



Journal of Transformative
Innovation

Oil and Water, Faith and Analytics: Entrepreneurial Considerations for Planting a Church

Craig Bell

Abstract

It is an accepted axiom of chemistry that oil and water simply do not mix. Much to the dismay of Christian Leaders, the notion of the inability of faith and analytics to merge has also become an accepted truism. To be fair, the lack of acceptance of the discipline of analytics – or business best practices within the realm of faith-based organizations – is not totally without merit. This article, however, seeks to present yet another truism; specifically, that you cannot suspend the laws of business merely because you have entered the realm of faith. Through in-depth discussions with three founding Pastors, it was observed that opportunities to apply entrepreneurial best practices to maximize organizational effectiveness also exist within the Ecclesial space.

It is an accepted axiom of chemistry that oil and water simply do not mix. Much to the dismay of Christian Leaders and Christian Organization Behaviorists, the notion of the non-mixture of faith and analytics has also become an accepted truism. In addition to believing that analytics has no place in faith while seeking to present a reason to disagree with a proposed procedural change, I was once told by a dissenting Pastor that "what makes good business doesn't always make a good church." To be fair, the lack of acceptance of the discipline of analytics – or business best practices within the realm of faith-based organizations – is not totally without merit. Most theologians proudly proclaim that they consider the Bible to be the

Journal of Transformative Innovation

Oil and Water, Faith and Analytics: Entrepreneurial Considerations for Planting a Church

inerrant, complete and total word of God and their ONLY rule of faith and practice. Such a declaration appears to exclude the need for supportive assistance from the business or scientific realm in decision-making. Please note that, as a Christian, I am not inclined to argue with a total reliance on God. I would, however, include Solomon's numerous exultations within the book of Proverbs of the value of wise counsel (Proverbs 11:14, 12:15, 19:20-21 and 20:19, to list a few) as a reason to consider best practices. Further, scripture also promotes the applicability of analytics to faith-based organizations. The sentiments expressed by Jesus in Luke 14:25- 33, Matthew 8:18-22, Luke 9:57-62 and John 6:60-65 concerning the evaluation of the cost of starting an action immediately come to mind.

Analytical Method

As a practical method of investigation, interviews were conducted with three different Pastors that, similar to entrepreneurs, made the decision (or as they would say "accepted the call") to become the founding Pastor of new ministries. Throughout the interviews, each Pastor was asked a series of entrepreneurial-related questions regarding their decision to start a new venture. Specifically, they were asked what they knew about their proposed endeavor before launching versus what they learned after the launch. They were then asked from a retrospective perception, what they wish they would have known at the beginning of the process. As an ode to Alistair Croll and Benjamin Yoskovitz's one metric that matters (OMTM), each Pastor was asked what metric they used to assess the stability of the church to move from one phase to another or even to signal potential failure.

Ministers Interviewed (based on tenure):

Bishop Kenneth Yelverton – Temple of Refuge International Fellowship; founded in 1996

Bishop Thomas Thompson – Victory Temple Worship Center; founded in 2008

Elder Sidney Phillips – Millennium Temple Baptist Church; founded in 2015

Churches range in size from 170 – 425. Annual budgets range from \$100K – \$700K.

Apprenticeships

The Network Rail conducted a survey in 2015 of 355 employees that had completed their advance Apprenticeship Schemes in search of empirical data on the true value of apprenticeship programs. They concluded that within the three areas of Job Satisfaction, accomplishment towards a 5-year plan and diversity of career path, those who had completed an apprenticeship were advanced far beyond their non-apprenticeship cohorts. Kyle Gray of Foundr Magazine noted that, with respect to entrepreneurs, an apprenticeship fills a unique role. He said, "the skills that entrepreneurs are looking for are tough to teach in a classroom, after all,

Journal of Transformative Innovation

Oil and Water, Faith and Analytics: Entrepreneurial Considerations for Planting a Church

and are better learned by doing." To this point, he recommended an apprenticeship as the optimal method of obtaining these skills.

I raise the point of apprenticeships because without exception, the Founding Pastors interviewed for this article all spoke of the value and depth of experiences gained via their previous pastoral or church administrative roles before venturing into founding a ministry. Two of the Pastors had previous pastoral experience, while the third had served as a close advisor and "right-hand man" to his senior Pastor. All three had served in various roles within their respective denomination's regional or state organizations. Two of the Founding Pastors noted that though these experiences were treasured, there were still some surprises and disappointments associated with their new role as church planters. One Pastor, however, credited the vast experiences gained via his apprenticeship for founding a ministry (extensive pastoral experience) with completely eradicating the surprises experienced by his counterparts in this article. This Pastor was able to anticipate the various "waves" that had to be ridden in order to navigate a successful start-up.

**Observation:* Similar to entrepreneurs, there is value in an apprenticeship before investing time and resources into a new venture.

Pre- Launch

The entrepreneur looking for advice or instruction in the steps to starting any business does not have to look very far. A simple Google search of "steps to starting a business" returned 187,000,000 results in less than a second. Though the advice is varied, several recurring themes can be observed. For example, Forbes magazine published an article by David Ehrenberg that listed not just the steps, but seven "metrics" that start-ups should consider. Similarly, Andreessen Horowitz – firm that proclaims that it "backs bold entrepreneurs who move fast, think big, and are committed to building the next major franchises in technology – published a list of 16 start-up metrics.

Though one Pastor did not rely on any particular metric outside of a discernment of God's call concerning timing, the other two Pastors both noted that extensive research was included in the determination of exactly when – and in one case where – to launch his ministry. In one case, while considering the "yearning of God" to start a ministry, this particular Pastor consulted several resources specifically designed to assist Pastors in planting churches. He indicated that by availing himself of these resources, he was able to establish a traditional timeframe and planning horizon for his soft launch. In line with the business journals listed above, he was able to glean information about the "steps" involved in planting a church, as well as gain insight into how to avoid the common mistakes made by church planters. Resources were offered that aided in the completion of all required administrative activities associated with a new launch.

A second Pastor took a more traditional business route in that he consulted both the Chamber of Commerce, as well as researched demographic information in search of a location.

Journal of Transformative Innovation

Oil and Water, Faith and Analytics: Entrepreneurial Considerations for Planting a Church

He also indicated that he ran radio ads and canvassed the neighborhoods that were under consideration. He contended that, in his case, the location was critical to the differentiation and niche market he felt led to service. Specifically, because the call was so specific, he realized that data was required to ensure he was indeed moving in accordance with the vision of God.

**Observation: As data is critical to the fashioning of both the product as well as the launch of a business, these examples highlighted the usefulness of data in the execution of God's call to ministry. The two are not mutually exclusive.*

Hard Launch

When considering the timing of an entrepreneurial venture, authors Thomas Davenport, Jeanne Harris, and Robert Morrison make the point that analytics can help answer the questions around the timing of a hard launch. The timing and particulars around the hard launch of at least two of the three churches were predicated on the analysis of data. To this point, in their book, *Lean Analytics Using Data to Build a Better Startup Faster*, Alistair Croll, and Benjamin Yoskovitz noted metrics varied by the nature of the business (i.e., churches). In this case, the two churches that used data had very different structures. A group of core members founded one while the founding Pastor and his wife primarily orchestrated the establishment of the other. Accordingly, the timing and nature of their hard launch were as different as their structure. The Pastor with the core members reported that the hard launch actually took place a full quarter earlier than he had planned or anticipated. As he had also availed himself to the church plant resources, all of the administrative paperwork had been completed earlier in the process, and members' excitement about moving forward was not containable. The commitment of the members, as will be discussed later, became the OMTM for his ministry. The timing for the second Pastor was not based on a core group of members; rather, it was based on an assessment of responses gathered through traditional canvassing of the targeted neighborhoods. Since this Pastor had consulted the Chamber of Commerce and demographic information, he relied on the more traditional feedback loop from potential members and other respondents. The third Pastor, in keeping with a model based on his superior experience (specifically, pastoral experience and preaching notoriety), made a decision on the timing and simply allowed "word of mouth" marketing to determine hard launch attendance.

**Observation: Regardless of the type of feedback loop (internal core or market research); the timing around the hard launch of a ministry is similar to that of entrepreneurial ventures; they are predicated on market conditions.*

Product and Target Market

Within this category, two unique observations can be made. Each Pastor was asked what prompted them to start a church, given their "product" was precisely the same as the church they left: salvation. Without exception, their response was that though the "product" was

Journal of Transformative Innovation

Oil and Water, Faith and Analytics: Entrepreneurial Considerations for Planting a Church

the same, they differentiated themselves via the culture of their particular assembly or the demographic group they sought to serve. For example, The Temple of Refuge, whose motto is "A Place of Rest. A Place of Solace. A Place of Belonging" was founded specifically to provide this unique experience on the eastern side of Charlotte, NC. While the Pastors of Victory Temple Worship Center and Millennium Temple Baptist Church spoke of the cultural and worship format as differentiating components. Regardless of the component, each Pastor was clear that their desire was not to cannibalize the ministries from which they emerged. Rather, there was a call to minister in a different way to a uniquely different group of people. In an article exploring niche marketing, Marketing-schools.com reminded their readers that niche marketing first identifies a specific segment of an overall market. It then tailors a marketing plan for the habits and preferences of that market segment. In essence, niche marketing is precisely what these three churches did. They identified their particular niche and sought to service them.

Concerning their Product, one Pastor made a very interesting observation. Because he began his church by himself, he noted that one lesson learned was that the absence of a core group prevented vision clarification. From a business standpoint, Patricia Lotich noted in a 2015 article in *The Thriving Small Business* newsletter that focus groups "provide data to enhance, change or create a product or service which targets a key customer group." Since this church was founded to minister to a specific demographic and without the benefit of a core-initiating group, this Pastor later came to realize such a core group would have been beneficial. He noted that though he clearly understood the vision God had given him, very much like the functioning of a focus group, an initial core group would have assisted in the clarification of the vision as it related to the core demographic.

**Observation: The particulars of niche marketing are particularly applicable in that all churches offer (or at least should offer) the same product – Salvation. As a result, there only differentiating or competitive advantage is their ability to successfully market and ultimately service the niche they are called to engage.*

OMTM

As noted above, Alistair Croll and Benjamin Yoskovitz promoted the concept of the one metric that matters (OMTM). They asserted that oftentimes, start-up firms could suffer if they try to measure too many things. Therefore, in order to not lose focus, these firms should decide on that one specific measure that is critical to the success of their organization. When asked about the one critical metric, each Pastor responded that they did not necessarily have a specific metric they utilized. Interestingly enough, they all indicated that the number of members was not their OMTM (as if it was the natural metric to mention). When the question was posed differently, and they were asked how they determined when they were ready to add ministries, move location or change directions, without fail, they all listed the commitment of members. Based on the individual structure, this commitment was manifested either in attendance or in financial support. Thus, without realizing it, they had indeed determined a specific metric. It was just an unconventional one from a business perspective in that, in many cases, it was not quantitative.

Journal of Transformative Innovation

Oil and Water, Faith and Analytics: Entrepreneurial Considerations for Planting a Church

What was not anticipated when posing the question was that each Pastor applied this metric not only to the members of the congregation but to themselves as well. Though they used different terminology, a consensus was found in the notion that when their level of "passion" and "focus" decreased or sense of "familiarity" with the work increased, they realized it was time for a change. Though they all stated that those moments were not used as an indication that the ministry should close, there were used as a guidepost that a renewed revelation was required.

**Observation: Though the metric was not necessarily quantitative (expects where a commitment was measured in financial support), even within faith-based organizations one critical metric can be determined and used as a signpost of the strength of the organization.*

Other Generic Similarities

Conditions found only with one church were as follows:

Similar to corporations with iconic leaders (i.e., Oprah with OWN, Sam Walton with Walmart), Pastors found that regardless of their best efforts to make it "not about me," their ministries became associated with and centered around them.

The use of short-, mid- and long-term goals was beneficial in the planning and execution of divinely inspired strategy.

Similar to entrepreneurs with a new venture, founding Pastors take their ministries personally. As such, the loss of founding members is personally hurtful.

Conclusion

Though, as noted in the opening of this article, it is increasingly becoming the case that business acumen is not taught or accepted within faith-based circles, these interviews proved that you cannot suspend the laws of business just because you entered the realm of faith. It is notable that this article only presents the results of three ministries. While this certainly does not represent a complete cross-section of all founding Pastors, at least at an anecdotal level, the similarities and applicability of entrepreneurial best practices are shown to exist. The various observations noted throughout this article are examples in which the recommended strategies associated with entrepreneurs proved to be of both relevant and of value for Ministers called to start or plant a church.

Further, the usefulness of metrics (even if not quantitative in nature) is evident in improved decision-making within faith-based organizations. Despite the fact that the vision and mission of these ministries are inspired and given by God, each ministry has to live and function in the environment within the earth realm. In that realm, data and analytics still reign supreme.

Journal of Transformative Innovation

Oil and Water, Faith and Analytics: Entrepreneurial Considerations for Planting a Church

Finally, to borrow a phrase from the book of Solomon, when considering the call of God to plant a church, “in all thy getting, get:”

1. Prior Pastoral or at least church administrative experience;
2. A core group of members to assist in Vision Clarification;
3. All available information and consider all forms of data that are pertinent to your budding ministry;
4. An OMTM for your specific ministry;
5. Renewed insight from God based on results of the OMTM.

About the Author

Craig Bell is a Managing Partner of Bell, Griffin & Associates, a premier, full-service consulting practice to faith-based, governmental and nonprofit organizations. He is a highly sought-after thought leader, strategist, change agent and motivational speaker on international, national, regional and local levels. He has over 30 years of project and logistics management experience as a corporate Project/Change Manager for Fortune 500 companies. Additionally, he has over 25 years of executive leadership experience in Ecclesial service. Mr. Bell has an earned Doctor of Strategic Leadership degree in Ecclesial Leadership from Regent University. The author may be reached at craibel@mail.regent.edu.
