

Isn't the Holy Spirit Enough?: The Case for Churches and Ministry Leaders to Hire a Professional Consultant

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Businesses and non-profit organizations understand the value of hiring consultants to provide analysis of their enterprises, develop leadership strategies, and help implement change initiatives that will provide a realistic opportunity for the organization's long-term sustainability. They have embraced the potential benefits of looking beyond their in-house talent to experts in the needed fields. While some churches have begun to use consultants, as a whole they are late adopters of this practice, often stating that church leaders should be able to discover solutions to challenges merely by listening to God. This article agrees the Holy Spirit should have a major influence as ministry leaders chart the course a church should follow, but it will posit that it is wise to seek the input of many counselors and that the most qualified consultant for any church is someone who has been called to ministry and is experienced in local church ministry.

Businesses and non-profit organizations have long understood the value of hiring a professional consultant to provide analysis of the state of their enterprise, develop leadership strategies, and assist in the implementation of critical change initiatives that will provide a realistic opportunity for the long-term sustainability of their place in the market. These firms have embraced the potential benefits within their grasp by looking beyond their current in-house talent and outside their walls to individuals who have proven themselves to be experts in their particular fields. While some faith-based organizations, particularly churches, have begun to explore the use of consultants, as a whole they tend to be late adopters of this practice, often stating that church leaders should be able to discover solutions to challenges merely by listening to God's voice.

This article does not argue with the importance of the Holy Spirit having a principal seat in the boardroom as ministry leaders chart the course a church should follow, but it will posit that it is wise, as the book of Proverbs teaches, to seek the input of many counselors (Proverbs 15:22, English Standard Version), accept instruction (19:20), and listen to advice (12:15). This article will make the case that churches and their leaders will serve their people best when they become willing to listen to the advice of a professional consultant, however, the point will be made that the best and most qualified consultant for any church is someone who shares the common tenets

of the faith, practices its mission and values, has been called to ministry, and is experienced in the actual trenches of local church ministry.

What About the Holy Spirit?

Later in this paper there will be a discussion of common roadblocks of resistance which arise when a church begins to explore possible changes to existing practices, which a consultant is often hired to address. First, though, comes a question which may arise in the early stages of consideration of bringing in an outside consultant – “Isn’t the Holy Spirit enough?” This question must be addressed before the remainder of this paper advocates for the hiring of consultants by church leaders.

In the book of Acts, great emphasis is placed on the importance of and the interrelated reliance on the Holy Spirit in the leadership and functions of the church. At virtually every moment, the apostles and the people who joined the church looked to the Spirit for guidance in every aspect of their physical, emotional, social, and spiritual lives. The Spirit gave power to the church to become Christ’s body and provide bodily assurance that Christ was Lord (Nessan, 2016). It cannot be overstated that the church then practiced Spirit-active leadership (Standish, 2007), which seeks the influence of the Spirit before anything else and understands that it is only by placing ourselves under the accountability of the Spirit that we can accomplish significant feats for the kingdom (Michels, 2012). The church today must also seek the Spirit in this way.

With that said, however, there are modern-day church leaders who ignore sound business and biblical practices which should accompany a sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit. Following only a gut feeling and calling it the Spirit will sometimes result in disastrous outcomes that could have been avoided if the gut were to have been partnered with the mind. Sometimes God will give someone a vision of what to do, however, being a creative and orderly God, He is also likely to direct a leader’s steps through circumstances, experience, education, available resources, people, and internal or external environmental forces. The influence of the Spirit is the glue that holds good decisions together, but a wise and effective leader should take into account all of the available information before choosing the path to follow. In addition, they should seek the counsel of others, which is the topic of the next section.

Wise Counsel: Why a Consultant?

Recent trends show that churches and parachurch organizations are putting resources into hiring advisors for pastors and providing increasingly sophisticated training for small-group leaders, board members, and mission executives (Collins, 2002). Often the decision to do so is driven by their need to add specialized expertise without over-hiring and incurring a long-term and overwhelming expense (McDonald, 2016). Consultants can be hired needing little additional technical training, able to focus on specific issues, typically possessing high relational intelligence, and motivated to work under either a short- or long-term temporary agreement.

Scriptures from the book of Proverbs support the use of consultants. The first is in the passage that “suggests that many counselors be involved in decision-making processes...[because] in the twenty-first century, when many churches, mission agencies, schools, and workplaces are multicultural, having many counselors is even more pertinent” (Enns, 2004). Simply stated,

“Without counsel, plans fail, but with many advisors, they succeed” (Proverbs 15:22, ESV). Two other scriptures support church leaders’ employment of outside and objective voices, particularly if there is conflict within the ranks. Proverbs is repeatedly clear to identify those who argue as fools and states, a “wicked fool is one that consistently refuses to listen to instruction, or rebuke or advice” (Ortlund, 2013, p. 7) Proverbs 19:20 states, “Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future,” and Proverbs 12:15 states, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.” Consultants provide objective and unbiased viewpoints which are not influenced by the pressures of being a member of the permanent team. They can offer wise counsel freely without the need to shape the truth in order to keep their job.

A Primary Role: Addressing Roadblocks

One of the most typical jobs of a church consultant is to assist in the implementation of necessary change, which immediately puts the workforce and the congregation on edge as they quickly decide which side of the argument for change they support. This is another reason why it is often beneficial to an existing church staff to hire a consultant, because they can be objective and absorb some of the pushback that will inevitably arise in the form of roadblocks to change in the church, even when desperately needed. While the staff, and particularly the lead pastor, must be willing to accept the responsibility for change initiatives, having a seasoned consultant who can work to reduce the resistance to change and overcome organizational inertia (Pearse, 2011), knowing that they are temporary, is helpful in guiding a church through what can be a chaotic time. Resistance may appear in many forms, but a few are almost always present, and a quality consultant will be equipped to handle them. One thing to keep in mind is that according to organizational consultant Peter Block (2011), “Resistance is a sign that something important is going on” (p. 289), so it should not be feared, but anticipated and welcomed.

While there are many ways resistance can manifest itself, three common roadblocks to church change are tradition, bias, and the fear of failure, which result in a loss of status and influence to those who are championing the cause. Tradition is one of the most evident roadblocks in churches across America. Even the most modern of churches develop a “the way things are done around here” attitude (Schein, 2010), soon after they first form. People naturally fall into preferred patterns of behavior because they provide a level of security in their lives amidst uncertain times. Jobs, family, politics and more issues create tension for most people, and they look to the church to be a place where they can find some form of calm and consistency of identity.

When the church responds to the need for change, even the most progressive-minded individuals may respond with trepidation, perceiving a potential personal loss. This is not a new phenomenon. Throughout recorded history, the church has a record of responding poorly to those who challenged the status quo, with leaders often reacting condescendingly and sometimes violently (Rose, 1968). Opponents to change argue that the church must remain steadfast in its doctrine and methods in response to a chaotic culture, however, as T. Howland Sanks stated in his research, “Tradition itself is not static, [rather] it is dynamic” (Sanks, 2015, p. 299). Churches can and need to walk the fine line of remaining firm on the truth of scripture but do as Christ Himself did and go to the people and speak in ways which relate to them, often counter to traditional practices.

Another roadblock that appears when the above-described traditions move beyond mere preferences and habit is bias in many forms. Savvy consultants are equipped to handle this because

they do not have the personal attachment to the church body, so they are able to spot bias as it appears, particularly when the church members have become blind to its existence. This can be the obvious bias of race, social status, gender, and age, however, the more difficult bias for people to accept has to do with cultural bias and the church's response to the needs of people around them. "Sect-church theory explains that religious organizations range along a continuum from complete rejection to complete acceptance of the cultural environment" (McKinney, 2015, p. 15). Some churches flourish by rejecting bias of all kinds, while others are so set in their ways that they are oblivious to being biased in any manner. One of the things a consultant can do is unmask the congregation and ministry staff, exposing issues which run contrary to Jesus' life of love and inclusion.

The third common roadblock to church change is mostly on the practical level – fear of failure. Overcome this, and the resistance will give way to the ability to move forward. Fear of failure can be a ball and chain which holds church leaders and their congregations back from implementing innovative methods that would revitalize their ministry and reach more people with the gospel of Christ. As described above, congregation members often fear change because they simply believe that church should be "the bastion of non-change in a changing world, [however, because] pastors know that they have been hired to supply the good old stuff" (Stendahl, 1971, p. 392), they fear risking failure and the possibility of losing their livelihood if they make radical changes. Pastors and their congregations will often remain in the safe confines of the status quo because stepping out with new initiatives and failing could jeopardize their status in the eyes of the community and remove any influence which they have enjoyed. They know that when looking for advice on how to succeed, seldom does one organization look to another, or a person, who has failed.

A Consultant Meets the Challenge

Greiner and Poulfelt (2005) stated, "Hanging on to past practices and strategies will likely become a recipe for future disaster (p. 8)," which underscores the need for organizations to get past the roadblocks of tradition, bias, and fear of failure. To combat tradition, consultants have the skill to empower people to look beyond the way things have always been done and find new solutions to old problems, being encouraged at every step (Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, Sandahl, & Whitworth, 2011). Bias can often be handled through the presentation of facts, information, data, and systems which directly point to solutions to persistent problems (Biech, 2009). Even the most biased church leader can often be swayed to a new way of doing things when a consultant presents objective realities and then appeals to the higher cause and ideals of Christ. Finally, Stoltzfus' (2005) research reveals that "sixty percent of U.S. pastors don't feel they have anyone in their life that they can talk to honestly about their job" (p. 86), which contributes to their insecurity and fear of failing. Consultants have the unique ability to offer a safe and confidential outlet for struggling pastors who may need to know that they are not facing the challenges alone.

Case Study: Family Church

Family Church was healthy and prosperous. It had a nearly 100-year history and had tripled in size over two decades and moved into a prominent and spacious new facility with high visibility in the community. There was no reason to believe that the church would do anything but continue to enjoy the blessings of God as it looked forward to the succession of a new lead pastor. With this event only a few years away, the current pastor, being highly influenced by successful business

people within the congregation, hired an outside consultant to perform an analysis of the current strengths and weaknesses of the organization, clarify mission and values, and set objectives for the future. The consultant was also charged with assisting the senior leader with the complex process of succession to an already-identified new leader.

For nearly two years the process of analysis, mission clarification, rebranding, and the implementation of comprehensive organizational restructuring took place, with the consultant being given broad influence in the decisions being made because of their extensive and successful experience in the secular business world. Generally, advice given and actions taken were sound and appropriate in an organizational context, however, as time progressed, it became evident that while the consultant was well-qualified and effective for a business environment, they lacked certain insights due to an incongruence of faith, a misunderstanding of the church's biblical values, and a lack of concern for the heritage of the church – a concern which is important to churches, though not necessarily to secular organizations. In the end, broad change initiatives were implemented and the succession completed, and the church has remained strong, however, not without the casualties of broken relationships, loss of talented staff, and departure of long-time members. Today Family Church is thriving, but only after a painful transition.

Cautions

The case study above described the negative situation which arose during the selection and hiring of a consultant at Family Church. Caution must be observed by churches regarding a dark side which can arise when church leaders choose to hire someone who is not aligned with the church's values, views, and mission, or when there is a lack of knowledge and understanding of how a church functions, not only from a standpoint of the heritage of the local ministry but also according to biblical guidelines. "Values are generally defined as an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable" (Rokeach, as cited by Ryu, 2015, p. 474) This concept also applies in an organizational context, especially to churches, and in this case, values were not fully shared. A "permanent dilemma of congruence" (Vveinhardt, Gulbovaite, & Streimikiene, 2016, p. 248) occurs when the church and the consultant do not share similar beliefs and values and can result in decisions being implemented in ways that run contrary to the servant leadership modeled by Jesus. While the concepts of rightsizing an organization (Hitt, Keats, Harback, & Nixon, 1994) and getting the right people on the bus (J. Collins, 2001) are applicable to both secular and faith-based organizations, the ways they are implemented are quite different. Compassion and care take on greater importance in an organization such as a church that espouses its priority as the welfare of its people, as does the understanding that churches are sacred places in which the people, purposes, and properties must be treated differently than at most businesses in the marketplace (Rose, 1968).

One last caution to church leaders as they choose to employ a consultant is that the act of hiring a consultant may be an irritant to the rest of the church staff and lay leaders. While it is understood that an outside voice is typically better accepted than that of someone from within the team due to the "prophet is without honor at home syndrome" (Foden, 1991, p. 52), people may still feel threatened, undervalued, and nervous about their standing as a result. It is important to put them at ease, reassuring them of their importance to the team and highlighting the additional skills and perspectives the consultant brings to the table which will benefit everyone.

Who Ya Gonna Call?

It is the position of this writer that the best and most qualified consultant for any church is first, someone who has put their life in the hands of Christ, experienced a call to ministry from God, and is experienced in working in the actual trenches of local church ministry. Secondly, they must be competent (Passmore, 2012) in not only the technical knowledge of organizational leadership and facilitation of change initiatives (Hartwig, 2016), but also possess a competence of congruence as it relates to the culture, history, mission, doctrine, and values of both a local church and the church in general. Furthermore, they should adhere to ethical standards such as those set by the Institute of Management Consultants and their coaching counterparts Christian Coaches Network and the International Coach Federation.

Final Thoughts

It is the hope of this writer that church leaders can be persuaded to utilize the expertise and energy a consultant can provide, however, within the guidelines of caution outlined in this paper. It was stated in the case study that Family Church is thriving today, however, they had to get through a painful period before doing so. With that in mind, it is also the hope of this writer that by taking into consideration the cautions provided, other churches can avoid similar pain.

The heart of this writer, as a consultant to churches, is to first and foremost see churches and their leaders as God sees them (Stoltzfus, 2005), flawed but loved, and critical in the mission of restoring to mankind a relationship with God. The second goal is to help them execute Standish's 2007 concept of Spirit-active leadership, which proactively considers all possibilities, places them before God in prayer, and seeks God's way over their own (Standish, 2007). This will be achieved by combining reliance on the Holy Spirit, seeking wise counsel from many advisors as Proverbs instructs, utilizing sound and savvy business practices, and practicing compassion and care for the people when resistance arises. It will take a special level of humility from all parties, but will be well worth the effort.

About the Author

John serves as an executive coach, church leadership advisor, and strategic and creative consultant. He holds a doctorate in strategic leadership and a master's degree in organizational management. He is a published writer, adjunct professor for multiple universities online, workshop leader, and has been a full-time pastor for 25 years. In conjunction with his final project for his doctorate, he published the book *The Humility Factor: Healthy Churches are Led by Humble Pastors*, in which he challenges church leaders to reevaluate how they hire their pastors.

He and Karen live in Northern Colorado and were married right after college. They have three Millennial children!

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