
GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

The Invisible Obvious

Have you heard the story of how a little boy saved the fire department a lot of work? It seems that a fire truck became stuck under a low bridge as it was responding to a fire in the foothills. In fact it was wedged so tightly under the bridge that it couldn't be moved at all. For several hours, the experts at the fire department, as well as the tow truck driver who arrived to help, studied the situation, but nothing they tried worked. Standing a short distance away was a little boy who had arrived on his bike to see what was taking place. After observing the situation for a few minutes, he shouted to the workers, "Why don't you let some air out of the tires?" Upon hearing the boy's suggestion, the workers tried it and were able to move the truck out from under the bridge, proving that sometimes we cannot see the answer to our problem simply because it is too obvious.

Richard Farson, a psychologist and founder of several research institutes, writes, "Nothing is as invisible as the obvious." He suggests, "The most important discoveries, the greatest art, and the best management decisions come from taking a fresh look at what people take for granted or cannot see precisely because it is too obvious."

Numerous examples are found of new inventions coming from someone seeing the obvious. Consider the following:

For years people observed the water vapor coming out of a teakettle, but it took James Watt to see its obvious relationship to power, which led to the invention of the steam engine.

For years scientists observed that penicillium mold stopped the growth of bacteria, but it took Alexander Fleming to see its obvious potential use as an antibiotic.

For years teams of craftsman built cars one-by-one, but it took Henry Ford to see the obvious possibility of building cars more efficiently along an assembly line.

For years people carried their luggage through airports, but it took an airline pilot, Robert Plath, to see the obvious and add wheels so the luggage could be pulled upright.

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I've observed that church leaders often miss the obvious, too. Consider the following:

For years a church maxed out attendance at its worship service, but it took an outside consultant to point out the obvious answer of holding two worship services.

For years a church hovered around 175 in attendance with one pastor, never able to break the 200 barrier, but it took a new elder to see the obvious answer of adding a second pastor.

For years a young man struggled unsuccessfully in youth ministry, but it took a godly mentor to see that he obviously worked better with adults than youth.

For years a pastor strived to manage a staff of thirteen, but it took a business person to see that he obviously had too many direct reports and needed to realign the staff structure.

For years a church augmented its ministry by using its facilities and property multiple times, but it took a new leader to note that they obviously needed to relocate to a new property.

For years an associate pastor strived to be a lead pastor, but it took a wise friend to help him accept his gifts that made him an obvious second pastor.

Seeing the Obvious

It is always difficult to see the obvious. This fact is highlighted in common statements, such as, "We are often too close to the forest to see the trees."

There are numerous obstacles blocking one's ability to see the obvious, for example, tunnel vision, tradition, cultural values, personal perceptions, individual bias, and ideological views. Helping others see the obvious is one of the most valuable services one can offer to any organization. Here are three ideas to help you see the obvious in your church.

Invite new people to share their insights. People who have been attending your church for less than one or two years often see things that long-term attendees miss.

Invite outsiders to share their insights. One time I attended a conference on evangelism. During one session, the organizers of the conference had someone ask people walking down the street to come in and be interviewed (they were paid \$50 for fifteen minutes). The insights gained from the interviews helped those at the conference see the obvious barriers to evangelism.

Invite someone to be a secret visitor on a Sunday and then share their insights with your leaders. Guests often see things that obviously need to be improved.

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Church Consulting

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Is it possible? The answer . . . a resounding YES! It is possible. Indeed, God very much wants to see it happen. Just think about it. God wants your church to grow! And, the McIntosh Church Growth Network stands ready to assist you through personal coaching and/or your church through consulting to see growth take place.

Gary L. McIntosh is considered one of the premier church consultants in the United States today. Here is what others are saying about his church consultations and guidance.

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“It was wonderful to return from my time in England and Indonesia and to receive the McIntosh Report. Thank you for its clarity, brevity, wisdom and insight. Everybody so far has received it with enthusiasm, which is no mean feat in the Midwest! May God richly bless you in your ministry of strengthening and supporting the Church.” —**C. John Steer, Autumn Ridge Church**

“I have had the opportunity to meet and speak with Gary individually on several occasions, and he has been a tremendous blessing to my life and ministry. Gary is a very wise, stable, insightful and capable Christian man. The counsel, guidance and direction Gary has offered to me over the past two years have been extremely helpful.” —**John W. Tastad, East Hills Christian Church**

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The Depths of Church Culture

Understanding a church's culture is a bit challenging. However, I've found it helpful to think of culture as a lily pad.

If you picture a lily pad in your mind, you will see a flat green pad laying on the top of a pond. Unseen under the pad is a long stem that reaches down deeply into the water. Embedded even deeper into the muddy bottom of the pond are the roots of the lily pad. Both the stem and the roots are unseen when looking at the pad on top of the water. Together these three elements of a lily pad—pad, stem, and roots—illustrate the different levels of culture found in a church.

Levels of Culture

The pad represents the Face of Culture, which is the physical and social aspects of church life and ministry that are clearly visible. This is sometimes called the “hard culture” of a church, and includes artifacts, such as, the facility and furnishings, various programs and ministries, and written or recorded documents. This hard culture is easily observed and understood.

Hidden below the surface is the stem, which represents the Mind of the Church. This is the “soft culture” of

beliefs and values. Determining a church's true beliefs and values is more difficult than observing the hard culture, but can be understood through observation, conversations, and strategic investigation. For example, observing how a church spends its budget, or what ministries are neglected, or where people invest their time, may indicate its true beliefs and values.

Deeply buried is the Heart of the Church, which is represented by the roots of the lily pad. As roots are buried deep in the mud at the bottom of a pond, so to is the heart of a church. This “spongy or slippery culture” is difficult to grasp. It represents the assumptions that supply the rationale for beliefs and values, and ultimately for the artifacts that arise over the years in a church. A church's assumptions are often the result of past negative or positive experiences, which have served to shape the thought process of the leaders and people. This level of culture is the most difficult to identify and understand.

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Evaluating Culture

If you desire to truly understand your church's culture, consider the following process of evaluation.

First, start by looking at the Face of the Church, i.e., the hard culture.

What do the facilities say about your church? Are they clean, modern, and up-to-date? Are they worn, dingy, and out-of-date? Are they open and accessible or closed and unhandy. What does this say about your culture?

What do the programs and ministries of your church reveal? Are they inward focused on current attendees? Are they outward focused on newcomers? Are they examples of older models of ministry or newer models? What does this say about your culture?

What do the written documents demonstrate? Are they written in churchy language or do they use newer terms? Are they clear to the average person or difficult to understand? Are they found in old forms or newer forms (perhaps on the church's website)? What does this say about your culture?

Second, investigate the Mind of the Church through conversations, interviews, and observations.

What is the attitude toward guests? Are guests expected, welcomed, and

embraced, or are people surprised when a guest arrives? Are newcomers involved quickly into entry levels of ministry, or not used due to mistrust? What does this say about your culture?

What ministries or programs attract the best attendance or participation? Which ones attract very little attendance or participation? What new innovations have been embraced? What potential changes have been rejected? What does this say about your culture?

What does the church's use of money disclose? Where is the money spent? What is neglected in the budget? Where do you find people volunteering? Where do you find it difficult to find volunteers? What does this say about your culture?

Third, delve deeply into the Heart of the Church to discover its stories, victories, defeats, and long memories.

What are the stories that are told over and over again in your church? What do people remember being the most significant events in the history of your church? What major victories or defeats do people recall? What does this say about your culture?

Start thinking deeply about your church's culture. Explore the three levels by developing an outline of ideas, insights, and thoughts under the subtitles of the Face, the Mind, and the Heart of the Church. Investigating the depths of your culture will be revealing.

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Mentoring Relationships

Recent research among church planters, as well as turnaround pastors, has revealed that having a coach is a predictor of success. This should not surprise us. Most professional trades have apprenticeships. Medical professions require internships. Even the Bible reveals that ministry success or fruitfulness often comes out of mentoring relationships, e.g., Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Paul and Timothy, or Naomi and Ruth.

What is Mentoring?

One of the most comprehensive definitions of mentoring says, “Mentoring is an ongoing relational process in which someone who knows something, the mentor, offers that something (wisdom, advice, information, support, etc.) which is received by someone else, the mentoree, at a sensitive time so that it impacts personal and/or professional growth” (*Connecting*, 1992).

While that definition is extensive, I personally like the one offered by The Uncommon Individual Foundation: A mentor is “a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction.”

Fred Smith said, “Mentoring is a one-on-one relationship between a mentor and mentoree for the specific and definable development of a skill or an art” (“Mentoring that Matters,” 1999).

These three definitions make it plain that mentoring is more than simply talking together, or having a Bible study, or playing games over coffee. While these types of activities are excellent, they are not mentoring. True mentoring involves a strategic goal of helping a person improve a skill.

When mentoring relationships are analyzed, you normally find a younger or less experienced person initiated contact with an older or more experienced person with a specific request for help in developing some skill. For example, I’ve often been approached by younger writers to help them learn the process of writing a book. Their request resulted in a mentor/mentoree relationship.

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Being an Effective Mentor

While there are many ways to engage in a mentoring relationship, here are some basic guidelines you should keep in mind.

First, set the tone and expectations.

It's up to the mentor to set the tone. Do you want the relationship tone relaxed and informal or business-like and formal? Will you let the mentoree become like one of your family members, or will you keep a boundary between home and work? Will you simply invite the mentoree along to observe you in ministry situations, or will you spend time sharing your personal story?

Define the expectations early on in the relationship. Who will pay for the coffee? How often will you meet? How long will you meet? What level of accountability is expected? What is the purpose of the relationship? Is there a fee for your time, or are you giving your time to them for free?

Determining realistic expectations at the beginning of a mentoring relationship will keep unrealistic expectations from undermining you later on.

Second, ask good questions.

A mentor is not just an "answer person" but a "question person." Perhaps the most important ability of a

good mentor is asking good questions. Consider some of the following questions as examples:

"What are you thinking about?"

"What is going on inside of you?"

"What is working in your life and ministry?"

"What is not working in your life and ministry?"

"How is your sense of God's call being clarified?"

"What are some new things you could try?"

"As you assess your growth, where do you see areas you need to work on?"

"How may I help you?"

"How has that experienced shaped you?"

"How has (or might) God use your past pain to prepare you for the future?"

Note that these are all open-ended questions, i.e., they cannot be answered yes or no, but require more thoughtful answers.

Third, nudge in the right direction.

Many people approach a new task with fear. Thus, a good mentor serves as a confidence builder, often by pushing mentorees in new directions. Ask, "What are you going to do about it?" "When are you going to get started?" "What are your next steps?" Push mentorees through their discomfort to take responsibility for their actions.

Mentors set the tone, ask good questions, and push in the right directions.

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FACULTY-MENTORS

DR. GARY MCINTOSH is Professor of Christian Ministry and Leadership at Talbot. He has served as a consultant for hundreds of churches in North America. Dr. McIntosh is also the Founder and President of the Church Growth Network, which provides a wide range of professional consulting services in the areas of church growth analysis, strategic planning, and generational change. He is the editor of the Growth Points newsletter. Having published over 300 articles and written over 25 books, he is a prolific writer and church growth expert.

DR. ALAN MCMAHAN has served in churches in North America and on the Pacific Rim. He has also taught in the areas of missiology, church growth, leadership, organizational development and evangelism. He has been active in training undergraduate and graduate students including mid-career professionals, Bible school teachers, pastors, and denominational leaders through the U.S., Canada, and much of Southeast Asia in the effective means to develop leaders and grow churches. He has served as Vice President for the Alliance Theological Seminary and as the Academic Dean at the King's College in mid-town Manhattan. He and his wife, Terri, have two sons, Billy and Jonathan, and live in La Mirada, CA.

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