. Gerald Brooks's words con-

tinually ring in my ears: “Your church will grow only to the level of your pain threshold.” Quite often I don’t know what I’m supposed to do next. In fact, I don’t even know what to do first! The ambiguity created by the maze of choices can paralyze me unless I reflect on the goodness and greatness of God. I may not know what to do, but I know that he does. I may not have thought through all the implications of a decision, but God knows absolutely everything, even the number of hairs on my head. My love for others may waver, but his love never fails. Ultimately, leading transitions isn’t about changing the direction of the church or changing the staff. It’s about God changing me as a leader so that I trust him more fully, listen to him more intently, and obey him more gladly. Jesus was completely committed to his Father’s will, and his trusting obedience led him through the misunderstanding of his friends, the condemnation of his enemies, and eventually suffering and death. I remind myself that just because I’m following the Father’s will doesn’t mean I should expect smooth sailing, comfort, and applause. A disciple is not above his teacher. If Jesus faced challenges in ministry, I shouldn’t be surprised if I do as well.

Ultimately, the vision that God gives to church leaders and pastors isn’t about the size of the church; it’s about God accomplishing *his* purpose, rescuing the lost and turning them into fully devoted followers of Christ. I can honestly say that the vision for our church has never been about numbers. When Christ looked at the city of Jerusalem the week before he died, he cried out because of the many people who were living in hopelessness, and his heart broke because he knew they would soon reject him. As I look out on our community, if my heart is in line with Christ’s, I too will cry out when I see men and women, boys and girls in our community who are lost, distressed, and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd. Everything we do as a church is motivated by God’s love for those people, and when they respond to his grace, we help them learn what it means to live for Christ with a rich, deep faith and a heart full of devotion to him. Our goal isn’t to have big services or large buildings; it’s

to touch hearts with God's amazing love and power. The purpose of each service, meeting, class, small group, and activity is to

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create an opportunity in which people's lives can be eternally transformed by the power and grace of Jesus Christ.

We *expect* that God will change people's lives. Before every sermon series, we ask six questions that refocus our priorities back on God's purposes. The goal of each sermon is not mere communication of ideas; we want our messages to be about the transformation of hearts and lives. To keep ourselves on track, we ask these questions before each event:

- What is the big idea for this service?
- What do we want people to know?
- What do we want people to do?
- What do we want people to feel?
- What are the thoughts that we want people to take away from the service?
- What assignment should we give to help people apply the message?

Our goal in every worship service is to create "God moments" in which the Spirit gives insight, correction, and healing—and the strength to do God's will. After services every week, people come up and tell us how God spoke to them and changed their lives during the service. It's electric! At our church, God's vision may be as wide as the earth, but it's as personal and intimate as each individual who is touched by the Spirit in a unique way each week. Those God moments keep us going.

God may give us a kingdom-sized vision of what he wants to accomplish to touch hearts and transform families, but he seldom gives us the complete plan from the outset. In his book *Knowing God*, author and professor J. I. Packer says that we misunderstand God's wisdom if we think we are like air traffic controllers, looking at a screen to track dozens of planes going in different directions. The controllers can see everything going on in their

sectors, and they can anticipate where every plane will be at any given moment. In our spiritual lives, we sometimes expect that we'll be able to see God's vision the way these air traffic controllers see the planes on their screens. Somehow we'll know exactly what God is doing in us and around us all the time. But that's not the way spiritual life works. We are, Packer says, more like drivers on a winding road in the night. Our headlights show just enough for us to make the next decision, to see whether we should turn left or right, to avoid that truck or merge between those cars. God may not give us the complete picture and every detail of the plan, but if we seek him, he'll give us enough insight to make the next choice. That's all we really need anyway.<sup>6</sup>

We don't manufacture God's vision for our lives and our churches in our own minds. We trust God to impart his heart and vision to us. And we don't mimic someone else's vision. We can learn a lot from others, but we need to go to God for the specific, unique vision he has for us. If we go to a conference, listen to a dynamic speaker, and try to copy the plans that others have made, we'll likely quit when things don't work out as we expect them to. If we don't spend time on our faces, waiting for God to change our hearts, we'll be tempted to take the glory for ourselves when we see God at work.

The vision to lead must come from God, and the fulfillment of the vision must depend completely upon God and be for his glory. When we're convinced that we're on track with him, and his voice is so clear that we can do no other than to

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obey the one who has called us, then we can stand strong during tough times of transition. And those tough times will come. We can count on it. There have been times when I felt so discouraged that I had to go back to God and say, "Hey, this wasn't my idea, God! You got me into this, and I'm counting on you to give me wisdom. I'm counting on you to provide the finances. And God, you'll have to raise up leaders to accomplish what you've called us to do." And in every case, whether it was with an immediate

miracle or with a longer process, God has always provided what we needed.

### **Excellent Communication**

Many churches in transition experience resistance and conflict because they fail to communicate the vision and process in a way that invites feedback and involvement from the congregation. The key to excellent communication in times of transition isn't what's said from the pulpit; it's the patient process of informing and enlisting the support of key leaders in the church. Without them, transitions seem like a one-man promotional show, but with key leaders on board, you'll have a team of people committed to the same purpose, praying and working hard to make it a reality.

When you communicate vision to your congregation, never communicate beyond the level that your leaders have embraced. Make time to meet with key leaders, enlist their support, and then invite them to help you enlist the support of others. This process builds a wave of enthusiasm, and when the time comes to share the vision with the entire congregation, every staff member, every board member, and every volunteer leader will be nodding in hearty agreement.<sup>7</sup>

### **Relationships of Affirmation and Authenticity**

I've talked to a lot of pastors and church leaders who feel tremendously lonely, and during times of transition they feel beleaguered. Spiritual leadership is a demanding role, but we don't have to face it alone. One of the most important lessons I've learned is the necessity of finding someone to coach me to be a better leader. In addition to many close friends, God has given me two men who love me enough to be honest with me, who share the wisdom they've learned, and who encourage me every step of the way. One of them is a gifted Christian counselor and senior pastor, and the other is a leadership life coach. They didn't fall out of the sky one day when I needed a wise friend. I asked God to give them to me, and he gave me wonderful, godly men to coach me and keep me on track with his call for me and our church.

In everyday life, misunderstandings easily morph into hurt feelings, which can fester into resentments. During times of transition, many people feel threatened by change, and they become increasingly defensive, fragile, and suspicious. Build unity in your team by doing two crucial things: affirm people more than ever and cultivate an environment of authenticity. When we're under stress, many of us see only what hasn't been done, and we overlook the positives around us. When the pressure is most intense, make it a point to identify and point out the good things people are doing around you. And to keep embers of hurt from bursting into full-fledged fires of resentment, ask your staff and board to be brutally honest with you about what they're thinking and feeling. After every staff meeting and board meeting, I look each person in the eyes and ask, "Is there anything we need to talk about? Are you and I okay?" I invite people to tell me about their confusion or disagreements so we can discuss them right there. Most of the time, people simply want to be sure I've heard them. They don't demand that I agree with them, but they want to be assured that I've listened to them and I understand. Sincere words of affirmation keep the wheels of relationships turning, and our commitment to authenticity propels us toward God's calling with genuine enthusiasm—and prevents a multitude of problems.

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### **Tenacity**

The magnificent stories in the Bible of men and women who followed God aren't straight-line growth patterns. Not at all. Every person used by God experienced deserts and valleys, persecution and disappointment. God called Abraham to be the father of a mighty nation, but for decades he and Sarah couldn't have children. God gave Joseph dreams that he would be a great leader, but his brothers sold him into slavery, and his master's wife tried to seduce him and then had him thrown into prison. Jeremiah was given a word from God, but it was a word of condemnation

that earned him scorn from his hearers. Over and over again, following God required leaders to be incredibly courageous and tenacious, to keep going when the next step seemed hopeless.

We make detailed plans to lead a church through transitions, and we expect a flash of growth when we implement the next new thing. Sometimes that's exactly what happens, but often the moment of exponential growth comes from the accumulation of small, almost imperceptible, steps forward. Author and cultural critic Malcolm Gladwell says that organizations experience "tipping points" when something happens that propels them to the next level of effectiveness.<sup>8</sup> In his seminal book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins describes an organizational principle he calls "the flywheel," consisting of countless pushes that propel the wheel a little faster each time. At some point "the momentum of the thing kicks in your favor, hurling the flywheel forward, turn after turn . . . whoosh! . . . its own heavy weight working for you. You're pushing no harder than during the first rotation, but the flywheel goes faster and faster."<sup>9</sup> Gladwell would call this a tipping point. All of us would call it a breakthrough. Many leaders push on their ministry flywheel for months and years, but they give up before they experience this transformational moment. If that's where you are today, don't give up. Keep pushing, keep trusting, and look for the tipping point.

As we obey God's call and pursue the vision he gives us, we should expect some obstacles and resistance. Without a ruthlessly realistic view of the path down which God has led countless other leaders, we'll be tempted to think God has let us down. In our church, tenacity comes because we purposefully cultivate a sensitivity to God's Spirit and require that any sense of vision for the church be confirmed by all of our leaders. We're committed to listening to the Spirit's voice, communicated through the Scriptures and promptings in prayer—and not the desire to be big, the need to earn respect, or the arrogance of wanting to be in control. We want to do what God calls us to do. If the fire or the pillar of cloud moves, we want to move with it. But we can't be arrogant about hearing God's call. Though I'm the senior pastor, I never

walk into a staff or board meeting and pronounce, “Thus saith the Lord! We’re going to do this or that.” After I’ve prayed, often for weeks or months, I go to our leaders and say, “This is what I sense God is saying to me about the direction he wants us to go. Will you pray and ask him to confirm that direction or lead us in a different way?” For major decisions, like the transitions we’re addressing in this book, I ask for unanimity among our leaders. If God doesn’t confirm his calling in each leader’s heart, we keep pursuing God to ask him for clarity. It’s that important. When

## OBEDIENCE TO THE CALL

Dino Rizzo

*Healing Place Church: Baton Rouge, Louisiana*

It seems there’s always *someone* who is going to fight against what you’re doing for the kingdom. On the one hand, no one should expect to go into ministry with the goal of being popular. We do what we do because we have a heart for Jesus and a desire to help people. And we don’t do everything perfectly. But on the other hand, criticism often comes for no good reason, and many times it comes from those within the Christian community. Criticism can be very powerful, and it takes only a few negative people to get the pastor’s ear or drain the energy from the vision of an organization.

My wife, DeLynn, and I launched our church several years ago, and it was originally called Trinity Christian Center. It was a nice, safe, holy-sounding name. People could relate to it, and they kind of knew what to expect by the title. But it wasn’t a very clear reflection of who we were or what God had intended us to become. Sure, we believe in the Trinity, we operate on Christian principles, and we are at least somewhat centrally located. But we also knew that God had much more in store for us than this! So a few years later when God began dealing with me about changing the name, I wasn’t all that surprised. I do have to admit that I wasn’t too excited about the idea of rocking the status quo.

I began asking around, checking with a few key staff to see what they thought about changing our name to the one I felt God was wanting: “Healing Place Church.” Responses ranged from “Trinity is a good name, and we’ve earned a great reputation” and “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” to “It kinda sounds like a church that plays with snakes and sells diet pills” and “When do we start

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serving organic, high-fiber rice cakes?” After listening to all these reactions, I decided to put the change on hold. But God, in his own kind-but-firm way, reminded me that this wasn’t something he wanted anyone’s input on. This was his idea, and I had to choose between the advice of those around me and the instructions given by the God of the universe, the Creator of everything from nothing, the all-powerful, ever-loving God. When I thought about it that way, I knew what I had to do.

The next weekend at church, right before I began the message, I just did it. I stood on the stage and told everyone, “Hey, by the way, from now on we’re going to be Healing Place Church, not Trinity Christian Center. Just thought you should know. Now turn in your Bibles to the book of Matthew . . .” That was it. Sure, it was a little (okay, maybe a lot) abrupt, but I *knew* it was what God wanted, and the time for discussion about it was long past. And to be honest, it didn’t take long for our church family to embrace it.

The moral of the story? When you obey God and follow his lead on making transitions, it will always work out the way *he* wants it to. When we are too afraid to obey or when we try to mix our ideas in the formula—that’s when the plan gets messed up and the picture isn’t what it should be. Ask God what to do, then obey him. While it may be scary or even uncomfortable, when all is said and done, you’ll be doing the *right* thing—and that’s what matters most.

God grants confirmation among the leaders, we can face any setback, hurdle, or resistance, and we’ll trust God to open doors, provide finances, and grant grace so resistance is transformed into support.

During the struggles of transition, doubts and fears inevitably arise. At those moments, we need to be assured in the depths of our hearts that we haven’t dreamed up this plan on our own but are following God’s clear calling. With that assurance, we can face almost anything.

## LOOKING AHEAD

In the rest of this book, we’ll unpack many of the concepts and commitments we’ve briefly addressed in this chapter. Let me give you a foretaste of where we’re going. In the coming chapters, we’ll address the following:

- The necessity of a crystal-clear vision from God
- How to anticipate pivot points at which growth accelerates
- How to build relationships during times of transition (instead of having them destroyed by stress)
- The beauty and power of trusting God together
- How to seize opportunities and overcome obstacles
- The need to cultivate a culture of celebration
- The importance of finding a good coach to give you insight and encouragement
- How to keep the vision fresh and real
- How to endure in God's grace during times of transition

In this book, we'll look at a lot of principles and examine a host of techniques, but my main hope is that people who read it will come to the conclusion that they care far more about God's calling than their own comfort. I hope God refreshes your joy in him in such a way that you can say, "I want Christ above everything else in my life." Our desires don't mean anything if they're not directed by Christ, our love is meaningless unless it is energized by his compassion, and our hard work is idolatry if our efforts aren't for his glory. The Scriptures are full of passages that challenge my selfishness and enflame my desire to please Christ with all my heart. The Lord spoke through Jeremiah: "This is what the LORD says: 'Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,' declares the LORD" (Jer. 9:23–24).

I want to delight in the things that delight the heart of God. Paul wrote his purpose statement to the believers in Philippi: "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:8).

And of course, Jesus' invitation and challenge grip our hearts. He told his followers, "If anyone would come after me, he must

deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matt. 16:24–25).

These passages should never grow old to us. God frequently uses these Scriptures to remind me of his infinite grace, the privilege of being his child, and the challenge of living every moment of every day for him instead of for selfish gain. When leaders have wrestled their thirst for power and applause to the ground, and they’re willing to say to God, “Not my will, but yours,” God will use them more than they’ve ever dreamed. This isn’t a

Without a passion for Christ, strategy is only manipulation of others for selfish gain.

book about growth techniques. Without a passion for Christ, strategy is only manipulation of others for selfish gain. When we long for God to be honored above ourselves, when we want God to transform individuals and restore families, when our hearts ache for lost people to

know the Savior, and when we’re thrilled when others are more successful than we are, we become soft clay in the Potter’s hands, and he’ll form us into a useful vessel. And when our hearts are right, the strategies, principles, and techniques we develop can become useful tools as we trust God’s Spirit to empower us and direct us to touch lives.

## **STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS**

A few years ago I had a dream. I was preaching the gospel to thousands of people in an outdoor crusade, and I was aware that God was moving in powerful ways to change countless lives. In my dream, people could only see me from my waist up because I was standing behind a huge wooden podium. But when I looked down at my feet, I realized I wasn’t standing on the platform. Instead there was a big hole in the floor. My father was standing in the hole, and I was standing on his shoulders. His hands were holding my ankles, and his eyes were closed as he prayed intensely for me. At that moment I suddenly realized that all the impact I’ll ever have and all the good I’ll ever do for the kingdom is because I stand on my father’s shoulders in ministry. He was the one who

taught me, trained me, affirmed me, corrected me, and modeled a leader's life of faith day in and day out.

When I woke up that morning, I called my dad and said, "Dad, thanks for your shoulders."

A little confused, he laughed and asked, "What do you mean, son?"

I told him about the dream, and we wept together on the phone. After a few minutes I said, "Do you know what I live for, Dad? I live so that my sons can stand on my shoulders one day. And I live so that others can stand on my shoulders and serve God with their whole hearts. You gave me everything you had, and you were thrilled for me to stand on your shoulders to serve God. That's the impact I want to have on my boys and anyone else who wants to have an impact for God. That's your legacy in my life."

This image has become one of the core values of our church. We live to make people of every generation bigger, better, and stronger in their devotion to Christ and their skill in advancing his kingdom. Our goal, our delight, and our strategy is for every succeeding generation to "excel still more" in their passion and effectiveness. We don't demand that they do things the way we do them. They need to trust God for his direction and power to reach their culture. It's our pleasure and our responsibility to equip and support them.

If we care more about God's calling than our comfort, and if we care more about helping others succeed than padding our own resumes, we'll pursue God's vision with all our hearts, facing the obstacles and fears generated by change, and leading with a powerful blend of grace and strength.

At the end of each chapter, you'll find some reflection questions and exercises. I get far more out of reading books if I take a little time to wrestle with the issues. These questions are designed to help you gain insights as you begin or continue pursuing God's calling for you and your church. You can also use them to stimulate rich discussions with your staff, board of elders or deacons, and other pastors. Don't rush through these questions. Ask God

to use them to stimulate your faith, sharpen your vision, and shape your strategy.

## MAPPING YOUR DIRECTION

1. What do you think it means to “care more about God’s calling than our comfort”? Who do you know who exemplifies this conviction? What are the costs involved? Is this attitude attractive to you? Why or why not?
2. On a scale of zero to ten, what is your pain threshold, the most you are willing to suffer for Christ and his kingdom? How can you tell what it is? Are you satisfied with it? Why or why not?
3. What major ministry transitions have you experienced in the past five years? What transition do you face today?
4. Describe the way personal stresses compound the pressures experienced in transitions. Give some examples from your own experience.
5. Give yourself (and your team) a reality check to determine how you are positioned to thrive in transition. Evaluate your proficiency in the following:
  - A clear vision of God’s calling
  - Excellent communication
  - Relationships of affirmation and authenticity
  - Tenacity
6. What do you hope God will do in your life as you read this book? What are your specific goals for reading it and applying the principles?