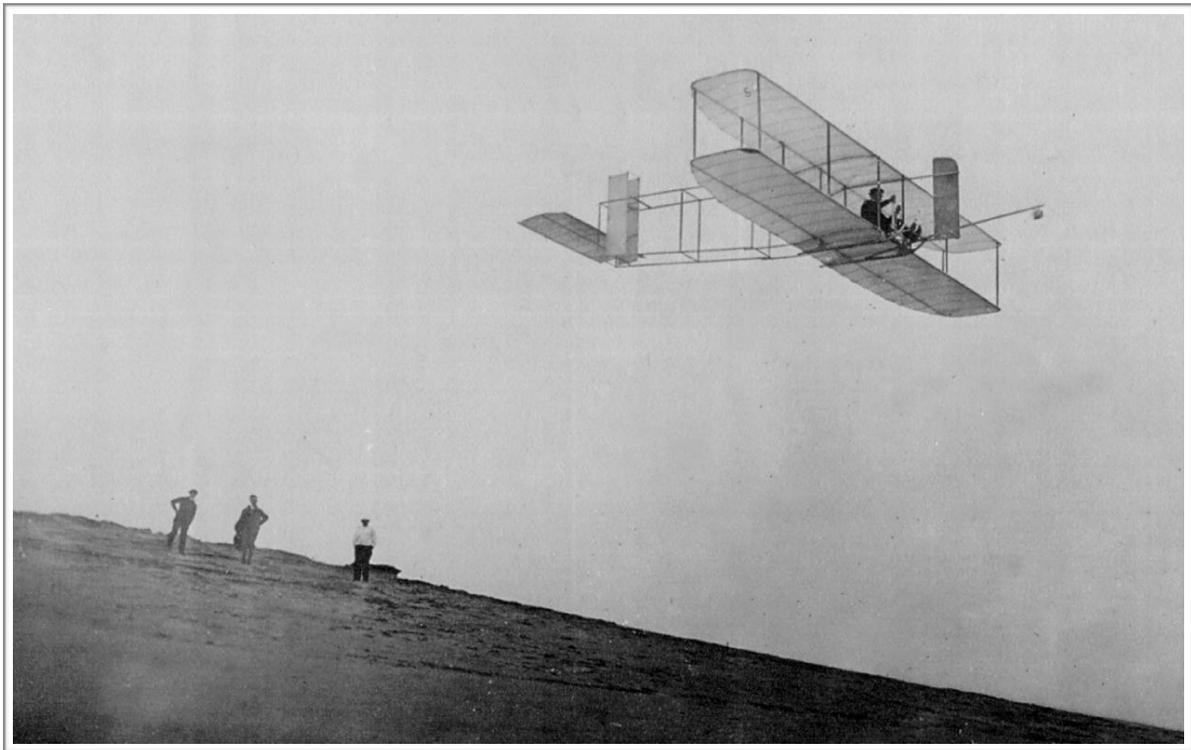

The Pivotal Design

*The breakthrough discovery that explains why
some churches prevail and others don't*

RON GLADDEN



Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, December 17, 1903

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The conversation with Dr. Lyle Schaller is a paraphrase based on the author's recollection.

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“This document will make you nervous; please read it anyway. Grapple with its propositions. Challenge its assumptions. I make this promise: It will make you want to do something. So, do it. And know that the history of most healthy movements shows that they grow, not from the center, but from the edge.”

– Don Jacobsen (Past President, Adventist World Radio)

“A wise professor of mine, Robert Worley, said ‘Church structure did not come down from heaven on the wings of an angel. Structure arises out of the needs of the culture. As the culture changes the structure needs to change.’ There is a saying in the business world that structure follows strategy. That is exactly what Ron Gladden and Mission Catalyst are doing. They are following the words of Jesus who said you cannot put new wine into old wineskins. The wineskins, the structure, must change if the church is going to be faithful to the great commission of discipling people for Jesus.

– J. David Newman (Senior Pastor, New Hope Seventh-day Adventist Church, former editor of Ministry Magazine)

One discovery or invention changes everything.

True or False: Wilbur and Orville Wright started from scratch when they created the world’s first self-powered, heavier-than-air flying machine.

Definitely false. They were unquestionably smart, passionate, and persistent, but they stood on the shoulders of those who, over the centuries, tried, failed, and tried again.

Everything changed on December 17, 1903, when Wilbur guided the aircraft on a 59-second flight that covered 852 feet. They could hardly contain their excitement. They sensed they were on to something, and they were right. A hundred years later, airplanes are faster, safer, and more efficient, but they are still manufactured on *the pivotal design*.

Until recently, most church leaders missed something important: successful churches are based on a pivotal design. If your church doesn’t exactly fly, Ron Gladden suggests you focus your prayers, passions, and persistence on discovering how God is working most powerfully today.

To create a strong, healthy, growing church (where ever-increasing numbers of people cross the line of faith), don’t waste your time gazing at the sky and wondering why others can fly and you can’t. Discover *the pivotal design*.



Whether it’s climbing the highest point in each of the 50 states or equipping leaders to start churches, Ron Gladden lives life with passion. Ron serves as founder and directional leader for Mission Catalyst and has authored the exciting books *Plant the Future* and *The 7 Habits of Highly Ineffective Churches*. He lives in Vancouver, Washington, with his wife Fran (and just down the street from the best kids and grandkids in the world).

Dedicated to all the upright beetles.

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How would you feel? I was sitting in the home of one of the smartest people on earth (when it comes to creating healthy, growing congregations), and he told me I was doing it wrong. Ouch!

Indispensable Lessons from Early Flying Machines

One discovery or invention changes everything. Whether it's penicillin, the airplane, or the internet, a simple discovery destroys old assumptions, disturbs equilibrium, and forever alters reality. It's like watching water run uphill or the hands of a clock turn backward.

Consider the airplane. For centuries, people had a hunch that human flight was possible. After all, birds are heavier than air, yet they overcome gravity and travel at will with no regard for the land or water below. "If they can do it, why can't we?"

No one knows when the first effort was made. Perhaps a wild and foolish thrill seeker from Mesopotamia (with an architecturally simple brain) strapped some homemade wings on his arms and tossed himself from the top of Cliff Zizz. Friends and well-wishers gasped and watched wide-eyed as he fluttered frantically before plunging into the Tigris.

In AD 875, 65-year-old Armen Firman launched himself in a prehistoric hang glider from the Mount of the Bride near Cordoba, Spain, and drifted for a few moments before contacting the ground more vigorously than he had planned. He survived his injuries ("Aahh! I wrenched my back!") and, according to Philip Hitti in *History of the Arabs*, became "the first man in history to make a scientific attempt at flying."¹

All major inventions during the Industrial Revolution, such as the steam engine and the sewing machine, followed a slow process of study, analysis, and experimentation by a

¹ According to the Wikipedia article "Aviation History," the first expression of human flight might have occurred in sixth-century China when persons who offended a law were punished by tying them to a kite and launching them into the heavens. *Mommy, can I be next?!*

variety of people. Progress was cumulative. Tomorrow's entrepreneur learned from yesterday's failure and today's partial success.

Flying machines evolved exactly like that. One person, who could not live with himself until he tried to fly, collected all the information he could, sifted it through his fertile amygdale, then defied reason (everyone else's at least), and made a contribution to the flying machine database of learnings.

After many failures, a few nominal successes, and a plethora of injuries, the collective experimentation resulted in a pivotal design. Wilbur and Orville Wright are largely credited with inventing the first practical flying machine, but their creation could result only thanks to the bumps and bruises of those who had gone before. Airplanes are still getting faster, safer, more efficient, and more comfortable, but they all owe their success to the long line of maniacs who couldn't be happy until they caught up with the birds.

**Once the pivotal design is realized,
does anyone in his right mind revert?**

We have to ask some stupid questions. Knowing what we know now, how smart would it be to fabricate some wings, secure them with duct tape to our arms, and base jump into the sky? What kind of inventor would relaunch one of those pedal thingies that produced a few moments of lift before thudding to the ground, leaving the pedaler exhausted and battered? How do you explain a person who tries to fly while ignoring what others have learned through accumulated trial and error (other than he must have a room-temperature IQ)? Once the pivotal design is realized, does anyone in his right mind revert?

Indispensable Lessons from Early Church Planting

It was the last thing I wanted to hear, and I cringed. "The churches you are planting have no chance of growing beyond the small church stage."

My brain went into overdrive. *This guy has written fifty books, I reminded myself. He is considered the nation's leading interpreter of congregational health and growth. But he's in his eighties. Should I take him seriously, or is he tilting toward senility?*

I was director of the Adventist Church Planting Center, and some friends had joined me on a pilgrimage to Dr. Lyle Schaller's home. I was aware that Adventist churches, on average, are smaller than those in every other denomination; but we were planting new ones, and I wanted to get it right.

Four hours of mental sparring were followed by lunch. When the last brownie had vanished, we resumed our positions and picked up the pace. Facts, stories, and questions bounced around the room like ping pong balls at a Changsha tournament.

"I can point to hundreds of significant churches," Dr. Schaller challenged, "but none of them is part of your denomination. Maybe I'm missing something, so help me out. Point me to the Adventist success stories. Where are the prevailing churches? Where do you direct someone who asks how to get it done?"

Where is the fruit of the ten-talent pastors?

He had us over a barrel, but he wouldn't let up. "Every denomination has a percentage of one-talent pastors, five-talent pastors, and ten-talent pastors. Where is the fruit of the ten-talent pastors? All of your churches plateau at a rather small size. You have larger churches near your institutions, but they don't grow. Can you explain why virtually every ten-talent pastor – after a five- or ten-year run – ends up leaving his local church?"

Corners were stared into. A pen was clicked. Someone's stomach growled. One of us finally spoke. "We can point to a hundred places where we've had bursts of success. But you're right -- it doesn't last more than a few years. As soon as something starts happening, the pastor moves on, the budget is cut, or something else applies the brakes. We feel like we're always playing catch up. That's why we came to your house today, so you could bestow some wisdom!" We felt like six-year-old kids on the first day of school.

“First, look at results,” he advised. “Don’t let yourself be mesmerized by theories. Some people tell me that New Testament churches met in homes, so if we’re biblical we have to do the same. House churches are fine, but they tend to run their course and go away. You have to visit a developing country to find home-based churches that last more than a decade. Whether we like it or not, the political and social realities of America are a far cry from first-century Palestine.

“Others have a preference for the worship and ministry style of Methodists in 1901. I like to remind them that pretty much everyone who went to church in 1901 no longer attends. You don’t need to alter the gospel, but the way you do church must constantly change in order to be effective.

“Second, in pretty much every city in America,” he continued, “God has raised up prevailing churches. They never stop reaching more of the lost and making more disciples. Their highest concern is the person who doesn’t know God. When you attend on the weekend, you step into a welcome, friendly environment. You experience energy and joy. Everything they do – the music, the preaching, their use of technology and the arts – is exceptional. You learn to expect a transformational message. A high percentage of those who attend don’t have a church background.

“But that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Look beneath the surface and you’ll find the church is a Spirit-filled body of people who are increasingly devoted to God. People truly care for one another. They love their church so they invite their friends. And supernatural life change happens constantly.”²

**When thousands of congregations
underperform, you need to open
your eyes and look at the system.**

“Let me make it simple.” Dr. Schaller scooted forward in his chair and doubled his intensity. “Systems produce what they are designed to produce. When a single congregation doesn’t fulfill its ministry potential, you might need to replace the pastor or

² My paraphrase of his description.

send him for some training. But when *thousands* of congregations underperform, you need to open your eyes and look at the system.” The two conference presidents in the room squirmed and longed for the golf course.

Dr. Schaller’s words were a concoction of wisdom and merciless sarcasm. “I will say it one more time: It’s not the people; it’s your system. If your goal is a new generation of small and struggling churches, congratulations. You’re doing everything right!” I desperately wanted him to be wrong.

I’m wiser today. The school of hard knocks is still in session, but after five years of starting independent churches, my eyes are wide open. I realize now that Schaller had discovered the pivotal design, while I somehow missed – or ignored – the accumulated wisdom of success. I was sending brave leaders into the sky in aircraft with an obsolete design.

The Process of Progress

Before I lift the cloak and reveal the pivotal design, let me remind you that progress is cumulative. (I know you’re dying to discover the pivotal design. Hang in there; it’s coming!) Down through time, each explorer and would-be inventor eagerly scoured data, stories, and commentary from those who had gone before. He knew his best shot at a breakthrough was standing on the shoulders of others. Even those who broke the mold and leapfrogged previous learnings studied the efforts of their forebears with ferocious curiosity.

There were no sacred cows. If the quest was discovering a land passage to the Pacific Ocean and the map was outdated, the explorer used it to start his campfire. If the mission was achieving flight, he respected the man who tried and failed, but dismissed his design. He tackled the task as if answering a holy call. If old ways of thinking ever became more important than the goal, he ceased to be an explorer and became, instead, an aging defender of erstwhile ways.

By way of example, the Wright brothers studied the problems and successes of previous flyers. They wrote to the Smithsonian and obtained technical papers regarding aerodynamics. They observed and chronicled the movements of large gliding birds.

The Prevailing Church

Are prevailing churches the exclusive domain of other Christians? So far, yes. But imagine going all out to merge the pivotal design with the biblical message as understood by grace-filled Adventists. The result is a prevailing church with a lot of people finding Christ and preparing for His return. The barrier is not the distinctives; it is doing church with an outdated design.

What does the prevailing church look like?

- The church ethos is unselfish; it's all about the next person who needs to meet Jesus.
- They understand and connect with the culture through music, technology, preaching, and the arts.
- A high percentage of attenders have no church background.
- Authentic Acts 2 community happens (largely, but not exclusively) through its small groups.
- The stories of supernatural life change and radical discipleship are countless.
- The church never stops reaching more people. Whatever the church's age, it continues to grow.
- The church has an increasingly significant footprint in the community. You can't miss it.

They created kites to learn how to control the roll, pitch, and yaw of a flying object. They built a wind tunnel and developed model-testing techniques. They tested over 200 different wings and airfoil models before finally attaching propellers and a 12-horsepower motor to their craft. The longest of four flights in 1903 lasted less than a minute and did not include any maneuvers.³

Consider the process of progress in the church. The first step is to agree on the quest. What are we trying to accomplish? What do we wish was true about ministry? What kind of church do we long to create?⁴ Remember Dr. Schaller's words during our living room melee? Wow -- give me the address, and I'll be there!

Once we agree on the quest, we're confronted with two questions.

1. From whom shall we learn?

We already decided that progress is cumulative. If others are flying to and fro, it is silly (and tragic) to peer off Cliff Zizz, mumbling excuses. If we truly want to fly, we have to inhale data, stories, and commentary from those who fly.

When I worked in the Adventist system, I encountered two kinds of people: learners and non-learners. (These groups exist, of course, in every system.) Some couldn't wait to get their hands on the latest book by Wayne Cordeiro or Erwin McManus. They devoured DVDs featuring Jim Collins and Patrick Lencioni. They listened with fascination as Rob Bell mixed an astounding database of knowledge with humor and a presentation style that brought the Word to life.

Learners attended the Purpose Driven Conference and the Leadership Summit. They left with their hearts on fire and their fists in the air, longing to apply what they learned in their own context. They returned to their cities with the passion of John Knox, who shouted, "Give me Scotland, or I die!" They prayerfully analyzed every new ministry idea, considered how it might make their church more effective, and then took a risk and tried it. If it worked, they doubled their efforts. If it didn't, they did something else. They bled on one another and poured fuel on each other's fire.

³ A coin toss decided who got to fly first. The winner was Wilbur.

⁴ The quest can be stated in any number of ways, but Schaller's description grows directly from Acts 2. Feel free to craft your own expression of these timeless, biblical principles.

The non-learners were the majority. Some were simply lazy. Others acquiesced to the bias against learning from Christians who weren't Adventist. "We don't need to go to the world (or Babylon) to learn how to fly. If Wilbur and Orville don't keep the Sabbath," they scowled, "we don't care what they've done."

**Adventists must bury their arrogance
and learn from today's spiritual
pioneers.**

From whom shall we learn? The question shouldn't have to be asked. If God is blessing a church with hundreds of conversions, what would possess a Christ follower to mount his moral soapbox and offer criticism instead of applause? Why would he conclude that he has nothing to learn from someone who loves God but sees some things differently? Does he imagine that his own knowledge is perfect and complete? Will he be the only person in heaven who has nothing to learn? Is he incapable of separating methods from theology? Why not rejoice that people far from God are crossing the line of faith and deciding to choose Jesus as their Savior and Lord?

Adventists in the denomination must bury their arrogance and learn, humbly and enthusiastically, from today's spiritual pioneers. Until they do, they will continue to sneer at the planes above them and attribute their success to "a watered down message." They will remain perched on the cliff with duct tape and artificial wings at their feet while paradoxically feeling superior. They will smile and nod approvingly as young, would-be pilots hurl themselves into the air, only to land harshly in a pile of broken dreams.

2. Is anything more important than the mission?

Here's an assignment: Carve out a couple of hours. Assemble the brightest leaders in your church and a few of your friends. Position a flip chart toward the front of the room. On the top of the page write: *More important than helping people find Jesus.* Leave room for a list of items. Assign a scribe, and let the discussion begin. As suggestions emerge, write them down. Wrestle verbally. Add, edit, and erase. Reach for consensus.

When the mental dust settles and you complete your list, send me a note, and I'll compare it with mine.

Assuming we don't toss the teachings of the Bible, what should we find on the list? What is more important than the gospel commission, than going all out to help people find salvation through Jesus? How about unity? Or preserving the traditional worship style? Would the denomination's organizational structure make the list?

Unity – When I pulled the trigger and started Mission Catalyst, a ministry that equips leaders to start churches, a friend offered some thoughts and then asked me a pointed question. “Everyone knows the system bogs down the spread of the gospel,” he stated matter-of-factly. “But isn't unity more important than being effective? Shouldn't we stay united at all costs?”

I was surprised by the question, and my brain hunted for words. It didn't get a chance. The sound waves reached his own ears at roughly the same time they reached mine, and he had already concluded the obvious. “Wow,” he exclaimed. “That sounded stupid, huh?”

How do you define unity? Keeping everyone happy? Embracing uniformity in methods? Insisting spiritual entrepreneurs abandon their call because “We've never done it that way before”? When some noisy believers demanded that Gentiles be circumcised before coming to faith (*Anything less is compromise!*), the leaders in Acts 15 came down on the side of making it easy for sinners to find salvation. They insisted that any unity grow out of their highest priority: to spread the gospel.

A year or so before the conversation above, Dr. Schaller wrote: There is “an absence of models in American Protestantism that demonstrate how the road to Christian unity overlaps with the road to fulfilling the Great Commission. History suggests those two roads are either at right angles, or may even run in opposite directions.”⁵ What, no models?

Any organization that elevates unity above all other priorities will descend into confusion and irrelevance.

⁵ Lyle E. Schaller, *From Geography to Affinity*, p. 199.

If unity trumps helping people find salvation, what unites us? What, exactly, is the basis of our unity? Upon what do we all agree that supersedes the great commission? (Do I see a half-second glance at the flip chart?) Any organization that elevates unity above all other priorities will descend into confusion and irrelevance.

Traditional worship style – Some of the saints will impersonate a cornered cat to protect their preferred style of worship. They belligerently insist that the order of service, choice of songs, permitted instruments, and hand position while singing should make late-nineteenth-century Methodists feel right at home. (“If it was good enough for Jesus...”) You can predict a couple of things about these people. (1) They rarely have friends outside the church, and (2) they don’t spend much time praying for people far from God to meet Jesus. (The exception is earnest prayer for their own children who – they can’t imagine why – bailed out long ago.)

It is normal to prefer one worship style over the other. Some like it old, others like it new. (And as soon as you get used to the new, that twenty-something kid who just met Jesus last week and has a tongue ring, holes in his jeans, and a stocking cap, creates some bizarre and boisterous way of “worshipping” God again!) But why should *your* preference be the benchmark for all other believers and for those who don’t call Jesus Lord?

Five times in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul speaks about unbelievers in worship. He appeals for sensitivity to the seeker and reprimands those who sing, pray, and preach with little or no consideration for the person who is checking out God. Paul would undoubtedly look at the flip chart, grab the permanent marker and draw a dark line through *Traditional Worship Service*. Clearly, the style of worship is not more important than helping people find the Lord.

May I climb out on a limb and speak the truth in love? Anyone who thinks that preserving the worship style of his own preference is more important than helping sinners cross the line of faith is spiritually selfish at best, and probably is in need of conversion.

The organizational structure – It is time to confront the sacred cow, the 800-pound gorilla, the elephant in the room. (Since we’re visualizing animals, shall we include the ostrich with its head in the sand?) Let’s treat the structure with due respect (after all, it has done what few structures have done: survived for over 100 years!), but we have to know if anything is more important than the mission.

The topic of the denominational structure deserves an entire book of its own (and if such a book were written, it could be titled, *The Fat Lady and the Kingdom*⁶). We don't need to scrutinize the five levels of the church, the flow of tithe, and constituency sessions, however, to decide if the structure is more important than the mission.

You already know what the answer is. Everyone knows.

A structure was created in 1863 to catalyze the spread of the gospel. When society changed and membership numbers expanded, Adventist leaders appealed with passion for the extreme makeover that led to the 1901 reorganization. It was all about mission. Nothing else mattered.

Not a single leader would have listed the organizational structure as more important than the spread of the gospel. Anyone who suggested otherwise would have been run out of Battle Creek by pitchfork-bearing activists to the cries of "Heresy!" If A.G. Daniells, E.G. White, and their colleagues were alive today, they would be incredulous that the issue is even on the table (let alone the flip chart).

**We must have the guts to elevate mission to its
rightful place above everything else.**

Yes, there are consequences to deciding (and admitting out loud) that the mission is more important than the structure. First, Paul would say, "Repeat after me. I do all things for the sake of the gospel." All things. If Paul were to conclude that the pivotal design was out of reach inside the system, he would have made a twinkling-of-an-eye decision to minister alongside (instead of inside) the structure.

The second consequence grows out of the first: a lot of blood-bought people, currently headed for an eternity without Christ, will find salvation when we have the guts to elevate mission to its rightful place above everything else.

⁶ If you haven't read it, you should. The author is George Knight, emeritus professor of history at Andrews University. Pay particular attention to pages 43-46.

The bottom line? Airplanes are soaring all around. The pivotal design is on display. Others have figured it out. Adventists don't need to invent anything. They don't need to risk compound fractures or brain concussions. They don't need to be brilliant. They just need to be wise and humble. God has put it in front of their faces. Their mandate is to eagerly learn from those whom God is blessing with success.⁷ And they must have the guts to wiggle free of the cultural draw that insists that loyalty to the system trumps loyalty to the mission.

The Pivotal Design

It is time to lift the cloak. To explain the pivotal design. To reveal the equivalent of Wilbur and Orville's success at Kitty Hawk. When you sense a call from God to create a prevailing church, how does it happen? (If your call is to plant a church that remains small, you'll want to learn from those who do that well.)

Do it any other way, and you may have a church, but not a prevailing church.

Dr. Schaller gave us a summary in his Naperville living room. My experience since that encounter has confirmed his wisdom. Here are the six components in the pivotal design of a prevailing church. Leave out any of the components (do it any other way), and you may have a church, but not a prevailing church.

And it is difficult. (That shouldn't surprise anyone who considers that inventors grappled with self-propelled, heavier-than-air flight for somewhere north of 5,000 years.⁸) Unlocking the missional code, discovering the mix of components that result in a prevailing church, is a sizeable challenge. Assembling just the right parts in just the right way happens rarely. But it can be done. It is probably happening right now in your city.

⁷ If you want to define success simply, try Luke 15: the next person coming home. The more that happens, we can assume, the greater the success.

⁸ Remember that the laws of physics remain constant while our culture continues to change.

And it's reproducible. Your deep passion for people far from God makes it worth learning what it takes and paying the price to pull it off.

("Ladies and Gentlemen, please stand at attention for the unveiling...")

The church is started and led by a team of pastors/leaders. Collectively, the team has specific gifts. Each team member must have certain characteristics and paradigms. The church possesses a specific culture. And from day one, the church's structure is self-determining. Follow me as I unpack each of these points.

First, a prevailing church is started and led by a team of pastors working together. (Remember: we're not in Guatemala; this is North America.) This principle is as elementary as the wings and rudder of a plane. No person or couple is sufficiently gifted to do it alone. Nor is he omnipresent. Take a field trip to a series of prevailing churches, and you'll find that assembling multiple pastors to work together is essential.⁹

Allow me a few words of emphasis. You can dispute this if you wish, you can opt to do it differently, but your efforts are wishful thinking. Where is the track record? Where is it happening? You cannot point to churches in North America that continue to make an ever-increasing, multi-decade impact that are started and led by a single person or couple (let alone a volunteer). Prevailing churches are started and led by a team of pastors working together.

Second, merely mixing random people together won't get it done. The team must be strategically assembled and must – collectively – share these specific gifts. (Only Superman has them all, although I haven't heard him preach.) The absence of one or more gifts on the team assures frantic fluttering and the eventual absence of flight.

- *People magnet* – This person has close friends who are far from God. He loves hanging out with people who have no use for church and he prioritizes his time accordingly. His people skills are off the charts.
- *Visioneer* – This person discerns God's desired future for the church, keeps the leaders focused on the big picture in spite of obstacles and distractions, and continually infects others with the vision.

⁹ To qualify as a pastor in a prevailing church, must a person have previous employment with a church or denomination? Must he or she have a theology degree from a Christian college or university? Not necessarily. For those without formal ministry training or experience, success in the marketplace, the spiritual gift of leadership, and a passion for ministry are the most important indicators of high potential.

- *Strategy architect* – This person has helicopter sense: he rises above the details to see the lay of the land. Once the big picture is clear, he maps out and navigates the journey from where they are to where they are headed.
- *Systems architect* – This person develops and implements leadership and operational systems. Systems are documented, ongoing processes that leave no detail untended, simplify complicated tasks, make training and leadership development easier, produce consistent results, and allow the church to grow large.
- *Excellent preacher/presenter* – This person consistently presents a transformational weekend message. Each presentation is Christ centered, biblically sound, entertaining, and has high take-home value.
- *Leader of leaders* – This person identifies people’s potential and unleashes their gifts to create highly-effective ministry teams. He discerns those with leadership potential and helps them achieve maximum impact.

No one person can pitch, catch, play shortstop, and cover right field all at the same time.

No one person excels in all of these gifts. Even if he did, he cannot pitch, catch, play shortstop, and cover right field all at the same time. Leaders who plan to grow beyond the small church size get it. They understand the power of a properly-balanced team. They grasp the power of synergy. Besides, it’s a lot more fun to be on a high-energy team than to be the Lone Ranger.

This list does not describe the positions or roles in the church. Obviously, a prevailing church has an exceptional children’s ministry, a robust small group ministry, and transformational worship. This list includes the gifts that must be present on the primary leadership team. The pastors function as specialists as opposed to generalists. When these six gifts are deployed, leaders for the various tasks will emerge.

Third, while the sum of the gifts above can be spread among three or more persons, certain characteristics must be present in each team member.

- *Integrity* – This is a no-brainer. The church deserves to know that every pastor on the team is walking with God. No one is ready for translation, but the consistent pattern of each life is to live whole-heartedly for God.
- *Chemistry* – Invest a half hour with some people, and they drive you nuts. Hang out with others and (*I can hardly believe it!*) it's one o'clock in the morning. Your eyelids may be sagging, but you somehow feel energized. In a prevailing church, team members love working together. They are known to spend their free time with one another, and (amazingly) may even vacation together.
- *Clarity of roles* – Each pastor on a highly-effective team is clear about his or her role. He has a healthy and accurate picture of his own personal wiring, and the team affirms and agrees on his niche.
- *Humility* – Turf wars are virtually absent in a prevailing church. When someone preaches and knocks it out of the park, the others cheer him on. When an attender gushes about something a pastor did, other team members love it and feel proud to work with such a dreadfully competent bloke. Jealousy? Doesn't happen!
- *Compassion* – Some leaders are energized by being around needy people while others feel drained. Regardless of their spiritual gifts and personal wiring, however, leaders in a prevailing church have a heart-felt love and compassion for people in all situations. They care, and it shows.
- *Listeners* – Leaders in prevailing churches constantly and desperately seek God for wisdom, clarity, and courage. They are open to the Spirit's leading. They also keep their ears open for concerns and suggestions from their followers. While they cannot (and should not) take everyone's advice, they keep their ear to the ground and discern between pet opinions and wise counsel.
- *Lifelong learners* – No matter how much they know today, they don't know enough for tomorrow. Each person on staff at a prevailing church must take the initiative to be a ravenous, lifelong learner. They eagerly learn from attenders, peers, mentors, and other churches, and they constantly stretch and focus their mind through books, DVDs, and seminars.

The fourth component in the pivotal design is the set of paradigms the team holds about ministry, life, and God. In fact, they can't imagine viewing the world through any other lenses. Like yeast in bread, these life perspectives permeate every thought, motive, and prayer, and give rise to their actions and decisions.

- *Matthew 28:18-20* – The church is all about the next person. Assembling the already convinced is important, but the primary purpose of the church is to

- continue the ministry of Jesus who came to seek and save the lost. The church unselfishly puts first those who are far from God.
- *Acts 2:42-47* – The church is not a crowd of disconnected people, but a body of those who see themselves as their brother’s keeper. They bear one another’s burdens. They are a family to do life with and a team to change the world with.
 - *Honest about the present; optimistic about the future* – Leadership begins with vision. It continues with confronting the brutal facts and acting on the implications. When a leader is willing to take an honest and diligent look at the truth of his situation, the right decisions often become self evident.¹⁰ Those decisions are made in the atmosphere of confidence that the church’s best days are ahead.
 - *Abundance mindset* – Most Christians are functional atheists. Prevailing church leaders plan and make decisions based on the perception that there is an abundance of resources, as opposed to thinking that resources are scarce. When the resources aren’t visible, they trust that God will be God and that His provision will be equal to the vision. (John Maxwell says, “There’s gold in them there pews!” and prevailing church pastors intend to find it.)
 - *God expects fruit* – Some say, “God doesn’t call us to be effective; He calls us to be faithful.” *Au contraire*. Jesus cursed the dysfunctional tree. With shiny leaves but not a peck of figs, it was a sham; it was unfaithful. Of course God expects us to be faithful, but He plainly commanded, “Go and make disciples.” Leaders in prevailing churches are never satisfied until they bear much fruit, and thus bring glory to God. If a church is not bearing fruit, prevailing church leaders do not get discouraged or make excuses. They instead invest their time and prayer in the discovery and embracing of the pivotal design.
 - *Longevity* – Creating a prevailing church is impossible when the staff is constantly shuffled like cards in a game of blackjack. Assemble all the other components of the pivotal design, and the aircraft will careen into Mt. Irrelevance unless the lead pastor, in particular, accepts a lifelong call to his city. Really? Yes. Do the research.

The pivotal design’s fifth component is the culture of the local church. This one deserves a book of its own. (Thankfully, Craig Groeschel wrote a pretty good one. The title of his book is *It*. If you haven’t already, buy *It* and read *It*.) But for the sake of this

¹⁰ See Jim Collins’ *Good to Great*, p. 88-89.

discussion, here is a brief overview of the DNA of a prevailing church. I will explain each point through the story of Epikos Church, a Mission Catalyst church in Vancouver that was patterned on the pivotal design.

- *Everything revolves around Jesus* – This is not a cliché. It’s a passion and a reality. Leaders love to talk about Him as a friend and their Lord, they aspire to be like Him in character and priorities, and they’re fired up about living with Him in heaven. They constantly invite people far from God to cross the line and follow Him in baptism. They are irrevocably committed to treating every person as He did. (Love, acceptance, and forgiveness were actually Jesus’ idea.)
- *The Bible is front and center* – A Bible is under every chair. During every message, attenders open the Bible and read it for themselves. Pastors use simple language. They are determined to make it relevant to people’s lives. They tell people, “If you don’t have an easy-to-read Bible at home, please take this one with you!” They proudly teach the things they have in common with Christians of other tribes as well as the truths that make their non-denominational church unique.

Story: After attending several weeks, Amanda was blown away at how interesting the Bible was. She persuaded herself that we must have doctored it somehow. She did an archeological dig in her garage and unearthed an old NIV Bible. She laid the Bible she received at church (also an NIV) next to her own. Surprise, surprise, they were the same! She realized that the Bible we gave her at Epikos wasn’t actually altered; God had breathed life into it as the Word was presented and she opened her heart.

- *It’s all about the next person* – If you have crossed the line of faith yourself and you recurrently renew that decision, you’re pretty well set for eternity (thanks to the amazing grace of God). But what about that guy you work with or your neighbor down the street? All of us need church, but the *primary* reason we turn on the lights and unleash the Word is to reach the next person. Every decision, expenditure, activity, and program is planned with that in mind. It’s anti-selfish.
- *The front door is wide open* – Guests who attend feel comfortable before the program even starts. They love the friendly greeters, the smell of hot drinks and fresh popcorn (with a dozen gourmet toppings) at the Café Ever After, and popular music playing in the background. Every detail matters (interior signage, program handout, lighting, etc.). We ruthlessly pursue the excellence and ambience of Starbucks (as opposed to, say, Waffle House).

- *We give our best and draw the best out of others* – Excellence honors God and attracts high-impact leaders. We’re not pathological about perfection, but we know we can always do better. High on every staff and programming meeting agenda is evaluation. No one is exempt from grace-filled feedback.
- *Every weekend experience is EPIC (experiential, participatory, image-based, and connective)* – Prevailing church leaders go crazy with this one. They believe that everyone who attends should (a) be accepted just as they are, (b) enjoy the experience, (c) understand everything that happens, and (d) be appropriately challenged to take a next step. The programming team meets every week to make sure the program is fun, relevant, and substantive. Heart-changing worship happens in the atmosphere of energy and commitment with a healthy dose of laughter.
- *Spiritual progress is normal* – No matter who you are, hang around a prevailing church for a while, and you will grow spiritually. As a first-time attender passes the Guest Services table, he picks up a cool brochure that explains the four levels of commitment and nudges him to the next level (Family, Team, Christian, Epi-ciple¹¹). Everyone is challenged to get in the habit of reading the Bible every day, hook up with a Life Group, or study one-on-one with an Epi-ciple.
- *The stakes are high, and so is our commitment* – Leaders in a prevailing church are nuts about taking God seriously, and they’re not shy about challenging people to pray, serve, and give. Leaders model high commitment in their personal lives as well as in their areas of influence in the church. Attenders love the atmosphere of full devotion to a kingdom cause, and they deem it normal to follow suit.
- *Healthy people do not demand their way; they do demand to have their way considered* – Secure leaders encourage dissent. They listen to every criticism, accolade, and idea and respectfully consider each perspective. They are clear about where the church is going, and they constantly make course corrections. They simply smile about (that is, they can’t imagine fighting over) trivial matters such as drums, meat, dress code, or whether the “Seinfeld” video clip crossed the line. Not everyone will like this church, and that’s OK.
- *There ain’t no ‘us’ and ‘them’* – Seekers can sniff out spiritual arrogance like decomposing fish at the Pike Street market. It doesn’t matter if it’s on the individual level, or if we deem our church to be superior to the one down the street. On the individual level, we all are sinners in need of a Savior. Wherever

¹¹ An Epi-ciple is a person who (a) is outrageously devoted to God and, (b) chooses to live out that commitment primarily through Epikos Church.

we are in our spiritual journey, we're on the same path as the next guy. On the church level, leaders in healthy churches don't presume theirs is closer to God than a church that sees some things differently or worships on a different day. We all are the Body of Christ, and all part of His plan to redeem the world.

- *Children are a sky-high priority* – Jesus set the bar high with His example and His “Except you become as little children” statement. Those sometimes-bratty kids who spill snacks on the floor and trip over the speaker cords during setup are fully open to the stories and truths of the Bible. Prevailing churches go all out to prioritize time, resources, and energy accordingly.
- *Talented people are invited to serve* – Our eyes are always peeled for people with exceptional talent. We don't care if they're part of our church or even Christian; we dream up excuses to connect them with what God is up to.

Story: The local paper printed an article about Katelynn, a fourteen-year old recording artist who has 100,000 hits on her MySpace page. When we invited her to share her talent at church, we learned that she wasn't exactly a churchgoer. No big deal. She sang during the message and, at the end of the program, decided to follow Jesus and prepare for baptism!

Story: Chris was minding her own business, painting window art at Whole Foods Market. She hadn't attended any church in over five years. Then along came Sam. The next thing Chris knew, she was drawing the theme of Sam's sermon on a chalkboard at Epikos Church. Everyone loved it, Chris loved the church, and she has attended ever since.

Story: *Good Housekeeping* magazine's June 2009 cover featured Annie, a young woman who found a winning weight loss formula; her weight plummeted from 210 to 135. We invited Annie to tell her story during a message on health and fitness. She was honored, and so were we. Annie and her husband, Chris, are planning to return on a regular basis.

Story: Jon is an award-winning musician who spends some of his evenings as a bartender. Sam visited him at the bar, made friends with Jon, listened to his spiritual story and learned he had no use for church but still had a heart for God. After some long, lemonade-laced heart-to-hearts, Jon started attending Epikos. Whenever he's not on tour, Jon shares his musical talent and his revived passion for Jesus at church.

- *Compassion for the “least of these”* – Even as a healthy Christian sees himself as his brother's keeper, a prevailing church is devastated by the systemic tragedies of our world and is determined to unleash substantial resources on those most deeply

affected. They joyfully and spontaneously model faithfulness to Jesus' instruction in Matthew 25.

Frequently, at least in church planting circles, leaders huddle up in smokeless rooms and fantasize about the church of their dreams. They emerge with a wish list of "core values" they hope will form the church's DNA. When time rolls forward, however, they often experience gut-wrenching incongruence between the lofty words and the M.O. of the church. Of course they meant well, but they later find themselves staring into the gap between aspiration and reality.

No church perfectly exemplifies healthy culture (we can't even figure out how to get everyone to show up on the same weekend!), but the aspiration/reality gap in a prevailing church is narrow. Leaders relentlessly pursue health and wholeness through modeling, teaching, and seeking God's involvement.

The Fork in the Road

Yogi Berra once quipped, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." *This* is the fork in the road. If you are a defender of the Adventist organizational structure, it is time to bail out on this article. If putting up with an outdated system trumps the call to build a prevailing church, fold these pages into a fleet of planes, and fling them toward the recycling bin. (Thanks for reading this far!)

**The final component is
incompatible with a parental
system.**

Because here is the reality: The first five components of the pivotal design can conceivably materialize in any system. It's unlikely, but suppose you find a way to

assemble a dream team of pastors with the ideal collage of gifts, paradigms, and characteristics. The final component is incompatible with a parental system.¹²

Here is component number six (assuming you're ready to pick up the fork in the road):

A prevailing church is self-determining. Always. One hundred percent of the time. No exceptions. Throw a rock in the lake, and you can bet it will sink. Name a church that never stops reaching an ever-larger number of people for Christ, and you can bet it is self-determining.

What does that mean? The local church makes its own decisions about money, staff, ministries, and facilities. If the church affiliates with a denomination or network, the local church, not the denomination, decides the final destination of the charitable dollar. When the Holy Spirit reveals the right person for a ministry position, local leaders are empowered to negotiate and bring her on board. If the church decides to seize the day and purchase twenty acres, local church bylaws spell out the process.¹³

No person or committee at a so-called higher level has authority or control over the decisions that affect the church's long-term success. The phone never will ring at the pastor's house – with the conference president's voice on the other end – announcing it is time to move on. Or the youth pastor's salary is being discontinued. Or the committee voted to disallow the purchase of that coveted real estate.¹⁴

The Pivotal Design

- Team of pastors
- Collective gifts of the team
- Characteristics of each team member
- Paradigms of the team
- Culture of the church
- Self-determining structure

Dr. Schaller piles on with his characteristic wit:

¹² Generally, parents control while grandparents support. They both want the same thing (healthy, happy, balanced kids), but their roles are notably different. Of course good parents provide support but, in denominational circles, there is a profound difference between control and support.

¹³ Does this mean the church is congregational? No way. Congregational polity expects the congregation to vote on every major decision – and a lot of minor ones. Prevailing churches are staff-led. The lead pastor and his team are voracious listeners – they keep both ears to the ground and take seriously what they hear – but major decisions are made by those who are called to lead. Remember what happened to Israel enroute to the Promised Land when they decided to act by majority vote. One-member, one-vote is not a Scriptural model.

¹⁴ Healthy networks and denominations necessarily protect against doctrinal drift and may have other requirements (e.g., Mission Catalyst also requires each church to support a mission project). But they do not control the factors that affect long-term success: money, staffing, ministries, and facilities.

When “interviewing recent new members in numerically growing congregations, I usually begin with two questions: *What brought you here the first time? Why did you decide to join this congregation?* Rarely do I hear anyone explain, ‘When we moved here, we decided to look for a church that places a high priority on sending money to denominational headquarters, and this is the only one we found that needs people to help achieve that goal.’”¹⁵

In the denomination, every local-church-based dream is eventually shattered.

Grandparental denominations and networks understand their role as advisory and supportive. They don’t want to control anything. Their passion is to help the local church achieve its maximum redemptive potential. They are clear that the local church is the hope of the world. Their greatest pride is seeing one of their churches reach hundreds of people for the kingdom. To repeat, in a prevailing church the decisions that impact long term growth are made locally by leaders who seek wisdom from God and from others.

Take a long and honest look at the family of Adventist churches in North America. Somewhere north of 95% struggle to keep the same attendance year after year. Bursts of success in the other churches are limited and temporary. Because, here is the unvarnished truth (Dr. Schaller tried to warn us): In the denomination, every local-church-based dream is eventually shattered.¹⁶

Profound initiatives that cause lasting impact cannot be applied in the system. Young pastors – or those with above average vision and energy – experience just enough growth to keep them hopeful. They experience seasons of success that always are followed by a change in circumstances they cannot control. They feel the dream slipping away, so they

¹⁵ *The Ice Cube Is Melting*, p. 48.

¹⁶ Only God knows how hard I prayed and worked to prove otherwise. (I was a slow learner.) When this became clear to me, I was heartbroken. Eventually, it becomes clear to everyone who honestly looks at the facts. If anyone argues otherwise, ask them why they themselves gave up on the local church and moved to a position in a distant office.

plead for understanding, resources, staffing, or more time. But their progress is stalled; their heart is crushed. They dial up the realtor, pack up the boxes (*How many times have we done this?*), choke out their goodbyes, and move on.¹⁷

Where? To the academy, the *Review*, or the conference office (where there is no pulpit, baptistry, or unchurched seekers). Or they bail out of ministry altogether and wonder why the handcrafted wings and duct tape let them down. They gave it their best, but they were launched into the sky in aircraft with an outdated design.

“You can’t create the future,” Rosabeth Moss Kanter asserts, “in a structure designed to repeat the past.” Systems produce what they are designed to produce. The system of control is the reason Adventist churches are the smallest of any denomination. And why growth is always temporary and limited.¹⁸

This Baby Flies!

Reporters swooned. Bystanders were in awe. (*Holy Toledo, Maude. We’re witnessing history!*) Photographers madly snapped photos. Wilbur and Orville were on cloud nine. The beat of their hearts seemed louder than the propeller pushing them along. *Did a self-powered, heavier-than-air flight just happen, or are we dreaming?* Something was different this time. Something with far-reaching results. The world, everyone knew, would never be the same.

We know how they feel.

Mission Catalyst has been equipping leaders to start churches for several years. We are proud of the commitment and courage of the leaders who took a flying leap into the unknown. Our efforts continue to produce tangible fruit. But I should have paid more attention in Schaller’s living room. The churches we started are strong in four or five of

¹⁷ The reasons why Adventist churches and pastors never break free from this hamster wheel deserve a thorough discussion. I recommend Schaller’s classic, *The Very Large Church*.

¹⁸ In every struggling denomination, some argue that getting the right people in the right positions will cancel the downsides of a dysfunctional system. After all, it is easier to shuffle people than to change the system. The evidence for that approach being effective, however, is absent. For a brilliant unpacking of this discussion, read Lyle Schaller’s *The Ice Cube Is Melting*, p. 87-88.

the vital components, but no single church was patterned after the pivotal design. They bounced heavenward, but they struggle to lift above the small church size.

Epikos Church was our first serious attempt to link the pivotal design with the message. The fusion was deliberate. When our board of directors grasped the concept and sensed its potential, they urged us to try it. They helped secure the resources to build a team and see if a theologically-faithful, methodologically-maverick church that obsessively pursued the pivotal design could fly.

It does. We feel the same excitement that gripped the Wright brothers ten decades ago. The bicycle builders from Dayton knew their creation was unfit for a trip to London, but it didn't keep them from celebrating their success. They knew they had encountered the pivotal design, and they spent the rest of their lives obsessed with improving their discovery.

Leaders at Epikos watched in amazement as God repeatedly blew them away, and exclaimed: *This baby flies!* They knew that Epikos was not ready for a transoceanic flight. (It started with six people and has been worshipping weekly since September 2008.) But they shared the Wright brothers' thrill of having discovered the pivotal design. Of merging the message with the way God is working most significantly in North America. Of being front-seat witnesses to an extraordinary moving of God that has limitless potential. It is a beautiful thing.

Prevailing churches never stop making an ever-larger impact.

Allow me an interlude to answer someone's question (it might even be yours). *Are you trying to talk us all into megachurches? Are you suggesting those are the only successful churches?* I'm glad you finally asked. The answer is no. But revisit Schaller's words about a prevailing church, and see if they don't fire up your spiritual motor. Imagine you and some friends get to be part of it. Visualize an increasing number of unchurched people deciding that attending your church on Sabbath is a higher priority than grilling out, enjoying the big game, or washing the car. Would that be cool?

Stated simply, prevailing churches are effective at reaching normal Americans with the gospel message. They never stop making an ever-larger impact. Their success is ongoing and long-term. If that creates a church that needs to add more staff, buy more land, or open a new campus, so be it. Give it whatever label you want, but prevailing church leaders are consumed with reaching the next person, with seeing lives changed. Bursts of success are leveraged for even greater (and permanent) impact. ¹⁹

Lyle Schaller declared it impossible, but we're doing it anyway. We assembled a team of leaders to create a self-directed church and turned them loose with the pivotal design – without conceding the message. (He was correct at the time, of course, because his point of reference was the Adventist system; he didn't anticipate Mission Catalyst.)

**Will more people find salvation when the message
is merged with the pivotal design?**

A Beetle on Its Back

So where do you go? What do you do?

First, decide if the message we share is important. Do you believe it yourself? Is it relevant? When understood and lived out with grace, is it good news? Next, ask the question: Will more people find salvation when the message is merged with the pivotal design? (Of course, they will. *Thousands* more.) Then ask if it's possible. (Hello! It is happening already!)

I talk with Adventists all the time who feel as helpless as a beetle on its back. The legs are still wiggling, but it's not going anywhere. Like those early dreamers who looked into the sky and wondered why only birds could fly, they feel a profound frustration. They wonder if they'll go to their grave before being part of a church that brings much honor to God.

¹⁹ If you would like more information about implementing the pivotal design, let us know. We are happy to provide more details or steer you to some great resources.

Here is your chance. Here is what you can do:

- 1) **Join us in prayer.** We are praying for God to assemble the team for a second prevailing church. It is important that each component of the pivotal design is in place. It is a God thing. We desperately need His leading, so we ask for your prayers.
- 2) **Create a team.** Maybe your calling is to link up with some kingdom maniacs and make it happen. If so, make some phone calls. Huddle up over pizza. Talk with people whose hearts beat fast for people far from God. Pursue the vision with hair-on-fire enthusiasm.
- 3) **Share the story.** You can see the faces of people who need to read this. Let them know you will send it, and ask them to read it. Once they have read it, urge them to send it to the people in their circles of influence.
- 4) **Share financially.** If you've given since way back when, we are grateful. If you've cheered from the sidelines, we hope you'll be willing to start blessing Mission Catalyst each month. And we know God will impress some to make a six- or seven-figure gift, a donation that will make a serious impact on a city and will significantly change the population of heaven.

I've listened to the same story hundreds of times. Even though each of the pastors has a different name, the tale is the same, and it always breaks my heart. This version is from Pastor Tony.²⁰ His email note ended up in my inbox not so long ago. It said, in part: "I recently finished Bill Hybels' book *Courageous Leadership*. When I put it down, I could not stop the tears. I felt an overwhelming sadness, because it hit me that I will never be part of a church like that. In the system, I will have some success here and there, but I will never have the freedom and the funds to build a prevailing church.

"If I could make sure my family has a home and some food, I would pack up my family in a heartbeat and devote the rest of my life to building a prevailing church. Please pray for me."

I am praying for Tony, and I hope you will pray as well. When the vision is clear and the finances are committed, people will step forward, band together, and create waves of prevailing churches.

²⁰ Not his real name.

The days of standing on Cliff Zizz, staring into the sky and wondering why others can fly while we are grounded, are coming to an end.