

# WORLD VISION LEADERSHIP LETTER

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## GROWING NEW ZEALAND CHURCHES

By Gordon Miller

### 1. Why We Need To Change

Most Protestant churches need to change the way they do church - for two reasons.

*First*, what we're doing isn't working. Some churches of all denominations are doing well with significant conversion growth; most have plateaued or are dying. Second, what we're doing bears little resemblance to the church of Acts 2.42-47, where "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (v. 47). We get few conversions. Several years ago, one leader estimated that each year our 4000 churches get 5000 conversions that last. We may get more now, but even if we do, we'll never re-evangelise the country at the present conversion rate. To make any impact we must change the way we do church. It's not that we're not trying. We try hard. But it's not working. The simple truth is: more of the same will not do.

### 2. What We Need To Change

There are four areas most churches need to change if they're to reach their potential for God.

**1. We should change our people's expectations of church** - inspiring them with a dream that lifts them out of the dreariness of maintenance to the challenge of mission. Since most churches have plateaued or are dying, few church people have seen many people come to Christ, join their church and go on for Christ. For decades, particularly in more mainline churches, we've been locked in a battle to hold our churches together, so we've focused on maintenance rather than mission. Getting people focused on growth and expansion is a whole new ball game.

Yet that's what Jesus did. He gave His people, weary with the Roman occupation, the dream of a new kingdom that would start in people's hearts while the Roman armies were still in the land, spread till it destroyed all other kingdoms and last forever. In the next few centuries, millions signed on for that dream and tens of thousands died for it. The new dream changed everything. New dreams of growth and expansion will change our churches too.

But there's a catch. We won't fire people with charts and stats, although alarming stats may jolt them into recognising the problem. We fire them when we shift their focus to the new future they can have in God, share stories of churches like theirs that were dead and are alive again, and commit ourselves to work with them to reach their new dream. It's Jesus' principle of offering people a bigger and grander dream. It's the way Martin Luther King worked. To break out of the bind we're in, we must change the way our people see church.

**2. We should change the way we do leadership** - shifting our focus from the office of leadership to the functions of leadership.

In the past, we've tended to treat leadership as a kind of prize that we give people for faithfulness and good character regardless of gifting - often ending up with large cumbersome teams of unsuitable people. But this model no longer works. In fact, it's the worst model for a missionary situation like ours, because it's based on position rather than function.

However, some gifted leaders, like some in NT churches (1 Co 5.1-5, 3 Jn 9, Re 2.20), are quite unsuitable for leading a church because they have a major moral or character flaw. But the principle stands: those who lead should be suitably gifted, be upskilling themselves, and be encouraged to build competent teams around them. In 21st Century churches, giftedness and function - not position - should be the cornerstone of leadership.

Churches work this out in different ways. Some simply go for a group of elders/leaders (by whatever

name) who lead and run the various ministries of their church. Others have elders/leaders who meet from time to time to guard "the DNA" of the church and oversee its direction while the day to day running of the church is left to those who lead the ministries. Whatever the formula, working harder and smarter on a formula that hasn't worked in the past only kills a church faster! If we want to see significant conversion growth, we must change the way we run church - putting the emphasis on function, not position.

**3. We should put our church services on a missionary footing** - so they're within reach of the people we're hoping to add to our church family. Churches do this in different ways. Some move to multiple services so they can reach a wider variety of people. Some target people in their 20s to 40s with contemporary services that feature modern music, flexible styles and seeker sensitivity. Others have a "standard" morning service and a livelier youth service at night.

Churches have other options for their Sunday services. If they're targeting older unchurched people, especially those with a Christian memory, traditional services with seeker sensitivity may be all that's needed. If they reach a wider audience and are large enough, seeker targeted services (which may have no congregational singing) or seeker oriented services (with some congregational singing) may be effective - provided the Christians in both cases are ministered to at other times during the day. And there are other options they can explore.

However, because of limited numbers in relation to building size, most churches are locked into one Sunday service till they have a "critical mass" for two different services - so if I led a church in this situation I'd go for seeker sensitivity. I'd plan this service with both churched and unchurched people in mind, choose songs that are within reach of less churched people, give a brief introductory comment to Bible readings and preach messages that reach both the churched and the unchurched at the same time. Bill Hybels and John Ortberg do it, and we can all do it if we keep both groups in mind in our preparation and delivery.

**4. We should complete our congregational journey into small groups** so senior leaders can concentrate on leading - their primary responsibility - rather than pastoring. In LL 160, we discussed small groups in general. But because the journey into small groups is so crucial to the larger question of working through change, here are the principles to follow.

**(1)** Aim to get more than 50% of your people into small groups with 10-12 in each group. **(2)** Assign someone other than yourself to co-ordinate the groups. **(3)** Put an apprentice training system in place immediately. **(4)** Develop a wide range of groups and allow for special interest or age groups. **(5)** Where groups use study material, experiment till you find suitable resources - to start your search, glance at [www.cbtnz.com](http://www.cbtnz.com). **(6)** Don't be concerned if some groups don't birth new ones; one of their primary purposes is to close the back door so people stay with you. **(7)** Provide alternative pastoral care for those who, for various reasons, cannot join a small group.

Effective small groups are a fundamental part of "doing church" in the 21st Century!

### **3. How To Work Through Change**

Over the years I've watched many ministers lead their churches through change. Some do it easily. Others ruin their churches and their ministries. Most struggle to take their churches from the deadness of the present to the fruitfulness of a new dream. Here's one way to get you to your "Canaan", or "promised land", as quickly and painlessly as possible.

**1. Before you start, check your relational (emotional support) "bank account" with your people** - and don't start till it's in good shape. Every leader brings some credibility, or bargaining power, to a relationship. If the relationship strengthens over time, the leader can make huge withdrawals of trust for the big issues of a church's journey; when a leader's initial credibility has been eroded even small changes upset people. The healthier the balance in your relational bank account, the greater the changes you can pull off; the smaller the balance, the smaller the changes. Let me put this in the strongest terms (because of what I've seen around the country): more leaders are shipwrecked on this principle than any other change factor. Don't even dream of moving into change until your relational account is in good shape!

**2. When you've checked your account, begin modelling your new dream before you share it with your leaders and people.** If you have a great dream for your church you'll bring a new warmth and optimism to your ministry. If you're as concerned about the unchurched as you'll later tell your church,

start building relationships with these unchurched people before you go to your leaders and congregation. That is, you become the "living" Bible they read before you say a word to them about your new dream. When you model your dream before you speak about it you put big deposits in your relational account which you can draw on later. People do what you do long before they do what you say.

**3.** Once you're modelling your dream, **share it with your leaders** - exploring it at a retreat, letting them have a say in shaping it and even changing some of your less important ideas. If your leaders own your reworked dream you've cleared your first hurdle. If the dream doesn't fire them, you haven't a hope of succeeding. Your bank account will run out long before you reach your promised land. Without your leaders' support, you can do nothing; with their support you have every chance of taking the whole church with you.

**4.** As you work with your leaders, **give special time to your influential leaders and encourage them to enthuse others** before you take the dream to the church. Every church has key influencers - people who go places and persuade others to go with them. Most influencers drift into leadership early in their journey with a church. So one of the keys to working through change is to identify these leaders, send them out to look at churches that are moving down the road you want to travel on, and encourage them to "leak" the emerging dream to as many people as possible. Major changes should not surprise people; they should be anticipated.

However, some influencers or "permission givers" may not be on the leadership team - and they're often the real leaders. If that's the case involve them, as well as the official leaders, in the whole process leading up to sharing the dream with the congregation. Then these influencers will do the hard work for you in persuading the congregation to back your new church dream.

**5.** Very early in the journey, **start preaching on God's dream for lost people** (cf. Jn 3.16). When churches have been going for a long time, the purpose of "church" gradually gets overlaid with other issues - like how a worship service should be conducted. The reason for having church, to turn lost people into committed followers of Christ, gets crowded out.

When you take your new dream to the church you have to break through all these layers of tradition so the church recovers the missionary call it was founded on - to be an evangelising agent for God the Son. Like Nehemiah and Haggai you call misfocused people back to rebuilding the church of God and its walls, so people of many races stream to it (Ne 2.17, Hag 1.7-9). With your leaders behind you, your preaching now becomes "prophetic", visionary preaching, calling your people forward to their promised land. Don't worry about the specifics of your dream at this stage - concentrate on giving your people the big picture of God's plan for his Church.

**6.** When you've done your groundwork **call several meetings of interested people to talk through important issues of the journey** - but write your dream down so people can reflect on it before and after meetings. Many dreams fail because leaders don't think through the details carefully or because leaders don't share their dream sufficiently with the people who can make it happen. A few years ago, many churches had a rocky journey into small groups - and some over-zealous ministers lost their jobs over it because they skimmed on this phase. If you don't carry most of your people with you, you and your dream will go down together!

**7.** If you run into difficulty at this stage, get your **"permission givers" to take several less convinced people to visit churches where dreams like yours are bearing fruit.**

This second visit to churches helps you get the critical mass you need to make it through the change process. On "the 2-6-2 principle" two out of ten people will accept change, six out of ten will sit on the fence and wait, and the other two may oppose change. If your permission givers take some fence-sitters to churches they've visited, those fence-sitters will convince the remaining ones to back the dream - leaving you with just a handful who may not go with it.

When Jesus wanted to fire the disciples with his dream for the Kingdom of God, he sent them out to experience it for themselves (Mt 10). When Paul wished to spread his dream, he urged Timothy to pass on to others the things he'd taught him (2 Ti 2.2). When we want to inspire our church with a missionary dream we send people to visit projects overseas. We follow the same principle when we make paradigm shifts in the church. Nothing, absolutely nothing, persuades a church like a first-hand experience of a dream.

**8.** When your dream has been accepted, **continue to tap into other churches' dreams** so you get to your promised land quicker and more easily than if you travelled on your own.

In some denominations, leaders with similar dreams keep in touch to help one another in their journey. They meet regularly, share success stories, learn from each other's mistakes, encourage one another and minister in each other's churches. Ecclesiastes 4.12 says, "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." There's synergy, strength and inspiration in numbers. Some leaders don't do this as much as other leaders, so when they take their churches through change they do so without the encouragement, insight and prayer support of others on similar journeys. As a result, many of these churches have a longer learning curve than is necessary and the journey is harder for the leaders than it needs to be. Develop networks with leaders in other churches, and you'll get to your destination quicker and with fewer disappointments.

**9.** When you're under way, **keep your dream constantly before your people.** We're often told that a week is a long time in politics; it's a far longer time in the church and in our walk with God. Adam and Eve knew that when they looked mournfully back at the Garden they'd left behind. Noah knew it after his drinking bout. David knew it after he'd seduced Bathsheba. Judas knew it after he'd betrayed Jesus, and Peter knew it after his denials. The people who leave church on a high on Sunday may be at their wits' end on Monday. With the pace and complexity of life today, a week is a very long time in the Christian life. We leak vision and need topping up constantly - bringing us full circle back to the church service. It's of paramount importance because it's the place where dreams are shared and nurtured, and people's lives are changed.

Bill Hybels says vision leaks out of us within 30 days. So ministers need to give several vision-casting messages a year and weave vision into their general messages, bring God's vision (which the people buy into) into service prayers and celebrations of communion, and feature people in the services who are making vision happen in the life of the church. Where there is no vision the people and the church perish. Where there is vision, churches thrive.

**10. When working through change take time for your journey - but don't waste time.** Most church growth leaders today fall into two categories. Some with a "power boat" mentality try to get from A to B as quickly as possible regardless of the waves they create - waves that may destroy their own church and ministry. Some with a "yachting mentality" tack their way skilfully through unfriendly winds towards their destination; they take longer but they take their church and ministry through to the finishing line. Wise leaders recognise that the bigger the issue (like church services) and the longer the church has been going, the more time is needed to make the change.

But we can take too much time and like the captain of the Titanic leave our run for change too late. Many leaders do this, hoping against hope that they'll get everyone on board but this is a pipe dream - especially in larger churches. If the NT churches are any guide and human nature being what it is a small vocal group may fight you all the way. One leader who has taken his larger church through change says leaders must know where they're going to draw the line if the more obstinate people persist with outright intolerance and threaten to leave. He says, either they lead the church by their threats or we lead the church because we're convinced God wants us to. He comments, "sometimes we have to lose some to gain many for the Kingdom of God"; and he adds, "that's the call that leadership must make." Take time to make changes but don't waste time.

**11.** In the long process of reaching your dream, **grow with your dream.** Leading a church through change is a hazardous journey through a minefield of setbacks and surprises. Three guidelines will keep you on track.

**First, read widely.** There's a vast amount of material coming out at present on music, preaching, seeker-friendly services, small groups and every aspect of leading churches through change. Use these resources and pay special attention to John Maxwell's books. They deal with the big picture. **Second, listen to leadership tapes frequently.** I get many Maxwell tapes each year and listen to them when driving, marking sections I may want to revisit. They're expensive but worth it. I do the same with Willow Creek tapes. **Third, adapt constantly.** It's a mistake to think we can uplift programmes and strategies from other cultures and place them, without adaptation, in our churches. One friend who tried to push all their small groups into being composed of family groups didn't allow for special interest or age groups. When he realised his mistake he apologised to the church and asked for their forgiveness. I'd trust a leader with that much integrity!

#### **4. When Change Is Difficult**

Sometimes churches can't be changed - though much less frequently than we think. A church may have declined to the point where, everything having been tried, it's no longer viable. When this happens it may be best to shut the church down, give it a short recess and reopen with new leaders and a new dream, possibly in a new location.

Another difficulty is churches that are paralysed by power struggles reaching back over generations. Some leaders, like John Maxwell, can break power struggles and turn churches around; many can't. Churches with conflicting visions are another problem area. If you're in that situation, some of you may have to go - either to other churches with matching visions or to start a new church. Starting a new church isn't advisable except in exceptional circumstances. But if you must leave do it with grace, bless those you leave, pray for them and keep on friendly terms with them.

The most difficult situation is a church that has seemingly compromised the truth beyond the point of no return. Israel did this in Jesus' day - forfeiting their place in God's purposes for a season (Ro 11.11-24). The Gnostics did this in the early Church. The Deists did it in the 17th and 18th centuries. In summary, Israel lost its place in God's purposes for a season because it wouldn't change some things that needed changing, while some lose their place in the Christian Church because they change some things they shouldn't change. When a church, despite all efforts to the contrary, persists in compromising the truth summarised in the early creeds, there may be no alternative but to leave and go to another church.