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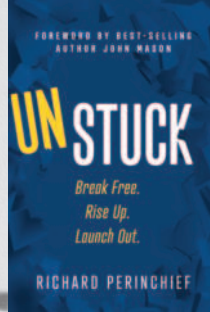
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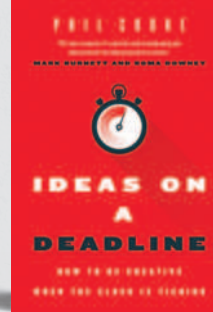
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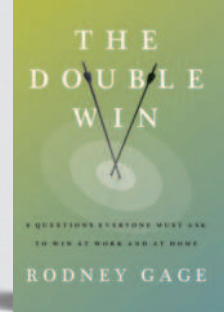
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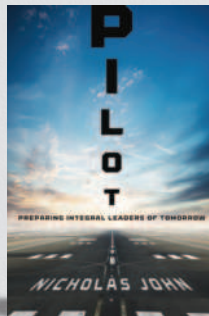
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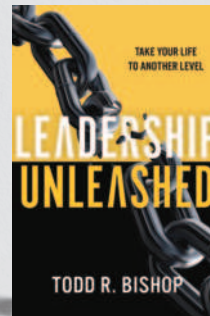
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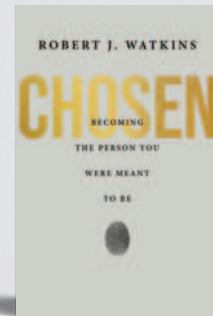
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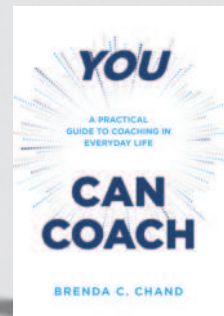
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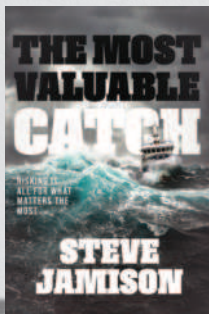
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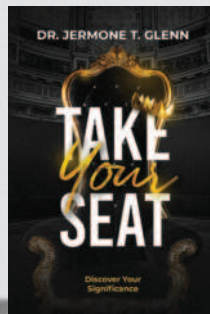
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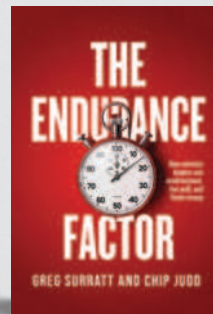
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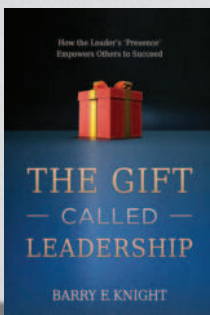
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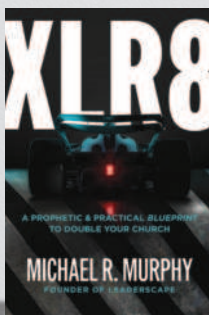
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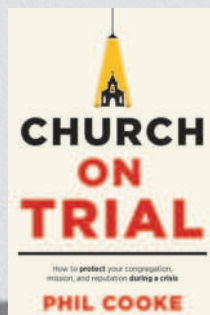
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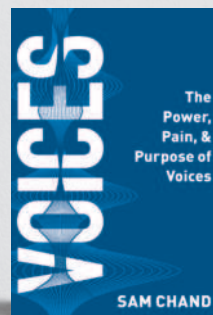
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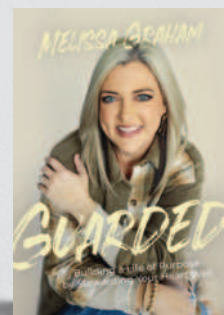
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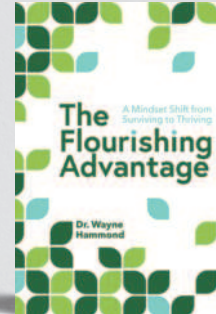
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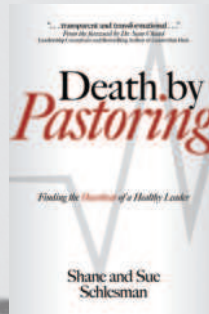
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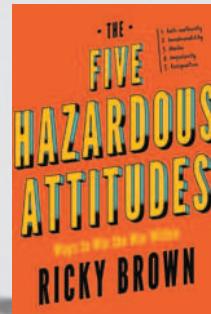
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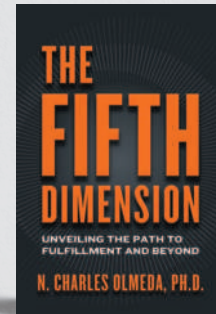
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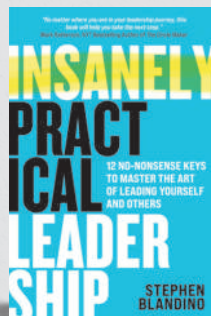
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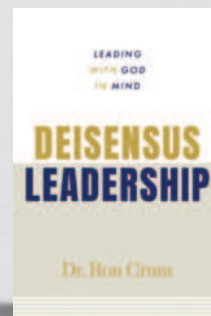
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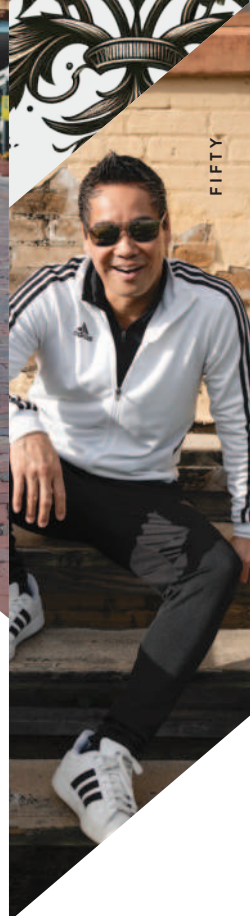


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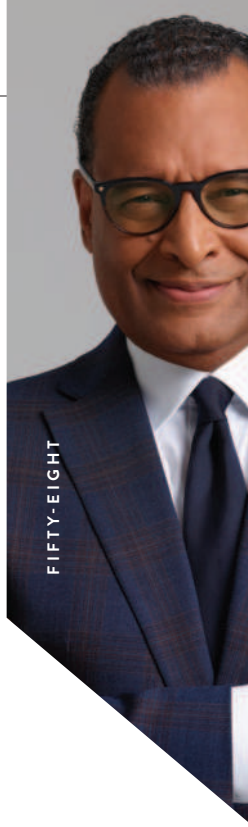
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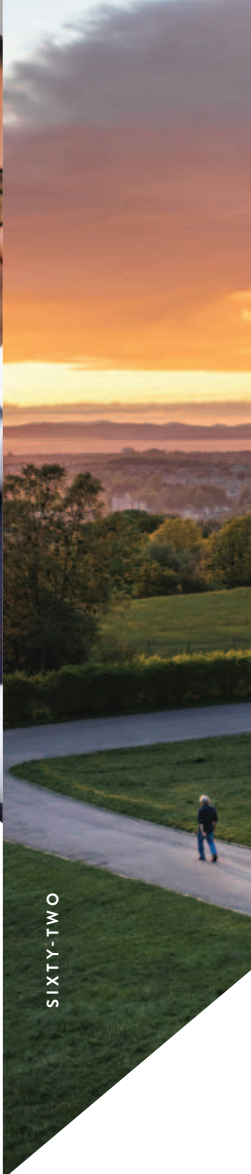


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The ART of LEADERSHIP

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# A Seat With a View

I'm sorry to say it, but I haven't always been reflective. However, now I find myself viewing the present through the past.

As I write this, I'm thinking of what I observed while sitting on a plane returning home from Honduras. Out of my window, I could see people, including kids, standing outside the security fence watching flights land and take off.

I turned to my daughter Rachel, who was traveling with me, and reflectively recounted for her that when I was a young teenager, my cousins and I would ride our bicycles out to the airport in our town and do the same: watch the one flight that came in and out of our little one-room airport. Then I said to Rachel, "Never did I think that later on in life I would fly 200-plus flights a year globally!"

The brief moment of reflection took me back there, brought me to the present and made me wonder what the future might hold for my life.

For example, I can still recall receiving a phone call, more than five years ago, from Martijn van Tilborgh, my CEO and cofounder of *AVAIL* (the journal you're reading right now) in which he cast vision for all things *AVAIL*.

He was explaining—at least trying to—the entire concept of this leadership brand: how we would help leaders launch and expand their message . . . how we would give voice to deep churnings in leaders' lives . . . how we would publish books and study guides, host webinars, produce podcasts, publish blogs, launch masterclasses and, yes, publish a journal that was high quality in both content and aesthetics.

I gave Martijn the highest level of resistance on that last part—an *AVAIL* magazine.



“  
**SOME CALL IT HINDSIGHT.**  
*I CALL IT INTENTIONAL, REFLECTIVE THINKING.*

I reminded him of name-brand magazines that were once staples and are now extinct. If those global publishing enterprises couldn't survive, what made him think we could thrive?

On reflection, that is one of the best yeses I've said.

Now, 20 issues and five years later, you are reading a publication about which so many people have said, "I want to be published in *AVAIL Journal*."

Some call it hindsight. I call it intentional, reflective thinking.

Think about your life. Reflecting on it may cause you to say, "Thank you, Lord," "Hallelujah" or maybe what my wife Brenda and I say weekly: "Who'd have thunk?" ▣

Sam Chand

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# The Time That Is Given Us



“Unprecedented.” It’s a word used (or, perhaps, overused) by journalists and thought leaders—particularly when applied to presidential elections, pandemics, natural disasters and so on. In fact, a glance at Google Trends indicates the word reached an apex of usage around—you guessed it—spring of 2020.

As it turns out, most events *are* preceded when you extend the historical horizon beyond our rather limited frame of reference. In fact, so-called unprecedented events often occur in generational cycles that correspond with one another. As Mark Twain once said, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.”

In his book *The Fourth Turning Is Here*, Neil Howe makes a case for these recurring generational cycles in American and Western European history. Howe theorizes that each generation of approximately 21 years (the typical time frame within which a person reaches adulthood) is part of a larger cyclical saeculum of about 85 years.

Each saeculum is marked by four pivotal events or “turnings,” which signal a transition into a new stage of the generational cycle: the high, the awakening, the unraveling and the crisis. Crisis periods in U.S. history include the American Revolution, the Civil War and the Great Depression/World War II.

Howe argues that we are living through a new crisis that began with the Great Recession in 2008 and continued into the COVID-19 pandemic and Russo-Ukrainian War—a crisis that could stretch into the 2030s.

When each crisis period comes to a close, society, culture, government and the economy are fundamentally transformed. Some things are better, others are worse, but everything is different. For example, when the Great Depression/World War II crisis concluded, Americans were living in a different world, shaped by the Cold War, the G.I. Bill and a federal government with increasing power and involvement in citizens’ private lives.

Additionally, in a crisis, each generation has a role to play in ushering society toward resolution. For example,

“**MOST EVENTS ARE PRECEDED, WHEN YOU EXTEND THE HISTORICAL HORIZON BEYOND OUR RATHER LIMITED FRAME OF REFERENCE.**

in the crisis noted above, the G.I. Generation fought to free Europe and Southeast Asia from the grip of the Axis Powers, while their elders (“The Missionary Generation”) wielded the levers of industry and government that fueled the war effort.

Such a theory of history is thought-provoking—and, of course, it has its detractors and skeptics. However, the broader principles are inescapable. Each of us has been born into a unique time frame in human history and given stewardship within that time frame.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo bemoans to Gandalf the disruption the Ring has brought to the Hobbit’s placid life.

“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo.

“So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

My only prayer is that, like King David, I “serve God’s purpose in [my] own generation” (see Acts 13:36). ▣

**MATT GREEN** is the editorial director for *AVAIL Journal*. He also serves as vice president of marketing for Pioneers, a global church-planting organization based in Orlando, Florida. He lives in Central Florida with his wife, Andy. They have four children and one grandchild.

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ANDREW VAN TILBORGH

11

# ON

**the evening of March 11, 2020, the** NBA announced it was suspending all public events due to rising cases of COVID-19. The final eight games of the season were played and televised behind closed doors at the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex in Orlando, which became known as the “NBA Bubble.”

In addition to the global pandemic, the country was facing widespread social unrest stemming from police brutality—much of it impacting the Black community. The crisis came to a head with the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers on May 25, 2020, leading to nationwide protests and demonstrations.

The rallying cry of “Black lives matter” evolved from a statement of solidarity with victims of police violence to a broader litmus test of alignment with other social causes. A nation already polarized by pandemic lockdowns, economic uncertainty and a contentious presidential election became a hotbed of shifting loyalties—many of them defined by one’s embrace of or resistance to “BLM.”

But it wasn’t only politicians or actors who were expected to take a side. Four years earlier, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick had expressed his protest against racial injustice by kneeling during the national anthem. Now, professional athletes were expected to use their platforms to advocate for social justice and signal their positions on the social issues of the day.

It was July 31, 2020, and the Orlando Magic were preparing for a game in the Bubble against the Brooklyn Nets.

**12** Twenty-two-year-old Jonathan Isaac was in his third season playing for the team. At 6 feet 10 inches, he had earned a reputation as a fierce defender on



the court—one teammate describing him as a “lion in a giraffe’s body.” In addition to his on-court prowess, Isaac was known for being outspoken about his faith, earning him the nickname “Baby Jesus.”

The day before, the New Orleans Pelicans and the Utah Jazz had played in the Bubble. As the national anthem came over the sound system, every member of both teams knelt to express solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. That game was followed by another between the Clippers and Lakers. Again, the players, coaches and referees all knelt during the anthem.

Following the two games, the Magic players and staff gathered for a meeting. Management gave their support to the team kneeling—but with one caveat: “Whatever you decide, do it together.”

The consensus of the players was immediate. “We can’t be the only team not to take a knee,” was the overwhelming sentiment, with only one dissenting player: Jonathan Isaac. When the anthem came over the speakers before the next day’s game, he was the only one standing.

Isaac’s position wasn’t one borne of privilege. He grew up in the Bronx, where his mother was a nurse and his dad managed a McDonald’s. His parents split up when Isaac was 10, and he moved with his mother and siblings to Naples, Florida, where his mother worked multiple jobs to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads. Isaac had seen his share of racism and was just as horrified as his teammates by police brutality.

“Because I share in the pain of the moment,” he explained in a recent interview with *AVAIL*, “doesn’t mean I’m necessarily going to go along with what you feel like is the solution.”

His disagreement isn’t with the sentiments of BLM but with the embrace of a solution he believes ignores the root issue—that we’re all sinners in need of salvation. Although he knew taking such an unpopular stand would result in public criticism, Isaac believed it would also provide him a platform for sharing the gospel.

“Who said this was the only way to

support black lives?” he wrote in his 2022 book, *Why I Stand*, questioning what he believes is the movement’s tendency to divide the races and overlook the sin that lies at the roots of racial violence. Isaac was also bothered by the assumption that he would unquestioningly embrace a cause because everyone else on the team did.

“I want people to see that Jonathan is somebody who is going to think deeply about the issues at hand and try his best to make a decision [based] on whether or not he agrees, disagrees. And he’s OK with being forthcoming about what it is that he believes,” he explains, “I’m my own person, and I’m a Christian and I’m going to let that lead over my Black identity—over anything else.”

Now 26, Isaac is the first to admit this boldness does not come naturally and that he has struggled with confidence since childhood. His junior year in high school, he was living with his mother in Naples, Florida, and was recruited to play basketball at the International School of Broward, a high school on the other side of the state. While at the time Isaac had no aspirations of becoming a pro, others saw his potential. It didn’t hurt that he grew six inches between his freshman and senior years.

When he graduated in 2015, Isaac was ranked No. 1 in Florida, No. 3 small forward in the country, No. 12 overall by 247Sports, No. 9 by ESPN and No. 5 by scoutBasketball. Even with these accolades and a scholarship to Florida State University to play for the Seminoles, he was unprepared for the pressures of college ball. With a massive case of imposter syndrome, Isaac suffered from panic attacks that nearly sidelined his budding career.

“I saw every great thing I had done as something outside myself and every failure as part of me,” he wrote. “I craved accolades and crumbled under criticism.”

Isaac’s struggles continued, even as he was selected by the Magic as the sixth overall pick in the 2017 NBA draft. Although he had been brought up in the church, he hadn’t really taken his faith seriously. A single young man living in a high-rise apartment in downtown Orlando,



**I’M MY OWN PERSON, AND I’M A CHRISTIAN AND I’M GOING TO LET THAT LEAD OVER MY BLACK IDENTITY—OVER ANYTHING ELSE.**



Isaac was inevitably drawn to the fast life that came with being in the NBA. Invited to a team chapel by teammate Elfrid Payton Jr., Isaac heard the speaker quote from Luke 6:46 and was stunned: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”

“I was perplexed about the possible realness of God beyond the childhood stories, family traditions, saying I’m a Christian because it sounds good or mumbling a prayer in youth group service years ago,” he recalled in his book. “I started to imagine what it would really mean for it all to be true, what my life would look like if I actually believed.”

After that night, Isaac threw himself into reading Scripture, apologetics and theology. A turned ankle caused him to miss 17 games. He played two games, and another injury knocked him off the court for 27 more games, giving him time to study and reflect. Then, in a chance encounter in the parking garage of his apartment, Isaac met Bishop Durone Hepburn, founder and senior pastor of J.U.M.P. Ministries Global Church in Orlando.

Hepburn befriended Isaac, and the church community reached out to him, gathering to lay hands on him and pray for his injured ankle, bringing him meals and encouraging him in his growing faith. He not only began attending J.U.M.P., but he came to 5 a.m. prayer meetings at the church when he was in town.

“I had really started to change things about my life. I went celibate, started deleting phone numbers and stopped going to the club and all that stuff,” Isaac recalls. “I said, ‘God, I want you to be first in my life.’ How do I do that? Start stripping stuff away.”

One night around this time, he was alone in his apartment

when he felt a distinct prompting from the Holy Spirit to preach—something he’d never considered before. He tried to dismiss the inclination but eventually shared what he was feeling with Hepburn, who promptly invited him to speak to the church.

“You’re insane!” Isaac remembers responding to his pastor. “I fought him a whole bunch. And then he said, ‘You know, you should invite your teammates.’ And I was like, ‘OK, I’m never coming to this church again. ‘Cause I’m not going to put myself through that.’”

But he did put himself through that, inviting the same guys he had partied with months before. Although none of his teammates came to the service, he was surrounded by the encouraging faces of his new church family, who clapped and cheered Isaac on for his first sermon—a simple account of his testimony, with reflections on several Scripture passages.

As he looks back at the terrifying moments of his first public speaking at J.U.M.P., Isaac believes these were preparing him for future situations in which he would need to be uncomfortable for the sake of obeying Christ.

“Those were the little moments behind the scenes that prepared me for the bigger moment.

Because I took baby steps and found I can trust God when I put him first—He’s got my back. He’s faithful. I didn’t pass out up there,” he recalls, laughing. “I got through it, and then there are more of these little instances of gaining faith to the point where I’m like, ‘This is the right thing, and I’m going to do it.’”

In the years following his first sermon, Isaac’s relationship with his mentor grew stronger, and he regularly sought the bishop’s counsel in decisions relating to

faith and life. While successful on the court, he slowly recognized his identity shifting from “Jonathan, the basketball player” to “Jonathan, the follower of Christ who plays basketball.”

He became known in the NBA and on social media as someone vocal about his faith—even as he continued to battle fear and anxiety on and off the court. As he called Hepburn before games to pray, the bishop’s counsel brought him encouragement and clarity. A regular verse Isaac came back to was Proverbs 28:1: “The wicked flee though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.”

His early years with the Magic were not without uncertainty. Frustrating injuries sidelined him for months at a time, but when Isaac was on the court, his reputation as an outspoken Christian and his skill at swatting opponents’ shots away from the net earned him the moniker “Minister of Defense.”

All this culminated in July of 2020, during the surreal early months of the global pandemic. Like most other significant decisions in this life at the time, Isaac shared with Hepburn his plan to stand while his teammates knelt for the anthem. Isaac notes that Hepburn never told him what to do in these situations. He might point to relevant Scripture passages, but in the end, the bishop always asked a single question: “What do you want to do, Jonathan?” Then, he would reassure the young man of his support and prayer, wherever he landed on the question.

Isaac admits the feedback following his decision to stand exposed in himself the desire to please people—many of whom were decidedly *not* pleased with his actions, labeling him a sellout to his race and to his team. To add



**I SAW EVERY GREAT THING I HAD DONE AS SOMETHING OUTSIDE MYSELF AND EVERY FAILURE AS PART OF ME. I CRAVED ACCOLADES AND CRUMBLLED UNDER CRITICISM.**





J U D A H

A H

16

# THE MINISTER OF DEFENSE

injury to insult—literally—Isaac tore his left ACL two weeks later during a game in the Bubble against the Sacramento Kings. For some of his critics on social media, the injury was deserved. “A knee for a knee,” they cynically observed. Although surgery to repair the injury was successful, Isaac would not play again with the team until January 23, 2023.

In the four years since his stand, Isaac has cultivated a reputation as an independent thinker. He questioned pandemic lockdowns and COVID vaccination requirements—a position that caused him to be labeled an anti-vaxxer by *Rolling Stone* (a description he eschews). In 2021, Isaac married Takita Thomas, a woman he met at J.U.M.P., and they welcomed their daughter, Naomi, in 2023. Unashamedly patriotic, pro-life and pro-family, he regularly speaks out on socially conservative causes, but he resists aligning himself with a political party or candidate.

“I love being in a country where I’m afforded the rights and the freedoms that I have now. There’s a side—definitely more on the conservative side—who lean more toward traditional biblical principles,” Isaac notes. “But neither side owns Christianity. I want God to lead me, I want Christ to be first and I think both sides do a good and bad job of honoring certain principles.”

An outgrowth of his social consciousness led Isaac to question corporate relationships with companies that don’t share his values. Prior to 2020, he had a sponsorship with Nike, but when he tore his ACL, the sportswear behemoth did not offer to re-sign Isaac’s contract. When he shared the news with Hepburn and mentioned he was considering seeking contracts with New Balance or

Adidas, his pastor had an alternative suggestion: “Why don’t you make your own shoe?”

It sounded like just another crazy idea from his pastor—and definitely not something that was common in the NBA—but Isaac was drawn to the idea of creating a values-based apparel company. He began exploring what it would take—from manufacturing to marketing—to design a shoe he could wear on the court to promote his values and become the cornerstone of a new brand.

The result was the JUDAH-1, a blue and white midtop sneaker emblazoned with 2 Corinthians 4:9 (“persecuted but not abandoned, struck down, but not destroyed”) and the first NBA signature sneaker with a visible Bible verse on the outside. The brand was named Unitus, a signal to wearers that they are brought together by a commitment to Christian beliefs and actions.

“I wanted to have a brand in the mainstream that was set on honoring God to the best of our ability, a contrast to the likes of Nike, Adidas and other brands,” Isaac explains. He believed none of those brands offered solidarity with people of faith and sometimes even undermined their closely held ideals. Instead, Isaac wanted to “build an entire sports and apparel company that is set on encouraging the believer to stand up for what it is they believe.”

Unitus apparel is currently available on the company’s website, *weareunitus.com*, and has expanded from the JUDAH-1 to hoodies, T-shirts and sweats. The company is managed by a team of five, and Isaac often finds himself in the weeds alongside his team, learning the ropes of building a business, while juggling family life, speaking engagements and the



**I TOOK  
BABY  
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FIRST—  
HE’S GOT  
MY BACK.  
HE’S  
FAITHFUL.**



Magic. When he spoke with *AVAIL*, Isaac had just gotten off a flight from Los Angeles, where he had meetings with the Unitus team and spoke at an event.

“Never in a million years would I have thought that I’d be able to do what I’m doing right now,” he notes. “To me, it’s a reality of the transformative power of relationship with Christ. We have power through the Holy Spirit and through relationship with Him. So it’s evidence that I’ve grown and I’ve changed and I’ve matured.”

Isaac, who just signed a five-year, \$84-million contract extension with the Magic, recognizes every pro ball career has an expiration date, usually defined by age, health and the whims of corporate owners. But for him, basketball has become a means to an end. He sees the platform he’s been given as an opportunity to live out his faith in public, ground his family in a local church and build a lifestyle brand that unites people with shared convictions.

“In all the ways our culture has departed from God being at the center—that’s my platform. It’s not because I’m perfect, not because I’ve done everything right, but because I know that it’s the truth,” Isaac explains. “So, whenever there’s an opportunity, I try my best to be vocal about it. For me to be an NBA player, for me to have the background I’ve had in terms of everything that I’ve struggled with in my past, it makes sense why I needed to go through that process of finding Christ and getting where I am now.” ■

**MATT GREEN** is the editorial director for *AVAIL Journal*. He also serves as vice president of marketing for Pioneers, a global church-planting organization based in Orlando, Florida. He lives in Central Florida with his wife, Andy. They have four children and one grandchild.

# UNITUS



**HONOR GOD WITH  
EVERY STEP**

1 SAMUEL 2:30

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A

How Jeff Little is bringing small-church

# SHEPHERD'S

values to a Texas-sized congregation

HE ♥ RT

BY KEN WALKER



# W

When the remnants of Hurricane Helene smashed into Asheville, North Carolina, in late September, they wiped out the last few days of Revol Church's three-week fasting and prayer emphasis, along with a two-day marriage retreat. But lead pastors Matthew and Michelle Coleman had a bigger problem: no Sunday services for the immediate future and a congregation literally under water also meant few donations to keep the four-year-old church plant going.

So, when Milestone Church of Keller, Texas—more than 1,000 miles southwest of Asheville—stepped in with an offer to pay the staff's salaries for at least two months, the gesture meant the world to the Colemans.

After the second week of October, they wouldn't have had the funds to pay staff members who had left jobs and family to serve at Revol, says Matthew, who met Michelle years earlier at the Los Angeles Dream Center. The young families included one who had adopted an infant. Since Michelle oversees the Asheville Dream Center, staffers shifted

**“IT'S VERY HARD TO BUILD A PLATFORM AND BUILD PEOPLE.”**

into round-the-clock disaster relief. They distributed supplies to more than 60 churches, recovery centers, businesses and nonprofits.

“Every dollar matters to build this church at our level,” Matthew says. “Knowing that our staff was taken care of took a high amount of stress and weight off my shoulders. It left me able to focus on meeting the needs in our city during this devastation. We are forever grateful. I have tears of joy and gratitude.”

Jeff Little, who with 32 supporters launched Milestone in 2002, says although his church supports national disaster relief

ministries, after Helene they wanted to find a specific congregation affected by the storm.

“Shepherds and pastors in that community were not worried about whether they could keep food on their kids' table,” says the 1996 graduate of Baylor University. “Now they could utilize some of those national resources and minister to their people. They were falling into bed every night at midnight like they were in a war zone or on an intense mission trip. We are constantly looking for ways to resource people; to me, that's incredibly rewarding.”

Such gestures don't surprise the person closest to





Little—his wife, Brandy. She has seen his shepherd’s heart in operation for three decades. It started with his first pastorate fresh out of college, at a traditional church where members didn’t always appreciate their efforts. Brandy recalls how sometimes a congregation member would stand to loudly protest in the middle of a service. Another time, a member shook the pastor’s wife and yelled at her during meet-and-greet time after service.

“I’ve loved Jesus all my life and always wanted to be a pastor’s wife, but I didn’t expect it to be quite like that,” says the

**Milestone Church has campuses in Keller, McKinney and Haslet, Texas.**

mother of four children, ranging in age from 14 to 24. “I would go home and cry, and he’d say, ‘We’re not going to cry about it; we’re going to go back and serve them. We’re going to shepherd them; we’re going to love them.’ He had that heart on a small scale from the beginning, and he’s never changed.”

Shepherding is a topic close to Jeff Little’s heart, which he anchors in 1 Peter 5:2: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve.”

### **A PERSONAL TOUCH**

While its weekly attendance of 11,000 would rank Milestone among the nation’s 50 largest churches, Little still takes a personal touch seriously. He and Brandy shake thousands of hands after four weekend services so they can keep a finger on the pulse of the congregation. He finds this kind of personal interaction preferable to anonymous surveys or email samplings to gauge opinions.

One reason Little places such emphasis on Peter’s words in 1 Peter is they were spoken toward the end of his life. The pastor characterizes the apostle’s message as: Shepherd

the flock of God, and when He returns, He will have this great reward for you.

Sometimes when pastors get upset over problems, conflict or dissension in their church, they can think, "This would be a great profession if it weren't for these people," Little says. But he believes if pastors have God's heart they will see their job description is serving Him, regardless of the pain that comes with it.

Little says a strong majority (90%-plus) of congregational members are like sheep, who don't naturally bite because sheep are not carnivorous animals. Instead, the pastor says people largely respond to the way their pastor treats them; most just want help staying married and resolving the problems they face in life.

This need for personal interaction is the reason he eschews the "be a rancher instead of a shepherd" theorem that emerged from the church growth movement of the 1970s and '80s. Little observes that the concept of church growth is relatively new in the church's 2,000-year history. While he's obviously not against growth, he's against the ethic it promoted. He thinks too many leaders want to become ranchers without knowing anything about sheep.

"It's very hard to build a platform and build people," Little says. "Today there's a very accessible route to building a platform, but it's hard to do both those things at the same time. I'm just an old-school pastor who ended up with somewhat



**Milestone Church met in a series of hotel rooms, public schools and a renovated grocery store over 15 years of its early life.**

of a platform, as opposed to a guy who builds a platform and hopes at some point pastoring takes place."

One of his favorite stories involves the meeting about eight years ago when Milestone set out to raise \$26 million to build a 2,500-seat sanctuary, kids building, café and preschool area. It had already opened a second campus 45 miles away in McKinney and now wanted to take the next step in its development. (A second satellite campus followed in 2021 in Haslet, where members will move into their new building in the fall of 2025.)

Meeting with some influential members, Little outlined the vision for the Keller project. Then one donor stepped up to declare, "Pastor, you built us. You spent 15 years loving on us. Our marriages are better, and our businesses are better." After pledging a million dollars to the campaign, he added, "We'll

build two of 'em."

"He changed the whole dynamic of the room," Little recalls. "Buying 50-plus acres of land and building a large campus was the riskiest thing we had ever done, but we also had something to lose. Sometimes in life, at those kind of precipices, you've got to do it being afraid. I had to portray strength, but inside I was afraid.

"I tell people in the community all the time, and people who give, that God resources His vision. People who give are givers anyway. They think that the money they give is what matters, but the credibility they give is way more valuable. So, what he did there was he lent me his credibility in the community, which was quite valuable."

#### **BUILDING MEN**

Little's desire to build stronger men drove his studies at Southeastern University, where he earned his doctorate



## “IF YOU BUILD YOUR PEOPLE, THEY’LL BUILD THE CHURCH.”

in 2022. His thesis on men and their engagement in the American church prompted him to write *The Way to Win*, a 2021 book subtitled “Coaching & Developing Men in Matters of Life & Faith.”

While we grasp development when it comes to sports, careers, hobbies or personal life, Little says our identity, purpose and relationships are far more important than a game.

Like that moment when the donor stepped up with a million-dollar pledge to the building fund, people want challenges that will help them become better in life.

“I think we’re busy having events and entertaining them, but they have a lot of options for that, when what they want is to be built,” Little says. “My point to pastors is a lot of them want to build their church, but if you build your people, they’ll build the church.”

He also wants to build pastors, a job he thinks is tougher than ever because of the complexities of modern culture and the plethora of voices coming at church members. In his early 20s Little jokes the main tasks were choosing the right songs from the hymnal and putting on some waders and a white angelic robe to dunk converts. Today Little says members may have already listened to 15 other pastors or spiritual influencers before their own pastor can say a word to them.

He thinks the pandemic helped accelerate the division and opinions that separate so many now. Little observes that he had never lived through a period of time where people who had never preached a message wanted to give input on what he should preach about. The pastor says it took resolve to avoid getting swept away by controversy that forced every church



## OPEN HANDS

The kind of personal touch Jeff Little extended towards Revol Church recently happens throughout the year at Milestone. The Texas congregation does regular grocery outreaches to 11 public schools where many of the children come from low-income families. Every summer it sponsors a shoe drive and opens the doors for youngsters to select new shoes for the school year.

In early autumn the church hosted its annual “Fairytale Ball” (above) for families whose children are facing life-threatening illnesses. During the immersive experience, prince and princess characters circulate while the children dress up in special gowns or suits. They also ride in pumpkin carriages pulled by teams of Clydesdale horses.

About a year earlier Milestone sponsored a “Serve Day” project where members remodeled a home for foster children and others who had been displaced from their home environment. In addition to fixing up the inside, they refashioned the back yard and playscapes as well as playing with the children.

“That kind of thing expresses my heart and is what makes me tick,” says wife Brandy, who also oversees two major events annually for Milestone Women. “All of that is because my husband has led out in ministry. The most satisfaction you get from ministry is not being well-known or famous or being on the internet. It’s serving people and seeing their faces light up when you serve them well.”

## MARKS OF A SHEPHERD

In a talk at the 2021 national conference of the Association of Related Churches (ARC), Jeff Little spelled out three primary points about shepherding; that message generated more feedback than any other Little has done over the years. His counsel included:

### 1. A good shepherd smells like the sheep.

In other words, they are connected to members and spend time with them. Little mentioned Proverbs 27:23, which advises to know the condition of your flocks and give attention to your herds. He noted the Hebrew says to “look into the face of the flock,” meaning pastors should know their people’s hearts and what they’re worried about.

He talked of attending a father/daughter camp once and how, on the third day, counselors told participants to look into each other’s eyes for several minutes without speaking.

“I’ll never forget it,” Little said. “I looked in her face, and I saw the insecurities she lived with in becoming a little woman. I saw her fears and measuring herself by some of the other girls around there. Statistics say we spend very little time with our children, looking into their face.”

Caring for sheep also includes basic principles, he said, such as: 1) they are social animals and don’t do well in seclusion; 2) they react to their surroundings and like routine, which calls for being patient when introducing something new and not yelling at them; 3) they should be fed in a local context. Pastors shouldn’t dispense material another shepherd feeds their folks in a different frame of reference, he said.

### 2. A good shepherd wants more for the people than they want from them.

Whether a leader is looking for a children’s church worker, ministry team member or someone to join their mission team, Little said the prospect will

instinctively sense whether the pastor’s request is for the member’s gain or the pastor’s.

Building is a slow and tedious process, said Little, whose church met in a series of hotel rooms, public schools and a renovated grocery store over 15 years. It finally launched a \$26 million building campaign to buy 54 acres of land and construct its current campus.

“If you want to have some people to talk to, you better shepherd some sheep,” Little told the audience. “If you focus on the platform, people are going to think, ‘You’re using me to get your platform.’ Your people can feel that. Those sheep will wander off to a shepherd, to where they can get their needs met.”

### 3. Every shepherd needs a shepherd.

Not only are pastors shepherds, they are also in need of a shepherd. That’s what Little discovered after he departed from the denomination of his youth and still needed close relationships with other pastors.

Milestone will host this year’s ARC national conference in late April. ARC figures like co-founders Chris Hodges and Greg Surratt, Steve Robinson (a keynote speaker this year) and Jim Laffoon have been men he calls big brothers and shepherds.

“I’ve needed shepherds in my life,” Little said. “The first time we moved into a building and had a lot of people, it was bittersweet. My wife was on the front row between our third and fourth child with tears in her eyes because she had lost a child, late-term. To stay in that race, you need a shepherd.”

to choose a path and a key message.

“You defined it in that time,” Little says. “If you were trying to please everybody, you were in trouble because nobody can win with that. I basically decided during COVID I wasn’t going to be a news center and I wasn’t going to placate everyone’s opinion. I wasn’t going to a church where lost people come and don’t get saved.

“Now we’ve baptized more people than ever (525 last year and 573 the first nine months of 2024). We’re seeing a revival among teenagers. In early October we had a Wednesday night service with 2,000; these are local kids, not teens coming to a conference.”

Despite those encouraging results, the Texas native reminds pastors to avoid getting carried away by numbers. He advises they not get seduced by the image of a charismatic figure with a huge platform and a national TV reach when there are 300,000-plus churches led by other pastors. The pastor of a small church on the prairie who faithfully serves a few hundred people is just as important to God as a nationally-known speaker, Little comments.

“I’m internationally and nationally unknown, but I’m pretty famous in my own house,” Little says. “My vision in life is not to be well-known by a lot of people; that doesn’t really drive me. I want to advance the gospel, but when I’m on my deathbed, I want my spiritual children and natural children to say, ‘Thank you for your investment; we’ll take it from here.’” ■

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KEN WALKER is a freelance writer and book editor from Huntington, West Virginia, who has profiled numerous spiritual leaders and businesspersons during his career. He has more than 4,600 article bylines and has co-authored, edited or contributed to more than 90 books.



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**THE**  
**ADVOCATE**

**JANY  
MARTÍNEZ  
WARD'S  
JOURNEY  
FROM  
ASYLUM  
SEEKER TO  
ATTORNEY**

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*By*  
**MATT  
GREEN**

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*Photos by*  
**ANDREW  
VAN TILBORGH**



# J

**JANY MARTÍNEZ** was 14 when her family presented themselves at the U.S. border in Brownsville, Texas. Although they were seeking political asylum and entered the country at an official crossing, the family was detained, just as if they had sneaked in illegally. While government officials sorted out their story, Jany (pronounced HAH-nee) and her younger brother were placed in a foster home and were only allowed to talk to their parents on the phone once a day.

Originally from Cuba, Jany's family had escaped the country when she was nine to seek a better life in Venezuela. When socialist military leader Hugo Chávez was elected president in 1998, Jany's mother observed the similarities between his regime and that of Fidel Castro in Cuba. Not long after, the family began making their way north to the United States via Mexico. Their ultimate goal was Hialeah, Florida, a northwestern suburb of Miami with a 90% majority Hispanic population known as a refuge for Cuban immigrants.

Jany's only possessions were the clothes on her back, a doll, a stuffed animal and a small gold necklace—a treasure that could be sold to pay for travel back to Venezuela should they be turned away at the U.S. border. While she was detained, everything was taken away from her—with the exception of



the necklace. She was given different clothes and slept in a room with bunks and eight other children.

Even though the family had passports and paperwork verifying their story, the children were questioned separately and treated with the assumption they would not be allowed to stay in the country. The trauma of Jany's experiences at the border has remained with her—and has shaped her career journey to this day.

“All I remember was just being scared and terrified and people trying to make decisions over my life—whether I

was allowed to stay or go—and all being spoken in a foreign language that was English,” she recalls. “And this is what prompted me to become a lawyer, to understand the laws. So, I became passionate about the law because of my story.”

In August of 1999, Hurricane Bret slammed into the Gulf Coast of Texas, unexpectedly expediting the family's processing for asylum, and they began the 1,500-mile journey to South Florida by Greyhound. When they arrived, Jany's mother got a job sewing mattresses, and her stepfather worked in a factory



## “I BECAME PASSIONATE ABOUT THE LAW BECAUSE OF MY STORY.”

that manufactured patio tiles. Soon they were able to purchase their first car—something few people in Cuba are allowed to have. Jany recalls they kept containers of water in the trunk to fill the leaking radiator so the car wouldn't overheat.

Jany's mother attended college to get a teaching degree, and Jany worked on the weekends when she wasn't in school. However, as she saw it, her real job was

to get straight A's so she could get a scholarship and achieve her dream of becoming an attorney.

While taking ESL classes in 10th grade, Jany was assigned a paper answering the question, “Write a letter to your future self explaining where you would like to be in 10 years.” In it she shared her dream of becoming an attorney, expecting to receive encouragement from her teacher, whom she

idolized. The paper was returned covered in red ink, and her teacher said, “You're never going to be a lawyer, and you're never going to enter the University of Florida. I went there, and it's really hard to get in.”

“I was devastated because I looked up to her as my first English teacher,” Jany notes. “I was sharing something vulnerable that, at that time, was my hope of becoming a lawyer. The person in authority in my life crushed me.”

Jany remembers crying bitterly when she heard her teacher's words, but she also remembers the incident as pivotal in cementing her faith and dependence on God.

“That was when my faith really kicked in,” she recalls. “Not listening to the



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Partners in life and business, Jany and Greg Ward launched Ward Law Group in 2012.

'no's around me but listening to what God's vision of my life was and what God had destined for me."

Although Jany had been baptized as a Roman Catholic, it wasn't until she arrived in South Florida and was invited to a Hispanic evangelical church that she accepted Christ as her Savior.

"That changed my outlook on life. And even though I didn't believe in myself, and it was so hard, I studied the Bible, and I believed what Jesus said—that I was a daughter of God," she explains. "That's when I turned the 'no's into 'yes's."

Contrary to her teacher's expectations, Jany was accepted to the University of Florida—with a full scholarship—and she studied Spanish literature and psychology. While pre-law studies or political science may be typical undergraduate degrees for aspiring lawyers, Jany believes her degree in psychology has helped her understand the human side of practicing law.

"I've always been a very empathetic person, and I wanted to understand people," she explains. "People come from different backgrounds, and as an immigrant you never really feel understood. You so desperately want to belong and want to be part of a community, but you always feel segregated and cast out."

Of all her studies, Jany says psychology is the one field she draws from every day.

After graduating from UF, she was accepted into the Shepard Broad College of Law at Nova Southeastern University. Jany earned her JD in 2012 and was admitted to The Florida Bar in 2013, followed by admissions in Washington, D.C., Texas, New York and New Jersey.

As her second year of law school began, Jany regularly attended church with her mother and grandmother, always leaving an empty seat for the husband she was praying God would provide. On December 31st of that same year, she even wrote a letter to God with a list of qualifications she was looking for.

Then, in February, Jany was attending a law lunch where she hoped to connect

with some attorneys to find out more about the profession. Across the room she saw Greg Ward and heard an audible voice say, "That's going to be your husband."

"I was freaked out," she remembers, "but I was excited, so I went across the room and introduced myself."

Initially, Jany's enthusiasm was not well received, and Greg laughs as he recalls his first words to her were something to the effect of, "Excuse me, I'll talk to you in a second. Let me finish talking to this guy."

Also raised a Catholic, Greg acknowledges that at the time, he did not have a relationship with God, describing his life as a "total disaster."

Greg had struggled after the death of his sister and father from leukemia, his marriage had ended and the law firm he started

English-speaking pastor at the Hispanic church preached.

"I felt the Holy Spirit when I walked in the door, I started crying," Greg explains, still getting emotional to this day. "I had some credentials at that point. I had a lot of success, and I graduated top of my law school class. But I just didn't have traction in life. I had no real power, and I kept failing and failing and failing—it was so hard."

When the altar call was given, he heard an audible voice commanding him to go, and he ran to the altar.

"I was the only one there that day that received Jesus, and it changed my life," Greg says. "If it wasn't for Jany, I'm sure the Holy Spirit would have got me eventually, but I was in a bad spot."

Greg and Jany were married in 2012.

## "EVEN THOUGH I HAVE 200 EMPLOYEES, IF A CLIENT WANTS TO TALK, I MAKE THE TIME."

with two partners was floundering. Although he'd been casually dating other women, after his first date with Jany, he called the other girls and told them he didn't want to see them any longer.

Early in their relationship, some people warned Greg that Jany was a "gold digger." What they didn't realize was that he was the one who was in trouble, not her. He had lost multiple businesses and had been financially ruined by a messy divorce.

"She met me at my lowest point," he recalls. "I was drinking, sleeping on a couch. I had a Kmart indoor-outdoor table in my dining room . . . I was in free fall."

Sensing there was something different about Jany, Greg began begging her to take him to church with her. She waited five months before doing so, gauging the seriousness of the relationship. When she finally brought him, he recalls having a powerful encounter with God as the

While Greg continued work with high-end clients, doing contract litigation, Jany pursued her dream of setting up a personal injury practice, running radio ads for her legal services in Spanish.

From the time she started law school, Jany had decided she wanted to fight for the rights of immigrants. Due to language barriers, unfamiliarity with U.S. law and experiences with law enforcement and courts in their countries of origin, immigrants are vulnerable to exploitation and neglect.

"We have kids that are 18 and 19 years old, starting college and they get in major accidents," she explains. "Because their parents are Hispanic, they never knew they even had rights. They pile up medical bills, or they suffer in their grades because they're injured and it affects their lives."

Greg recalls saying at the time, "All right, you can go do your little practice. I'll keep doing my big important stuff."



helping people, but become hardened by the profession.

“The miracle isn’t that she was able to get into law school,” he explains. “The miracle is she was able to get through law school without becoming a lawyer.”

Fifteen years later, the Ward Law Group has 200 employees and offices in Miami, Orlando and New York. Since its founding, the firm has recovered \$500 million for clients. Although most of Ward Law Group’s attorneys are Spanish-speakers, they come from upper middle-class families and are often third-generation immigrants.

As they care for their clients, the Wards remind the team of the struggles of their parents and grandparents, who often arrived with little more than the clothes on their backs and a limited understanding of the rights to which they were entitled.

“Particularly, it’s my job to enforce the standards on attorneys who sometimes

“We put it out there that we’re Christian lawyers and that our main core values are serving clients, serving each other as a team, serving the community and having faith,” Greg says, explaining that the couple expects those values to be exhibited by everyone in the firm, not just themselves.

The growth of Ward Law Group has enabled the couple, now the parents of twin girls, to give generously to causes close to their hearts. Firm advocates of tithing to their church, the Wards have also financially invested in churches, schools and orphanages in Latin America. They both serve on the board of “I Have a Dream” Foundation in Miami, which supports the educational achievements of low-income children from kindergarten through college. The couple has raised half a million dollars for research into leukemia—the disease that claimed the lives of Greg’s father and sister.

In addition to their charitable work, the Wards help guide entrepreneurs who are just starting out with skills in scaling their businesses. They’ve launched a co-working space where business owners can turn their ideas into sustainable companies.

“They rent offices month-to-month,” Jany explains, “but we also equip them with information so that once they get big enough, they can move out of our little offices.”

Jany’s long-term dream, however, is one that completes the full circle of her family’s harrowing experience: to start a nonprofit foundation to help displaced immigrants—whether they be from Latin America, South Asia or the Middle East.

“Displaced immigrants could be anybody displaced from their own country—whether it is for political reasons or otherwise,” she explains. “I want to be able to give them the empowerment, tools, knowledge or information to be able to help them assimilate in a new country.” ■

—  
**MATT GREEN** is the editorial director for *AVAIL Journal*. He also serves as vice president of marketing for *Pioneers*, a global church-planting organization based in Orlando, Florida. He lives in Central Florida with his wife, Andy. They have four children and one grandchild.

## “YOU DESPERATELY WANT TO BELONG, BUT YOU ALWAYS FEEL SEGREGATED AND CAST OUT.”

It turns out, however, that her first case was a big one—big enough to cause Greg to quit his work in commercial litigation and launch the Ward Law Group with Jany. Jany describes the early days of the firm in unglamorous terms.

“It was he and I on a plastic foldable table, my law school laptop and my cell phone,” she says, smiling. “We did everything from beginning to end. He would go to trial. He would win the cases. I was the receptionist, the legal assistant, the person to visit the client, sign up the client. I was the negotiator on the phone.”

Greg attributes Jany’s immediate success to her authenticity and compassion—a quality that people were able to hear in her radio ads. He notes that many people go to law school with intentions of

want to do their job as an attorney,” Greg explains, “but they don’t always think of the client as a human being.”

Jany’s role is more front-facing. She appears in the firm’s ads, meets with clients, listens to their stories, explains their rights and makes sure they are heard. She thrives on personal connections with clients.

“That connection with clients, hearing their stories, advocating for them—that’s what I love,” she notes. “Even though I have 200 employees, and they do a lot of the law, if a client wants to talk to me directly, I make the time to be with them and to meet with them because at the end of the day, that’s what I love. That’s the vision of the firm.”

The couple see the firm as a means to live out their faith.

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# FIGHT RIGHT

**A LEADER'S PLAYBOOK FOR HEALTHY CONFLICT**

**BY STEPHEN BLANDINO PHOTOS BY ANDREW VAN TILBORGH**







**When you're navigating conflict**, it's difficult to accurately read what the parties in the conflict think, want or expect.

Furthermore, all kinds of variables are at play in conflict resolution. Many good-hearted pastors have crashed because they didn't know how to resolve conflict. Many executives with bold visions and audacious plans have been crushed when resistance stopped them dead in their tracks. If you can't navigate conflict, you won't be a successful leader. That sounds blunt—perhaps even unreasonable—but it's true.

Conflict is inevitable in leadership, and your ability to steer through it will determine how far you go. Here's another sobering truth: how you deal with conflict reveals the level of your maturity.

Let that sink in. The way in which you handle conflict provides an unfiltered picture of your spiritual, emotional and relational maturity.

So, where do you begin? How do you successfully lead through conflict with so many changing dynamics and unpredictable challenges? Effective conflict resolution requires six ingredients—with the core characteristic being your ability to cultivate trust.

### **CULTIVATE TRUST**

Trust doesn't just play a role in conflict resolution; it plays the *central* role. The most difficult conflicts to traverse are the ones where trust has been broken. Thus, trust is the starting place and the driving force behind effective conflict resolution. Cultivating trust doesn't happen by accident. It requires a well-designed P.L.A.N.:

**Posture.** Trust begins when we approach people and conflict with the right posture. Some leaders take the posture of a pretender. They pretend the conflict doesn't exist, turning a blind eye to what's really happening. Others take the posture of a historian. This person keeps a record of wrongs so they can remind the other person of all their mistakes. Then, there's the judge. This posture turns conflict into a court date so you can find the person guilty.

None of these postures—the pretender, historian or judge—will resolve conflict. Instead, Jesus calls us to assume the posture of a *restorer*. He said:

*This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then, and only then, come back and work things out with God (Matthew 5:23-24, MSG).*

Jesus doesn't permit us to stew with anger or blast people on social media. Instead, He tells us to address conflict quickly ("leave immediately"), privately ("go to this friend"), and restoratively ("make things right"). The restorer resolves conflict by approaching it with a spirit of immediacy, kindness and grace.

**Listen.** Every conflict has two sides to the story, and our job is to listen to both sides to foster greater understanding. As Stephen Covey writes in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

Too often, we take a different approach: we seek to make a point so then they'll understand. But that's an unwise and unfruitful strategy to build trust. Your posture opens the door to trust, but listening gives you a seat at the table of resolution.

**Admit.** Years ago, a conflict came to my attention between two people—I'll call them Brandy and Janet. I met with them together and quickly discovered that Brandy had done something hurtful to Janet. After a lengthy conversation, Brandy finally offered an apology: "I'm sorry if you felt that way."

Immediately I saw the problem in the apology, so I said, "Brandy, that's not really an apology." She said, "What do you mean?" I said, "You're apologizing for Janet's feelings instead of your actions." She looked perplexed, so I continued. "How Janet feels is not the problem. What you did is the problem. You need to apologize for what you did, not how Janet feels."

She got what I was saying and then offered the best apology she could muster. The meeting ended well, and both ladies hugged one another. But to my surprise, a couple of days later, Brandy called me and apologized for how she had handled the situation. She not only recognized that her response lacked humility and sincerity, but she did the most important thing you can do in any conflict: she owned it.

You can't fix what you won't own. King David said, "But I confess my sins; I am deeply sorry for what I have done" (Psalm 58:18, NLT). There's no dodging or denial in that confession, and that's the approach we must take to bring about resolution and healing. Your ability to admit and own what you've done wrong is a non-negotiable step to reestablish trust and restore the relationship.

**Nurture.** The old saying is true, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." You can't just say that you care—people must feel that you care. This nurturing mindset places a genuine value on people. It puts the value of the relationship ahead of the need to be right.

## **YOU CAN'T FIX WHAT YOU WON'T OWN.**

These trust-building practices—Posture, Listen, Admit, Nurture—are the PLAN to cultivate trust so conflicts can be resolved. In addition, these practices are the PLAN to take with you into the remaining conflict-resolution strategies.

**CHOOSE TIMING**

Researcher Joseph Grenny and his colleagues at VitalSmarts discovered:

*95 percent of a company's workforce struggles to confront their colleagues and managers about their concerns and frustrations. As a result, they engage in resource-sapping avoidance tactics, including ruminating excessively about crucial issues, complaining to others, getting angry, doing extra or unnecessary work, and avoiding the other person altogether.*

Grenny goes on to note that “employees waste an average of \$1,500 and an 8-hour workday for every accountability conversation they avoid,” and that eight percent of employees cost their organizations a whopping \$10,000 or more because of their inability to deal with conflict.<sup>1</sup>

It's in your best interest—and the interest of the organization—to resolve conflict. Unfortunately, most people only address conflict in two scenarios: when it's easy to resolve or too big to ignore. When conflict resides somewhere in the middle—when it's not easy to resolve, but it hasn't turned into a full-blown crisis—we

ignore the conflict or delay our response to it. But good leaders know that ignoring conflict only makes it bigger, uglier, crazier and more expensive.

In general, the time to deal with conflict is when you can do so quickly and calmly. First, if possible, address the conflict quickly. The apostle Paul said, “And ‘don't sin by letting anger control you.’ Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil” (Ephesians 4:26-27, NLT). The word foothold means “location.” Paul warns us not to let the devil use unresolved anger to acquire square footage in our soul or a guest room in our heart.

Second, deal with conflict when you can do so calmly. If you're raging mad, take a few minutes—or a few days—to cool down before you tackle the conflict. Proverbs 14:29 says, “Slowness to anger makes for deep understanding; a quick-tempered person stockpiles stupidity” (MSG). Here are some simple questions to ask when you're determining the right time to deal with a conflict:

- Is my current emotional state under control?
- Have I carefully considered the part I played in causing the conflict?
- Have I taken time to process how I'll address the conflict in a healthy way?
- Have I prayed through the issue at hand and for the people involved?

When you can answer “Yes” to these questions, the timing is right to address the conflict

and keep it from becoming an all-out crisis.

**CLARIFY TENSION**

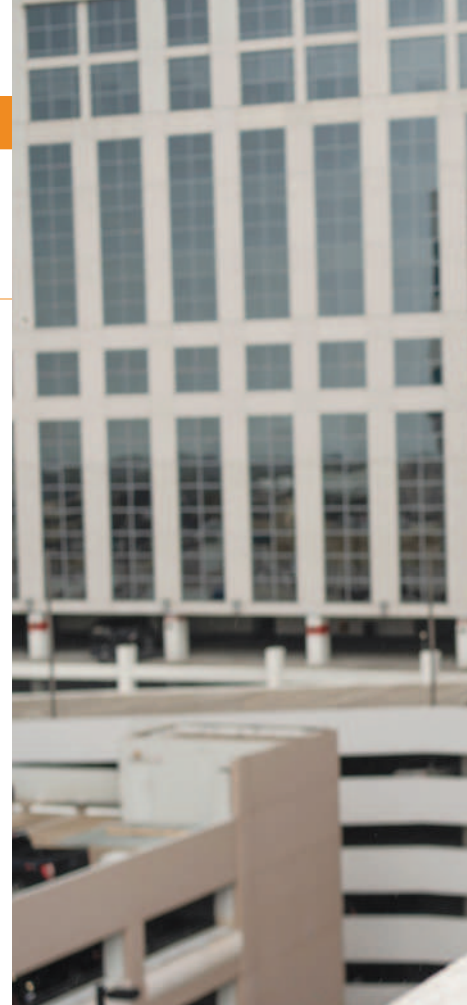
You can't resolve tension unless you fully understand what's causing it. That's why I try to live by a simple rule of relationships: ask questions before jumping to conclusions. You'll never gain understanding with answers. You only gain understanding by asking questions, and then pausing to listen intently.

Proverbs 18:2 provides some potent wisdom: “Fools have no interest in understanding; they only want to air their own opinions” (NLT). Don't take the posture of a fool. Reserve your own opinions and take time to listen, so you can clarify the tension. Here are some helpful approaches to clarify the tension:

“I could be wrong, but I feel like there's some underlying tension in our relationship. I wanted to take a few minutes to hear what might be bothering you.”

“I feel like I may have done something to offend you, so I wanted to see if you would help me understand what I've done and how you're feeling.”

“Recently I said something (or did something) that wasn't right. I want to own it and apologize to you for what I've done.”



**THE GOAL OF COMMUNICATING TRUTH IS TO BRING ABOUT HEALING.**



In research conducted by The Harris Poll for Grammarly Business, four issues ranked highest in communication difficulties among knowledge workers:

**71%**  
Choosing the right words to avoid offending others.

**71%**  
Finding the right balance between sounding too formal and too casual.

**63%**  
Spending too much time trying to convey a message in the right way.

**56%**  
Feeling unsure of the correct tone for communication.

“Can you help me understand what’s frustrating you?”

“Can you tell me more?”

“What would you like to see happen in this situation?”

“What would be a good first step from here that we could both agree on?”

Once the discussion gets going and their frustrations become clear, state back what you’re hearing them say to ensure you’re both on the same page. Again, your goal is to create understanding. Make observations, not accusations. “He said this” and “She said that” will only create an endless cycle of frustration and miscommunication. You may not agree with everything they say, but before you respond, ensure there’s clarity about the tension.

### COMMUNICATE TRUTH

Greg was a friend and a genuinely fun person. He had a big smile, a contagious laugh and a positive attitude, and

he never met a stranger. He was full of energy, incredibly social and gifted in multiple ways. Greg only had one big problem: he was a habitual liar. If his lips were moving, his lies were brewing.

On one occasion, my brother Chris told me about an interaction he and another friend had with Greg. When the conversation concluded and Greg headed out the door, Chris turned to his friend and said, “Everything Greg just said was a lie.”

His friend looked at him, befuddled by the comment. “Really?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah, every bit of it,” Chris said.

Greg was a convincing, chronic liar, and the only people who could see through his lies were those who knew him best—or those who had been burned by his conniving false promises and blatant fabrications.

We may not tell brazen lies in conflict resolution, but we

can certainly dodge the truth. Why? Because we hate conflict and will look for the quickest way out from under its unnerving cloud. Unfortunately, the quickest way out is to downplay the conflict, make promises you can’t keep or exaggerate the position that will help you the most.

But there’s a better path forward: pursue the truth in a trust-filled manner.

Simply put, don’t talk around the issue; speak directly to it. This is difficult, but half-truths and outright lies will only damage trust and prolong the conflict. When you’re

communicating the truth, keep in mind the ABCs:

**Articulate the facts.** Focus on the facts without getting sidetracked by the “-tions”: assumptions, emotions or accusations.

**Balance candor and care.** Be candid about the truth while delivering it with care, dignity and respect. As researcher Joseph Grenny observed, “The lag time for change is the same as the lag time for candor.” If you want things to change, it starts with the truth.<sup>2</sup>

**Cultivate dialogue.** Communicating truth isn’t a one-way speech but a two-way dialogue with the opportunity for both parties to speak and respond.

The goal of communicating truth is to bring about healing. Therefore, don’t use truth as a weapon to prove a point, get your way or crush the other person. In addition, avoid exaggerations, the blame game and indicting words like “always” and “never.”

### CONTROL TONE

While tone is specifically mentioned in the fourth-highest response (see graphic to the left), it’s implied in all the responses. Not wanting to offend others, sounding too formal or casual and conveying the message in the right way are all impacted by the tone we use.

For a powerful example of tone, look at the life of Jesus. Two remarkable attributes of Jesus are grace and truth. That perfect blend is found in the gospel of John when Jesus saved a woman from

her accusers after she was caught in the act of adultery. Jesus asked the woman, “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?” (John 8:10, NLT). The answer was clearly no. Then He said to her, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more” (John 8:11, NLT).

When Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you,” He extended grace. When He said, “Go and sin no more,” He pointed her toward truth. Simply put, Jesus spoke truth in the tone of grace. We need both to resolve conflict and build thriving relationships.

Tone is established early in the conversation. If your tone is one of correction, you’ll put others down. But if your tone is one of connection, you’ll lift others up. Which leader do you respect the most? The one who corrects you downward or coaches you upward? The answer is obvious. The tone of connection will always outpace the tone of correction. Connection alleviates conflict while correction amplifies it.

Proverbs 15:4 shares the sound of the tone of connection: “Gentle words are a tree of life; a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit” (NLT). Gentleness deflects anger and produces life. That’s the connecting power of controlling your tone.

### COLLABORATE TOGETHER

Just because you experience conflict with somebody doesn’t mean they’re your enemy. It usually means there’s

## JUST BECAUSE YOU EXPERIENCE CONFLICT WITH SOMEBODY DOESN’T MEAN THEY’RE YOUR ENEMY.

a misunderstanding or a misguided assumption that requires an honest conversation. If you’ll have an honest conversation, collaboration toward a better and brighter future becomes possible.

Business author Alden Mills notes, “By collaborating, you are acknowledging that you need others’ help, that you know they’re better at something than you are, and that their ideas matter and provide value to the team.”<sup>5</sup>

The solution to a conflict is never one-sided. It requires both parties to come together and come to an agreement. To successfully collaborate, keep three word pictures in mind:

**The bridge: focus on what unites us.** It’s easier

to focus more on the conflict and less on the resolution. Rather than allowing your differences to consume you, concentrate on the bridge that unites both of you. Clearly state your common ground so that each of you recognizes your shared desire for the same outcome.

**The scoreboard: make room for both parties to win.** In sports, a “shutout” happens when one team puts points on the board while the other team fails to score. That’s the goal in sports, but it doesn’t work in conflict resolution. Rather than focusing on a shutout, collaborate to create win-win outcomes. Work hard to ensure there’s a “W” (for “Win”) on both sides of the scoreboard.

**The footpath: identify your next steps.** Meaningful collaboration

doesn’t just talk about a conflict; it leads to clear and specific next steps. This happens when you ask, “Who will do what by when?” Said another way, “What will we do differently from this point forward?” A clear footpath helps you take steps toward a healthy outcome and a fruitful future.

These three word pictures—the bridge, the scoreboard and the footpath—provide a framework for successful collaboration.

Again, this is crucial to moving forward. If you don’t collaborate, you run the risk of discussing the conflict without fully resolving it.

The six ingredients to conflict resolution—cultivate trust, choose timing, clarify tension, communicate truth, control tone and collaborate together—are the keys to navigating the unpredictable conflicts you’ll encounter in leadership. ■

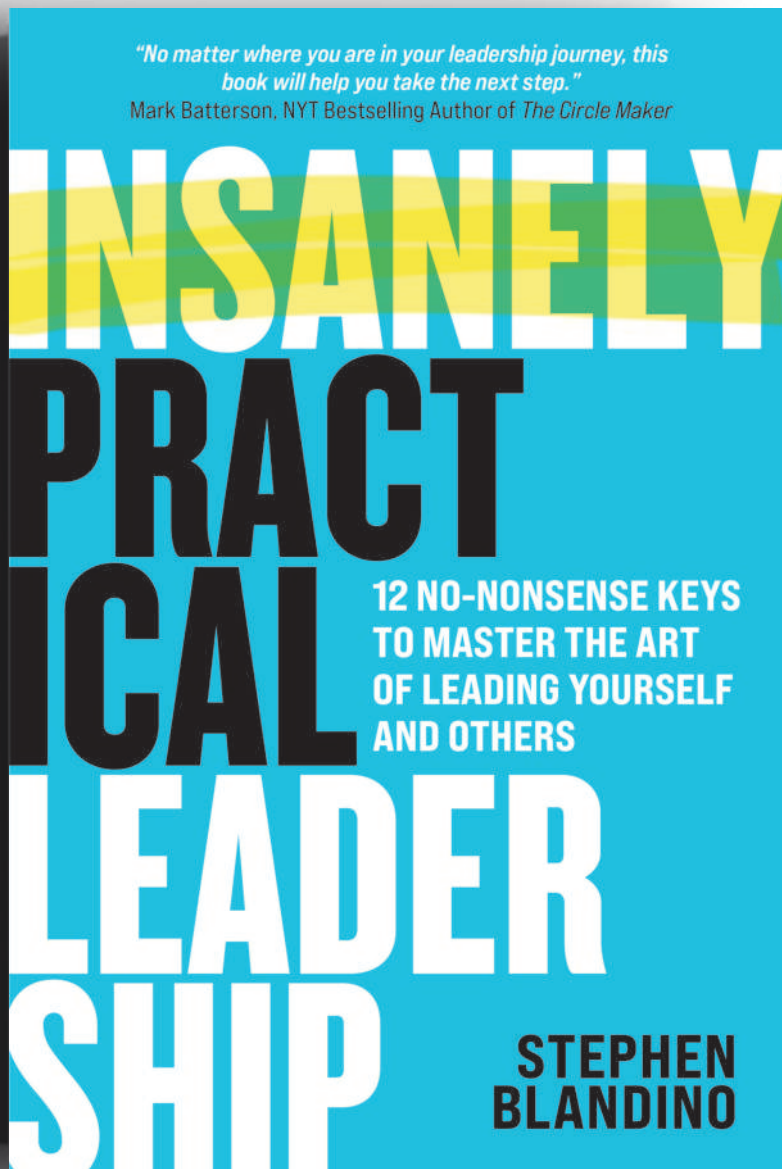
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**STEPHEN BLANDINO** is the lead pastor of 7 City Church, a leadership coach, blogger and the host of the *Leader Fluent Podcast*. He resides in the Fort Worth, Texas, area with his wife, Karen. They have one daughter and son-in-law, Ashley and Dylan, and two grandsons, Elijah and Wyatt. Stephen is the author of several books, including *Stop Chasing Easy* and *Do Good Works*. His new book is *Insanely Practical Leadership: 12 No-Nonsense Keys to Master the Art of Leading Yourself and Others*, from which this article is adapted.

#### Endnotes

1. Joseph Grenny, “Eliminating the Costs of Conflict Avoidance,” *ATD Home*, 22 Jul 2013, <https://www.td.org/content/atd-blog/eliminating-the-costs-of-conflict-avoidance>.
2. Joseph Grenny, quoted in Brandon West, “What GLS 2020 Taught Us About Life and Leadership,” *PHOS*, 22 Aug 2020, <https://phoscreative.com/articles/what-gls-2020-taught-us/>.
3. Alden Mills, *Unstoppable Teams: The Four Essential Actions of High-Performance Leadership* (New York: Harper Business, 2019), 83.

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*Words by*  
**DAVE MARTIN**

*Photos by*  
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**W**HEN IT COMES TO THEIR FAITH AND FINANCES, CHRISTIANS TEND TO MIGRATE TOWARD ONE OF TWO EXTREMES. ONE EXTREME IS THE VIEW THAT I WAS FORCE-FED AS A CHILD—THAT MATERIAL POSSESSIONS ARE SINFUL AND THAT, LIKE MOTHER TERESA, WE MUST ALL EMBRACE SOME SORT OF “VOW OF POVERTY” IF WE EVER INTEND TO BE CLOSE TO GOD. THE OTHER EXTREME IS THAT GOD WANTS US TO LIVE IN COMPLETE COMFORT AND EASE AS WE OSTENTATIOUSLY FLAUNT THE MATERIAL WEALTH HE HAS BESTOWED UPON US, ALL SO WE CAN INCITE FAITH IN OTHERS.

I don't buy into either of these two extreme positions. Both views distort the intentions of Scripture and completely miss the heart of God. In the Bible, the people who flaunted their wealth were usually driven by pride and ended up paying a high price for their egotism.

On the other hand, there is absolutely no connection anywhere in the Bible between wealth and sin. The list of prosperous people that God used over the course of about 21 centuries is quite lengthy.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job, David, Solomon, Joseph of Arimathea and Barnabas are just a few of the wealthy people God would use to accomplish His purposes in the world.

The connection between material wealth and sin takes place when one's love for wealth supersedes love for God or supplants God's purposes for his or her life.

#### **BELIEFS SHAPE THE FUTURE**

At the very beginning of human history, before there was sin in the world, God

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placed Adam in the midst of a veritable gold mine, and God gave him all kinds of enjoyable and needful things like food, work, sleep and sexual intimacy—things that were not sinful in and of themselves because sin was not yet a reality for human beings.

But sin took hold when Adam and his descendants started to make all these “things” that God had given to them more important than God Himself. You see, God designed man so that He could sit on the throne of man’s heart while all of His external blessings were designed to enrich man’s life from the outside. But when man reversed this divine order—moving God to the outside of his life and moving “things” to the throne of his heart—that is when sin became the destructive force that it is today. And that explains why money is a blessing, but why the *love* of money is an affront to the Lord (see 1 Timothy 6:10).

That being said, I don’t see anything positive that can come out of poverty except maybe a greater appreciation for wealth. And I certainly don’t see why God would allow the world’s most evil people to possess all the wealth that He created for Adam while His most devoted servants suffer under a self-imposed dearth. I don’t see why He would allow godless people who pay Him no mind to prosper while those who serve Him faithfully and obey His laws waste away in deficiency with no ability to raise themselves up.

Of course, the other extreme position is a feeble attempt to combine faith with selfishness and materialism, and this is

the theological position that some modern preachers have condoned. The extreme voices that advocate the modern prosperity gospel tell us that God wants us to have all kinds of material riches . . . period! There are no preconditions for these blessings. That’s simply not true.

The Lord wants the best for His children, but His best always involves more than just material satisfaction. So somewhere between these two extremes, there’s a place called “truth,” and I want to help you discover that truth. I want to help you develop a mindset toward your finances that is biblically based, practically achievable and theologically sound. I want to lead you to a healthy understanding of prosperity that can give rise to realistic goals and meaningful results in life.

Most of the objections Christians tend to raise against the idea of prosperity are actually objections to the world’s *system* for acquiring wealth—not to wealth itself. Wealth in and of itself is a good thing, a godly thing. God created wealth, God blessed Adam with wealth when Adam was perfect and sinless and God has a “system” whereby His people can now tap into the wealth that He provided for them when He created the world.

Wealth is something good that God created for man’s benefit in order to help man achieve the temporal, earthly purposes for which God created him, but it is simultaneously something that can awaken the vilest dispositions of a sinful heart. So, wealth is what we choose to make of it and what we choose to do with

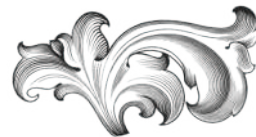
God’s instructions regarding its proper use. Like a brick that can be used to build a schoolhouse or a house of ill repute, money has no moral nature; it’s simply one of those “things” that God created for man’s benefit that can simultaneously expose man’s moral nature.

This means, of course, that God doesn’t want us to chase after wealth or take hold of it in ways that violate His moral laws. He doesn’t want us to do sinful things to obtain it, and He doesn’t want the wealth He has entrusted us to take His place on the throne of our hearts. He wants us to pursue wealth for the right reasons, acquire it in the right ways and use it to do the right things.

If we will respect these divine boundaries, wealth is something that God will make available to us in order to help us achieve His predetermined destiny for our lives. He wants us to buy into His system of prosperity, not the world’s system, so we can become who He wants us to be and achieve what He wants us to do in life. He wants us to buy into His system of prosperity, not the world’s system because the world’s approach to economics leads people farther away from Him and fills them with a gnawing sense of emptiness and meaninglessness. He wants us to live according to His “kingdom economy,” not the world’s economy, and, if we do, we will find that our prosperity is not only something He condones; it is a reliable way of living that is not subject to the ups and downs of global economics.

I haven’t met a Christian yet who doesn’t want to prosper under God’s hand of blessing,

## THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MATERIAL WEALTH AND SIN TAKES PLACE WHEN ONE’S LOVE FOR WEALTH SUPERSEDES LOVE FOR GOD.



but let's never forget the warning the Bible puts forth regarding money: the *love* of money, not money itself, is the root of all evil. To love money—to place it above God in our hearts and lives—is to invite destruction upon our lives because an unrighteous attitude toward wealth can lead only to sorrow and vanity.

As Paul explained to Timothy, it can cause us to be “pierced . . . through with many sorrows” (1 Timothy 6:10, KJV). But if we will allow God to enrich us in His way, according to the tenets of His eternal Word, we can enjoy a godly prosperity that is personally satisfying and financially resilient as we keep Him at the center of our lives. In other words, God’s “system” for prosperity, if followed faithfully, will enable us to avoid sin and steer clear of the topsy-turvy, roller coaster ride of worldly finance that is so often harmful to us spiritually because fear, greed, insecurity or other unseemly motivations drive it.

By believing and implementing the biblical laws of prosperity, you will be able to prosper financially. Your life will begin to look different from those prospering through the world’s system because you won’t just prosper financially, but mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually and relationally. That’s what the God-kind of prosperity can do for you.

The word translated *prosper* in the Bible is a word that goes far beyond the realm of finance. It’s a word that speaks to a person’s overall well-being because God wants us to prosper in every aspect of our lives to such an extent that it positively

affects others. Poverty can’t do that. Poverty repels people, but a lifestyle of living under God’s blessing and enjoying God’s provision can make an impact on the people who are analyzing our lives.

### **THE BIBLE SAYS MORE THAN CHRISTIANS THINK**

Unfortunately, no believer can receive the benefits of a specific promise from God unless that believer is first aware that such a promise exists because if it’s in the Bible, we have to believe it before we can receive it. Furthermore, God’s promises of prosperity are only half-baked into a lot of Christians, even those who are aware of them.

Many have been taught extreme doctrines, have built a whole theology from an isolated scripture, or are unable to move Scripture from the mind and into the heart. The ignorance (lack of knowledge and understanding) existing in the body of Christ today when it comes to the subject of divine prosperity disheartens me. And the ignorance existing among church leaders and Bible teachers is even more disturbing. It is costing us individually as we unnecessarily struggle through life, and it is costing us corporately as our churches and ministries are forced to suffer financial lack while the world perishes before our very eyes.

God has already given us His best. He gave us His best when He gave us Jesus, so why would He deprive us now of all the good things He has made for us? Why would He deprive us now of all the good things He designed to help sustain us and propel us forward in

life and ministry? Why, in the beginning, would He fill the world with such wealth for Adam and Eve but choose now to keep His people in poverty and want? Why would He fill the world with so many treasures and so many answers to mankind’s needs (like medical remedies and natural resources) but leave it to the people who hate Him the most to discover those things, harness those things and utilize those things to create wealth? The obvious answer is: He wouldn’t.

God’s gift of His Son serves as an illustration of just how much He wants to bless us. It serves as an illustration of God’s generous attitude toward the people He loves. God’s goodness benefits Him as much or more than it benefits us because God has made us to be a reflection of Himself. He has made us to be walking, talking advertisements for the Christian life.

Obviously, there will be seasons in our lives when God will allow us to be tested or endure certain kinds of trials, including financial trials, and the Lord will allow these seasons of testing in order to nurture faith in our lives or achieve His purposes through our lives. But generally speaking, God wants us to live under the shadow of His blessing and to walk in His prosperity, and we need to know that about Him if we ever intend to rise above our current levels of achievement. If God intends to bless the world through us, we are going to need a lot more resources than we currently have at our disposal in order to impact a world of eight billion people in need.

**MONEY HAS  
NO MORAL  
NATURE;  
IT’S SIMPLY  
ONE OF  
THOSE  
‘THINGS’  
GOD  
CREATED  
FOR MAN’S  
BENEFIT.**





**MONEY ISN'T EVIL**

Do you know why so many unbelievers prosper financially? Whether they know it or not, they follow a lot of God's economic laws. Obviously, some unbelievers are bent on acquiring their wealth through illegal or unethical means. Some submit false insurance claims, cheat on their taxes or sell stolen goods to unwary customers. But not all prosperous people are shady characters. God's eternal principles of economics work when we implement them—whether we attribute them to God or not. And that means that if they work for sinners, they can work for believers, too, because they are eternal principles designed to work for us if we work with them.

Unfortunately, many Christians just don't know the eternal principles of economics scattered throughout God's Word, and Christians can't activate the principles they do not know. These eternal principles of economics have changed my life and the lives of countless others, past and present.

I realize the subject of prosperity can be unsettling for many people because some of us have been around long enough to see the damage extreme teachings have done. I also know current events can have a real impact on this subject as we face the realities of an economic climate that is both discouraging and frightening. And I understand the skepticism about another faith-based message that promises to use the Bible to teach them about financial affluence and a righteous way of attaining wealth.

**THE WORD  
TRANSLATED  
PROSPER IN  
THE BIBLE  
SPEAKS TO  
A PERSON'S  
OVERALL  
WELL-BEING,  
FAR BEYOND  
THE REALM  
OF FINANCE.**



But let's get real here: money plays an enormous role in our daily lives, and it's the main reason we get up and go to work each day. When we're not making money, we're spending money, trying to save money or managing our money so we can afford the things we need. Money is an important part of our lives, and money impacts just about every aspect of our lives. It also impacts virtually every aspect of church life and ministry. And that's why God wants to be personally involved in our finances. It's why He is so concerned about us having a proper relationship with our money. Something that consumes that much of our time and that much of our attention will demand His hands-on involvement because He wants us to have enough money to live without constant stress, and He wants us to have enough money to pursue the visions and dreams He has placed in our hearts for ourselves, our families, our businesses and our churches.

If money—how much we have, how much we need, how we make it and how we use it—is so important to God, then it should be important to us, too. And since the Bible has all the information we will ever need to make wise decisions and live fulfilling lives, I believe we should look there, in the holy Scriptures, for the timeless wisdom we require when it comes to our finances. Besides, although money can't buy us happiness, neither can poverty. But money sure can solve a lot of our earthly problems.

Hundreds of Bible verses address this vital life concern, and Jesus had more to

say about money during His earthly ministry than any other subject except the subject of love. Moreover, God knows the devil preys upon our ignorance. God knows Satan does his best work in the empty spaces of our uninformed minds, where there is no biblical knowledge to offset his lies. The world sows its seeds of doubt and skepticism in those same empty spaces.

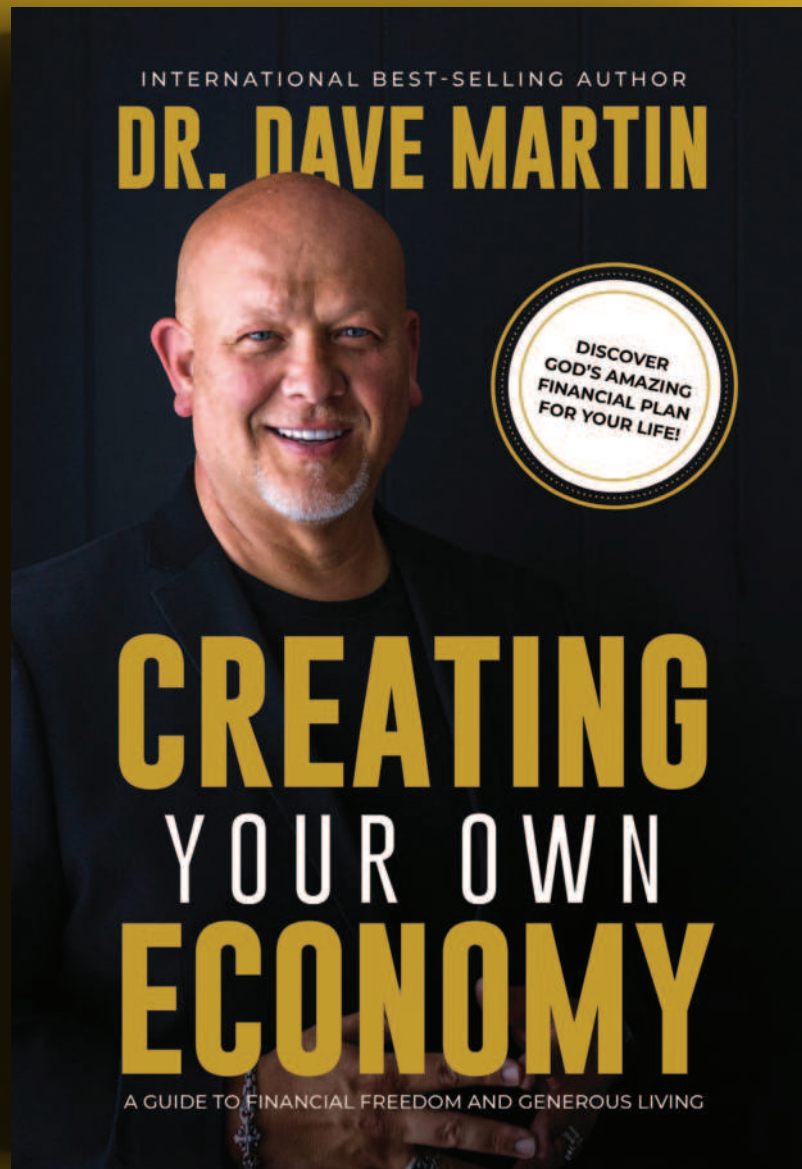
So let's fill those spaces with God's truth. Let's fill them with God's light. Let's fill them with a vast reservoir of God's promises concerning His desire to bless our finances and enrich our earthly lives, and let's fill them with an understanding of the Lord's requirements for living a life that is marked by His favor.

If we, as Christians, can get our thinking right when it comes to the subject of money, we can get our believing right. And if we can get our believing right, we can get our behaviors right. And if we can get our behaviors right when it comes to our personal finances, we can plot the course for our own lives and determine their quality and outcome so that the rest of our lives will be the best of our lives. ▣

—  
**DAVE MARTIN**, America's No. 1 Christian success coach, is a coach, pastor, mentor, inspirational speaker and business leader with a mission to communicate the biblical principles of success. Dave is a keynote speaker at the Get Motivated Seminars, America's largest business seminar. Over 1 million listeners in 80-plus countries participate in Dave's award-winning Forbes top-10 podcast called *Success Made Simple*.

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PRO

JAMES SANG LEE IS TAKING THE

TEL

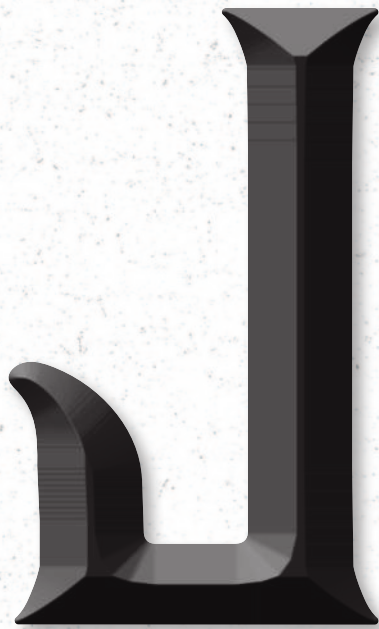
KINGDOM INTO UNEXPECTED PLACES

TOR

By MATT GREEN

Photos by ANDREW VAN TILBORGH





James Sang Lee was in elementary school when his father was assaulted by a police officer. A first-generation immigrant from Hong Kong, the elder Lee was a Ph.D. student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a Christian and a family man—not the stereotypical victim of police violence. ¶ Nearly 50 years later, Lee stresses that this encounter does not characterize the conduct of most law enforcement officers. However, as a child it affected him deeply—and it drove Lee to devote himself to learning martial arts to protect himself and others. ¶ “I was like, that will never happen again—

not to myself, my family, anything I’m ever a part of,” he recalls thinking. “I decided I was going to be a protector—a protector of other people as well.” ¶ For Lee, martial arts were the natural avenue for learning self-defense. Surrounded by kids with blond hair and blue eyes, Lee was starstruck when he saw his first Bruce Lee film in the ’70s. Here was an action hero that looked like him. ¶ “Once I saw Bruce Lee doing Kung Fu, I was hooked,” Lee recalls.

## **R** UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY

He dove into kung fu, karate, taekwondo, jiu-jitsu and kobujitsu weapons—Lee has accumulated black belts in five styles over the course of his 40-year career. An uncle was a master in kung fu, and the pastor’s son at the church his family attended ran a karate class at the church. Lee even trained with South Korean grandmaster Sang-kee Paik, one of his father’s fellow students who was also instrumental in getting taekwondo into the Olympic Games.

Lee continued to practice and compete throughout high school, but it wasn’t until he was in college at the University of Wisconsin that he considered turning his passion into a career. Ho-Sung Pak, a friend and a stuntman in several Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles films, told Lee, “James, you could win 10 more of these championships, but that’s not going to get you in the movie business. If you want to be in film, you’re going to have to leave Wisconsin.”

Lee landed in Florida and got a job working for a security firm. It was an unconventional role, and his boss also required him to perform at the venue where he was

employed. Lip sync, magic tricks, air band—it was up to him to choose.

“I can’t sing. I can’t dance. But I’m really good with weapons,” he told the DJ when it was his turn to perform. “What about nunchucks?”

The DJ cranked up a techno beat, and Lee whipped out two sets of nunchucks, wowing the crowd. Minutes after his performance, pro wrestler Hulk Hogan, who happened to be in the audience that night, approached the stage and said, “James, you gotta be in my movie.”

It wasn’t an idle offer. Lee did stunt work in three of Hogan’s films in the early ’90s,

which led to additional deals with Warner Bros., New Line and other major studios. While Lee has an infectious smile and a naturally outgoing personality, that’s not what made him a sought-after stunt double, fight choreographer and martial arts and weapons adviser in Hollywood action flicks.

“The film business likes me as a villain,” he says with a grin, explaining that his ability to project intense facial expressions means he’s typically cast as one of the bad guys. “It’s funny because I just have this villainous look on camera.”

Along the way, he worked with Mel Gibson and Jet Li in the *Lethal Weapon* series and fought Wesley Snipes in *Blade*. Lee had achieved his dream of working in the film industry, but he found he had strayed from the values and faith of his childhood.

“I had fast cars, everything, and I was living ‘the life,’ if you will—but far from God,” Lee explains.

## **R** PAINFUL TRANSITION

After coming home from a red carpet premiere one night in 2000, he felt the weight of his spiritual emptiness and prayed, “Lord, change my life.” A week later, the answer came in an unexpected and painful way. Lee was brushing his hair when his right shoulder blew out of its socket—shattering any immediate plans for further work in films.

He had been competing in martial arts competitions since childhood, worked as a professional stuntman, handled countless weapons and had never been hurt. Now, he’d been taken out by a freak grooming accident.



**“I HAD  
FAST CARS,  
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FAR FROM  
GOD.”**

A friend invited Lee to a service at Northland Church, a congregation in the Orlando suburbs. The senior pastor at the time, Joel Hunter, was preaching on the topic of sickness and healing. “God will sometimes do something painful in your life if the life you’re leading is not what God had intended,” Lee remembers him saying.

Hunter’s message hit Lee like a bolt of lightning. He continued attending the church and became friends with associate pastor Vernon Rainwater, who disciplined him and encouraged him to dig into Scripture. He also became friends with Rainwater’s son-in-law, Chad Turnbull, Northland’s youth pastor at the time.

“You should leave the movie business,” Turnbull told him, “and you should come and help me with the youth.”

“Are you sure you know what I do for a living?” Lee asked, laughing. “I blow up stuff. I beat up stuff. I bang up stuff.”

“James, you’re going to be so good with middle school students,” Turnbull replied. “You have no idea.”

## SECURE DOWNLOAD

Lee discovered he had a gift for youth ministry and ended up serving on staff for five years as youth director at Northland.

But it was during this time he also began having elaborate and detailed dreams about building a security team at the church, eventually leading him to shift from serving as youth director to heading up security and implementing a comprehensive strategy for the church.

“It’s like someone downloaded in me a complete security model,” he notes.

The experience was particularly timely as the church and its senior pastor grew in influence. Hunter served as a spiritual adviser to President Barack Obama, and the main campus of the multisite church became a premier location for concerts and events in Central Florida.

For five years Lee drew on his security experience and training in martial arts and weapons handling to develop a safety team and protocols for the church, covering everything from managing large events and high-profile guests to the unexpected aspects of spiritual warfare that churches must address as people attempt to

**“CHRISTIANS WILL NEED TO BE SO SKILLED AT WHAT THEY DO, THAT THEY’RE INDISPENSABLE.”**

disrupt the ministry.

At the time, churches typically outsourced security to off-duty police officers or private firms. Lee’s vision was different. While not discounting professional expertise as part of a “multi-layered model” of church security, he wondered what would happen if security awareness and responsibility were distributed among a team of trained and equipped volunteers in the congregation.

“God has put people in your church, in your organization, that have a heart to protect children, to watch over a flock—shepherds, if you will,” he explains. “We need to be mindful not to be so professional that we don’t need our very own people. We have to call out some of those giftings innate in the hearts of God’s people that would be part of the mobilization of protecting the flock.”

Lee draws inspiration for this from 1 Chronicles 9:22, which recounts the selection of 212 gatekeepers to guard the house of the Lord.

“What did they do? They protected God’s people, His property and His possessions,” Lee explains. “And so, we need that same aspect in the Western church, but we’ve forgotten it because we’ve relegated it to experts, professionals, law enforcement, military, et cetera.”

Lee notes that security issues facing churches have not just increased in frequency, but also in intensity.

“Some of it, too, is what I would consider spiritual warfare,” he explains, declining to go into detail about some of the more bizarre circumstances he’s encountered. “Situations I would consider a little outlandish.”

## RETURN TO THE RING

In 2010, Lee’s passion for martial arts brought him back into the ring full-time. Although he had fought from the ’70s into the ’90s, it had been more than a decade since he had participated in a competition. Lee gathered some young men who had been in his youth ministry and also had an interest in martial arts.

“You know what, guys? We need some accountability on this. Let’s spend time together. Let’s study God’s Word,” he recalls telling them. “Let’s go for the world title. And as we go, this will give you your chance maybe even to be in the movies.”

For several years, the world title evaded them, and Lee and his fellow fighters faced 43 teams in the first year, losing to Trinidad by 1/100th of a point in a bout broadcast on ESPN. He was ready to let go of his dreams of glory in the ring, feeling as though he’d already achieved all he wanted to. Then, a teammate encouraged him to give it one more try, which led to four ISKA (International Sport Kickboxing Association) World Championships in a row from 2010 on.

“Here I was, outside of my prime as a physical athlete, 20 years since I was in the World Championship rounds—and we would win not just one, but four in a row,” Lee notes. “Only God could do that. When it’s His time, His glory, He’s going to do it.”

Since the championship wins, Lee has continued to stretch his entrepreneurial muscles, remaining busy as a security consultant and martial arts trainer. Drawing on his



experience at Northland, Lee founded Alexander Security and Protection (ASAP). Through ASAP, Lee has helped prepare more than 500 churches with plans and procedures for security and has spoken and taught on the topic at church conferences.

Lee also offers training in active shooter response, violence prevention, de-escalation, threat management, international travel and self-defense. In his role as a contractor, he's been to Sri Lanka, Egypt and into the Red Zone of Ukraine during the Russo-Ukrainian War. Lee has also worked security in Brazil during the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games.

More recently, Lee has been intentionally investing in the next generation. As a speaker for the Student Leadership University, he challenges young people to see themselves the way Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did in the book of Daniel. Even if the values and beliefs of Christian young people may be at odds with the culture around them, what they bring to the table is indispensable.

"They were so good at what they did from a career standpoint, that they were at the king's court, in another culture, as slaves at the right hand of that king," he notes. "I think there's a time coming where Christians will need to be so skilled at what they do, that they're indispensable—regardless of politics, economics, religion and so on."

At 55, Lee observes that this is how God has orchestrated the journey of his own life and given him unique experiences and connections—a platform for influencing others and glorifying God—whether it be professional martial arts, filmmaking or, most recently, video games. Although he's not a gamer, Lee has noted the influence of gaming on young people and sees it as an opportunity for influence and ministry.

"I am so interested in this era of communication and gaming and all of these platforms where people are gathering, communicating, sharing ideas and talking through social media and video games," he explains, noting that Christian leaders who want to influence unbelievers and share the gospel will need to move outside the church to participate as missionaries in the places where culture is being made.

"I have a heart for evangelism so I definitely have a desire—maybe even curiosity—of how God might use video

## "I BECAME A GAMER TO THE GAMERS. I BECAME A JOCK TO THE JOCKS."

games and technology in this next era for reaching the next generation for Christ," Lee notes. "I even said one time in a gaming conference, 'I became a gamer to the gamers. I became a jock to the jocks.' A question for the church is, 'How are we equipping our congregations to *be* in their community, to *be* in their job location?' Because that's where the church can really penetrate."

### B

#### ACK ON SET

It was late summer of 2021, and Lee was

trudging through a man-made jungle in Puerto Rico. He had been there nearly a month, and temperatures were hovering in the triple digits. At 50, Lee was in good shape, but he was having difficulty keeping his weight up with the heat, strenuous schedule and wearing a full battle kit while on set.

Filmmakers at Lionsgate studios were looking to fill a role in a new action flick when Lee's name had come across their desks. It had been 20 years since the last time he had been part of a feature film production, but Lee had been asking God for a part in another film, if that was His will.

"It was so physically intense, I couldn't eat enough food to keep the weight on," he recalls. "I could tell my body was starting to change metabolism-wise."

The film was *Plane*, starring Gerard Butler and directed by Jean François Richet. Butler portrays a commercial pilot whose plane is struck by lightning on a flight between Singapore and Honolulu. Forced to land on a dirt strip on a rebel-controlled island in the Philippines, the plane and its passengers are taken for

ransom. Lee played Willis, a member of a four-person team of Green Berets sent to rescue the passengers.

The director wanted the team to act on screen as though they had been together for years, so he instructed them to spend time together off-set and get to know one another. For Lee, this was an opportunity to make his faith visible—just as he always had. One evening, Lee was hanging out with one of his teammates—a former Navy SEAL—and prayed to himself, "Lord, give me a unique question to ask him."

The question Lee heard was, "What brings a Navy SEAL to the movie business?"

"Well, James, I wanted to be a preacher," the actor replied. "If I wasn't on this movie set, I'd be telling people about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit and teaching them about the Bible. James, we are both here on this set, at this point in time, to be salt and light. So, no matter where we are, He says use it for God's glory."

The encounter confirmed to Lee that he was where God wanted him to be. Whether discipling kids in a local church or at a gaming tournament, competing on the international stage in martial arts or doing stunt work on a Hollywood film, God has His people in the mix, making a difference.

"No matter where we are, our occupation, our geographic location, our vocation," Lee notes. "God wants to use us for building His kingdom." ▣

—  
MATT GREEN is the editorial director for *AVAIL Journal*. He also serves as vice president of marketing for Pioneers, a global church-planting organization based in Orlando, Florida. He lives in Central Florida with his wife, Andy. They have four children and one grandchild.

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# A Voice in the City



Sam Chand  
talks with NYC  
church planter  
A.R. Bernard



**L**ast issue, I introduced the Founding Faith section, featuring conversations with founding pastors (who also happen to be friends of mine) in which I explore the origin stories of the churches they planted, perhaps identifying some of the common threads that have defined their success. I don't ask questions as a voyeuristic outsider, but as someone who has observed and admired, from close proximity, their integrity and leadership skill. I hope their stories will inspire and challenge you in your own leadership journey.

In this issue, I want to introduce readers to my friend Dr. A.R. Bernard. Few can articulate an elaborate and even complicated leadership thought as succinctly and clearly as Dr. Bernard. He is internationally acclaimed for

BY SAM CHAND



**LEFT:** In his preaching, A.R. Bernard is known for applying truth to current cultural issues with a biblically faithful approach.

**LOWER LEFT:** A.R. and Karen Bernard have been married since 1972 and raised seven children—all boys.



his wisdom, biblical teaching and pragmatic application of that wisdom.

I recall meeting him for the first time many years ago when we were both invited speakers for Dr. Dale Bronner in Atlanta. I had heard of Dr. Bernard, but when I saw and heard him communicate thought leadership, I was not just impressed but wanted to know him better. Now, over the years we stay in touch. I'm richer for it.

A.R. Bernard is the founder the Christian Cultural Center (CCC) in Brooklyn, New York. Before entering ministry, he had a successful 10-year career in banking. However, in 1979, Bernard left his position at a

major New York bank to pursue full-time ministry alongside his wife, Karen

What began as a small Bible study has grown into one of the largest churches in New York City. The Christian Cultural Center now boasts over 37,000 members and occupies an 11.5-acre campus in Brooklyn.

Bernard holds a master of urban studies and a master of divinity from Alliance Theological Seminary. He has also been awarded honorary doctor of divinity degrees from Wagner College and Nyack College/Alliance Theological Seminary. His influence extends beyond his church, as he has been recognized as one of New York's 50 Most Powerful People in Brooklyn and dubbed "The Power Pastor" by *The New York Times*.

Bernard has served in various leadership positions, including president of the Council of Churches of the City of New York, board member of the Commission of Religious Leaders (CORL), board member of the Brooklyn Public Library and board member of the New York City Economic Development Corporation. In addition, Bernard has founded several

organizations, including the Christian Community Relations Council (CCRC) and the Brooklyn Preparatory School.

A.R. and Karen have been married since 1972. They met in high school and have seven sons together.

Bernard is an author of several books, including *Four Things Women Want From a Man and Happiness Is . . . : Simple Steps to a Life of Joy*. He also hosts *The A.R. Bernard Show*, a podcast in which he interviews high-profile guests on topics of faith and culture.

**SAM CHAND:** How did you experience God's call to plant a church?

**A.R. BERNARD:** In July of 1977, after converting to Christianity from a form of American Islam, I experienced an undeniable call to ministry—a "vocare" or divine summons to service. This calling, as described in the Puritan tradition, is a sacred invitation to serve others in alignment with God's plan. It felt like a second conversion, a deep, inward impression of God's voice on my soul. This vision—a cross, empty but stained with the blood of Christ, symbolizing His resurrection and the kingdom of God on earth—revealed my role as a shepherd of souls.

My wife, Karen, witnessed this experience and supported me wholeheartedly. On January 1, 1978, we planted our church, The Household of Faith, in a storefront in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. From that small beginning, God continued to

**"NAVIGATING THE DEMANDS OF A GROWING CHURCH WITHOUT A MENTOR WAS PERHAPS THE MOST CHALLENGING."  
—A.R. BERNARD**



Christian Cultural Center has campuses in Brooklyn, Long Island, Orlando, Atlanta and online.

grow our congregation and mission, solidifying the calling He placed on my life.

**SC:** Tell us a highlight (and a “lowlight”) of the first few years.

**ARB:** The early years of our ministry were both rich and challenging. We saw miraculous healings, exorcisms, discipleship and growth. Each time we relocated, we quickly outgrew our space. This expansion, while exciting, also came with pressures—financial needs, growing responsibilities and the complexities of human relationships.

Navigating the demands of a growing church without a mentor was perhaps the most challenging. I carried over a workaholic mindset from my prior career in banking, and the drive to meet everyone’s needs often left my family in the background. My wife’s unwavering faith and shared sense of calling sustained us, even as we dealt with the strain on our marriage and family life.

**“IF YOU TRULY FEEL THE CALL, TRUST GOD AND TAKE THAT LEAP OF FAITH.”**  
—A.R. BERNARD

from the realities of life. I would have prioritized building a support system, seeking wisdom from experienced mentors, and structuring accountability within our ministry. A balanced approach, encompassing work and rest, would have tempered my intensity, allowing me to serve without sacrificing family relationships. Looking back, I would still give with the same passion and commitment, but I would be wiser in managing the balance between ministry and personal life. I would ensure I nurtured myself and my family as fervently as I cared for my congregation.

**SC:** How did church planting affect your family—marriage, children, extended family?

**ARB:** One of the most painful lessons I learned is that family should never be sacrificed on the altar of ministry. In my case, ministry ambitions created bitterness within my family and hurt our relationships. Thankfully, through

God’s grace, mercy and healing, we found a way to reconcile and restore these bonds. This journey taught me that maintaining a healthy family life is foundational for a successful ministry and is a living testament to God’s love.

**SC:** What would be your top three counsels for those considering planting a church?

**ARB:** For those who sense a call to plant a church, I offer three key pieces of advice: Get serious. Understand the sacrifices that church planting will demand from you and your family. It’s not an easy journey; it requires a mindset of total commitment akin to a lifelong marriage. Settle in your heart that you are fully committed to this calling. Get smart. Seek knowledge, training and counsel. Surround yourself with mentors and advisers who can guide you through the challenges. Equip yourself with as much wisdom and preparation as possible because you’ll need it. Get going. Don’t linger in doubt or second-guess yourself. If you truly feel the call, trust God and take that leap of faith. Move forward without looking back, confident that He will guide you each step of the way. ▣



**SAM CHAND** is a leadership consultant and the author of numerous books, including his most recent title, *Voices: The Power, Pain, & Purpose of Voices*. Sam is the founder of Dream Releaser Enterprises and the publisher of *AVAIL Journal*.

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**AVAIL**

The ART of LEADERSHIP

# Step Out

Don't  
wait to be  
qualified  
to answer  
the call

BY LAUREL ORDONEZ

PHOTO BY FRANCISCO GONZALEZ

**T**hey say, “God doesn’t call the qualified; He qualifies the called.”

But how many of us truly believe this?

If you’re reading this, maybe you’ve felt unprepared or even “unqualified” in your journey. You’ve made decisions that led to setbacks and endured times that felt like a series of losses. Times like these will shake your faith, not only in God, but in yourself. Yet, somehow, you’re still here, standing with the potential for something miraculous to emerge from the struggle.

Take a moment to really let that sink in, and be proud of yourself for not throwing in the towel. It’s a huge accomplishment to keep fighting against the odds! You never know when your big breakthrough will be. I surely didn’t, but I kept going despite it all.

In August 2021, I made the leap from a VP role in experiential marketing to starting Queenly Consulting with \$3,000 in the bank and a dream. Many smart people advise saving up at least six months’ worth of living expenses before making a move like this—but clearly, that wasn’t my path.

I never planned to leave my role to start a business. I think more than anything in life I value stability. The entrepreneurial journey can feel anything but stable at times. But what I was doing was helping some friends and a few nonprofits on the side. I learned very quickly that good marketing help was expensive and often could not reflect a direct ROI, or at least that wasn’t the focus. I wanted to take what I learned over the years and help

my “soloprenuer” friends and people making a big impact in our community.

I knew I had always been made for something bigger, but I was extremely content with where life had led me. Looking at where I had started in life, I had come so far. I was no longer the teenage mom that dropped out of high school. I was successful.

But then it all changed.

In August of 2020 we were able to purchase a new home. This home was the blessing I was asking for, and I couldn’t wait to move because I would now have the space to host a youth group in my home. Also, having three sons of my own, we needed that space, along with a roof that didn’t leak.

But as I was packing my bedroom and preparing to move, I heard the still, small voice of the Lord say, “If I call you, will you come?” I didn’t know what that meant, but I was almost positive I’d be leaving my role to become a youth pastor. But as the next year unfolded, it became evident that I was wrong. The position I thought would open at the church for me was never posted, and someone from another location filled it.

I was doing some amazing work with my friend who was an occupational therapist and developing a community-driven business development plan for her. However, things were getting more and more difficult, even tumultuous, at work. It was one of those situations that I knew God was calling me out, but I wasn’t listening. I wasn’t moving so He was going to make things so uncomfortable I would have no choice but to make a move.

So, I left. I gave a two-week notice, and the next week I went to work for myself. I kept a schedule, had my to-do list and started to take action.

The first year was a whirlwind, and to my surprise, we hit our six figures, and I didn’t even know it. That milestone was monumental, but it was just the beginning.

This success wasn’t accidental; it stemmed from a foundation of clear vision, a meaningful mission and defined goals.

When I set out to start Queenly Consulting, my vision was clear: I wanted to build a growth-oriented, impact-driven business that would empower other businesses to thrive. This vision was more than a motivator during those challenging early days; it was my anchor. Vision isn’t only about dreaming big—it’s about defining a destination so that even in the toughest moments, you remember what you’re striving for. A strong vision isn’t just inspiring; it’s grounding. It aligns every decision and keeps you resilient, no matter what challenges come your way.

This vision concept wasn’t new for me.

Almost 18 years ago, I was a high school dropout with a newborn. I lived with my mom in my grandfather’s house, and he told me I couldn’t raise a child in his house. He loved me and wanted better for me, and I understood his stance. In that moment, I knew my only choice was to succeed—for my son and, if I’m honest, to prove everyone wrong.

Those challenges, the failures, the heartbreaks, they taught me the importance of aligning my

**GOD WAS GOING TO MAKE THINGS SO UNCOMFORTABLE, I WOULD HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO MAKE A MOVE.**

actions with my dreams. Life, as we know, is never short of critics. But every challenge, every critical pass of judgment, was an opportunity to overcome, bringing me closer to the person I knew I could be.

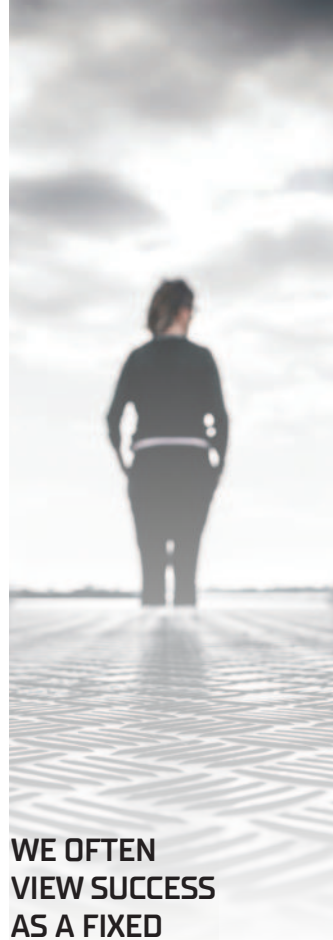
It was vision that kept me moving forward in the seasons of what was and what could be.

Your vision isn't just words on a website or a paragraph in a business plan; its elements are the compass points that guide you through inevitable rough patches. Vision is your "true north," keeping you focused and driven, even when obstacles feel overwhelming or the path seems unclear.

In April 2022, Queenly Consulting celebrated its first \$20,000 month—a milestone that symbolized the rewards of persistence and staying true to the vision. It reminded me that every hardship, every difficult moment, is temporary if you keep pushing. And that's a lesson for any entrepreneur: no lasting success is built overnight. In a world of instant gratification, it's easy to seek quick fixes and chase shiny things, but meaningful growth requires patience, sacrifice and a steadfast commitment to the journey.

This year has been a year of gifts, creativity and revelation. We launched the *Bossed Too Hard* podcast and The Business Growth Bootcamp.

Like many entrepreneurs, I jumped headfirst into business, only to realize I'd "bossed too hard" when the waters got way too deep, way too fast. And from what I've heard, I'm not alone in feeling that way. *Bossed Too Hard* is about normalizing the journey to success. There are so many steps, setbacks and hard lessons along



**WE OFTEN VIEW SUCCESS AS A FIXED DESTINATION, SOMETHING WE STRIVE TO REACH AT THE END OF OUR JOURNEY.**

the way. In a world where we often see only highlight reels, I wanted to create a space for real conversations about the entrepreneurial journey, featuring business owners at different stages.

As my business has grown, I've had the chance to step in as fractional marketing leadership for multiple organizations—a role I love. It's like being in corporate again, but on my own terms. However, as I grow, I want to make sure I continue serving from a place of

overflow. Scaling a one-on-one coaching program while also fulfilling fractional roles wasn't easy, so we launched a digital course, The Business Growth Bootcamp to create a financially accessible space where people can engage with the best I have to offer, no matter where they are on their journey.

Retainers and fractional leadership aren't accessible to every business owner, but both the podcast and Bootcamp allow me to support entrepreneurs in a way that encourages authentic conversations and sustainable growth at every stage.

As entrepreneurs, we often view success as a fixed destination, something we strive to reach at the end of our journey. However, the truth is that success is not merely a point on a map; it's an evolving journey

filled with lessons, growth and faith. Building Queenly Consulting has taught me that every setback can be a setup for a comeback, and every challenge presents a hidden opportunity for innovation and resilience.

This journey has underscored the importance of having a clear vision, a meaningful mission and actionable goals. Your vision serves as the beacon that guides you through the fog of uncertainty, illuminating your path forward. It defines what you aspire to achieve and shapes the essence of your business. Your mission is the heart of your operation, detailing how you will navigate the obstacles and complexities that arise as seasons change. It provides a framework for decision-making and ensures you remain aligned with your core values and life purpose. Finally, your goals translate that vision and mission into tangible steps, serving as guideposts that keep you on track as you move forward.

You don't have to be "qualified" to answer the call. You just need the willingness to step out in faith, embrace that God has a vision for your life, even when the path ahead seems unclear. Embracing your unique journey means recognizing that each experience, good or bad, contributes to your growth and understanding as an entrepreneur, business owner or organizational leader.

God can and will use it. ▣

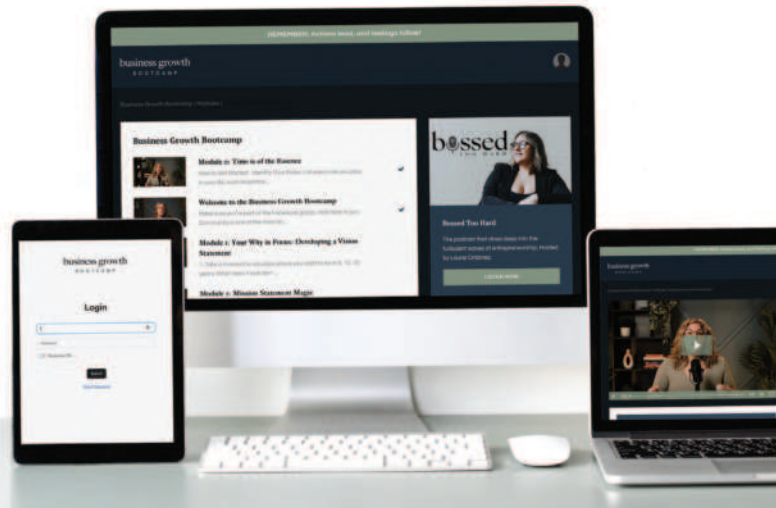


**LAUREL ORDONEZ** is a business growth strategist and entrepreneur with a background in hospitality, business development and digital marketing. She left her corporate position to pursue work-life integration that would allow her to show up powerfully for her family, clients and community. Through her experiences transitioning from a teen mom to a college student to a young professional to an executive, she understands the importance of mentorship and accountability in life's transitions. Her passion for encouraging and supporting the next generation of professionals in the workplace takes the forefront of all she does in her business and community. For more information on Laurel's work, visit [queenlyconsulting.co](http://queenlyconsulting.co).

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*Success doesn't happen by accident—it's built through purposeful action and strategy.*

The Business Growth Bootcamp is designed to empower entrepreneurs like you to grow with clarity, efficiency, and proven strategies. Whether you're just starting out or looking to break through to the next level, our 12-module course gives you the exact steps to grow, streamline, and create long-lasting impact.

”

“It was extremely helpful how she made the complicated items, simple. She cares about every single detail as much as we did, while always being there to offer additional tips and solutions for us to consider.”

*Kenneth Clark*

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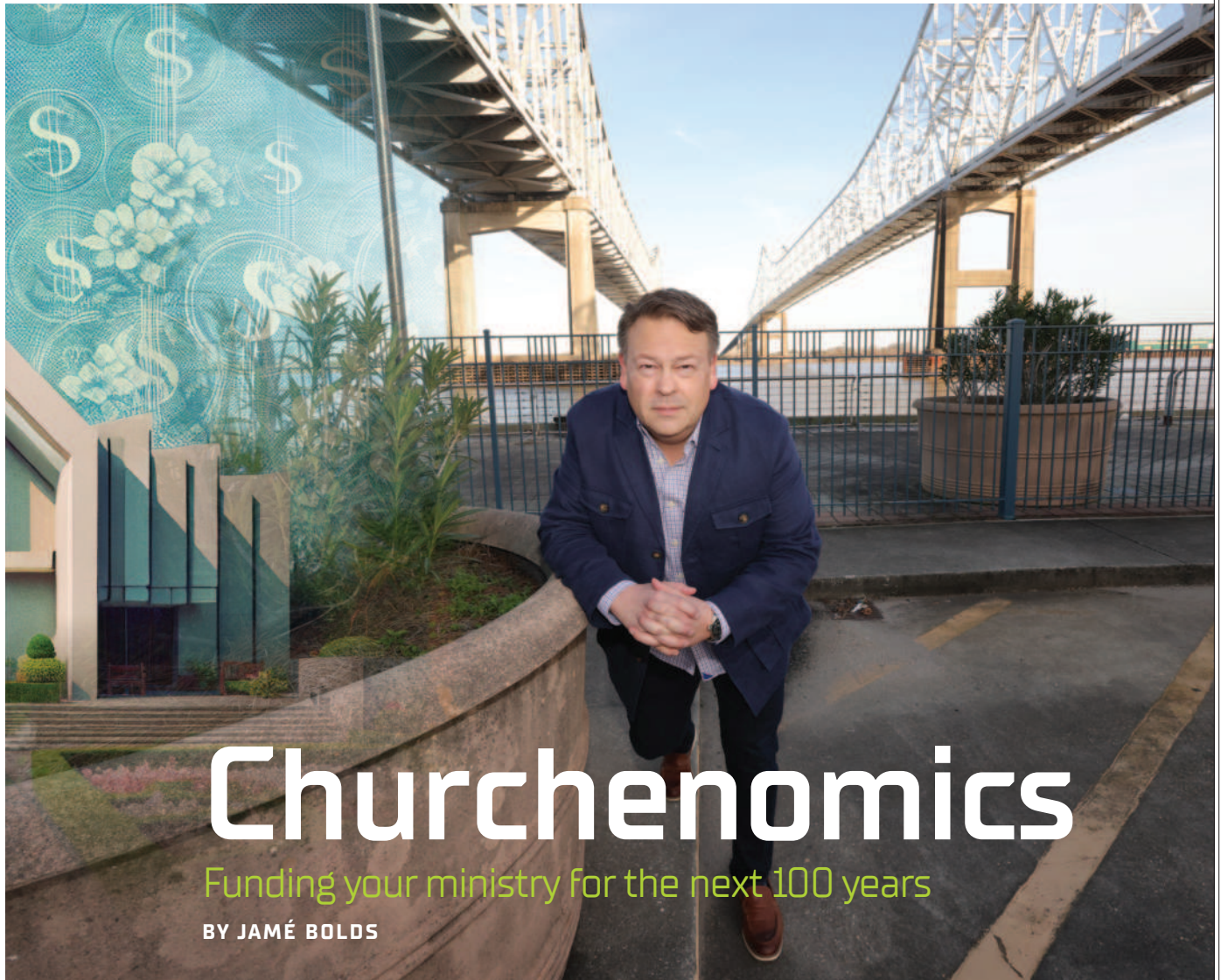
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# Churchonomics

Funding your ministry for the next 100 years

BY JAMÉ BOLDS

**T**he church in the next hundred years will be funded by solving a community problem and monetizing it. If your community prospers, you too will prosper (see Jeremiah 29:7).

I love working with pastors who are engaged in economic development. They are sharp, smart and creative. They push the bounds of what's possible. And they're, well, a bit eccentric. So, wait, some pastors understand economics? Sure.

Pastors are amazing. I've never met such talented leaders who give their life away. And you do it for no money. Pastoring is impossible. I get it. I'm a pastor, I'm in the game with you. I'm serious about the money; you are woefully underpaid, which brings me to my second discipline, which is economics.

I know that's a strange combination. Who loves pastors and economics? So many coaches, consultants and denominational leaders talk about leadership, and yet very few address the economic realities we as pastors face. And when we do talk about

economics, it's usually some form of, "How do you get more people to tithe in your church?" Well, that's not economics. That's charitable giving. And at worst, it's pleading out of guilt.

Money is tight, and no one talks about it other than saying, "Go to the congregation for an ask." As a pastor, I started to apply some economic modeling to church life and developed other revenue streams while solving community problems. The result was we relieved the pressure of the offering plate and created a church that's not solely funded by Sunday morning offerings.

After some poking and prodding and real reluctance, I helped start a venture philanthropic foundation to help churches do the same. We use the financial and academic rigor of venture capital and apply it to philanthropy.<sup>1</sup> We engage in some limited advising and then reinvest revenue into catalytic grants for churches and ministries that are socially and economically embedded in their community.

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### WHAT IS ECONOMICS?

Economics is intense. It's "mathy." It's a social science, but its moral framework must be calibrated theologically or else it's exploitative. What is economics? At the American Economic Association, we define it simply as "the study of scarcity."<sup>2</sup> At the foundation, we like to say, "Economics is the study of collective human behavior, measured in empirical data."<sup>3</sup> Economics is about as broad a discipline as theology: it's ancient, it's about people, the literature is wide, there are a lot of intense beliefs and it creates converts.

### 7 REALITIES OF 'CHURCH-ENOMICS'

At the foundation, we talk about the integration of theology and economics as "churchemomics."<sup>4</sup> Churchemomics is a long-game strategy that positions your church to be integrated and embedded into the social and economic fabric of your community. It identifies problems in your community that only your church can solve while simultaneously generating income so that you can do church and community-based ministry.<sup>5</sup>

**Reality 1: There is no rescue.** Kurt Lange, a pastor we work with on Boston's North Shore, is famous for saying, "No one's coming to rescue you." He's right. There's no \$1 million gift. An MBA is not working for free. There is no financial silver bullet. Money is made over time. If there's a church that's going to heal a community, it's you. It's time to get financially literate, create and leverage capital and, yes, finally pay yourself what you are worth. And if you have a financial miracle, just note it's a miracle. It doesn't happen to everybody, and it's God's grace on your ministry.



### WE RELIEVED THE PRESSURE OF THE OFFERING PLATE AND CREATED A CHURCH THAT'S NOT SOLELY FUNDED BY SUNDAY MORNING OFFERINGS.

**Reality 2: The tithe is slowing down.** Tithing is slowing. I hear you reply, "Our giving is up by 20%." "We are debt-free." "We have money in the bank." All of that may be true. Now. It's true *now*. Accounting is based on one simple principle—a snapshot in time. Your financial documents are all a picture in time. Financially, you're doing well *now*.

The reality is 55- to 65-year-old tithers currently fund our churches.<sup>6</sup> As the baby boomers graduate to heaven, so does your funding. Yet if you could dream with me, it is possible to structure your church so that tithing funds are allocated toward people's lives and not overhead or fixed cost structures. Tithing should fund people's needs, not the light bill.

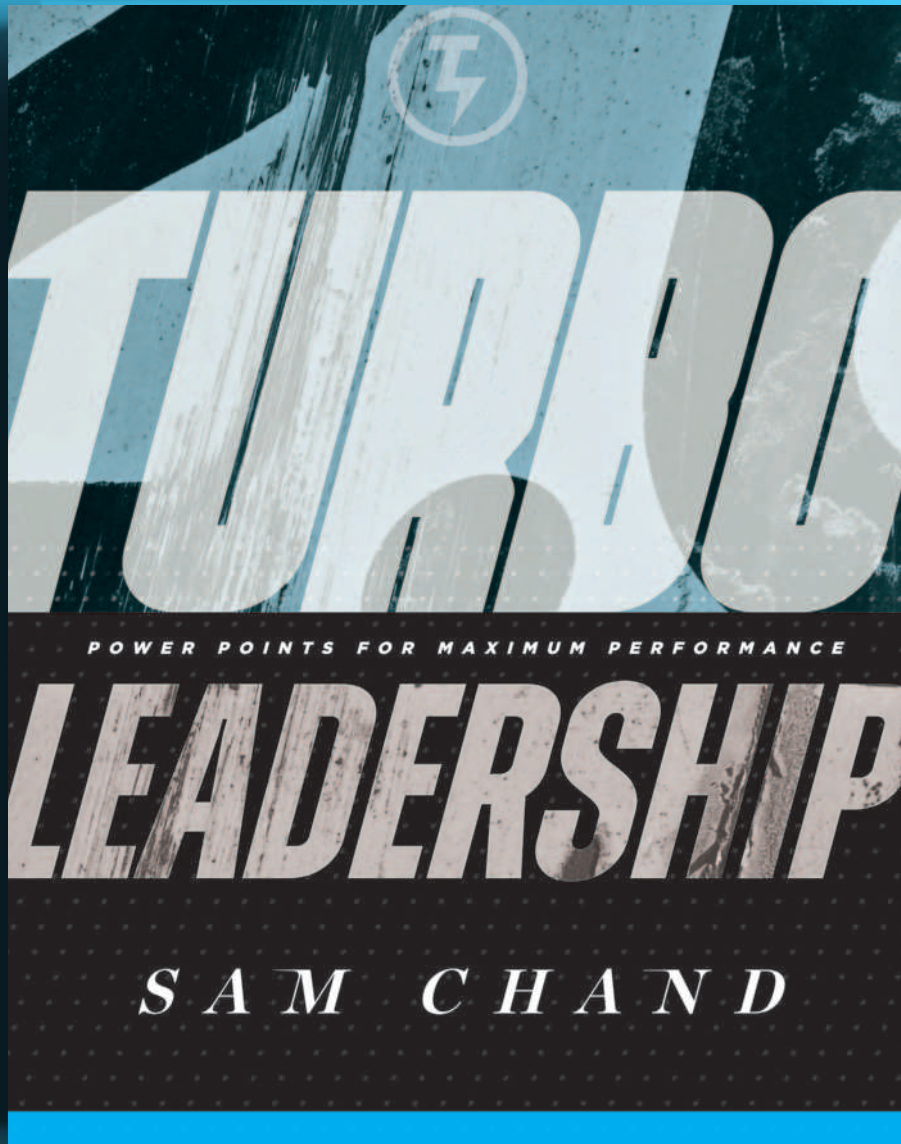
**Reality 3: Seek the peace of the city.** Churches are *in* a community but need to *be* the

community. Pastors and church boards are slowly coming to the reality that we've built a church for ourselves and not for the community. The adage of "If your church closed would anyone in the community miss it?" is truer today in a secularized culture. We need to start thinking about pastoring the city rather than just pastoring the church.

This means being an active member and contributor to the social and economic fabric of your city. Think about workplace visits (go to work with your people), grant funding, community boards, youth sports and other ways you can be embedded. This is the seed for your church to start a social ministry that is sustainable and creates economic engines that can drive church life.

**Reality 4: Church as an economic actor.** Here's a stretch

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*“Leadership is not a role. It is not something you do. It’s a responsibility related to who you are.”*

—SAM CHAND



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Jamé Bolds (CEO), Crystal Agnew (COO) and Charlie Self (CIO) lead Pathmakers Foundation, a venture philanthropic foundation that helps leaders develop self-funded organizations.

in your thinking: your church is an economic actor in the community. In other words, your church creates economic value in a community. When people come to church on a Sunday and they leave, they go get gas in their car, eat lunch in a restaurant and go to the grocery store. What happens as a result is called “an economic halo effect.”

Research shows that organizations with more than \$400,000 in revenue and five employees create a 3x multiplier in the economy of scale, putting \$1.2 million into a community.<sup>7</sup> A Philadelphia study noted that the average congregation contributed about \$1.7 million to the local economy.<sup>8</sup>

**Reality 5: Church as a problem solver.** Your church is uniquely positioned to be a problem solver—you just don’t know it. Your church can

**MOST CHURCHES ARE STRUCTURED LIKE LEMONADE STANDS—THEY ARE CASH-BASED. WHAT COMES IN IS WHAT GOES OUT.**

simultaneously solve a problem and be monetized. Think about it this way: you can “do good” and “do well” at the same time. Are you a church for Sunday or a church for Monday?

Your direct involvement in community development creates the credentials and concrete work for you to invite people on Sunday morning. Churches can lease land, or they can establish for-profit businesses (of course, you’ll pay taxes), daycares, after-school programs, business incubators, youth empowerment programs and so on. Whatever your church has, begin to leverage it.

**Reality 6: Build a fireplace for the fire!** Most churches are not structured to reach outside the four walls. Every church needs a separate 501(c)(3) community development corporation and an LLC. Our foundation does this all over the

country. But first, our pastors need to have the town wired.

In other words, who is doing what in town? Who is your city manager? Who takes care of zoning? Who’s winning grant money for youth empowerment?

You start toward solving a problem, and money will follow it. Start to interview local accounting and law firms who can help you with your corporate structure. This will create a blueprint for how to structure your 501(c)(3)s, establish endowments, create drop-down LLCs, design separate financials and create inter-organizational lease agreements that self-fund each other.

**Reality 7: Play the long game.** Now that the fireplace has been built, it’s time to light a fire. Most churches are structured like lemonade stands—they are cash-based. What comes in is what goes out. At the foundation, we like to challenge churches to think about the economic long game.

The first thing we do is advise churches to establish an endowment. What’s an endowment? It is like a 401(k) for the church so the church never runs out of money. It is the primary wealth-building economic engine that drives the 100-year funding cycle for a church. When one of your members passes away, they can leave you stocks, bonds, property and other assets.

Over time, interest grows, and you can use that interest to pay for the church’s mortgage, the ministry budget, pastor’s salary or whatever the church deems necessary. One of our churches is planning to dedicate the interest earned from their endowment to funding campus expansion.

# FOLLOW THE LEADER



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## THE MINISTRY OF ECONOMICS

The reality is you can't do ministry if you can't pay the bills. God's unique economy for the church is for its people to tithe. No question. Yet tithing can no longer be the only source of income for the church. Once we understand the church is an economic actor, then it's free to participate in the economics of the community.

Across the country, we have discovered urban churches that are leveraging economic insights and business acumen to pull off the impossible. Once you see the structure of the church as a corporation, then you can treat it as such and leverage the goods and services within your congregation to heal your community.

This simply isn't pie-in-the-sky, academic way of thinking. We're doing it. We are continually learning, growing and being challenged by the dynamic economic thinking leaders that we serve.

- We have structured urban churches with hydroponic vegetable gardens that sell the produce to the local grocery store.
- We facilitated a church to set up two homeowners associations for low-income housing.
- We partner with churches that have federal and state grants that pay for employees for church-owned coffee shops.
- We work with a church network that has a multi-staff counseling practice that cares for a community that's continually retraumatized.



**JAMÉ BOLDS** is a Ph.D. candidate (University of Stellenbosch, South Africa), an economic theologian and CEO of the Pathmakers Foundation, ([pathmakersfnd.org](http://pathmakersfnd.org)), a venture philanthropic foundation, that discovers, funds and walks with leaders in strategic and marginalized communities. As lead pastor of Victory Church (Yorktown, Virginia), he led a five-year, \$4.5 million revitalization and developed a self-funded economic model for "a church, in a park, in a city" not reliant on Sunday morning offerings. He is the co-author of *Life in 5D: A Vision for Discipleship* and a member of the Society of Pentecostal Studies and the American Economic Association.

—

**ONCE WE UNDERSTAND THE CHURCH IS AN ECONOMIC ACTOR, THEN IT'S FREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ECONOMICS OF THE COMMUNITY.**

—



- We recently leveraged a catalytic grant into a church-owned food bank which was then able to pull down a larger operational grant from the citywide food bank.

Economics is not simply about money. It's about positioning the church to be a catalyst for social change while simultaneously funding the ministry for the next hundred years. ▣

#### NOTES:

1. "How venture philanthropy works and its role in effective charity." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, January 29, 2020. [https://ssir.org/podcasts/entry/how\\_venture\\_philanthropy\\_works\\_and\\_its\\_role\\_in\\_effective\\_charity](https://ssir.org/podcasts/entry/how_venture_philanthropy_works_and_its_role_in_effective_charity)
2. "What is Economics?: Understanding the Discipline." American Economic Association. <https://www.aeaweb.org/resources/students/what-is-economics>
3. James B. Boldt, "The Church as a Market Participant: An Examination of Grounded

Theory in Economic Theology & Practice." 2024 Oxford Colloquy, New College, University of Oxford.

4. I coined the word Churchonomics as a communication tool even though its intellectual genesis comes from a subset of practical theology called economic theology.

5. James B. Boldt, *The Spirit's Halo Effect: Toward a Pentecostal Theopraxis for Economic Development*. Ph.D. dissertation, Universiteit Stellenbosch, South Africa, 2025.

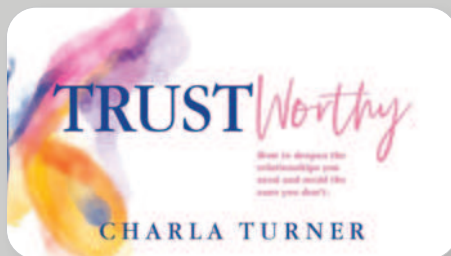
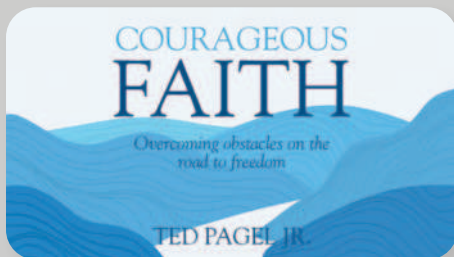
6. "The Definitive Guide to Churchgoer Giving: Key trends in online giving, attendance and engagement," <https://www.vancopayments.com/egiving/asset-the-definitive-churchgoer-giving-study>

7. Local Productivity Spillovers, Baum-Snow, Gendron-Carrier, and Pavan. *American Economic Review* 2024, 114(4): 1030-1069

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# FAITH-FUELED LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

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# Feeding the Soul

BY THANDO SIBANDA

Exploring the spiritual and physical benefits of long-term fasting

**F**asting is more than just abstaining from food; it's an invitation—a sacred, transformative journey where your spiritual life, mental resilience and physical body are intertwined in surrender and renewal. The journey of fasting is a time to reset—not just physically, but spiritually and emotionally.

Fasting's significance goes beyond the physical act; its outcomes are deeply spiritual. In Isaiah 58, the prophet reveals God's heart for fasting: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?" (Isaiah 58:6)

Isaiah underscores that fasting, when approached with the right heart, brings about justice, freedom and healing. It is a spiritual tool that God uses to initiate transformation in both our lives and the world around us. Fasting is not just about personal piety—it's about partnering with God in His redemptive work.

This is why fasting often precedes great moves of God. Before the walls of Jericho fell, Joshua and the Israelites consecrated themselves (Joshua 3:5). Before the disciples received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they spent time in prayer and fasting (Acts 1:14). And before Paul and Barnabas were sent out on their missionary journey, the church in Antioch fasted and prayed (Acts 13:2-3).

Fasting prepares our hearts for what God is about to do. It creates an atmosphere of expectation, where we are more attuned to God's voice and open to His leading. As you consider embarking on a fast of any length, remember that you are

engaging in a practice that has shaped history. You are stepping into a sacred tradition that holds the power to bring about profound change.

#### THE SCIENCE OF FASTING

Fasting is a journey of faith, but it's also a journey through your own physical biology, with a process more profound than we often realize. You see, while the spiritual benefits of fasting are immense, the physical benefits are equally remarkable—and understanding them will help you appreciate this practice even more.

When you fast, your body enters a unique state of renewal, where it begins to heal, repair and regenerate. Let's take this journey one step at a time, beginning with what's happening inside your body as you fast.

Fasting initiates a biological process called autophagy—a kind of cellular cleanup crew that springs into action when your body goes without food for a certain period of time. Think of it as a deep clean for your cells. Damaged cells, old proteins and other debris get swept away, making room for fresh, healthy cells.

But that's not all. Fasting also balances your blood sugar and increases insulin sensitivity, which is crucial for maintaining energy and preventing long-term health issues. As you fast, your body switches from burning glucose (sugar) for energy to burning fat—this is called ketosis. When your body enters ketosis, you start producing ketones, which fuel your brain with a cleaner, more efficient source of energy. This results in sharper focus, better mental clarity and a feeling of heightened awareness.

Moreover, fasting lowers

inflammation—one of the key contributors to chronic conditions like heart disease, diabetes and arthritis. By reducing these inflammatory markers, your body heals in ways that extend far beyond the visible. Fasting isn't just about what you stop doing (eating); it's about how your body transforms in response.

#### THE BENEFITS OF FASTING

While your body adjusts to fasting, there are changes happening in your mind and emotions, too. It's normal to feel hunger, irritability or fatigue in the beginning. But these are temporary discomforts, like a fog that lifts. Once your body adjusts, you'll find greater mental clarity, emotional stability and a renewed sense of calm.

Scientific studies have shown that fasting boosts the production of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a protein that promotes the growth and survival of neurons. Higher levels of BDNF have been linked to improved mood, enhanced memory and a lower risk of anxiety and depression. In other words, fasting can act as a reset for your brain, supporting your mental health and boosting your emotional well-being.

But the mental benefits go even deeper. Fasting removes one of life's greatest distractions—food—giving your mind the freedom to focus more fully on spiritual matters. Without the interruptions of eating and digestion, many find their prayers more focused, their meditation more profound and their connection with God more tangible. The longer you fast, the more you'll notice a heightened sense of awareness, like the veil between you and the

**FASTING'S SIGNIFICANCE GOES BEYOND THE PHYSICAL ACT; ITS OUTCOMES ARE DEEPLY SPIRITUAL.**

spiritual world is thinner.


You might be wondering—what does all this science have to do with the spiritual side of fasting? Actually, they are deeply connected. The Bible tells us that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). When we fast, we're not only caring for our spiritual well-being, but we're tending to the very temple where God dwells. The physical benefits of fasting—cellular repair, mental clarity, reduced inflammation—are all part of God's incredible design for our holistic health.

The healing happening in your body mirrors the spiritual cleansing and renewal God desires for your soul. Just as fasting removes toxins from your cells, it also removes spiritual and emotional toxins, clearing the way for God to work more deeply in your life. This journey of fasting is a reminder that God cares about every part of us—body, mind and spirit. When you fast, you're not just depriving yourself of food; you're creating space for God to nourish you in ways you may never have imagined.

### PREPARING FOR YOUR FAST

Before you begin your fast, take a moment to reflect. What is God calling you to focus on during this time? Are you seeking deeper intimacy with Him? Do you need clarity or breakthrough in a specific area? Are you fasting for healing, guidance, or transformation? Whatever it is, take some time to pray and ask God to reveal His purposes for your fast. Write them down in a journal or on a piece of paper that you can return to when you need encouragement along the way.

Fasting, especially for extended



**WHEN YOU  
FAST ...  
YOU'RE  
CREATING  
SPACE FOR  
GOD TO  
NOURISH  
YOU.**

periods, can be a challenge for your body if you are not used to it, but with the right preparation and direction, you can ease the transition. In the days leading up to your fast, begin cutting back on sugar, caffeine and processed foods to reduce withdrawal symptoms.

Drink plenty of water and keep yourself hydrated before, during, and after the fast. Hydration is key to keeping your energy levels up and supporting your body's detoxification process. Remember to be kind to yourself. You're not fasting to punish your body, but to bring it into alignment with your spirit. Gentle exercise like walking or stretching is great for keeping your body moving without overtaxing your energy reserves. The goal is to support your physical body while focusing on your spiritual journey.

Lastly, take time to prepare your spirit. Spend time in prayer, asking God to guide you, sustain you and strengthen you for the journey ahead. Remember that fasting is not about earning God's favor—it's about drawing closer to Him. Incorporate other spiritual practices into your routine, such as longer periods of prayer, reading scripture and moments of stillness.

Before embarking on a fast, it's essential to prepare yourself both spiritually and practically. Fasting can be a profound spiritual experience, but it also requires careful attention to your physical well-being. The tools you'll need for this fast will help you monitor your health, create a space for spiritual growth and maintain focus

throughout the journey. Here is a list of recommended items to equip yourself with before you begin your fast:

It's a good idea to stock up on water and other essentials before starting, particularly if you plan on retreating or limiting movement during your fast. Measure your vitals daily and keep a log of your progress. You can also keep track of this process on the Fasting Companion app, downloadable from the Google Play Store and the Apple Store.

### EMBRACING THE JOURNEY

A fast can have ups and downs. But through it all, remember that fasting is not about achieving perfection—it's about surrendering to God's process of renewal. Some days will feel easy, while others may challenge you. But in both, God is working, drawing you closer to Him.

Remember that the physical, mental and spiritual benefits of fasting are deeply connected, and you're about to experience a powerful transformation that will impact every part of your life. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, knowing that He will sustain you through each step of this journey.

This is a path worth walking, and I'm honored to walk it with you. ▣

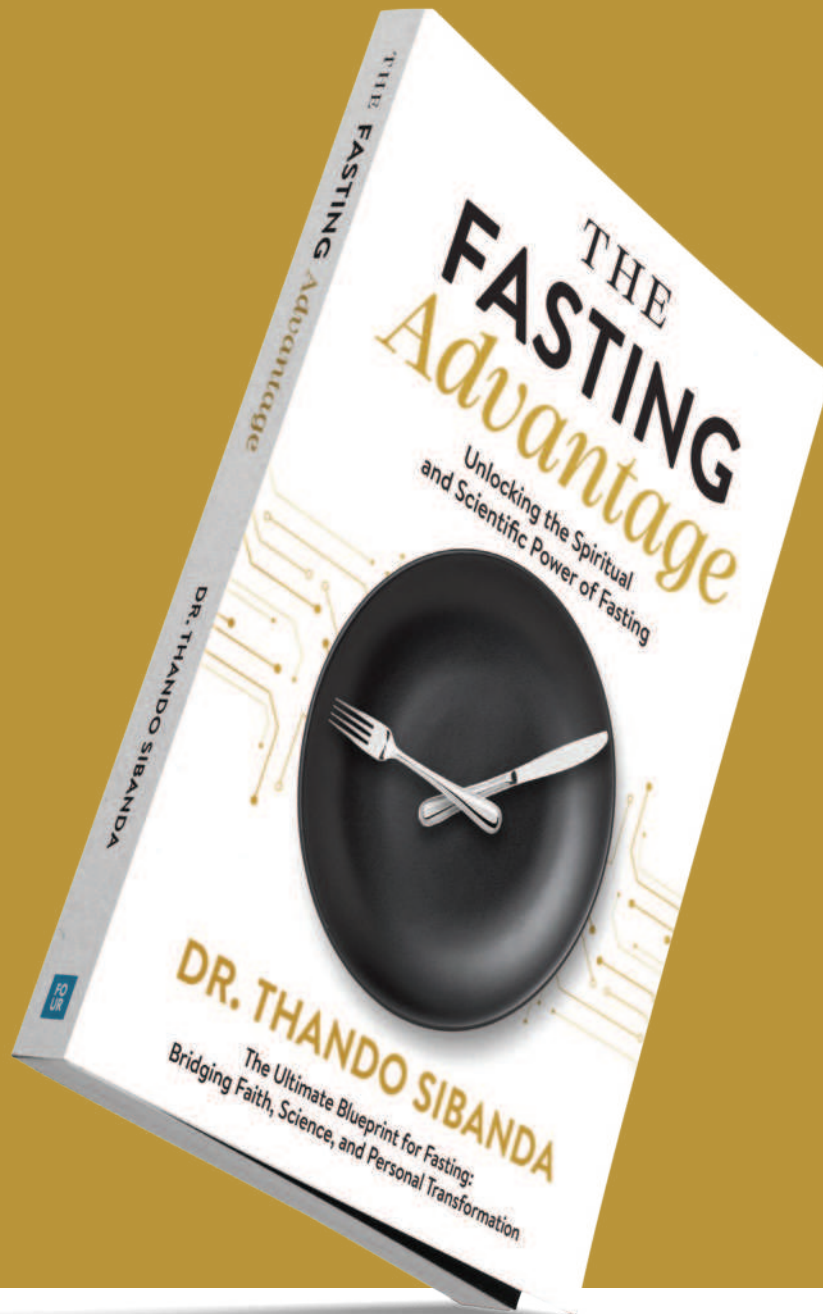
***END NOTE:** If you are on prescription medication or pregnant, please consult a physician before engaging in a long fasting protocol such as a 21-day fast.*



**DR. THANDO SIBANDA** is a pastor, executive coach, speaker and leadership consultant, deeply passionate about spiritual formation, leadership, strategy and equipping the body of Christ to fully manifest the kingdom of God on earth. He holds a Ph.D. in leadership and management and is certified in neuroscience and coaching, which allows him to blend cutting-edge research with practical insights. His latest book, *The Fasting Companion*, draws from his extensive experience with fasting and prayer, providing a practical guide to deepen one's spiritual walk and cultivate a closer relationship with God. Dr. Thando Sibanda lives and travels out of Dallas, Texas.

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we declare that  
our need for  
God is greater  
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# The Great Rescue

Why reviving sick churches is just as important as planting new ones

BY JEFF BAKER



**S**it back, grab a cup of coffee and get comfortable while

I tell you a story from 3,000-plus years ago that resembles the current state of the American church. This story starts shortly after Saul became king of Israel and is found in 1 Samuel 11. Before you continue with this article, take a moment and read verses one through nine to grasp the picture I want to paint for you.

It was a typical day in the town of Jabesh. The sun was shining, the birds were chirping and the people were happy and carefree. Suddenly, their worst nightmare approached like a cloud of darkness, and they found themselves surrounded by the army of Nahash the Ammonite. He was a vicious enemy with brutal techniques of oppression and slavery. His signature act was to gouge out the right eye of his victims to demoralize, disgrace and leave them defenseless as slaves in his ever-growing evil expansion.

Why would he gouge out the right eye? In those days, armies would fight face-to-face with swords and shields. Warriors were predominantly right-handed, so shields were held in their left hands, protecting their hearts, lungs and bowels, while their right hands were free to strike with the sword. If a warrior didn't have a right eye, then he would be forced to slide the shield to the left, exposing his vitals and leaving him vulnerable to a severe wound that could end his life. The army whose soldiers weren't able to defend their vitals would be the army that fell victim to defeat.

So Nahash was removing the

ability of his victims to protect themselves and fight back. He was taking away their will to dream and relegating them to complete submission to him. He offered to spare their lives, but from then on, they would live demoralized and powerless.

The people of Jabesh negotiated with the enemy and begged for mercy. They asked if they could send for help and see if anyone would come to their rescue. Nahash, being prideful and arrogant, agreed. Some of the messengers traveled to Gibeah, where King Saul lived. They shared their plight, and the people fell to the ground, weeping in fear and turmoil.

"The enemy has surrounded us and is threatening to take the right eye of every man, woman and child," you can almost hear the messengers from Jabesh say. "There is no hope; run for your lives. He's coming for you next."

When King Saul returned from the fields with his oxen and heard this desperate and hopeless message, a wave of righteous anger came over him, and he said, "Not on my watch!" He took his sword and violently cut his oxen into small pieces as a sacrifice for the cause. He then gave those pieces to new messengers and sent them into the surrounding towns to gather all the fighting men.

Saul realized that if this was the message that had come to his village, then it had also gone to other towns. If this were the case, the people of Jabesh were stranded, defenseless and at the enemy's mercy. So, he was saying to neighboring villages, "If you don't join me in battle, I will come to your town and cut up your oxen like I sacrificed my own!"

A few days later, 330,000 fighting men gathered for battle to save the people of Jabesh. Saul sent the old messengers back to the people of Jabesh with a new message: "We will rescue you by noon tomorrow." As can be expected, the response on the part of Jabesh was "great joy in the city."

Let me explain how this story corresponds to the local church in America today. I have always felt like the town of Jabesh represents the local church, surrounded by the enemy. This has taken place over an extended period of time, during which we have let our guard down, stopped preparing for spiritual battle and grown comfortable in our so-called Christian nation.

When you're surrounded, there is no life going in and no life coming out. We see this in America: fewer than 10% of churches are growing numerically. Somewhere, we let our guard down, we got comfortable and we forgot there is an enemy who wants to kill, steal and destroy.

We have an enemy like Nahash who desires to gouge out the right eye of the local church and take away its spiritual fight, leaving it powerless to offer a message of hope and good news. We are watching this happen in America during our lifetime as more churches close than are opening—to the tune of nearly 200 every week. It would seem the right eye of many churches has been gouged out.

The message of the local church has been diminished and is becoming irrelevant, offering no hope—the one thing that attracts the lost to the good news. Meanwhile, 3,500 people

**YES, WE  
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are walking away from practicing faith daily in America. The local church is in trouble.

But there is still hope!

Just like King Saul, we are called by Jesus to step up and sacrifice what we have, with righteous anger, and say, “Not on my watch!” We are called to rally healthy churches to empower, coach and resource churches that are ready to close their doors because they are stuck, defeated and demoralized. There is a spiritual war against an enemy who doesn’t want to see local churches thrive and give their communities hope. He surrounds many churches to the point at which no salvations are coming in, and no life-giving hope is going out.

I say enough is enough! It’s time for spiritual leaders who love Jesus and believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to stand up and once again speak with boldness as Saul did, “By noon tomorrow, we will rescue you!” It’s time for life-giving church leaders to join forces and rescue the American church before it’s too late. It’s time to push back the enemy and restore life to the struggling church.

These are the facts: in many places, crime is at an all-time high and murder has skyrocketed. Hate has saturated our nation, and division seems insurmountable. Divorce taints generations, and Americans see little to no value in the message of Jesus. If we’re honest, we’ll realize that we have allowed this to happen.

Every time a church closes, America gets darker. All the while, the local church is God’s answer for sharing the light of the good news. When the local church closes its doors, the light stops shining, and people are left to



**WHEN THE CHURCH IS RESCUED, PEOPLE ARE RESCUED.**

chase their desires. Does this sound familiar? Does this sound like the world in which we are currently living?

There is a better way. There is a solution. Yes, we need to plant more life-giving churches, but we also need to double down on rescuing the churches we have before their light goes out.

I recently had the privilege to come alongside a pastor who moved his family from Florida to Willard, Ohio, after being elected to a small rural church with only 15 people. Pastor Mike knew he needed help—someone farther down the road of ministry to share what he had. I had one simple agenda: to see Mike get the support and resources he needed to keep the church from closing and see it become a shining beacon of light in the community once again.

It is rewarding to say that, after some coaching, support, friendship and resources, the church Mike leads is thriving! They are seeing new people walk through the doors to find Jesus and get baptized. Mike now has

the support and relationships needed to be a healthy pastor and the tools needed to dream a big vision for the community. Willard, Ohio, is getting a little brighter each and every Sunday. Joy is coming back to the city!

America has thousands of churches like Mike’s church in Willard, Ohio—and one is near you. To save our nation, we need spiritual leaders who will step up with righteous anger and declare in their hearts, “Not on my watch!” America can be saved, and the answer is in the local church.

Like King Saul, catch God’s heart for the struggling church and step into the solution. Everyone has something to give. Sacrifice your experience, talents, resources and time to see the bride of Christ, the local church, shine bright all over our nation. When the church is rescued, people are rescued. Let’s save America, one rescued church at a time! ▀



**JEFF BAKER** is the executive director of Church Boom, a ministry focused on rescuing churches and coaching pastors. He also serves as the lead pastor of New Life Church in Nebraska. New Life is a growing church consisting of five campuses. Jeff has traveled to over 50 countries, speaking to pastors and sharing the good news of Jesus. He’s been married to his wife, Kim, for 37 years. They have four children and 11 grandchildren. He’s a pilot and a thrill seeker who loves playing ice hockey, flying his airplane, hiking mountains and drinking espresso.

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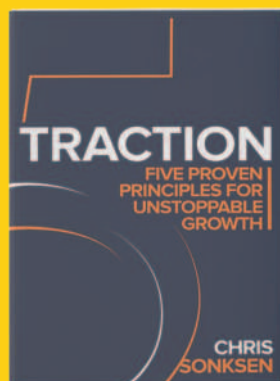
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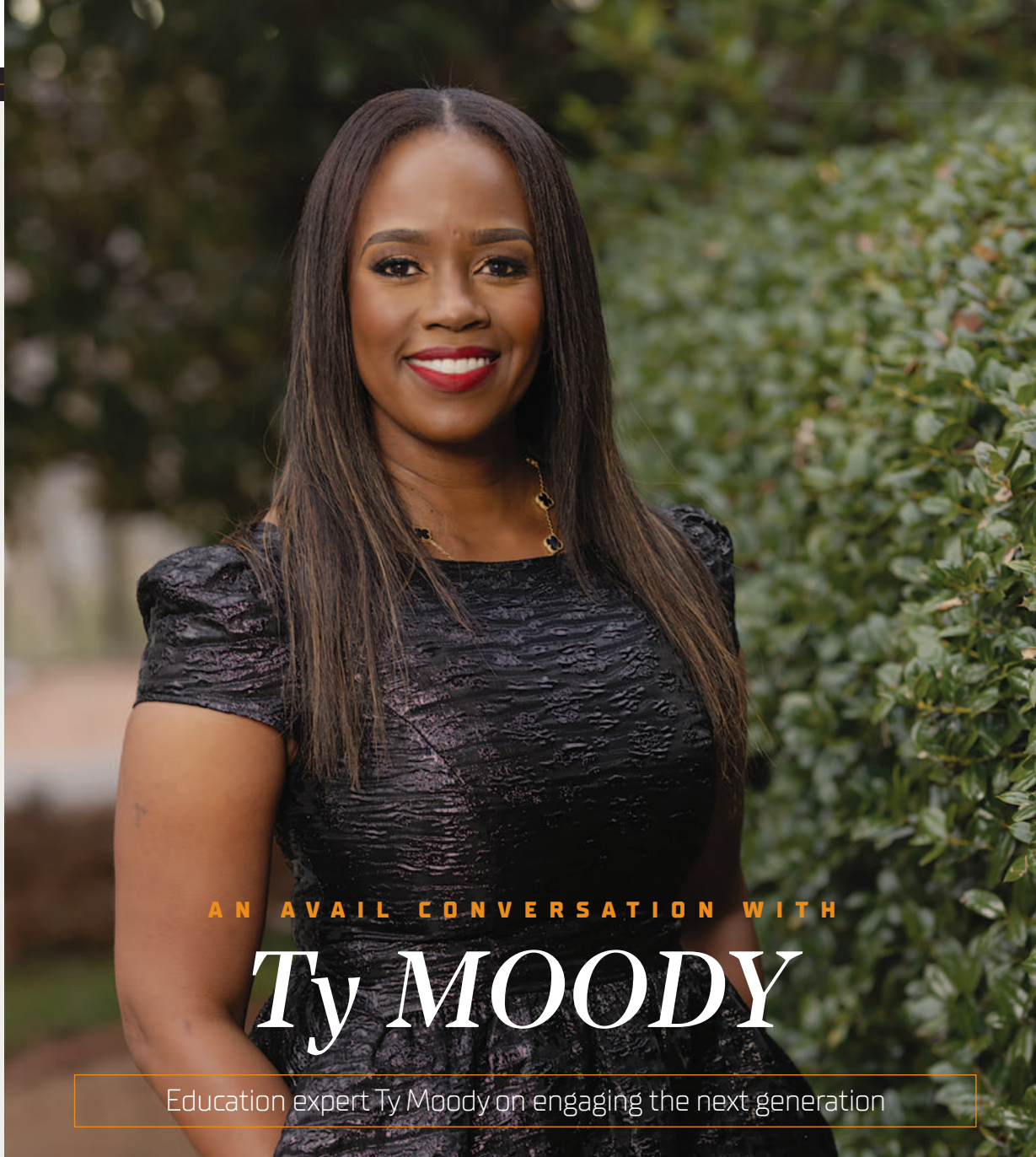
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AN AVAIL CONVERSATION WITH

# Ty MOODY

Education expert Ty Moody on engaging the next generation

**I**n March 2006, Van and Ty Moody, along with 18 believers, planted The Worship Center in a small, rented banquet hall in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. The multicultural ministry grew quickly and has launched additional campuses throughout Alabama.

Born in Detroit, Michigan, Ty Moody earned a doctorate in education in 2008 and has an extensive background in community leadership, elementary education,

educational leadership and instructional reading for grades K-12. She is also the director of next generation ministries at The Worship Center, and in 2015 she launched Einstein's Playground, a daycare and pre-K that operates out of several of the church's sites.

AVAIL media host Virgil Sierra recently sat down with Dr. Ty to discuss her leadership journey and some of the challenges and opportunities the church faces in engaging and developing the next generation.



**VIRGIL SIERRA,**  
AVAIL MEDIA HOST



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**AVAIL:** Can you tell us a little about your leadership journey and how you ended up taking on leadership of the next gen ministry at The Worship Center?

**TY MOODY:** I always saw myself as a leader, but in education, not in ministry—knowing I was supposed to marry them all, but not knowing what that was going to look like. So, the beauty in my walk and my journey is I did not have a list of expectations I was walking into when we started our ministry. I did not have another first lady's shoes to walk in. My husband allowed me to slowly become comfortable in what God had called me to, not feeling like I had to compete with my husband and his role. We are a team, and my role—even when I was a stay-at-home mom—was just as vitally important as it was for him. And then God began stretching me and asking me and calling me to do more. I used to say I was comfortably uncomfortable in the things God called me to. I learned to say yes and be open, not always knowing how it was going to get done.

**AVAIL:** Tell us a little about your passion for educating the next generation.

**TM:** One of the things that I always knew I was called to was education. But what that looked like, I wasn't quite sure except, naturally, to go to school to be a teacher, which I did at the University of Florida (go, Gators!) I had a great experience there, but what I learned later on in life was my true purpose, and that was to help marry the church, the community and the school. I was passionate about the community and parental

—  
**“OUR KIDS WILL TELL YOU IF YOU'RE OPEN TO LISTEN . . . BUT THEY DON'T WANT TO HEAR FROM SOMEBODY THEY CAN'T RELATE TO.”**  
 —

involvement and knew that was what was needed for success. So, I knew education was “it,” but I knew God and His Word were so much more powerful in that process.

Once I married my husband and knew what we were called to do—to build a ministry—it all made sense and led to starting Einstein's Playground. I knew that in one's early childhood, that's the time in which you grow most. The first five years of an individual's life are the most growth in their brain. For us to be a part of the lifeline and the story of a child so early—not only academically, but spiritually—was just a powerful and purposeful opportunity.

For us it just seemed like it fit what God called us to, ultimately: making sure young adults and children are academically prepared for the future, not only in school, but in life, to be productive citizens of this world. So, I'm just grateful that God was able to give me that clearly—not giving it to me up-front—but just showing me, as I lived each day, how that was going to unfold.

**AVAIL:** You're overseeing everything that has to do with the next generation, from the babies to the youth and the young adults. What are you seeing as some of the outstanding challenges that the next generation is facing?

**TM:** There are a lot of our next generation that are just leaving the church. There's nothing relevant for them there. So, it is finding creative ways to be relevant for them. The biggest thing for us is being relevant,

but still being true to the Word of God. They have needs, and these days not only are they leaving church, but those who come to church don't come consistently. We have learned that building relationships is the best way to do that. I'm fortunate to have a great team that's open and willing to do different things, to pivot and not dig in our heels.

There are a lot of things that our children are facing today that, to be honest, I don't think I've ever experienced. Ever. I don't quite understand all of the nuances, but I'm open and willing to ask those questions of them, such as, “What would you want to see? What would make your friends want to come? Why won't they come? What would help you?” Ask them questions, and be willing to pivot your programming to what they want and not just what makes you feel comfortable.

You can't expect them to come to you because you have this great speaker or you're giving away money. You can have programs, give away shoes, give away gift cards, have great speakers, have DJs, have parties—and it's crickets.

Our kids are so involved in so many different things. We as an organization have to be OK with that. We need to go to them. We need to go to the game, go to their football games, go to hangout spaces where they are and don't expect them to come into the church. Once you build relationships with them, then they may come to the church because they know you.

**AVAIL:** I think there are probably people who are maybe in that season of their journey where they're thinking, *What if we opened up a school, a preschool, a daycare?* They may be looking for a bit of insight, since you're almost eight years in. What do you wish you would've known before that would've made a big difference?

**TM:** I think ultimately knowing what you're called to helps the process. It helps those hard times, when it's challenging. For us in the state of Alabama, it was all of the nuances and the state regulations and rules. Those were the areas I was not aware of—the health department, the state department, having all the boxes checked. Then there was all of the federal funding and grant opportunities I wish I would've known about on the front end. Even now, I wish I knew more about fundraising and was comfortable asking people for money. As a church, you don't ever want to ask for money, but when it comes to education and the lives of our children, it's a little bit different. And it was challenging for me to pivot from that.

**AVAIL:** What should we look for in leaders who want to help us lead our next gen?

**TM:** They have to be teachable, flexible and open. Our kids will tell you if you're open to listen, but they're not going to like it if you talk at the students versus allowing the students to help lead the conversation. They don't want to hear from



**“ASK THEM QUESTIONS, AND BE WILLING TO PIVOT YOUR PROGRAMMING TO WHAT THEY WANT AND NOT JUST WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE.”**

somebody they can't relate to. They would rather hear from somebody who is a peer—a little older than them, who we have discipled. We recently had to hire a new next gen pastor. That was a challenge going through, but one of the things that I wanted to be clear on is that I wanted someone who would not just look cool and look like their age. We don't want somebody to age out in 10 years because they don't wear the skinny jeans and ripped jeans anymore. I want somebody who is willing to be open and shift and pivot and be mature enough spiritually to be able to still be there for the next gen in 10 to 20 years. ▣

—  
For more information on Ty Moody, The Worship Center and Einstein's Playground, visit [theworshipcentercc.org](http://theworshipcentercc.org).



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## JANY MARTÍNEZ-WARD

### TOP 10 Resource Recommendations

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#### *The Bible*

Rooted me in faith and purpose . . .



#### *The Reality-Based Rules of the Workplace: Know What Boosts Your Value, Kills Your Chances, & Will Make You Happier*

by **Cy Wakeman**. Taught me to eliminate drama and focus on results . . .



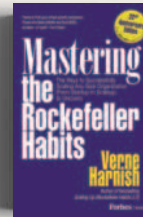
#### *How to Talk to Anyone: 92 Little Tricks for Big Success in Relationships*

by **Leil Lowndes**. Equipped me to connect authentically with clients and managers . . .



#### *The 80/20 CEO: Take Command of Your Business in 100 Days*

by **Bill Canady**. Showed me how to prioritize and amplify the most impactful efforts . . .



#### *Mastering the Rockefeller Habits: The Keys to Successfully Scaling Any Organization (From Startup to Scaleup to Unicorn)*

by **Verne Harnish**. Gave me the tools to scale my business with discipline and strategy . . .



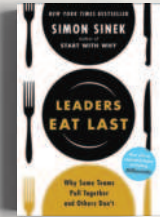
#### *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . And Others Don't*

by **Jim Collins**. Inspired me to build an enduring and values-driven company . . .



#### *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*

by **Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler**. Helped me navigate difficult discussions with grace and effectiveness . . .



#### *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*

by **Simon Sinek**. Reinforced the power of servant leadership . . .



#### *The Best Yes: Making Wise Decisions in the Midst of Endless Demands*

by **Lisa Terkeurst**. Taught me to make wise, intentional decisions in the face of endless opportunities . . .



#### *The 260 Journey: A Life-Changing Journey Through the New Testament One Chapter at a Time*

by **Tim Dilena**. Deepened my daily spiritual walk to guide my decisions.

Born in Cuba, **JANY MARTÍNEZ-WARD**'s family left the country when she was nine, making their way to Venezuela and then the U.S. border via Mexico. Her family's experiences as asylum seekers inspired Jany to pursue a career in the law. She achieved her dream of becoming an attorney and, together with her husband, Greg, launched the Ward Law Group. Based in Miami, the firm is committed to protecting the rights of immigrants and other vulnerable communities. Read more about Jany's story on page 26 of this issue of *AVAIL*.

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# TRENDS



**ATTENDANCE** — According to a 2024 Barna Group report, 39% of Millennials now report attending church weekly, up from 21% in 2019. This increase places Millennials at a higher attendance rate than Generation X and even the traditionally more faithful Boomer generation. However, 40% of Millennials remain religiously unaffiliated. For church leaders, this trend presents both an opportunity and a challenge. It suggests a growing spiritual interest among Millennials that churches can tap into, but also highlights the need for targeted outreach and engagement strategies to connect with the large unaffiliated segment of this generation.



**LEADERSHIP** — The Lily Endowment's *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond COVID-19* study reveals that the average age of senior pastors is nearing 60, indicating a looming succession crisis in church leadership. This aging trend, coupled with limited opportunities for younger leaders to take on high-level roles, poses a significant challenge for church continuity. To address this, churches must prioritize leadership development, creating clear pathways for younger leaders to grow and eventually assume senior positions. Implementing mentorship programs, providing leadership training and offering real opportunities for younger staff to lead at higher levels are crucial steps for ensuring the future stability and vitality of congregations.



**TECHNOLOGY** — According to a 2024 LifeWay Research survey, 78% of churches now use some form of church management software (ChMS), up from 52% in 2019. This significant increase reflects the growing recognition of technology's role in streamlining church operations. The survey also found that churches using a ChMS report a 40% increase in volunteer engagement and a 35% improvement in member communication. However, only 45% of church leaders feel they are fully utilizing their ChMS's capabilities. For church leaders, this trend highlights the need for ongoing technology training and the importance of selecting user-friendly systems. As digital tools become increasingly integral to church management, leaders must prioritize tech literacy among staff and volunteers to maximize the benefits of these investments.



**CULTURE** — A 2024 Pew Research Center study indicates a significant shift in cultural attitudes among younger Christians. The study found that 68% of Christian Millennials and Gen Z prioritize social justice issues in their faith practice, compared to 42% of Boomers. This generational divide is reshaping church outreach and ministry focus. Churches that actively engage in community service and social causes report 35% higher attendance rates among younger demographics. For church leaders, this trend underscores the importance of integrating social responsibility into church programs and messaging. Developing ministries that address current social issues while maintaining biblical foundations can help churches remain relevant and attractive to younger generations. Leaders should consider creating opportunities for congregants to engage in meaningful community action as an expression of their faith.



**MEDIA** — A 2024 study by the Pew Research Center reveals that 68% of Christians aged 18–29 primarily engage with faith content through social media and streaming platforms, rather than traditional church services. Additionally, Christian content creators on platforms like YouTube and TikTok have seen a 150% increase in followers since 2022. This trend highlights the growing importance of digital media in faith formation and outreach. For church leaders, it underscores the need to develop a robust digital strategy that includes creating engaging online content, leveraging social media platforms and potentially collaborating with Christian influencers. Embracing these digital channels can help churches remain relevant and connected to younger generations while expanding their reach beyond traditional boundaries. ▀

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# No Partiality

How the gospel redefines 'in' and 'out'

BY JASON CLARK

**T**he early church, led by Peter and a handful of others, was beautiful—and that’s an understatement. From the moment Holy Spirit burst onto the scene in the upper room, as depicted in Acts 2, there was an evangelistic explosion. With “many wonders and signs,” folks were added to the church daily, weekly and monthly (see Acts 2:43; 5:12).

Unity marked this early church. The phrases “all together” or “of one accord” can be found five times in the first five chapters of Acts. The power of God displayed by leadership was remarkable. Even Peter’s shadow healed people (see Acts 5).

Young leaders—most notably, Paul and Timothy, both championed by Barnabas, and later, James, championed by Peter—were raised up and commissioned to spread the good news from village to village and city to city.

Miracles occurred at a rate the world had never seen. Yes, there was persecution, and yet the church grew, and “the church throughout Judea, Galilee

and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened . . . [and] increased in numbers” (see Acts 9:31).

The presence of Holy Spirit manifested in every aspect of the church. From Pentecost on, Holy Spirit was present and known to fall “on all who heard the word” (see Acts 10:44).

In this beautiful church, sons and daughters grew confident in the love of a good Father! This was a church passionately releasing heaven on earth, the kingdom within us; a church where righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit were deeply rooted in the soul and in every aspect of life (see Romans 14:17).

This was also a generous church where the lost were being found, the sick healed, the sinner forgiven and transformed, the lonely placed in family, all who were thirsty could come and drink and “where they sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (see Acts 2:45).

*All could be saved!*

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Except, well, anyone who wasn't Jewish.

So, not literally *all*, I guess. Just, well, the Jewish *all*.

In those first nine years or so of the early church, when I write all could be saved, what I mean is that a small, exclusive group of people could be saved—all of the included *us*, but none of the excluded *them* could be saved.

Just like today, the understanding of the good news of Jesus within the church and her leadership was limited but ever-expanding. In those beautifully formative early church days, the limitation was that only Jews were in.

Imagine a church stunning in fellowship—a church Jesus referenced as “the light of the world, a city set on a hill” (see Matthew 5:14). Imagine the revelation of eternal life flowing through their veins. Imagine the power of their evangelism.

Now imagine, because of their tradition, culture and limited understanding, they only shared this life-transforming good news with a select few. Imagine most of humanity was excluded.

I know. It's nearly impossible, but imagine the church interpreting Scripture to reveal Jesus as the Savior of a select group, a people who looked, believed and acted like them—as though atonement was somehow limited.

Imagine they interpreted Scripture in ways that separated Gentiles from Jews, in from *out*, women from ministry and on and on . . .

I know. It's difficult, but try to imagine the church experiencing profound revelation,

### THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS WITHIN THE CHURCH WAS LIMITED BUT EVER-EXPANDING.

favor, life, joy and unity while simultaneously living with a heartbreaking, limited perspective regarding the all-inclusive nature of our heavenly Father.

You may be picking up on some playful sarcasm. Why? Because it's relatively easy to imagine this church. You've likely participated in it. I certainly have. I don't write that as a condemning statement. Rather, it is an invitation to daily repent—to mature in the reconciling love demonstrated at the cross.

The early church and her leadership were authentic, sincere and growing in revelation. At the same time, the early church had a serious flaw in its God lens—the same dualistic, hierarchal flaw the church and her leadership continue to discover and repent of today.

“Us or them.”

“In or out.”

“Republican or Democrat.”

“Women and ministry.”

And I could go on.

The early church knew the transformational truth of reconciliation. They experienced the kindness that leads to repentance, and they followed a friend of Jesus who knew cruciform love and restoration like few others.

Peter and the early church grew in the revelation of an all-inclusive reconciling love. Yet, even in the daily, miraculous manifestation of God's goodness, for the first nine years or so, the early church seemed oblivious to the devastating *us or them* flaw in their God lens—especially pertaining to Gentiles.

God didn't ignore their delusions or condemn them for their exclusivity. He just walked

beside them as the Emmaus Stranger and kept speaking to their burning hearts.

Like that farmer who went out to sow seed in the parable of the sower, God just kept sowing into every limitation of their understanding, every delusion, every hierarchy of exclusion and every cruel and punishing missing of the mark.

Throughout history, God seems to believe His greater love—fully revealed through His life, death, resurrection and ascension—is more powerfully inclusive than all our flawed and often exclusive understandings—and it is!

And it was . . .

Ultimately, the early church's *us or them* thinking began to change—often with Peter first. Then, one day, when the soil of Peter's heart could bear good fruit, our Father gave him an offensively good vision that was insightful in two ways.

First, God seems to like bacon. Second, as it turns out, God really loves Gentiles. You can read about this vision in Acts 10.

But the fruit of this vision is that it empowered and led Peter to visit the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, a heathen, an outsider, one of *them*. And on that day, Peter discovered a gospel so expansive as to include the whole world in the finished work of the cross—you see, God was present within the Gentiles.

Peter told Cornelius and his household, “Truly, I understand that God shows no partiality.”

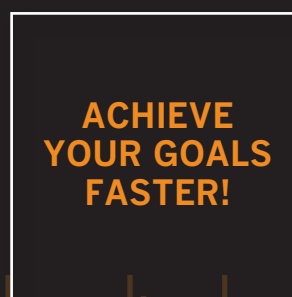
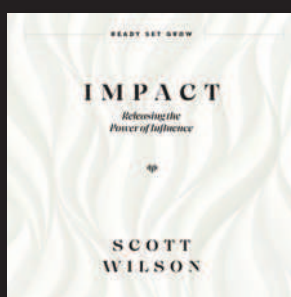
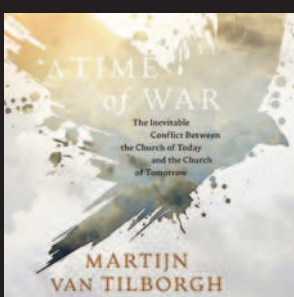
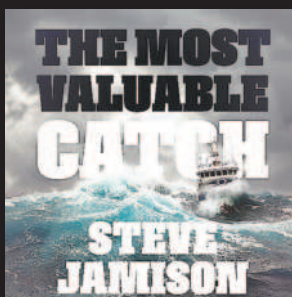
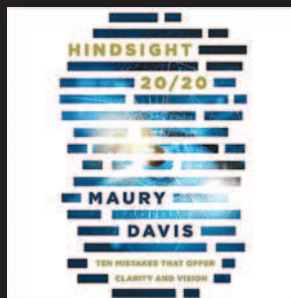
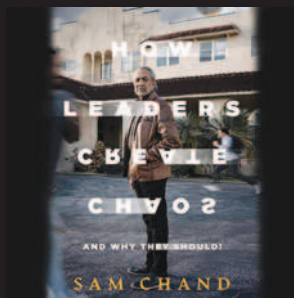
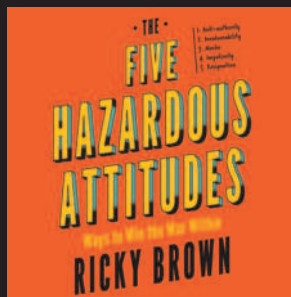
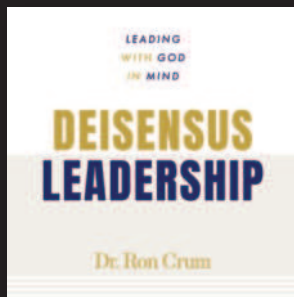
That's worth underlining.

Then Peter began to share the story of Jesus and cruciform love, a greater love, the good news. And as he spoke, “. . . Holy

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Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter [the us] were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles [the them]" (Acts 10:44-45).

"Then Peter declared, 'Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'"

The answer?

No, of course not!

For nearly a decade, when it came to what the early church believed, Gentiles were out. Then suddenly, Peter discovered what was always true—revelation—the truth that set him free: there is no *us or them*, no *in or out* when it comes to our heavenly Father and His kids. Peter discovered what Paul later wrote about in Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

"And he [Peter] commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:47-48).

The same Peter, who years earlier swung a sword on behalf of his hierarchal thoughts about *clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile, in and out, for and against*, suddenly recognized and embraced the inclusive nature of reconciling love for the whole world.

Confronted by God's goodness, Peter repented of the

## THE EARLY CHURCH'S *US OR THEM* THINKING BEGAN TO CHANGE—OFTEN WITH PETER FIRST.



long-standing exclusion on his ideological and theological lens. He changed his mind and aligned his thoughts and actions with greater love—and that's a big deal!

The willingness to face our offense and repent of our bias and exclusivity when confronted with the measureless nature of God's inclusiveness is the birthplace of personal transformation and an absolute requirement for friends of Jesus—especially leaders who are feeding His sheep.

Peter recognized eternal life, the good news, through the infilling Spirit of Christ in

Cornelius and his household. Suddenly, Peter could see what was always true: Christ's image and likeness dwelled within all humanity. "Truly . . . God shows no partiality!"

Because of this revelation, Peter welcomed you, me and several billion more into the family—all creation!

As it turns out, we're all insiders—every tribe and tongue, all humanity—welcomed sons and daughters, the whole world included in the friendship of the Trinity. As it turns out, the good news is always more inclusive than we last imagined. ▣



**JASON CLARK** is a relational theologian—a storyteller who writes to reveal the transforming kindness of the love of God. He has authored several books, including *Leaving and Finding Jesus* (from which this article is adapted) and *God Is (Not) in Control*. He is the lead communicator at A Family Story and host of *Rethinking God with Tacos Podcast*. He and his wife, Karen, live in North Carolina with their four children, Madeleine, Joseph, Ethan and Eva.

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“The gospel is simple. . . . Once you see it, everything changes.”



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# Just Say No!

## Setting clear boundaries for maximum productivity

**WHAT MAKES PEOPLE SUCCESSFUL** has nothing to do with the fact that they're smarter or more talented than anyone else. They are successful because they have discovered their unique abilities and have built a framework around leveraging them every day. They develop daily habits, set boundaries and pursue growth in a way that feeds into those abilities.

You've probably experienced people who have no boundaries. Everyone knows they can enlist that person's help; they say yes to everything. But in doing so, they often overcommit—and at the expense of more important items. Stress, anxiety and burnout are written all over them.

As a helper, this is an area I have struggled with. But I have learned that boundaries release us to do our best work, be our best selves and bring our highest level of creativity to whatever problem we're trying to solve. It's important to know that we can say no—and in fact, we should be saying no a lot more often than we do!

Wanting to be available to help others is a good thing, as long as it's kept in check. Often, strengths that are unchecked will lead us away from what we're trying to accomplish. Building the appropriate boundaries can help us discern what we should be saying yes to.

Here are some recommendations for building boundaries that can help you function at your best:

- Turn off notifications on your phone. Start with email and social media notifications.
- Turn off notifications on your computer (or close your email when you're not working on it).
- Block specific times of day for returning calls or emails.
- Block time into your week for proactive activities—the ones that help you move things forward.
- Preserve white space in your calendar for you to use as needed.

The thought of some of this may make you break into a cold sweat, but trust me, it's liberating! We really do not need to know the second that someone posts something.

Reading or reacting to it every moment distracts us from delivering our very best. That little pop-up telling you that you have a new email takes you out of what you're currently working on and disrupts your work, even if momentarily.

Unless you have a position that requires it, in most cases you do not have to return a call or email



**OFTEN, STRENGTHS THAT ARE UNCHECKED WILL LEAD US AWAY FROM WHAT WE'RE TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH.**

immediately. Stay focused on what you are doing that is proactive, and use a specific time block to “catch up” on phone calls and emails. Be sure that you're blocking time for accomplishing tasks or driving strategy.

And finally, don't forget to leave some white space in your calendar that you can use as needed. Maybe taking a break, checking in to help a partner or tackling the priority that just came up.

Distraction lowers productivity. Notifications, emails, phone calls and other interruptions that come at us all day, every day are filled with other people's to-do lists and agendas. It's important to serve as a resource and help others, but not at the expense of delivering our very best to those counting on us.

Build some boundaries today that corral the chaos and create more freedom! 📌



**MICHELLE HUBERT** is principal at Korsgaden Insights and author of *Living With Purpose: A Framework for Igniting Your Fullest Potential*, from which this article is adapted.



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# Well Spoken

Your words are not your own

**INCREDIBLY, THE GOD WHO CREATED AND RULES THE UNIVERSE IS NOT SILENT.** He's not just a God who does amazing things; He also says amazing things. And why does He stoop to speak to us? Why does He take the time to address us with the words of human language that we can understand?

God knows we will never understand what we need to understand; we will never know what we need to know to be what we were created to be and do what we were designed to do unless He speaks to us.

God speaks! God speaks! God speaks! And He has spoken to us in His most expansive, comprehensive and fundamental form in the Word that He has given us.

That means there is the hope of knowing, a hope of understanding, a hope of being wise, a hope of being sure, a hope of making the right decisions and taking the right actions, understanding who you are and what you are called to do, and having answers to the most fundamental questions of human existence.

For any of us who have ever been confused . . . ever had big questions . . . ever lain in our beds wondering things about life . . . ever not known what to think or do next . . . ever found ourselves in situations that are way beyond our knowledge, understanding or wisdom, it should be a phenomenal comfort to us to know that God is a God of revelation.

Allow me to address another very important (and related) truth.

You cannot understand human communication unless you start here. The first words ever spoken on earth were not spoken by a human being; they were spoken by God. God is the Creator of language. Words belong to Him. And in the words of God, you see words used for the highest purpose.

It's not enough to say that God spoke, that He gave us the ability to speak. We must recognize that words belong to the Lord, and my words belong to the Lord.

Because words are rooted in Him, because everything we say is connected to the God who speaks and gives us the ability to speak, we have to say, right here, right now, in everyday life, "My words belong to the Lord."

In God's initial words in the garden, we see the dignity and the power of words. And when you see words at their most powerful and dignified, you see the way God intended words to be spoken.

You should ask, "Are my words spoken with that kind of dignity—with the awareness of how important words are?" As you talk, do you recognize the power of this amazing gift?



**OUR WORDS BECOME A PLACE OF TROUBLE WHEN WE MISTAKENLY TAKE WORDS AS IF THEY BELONG TO US.**

Proverbs 18:21 states, "Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit—you choose (The Message).

This means that our words have power and always create some effect. They are never powerless or neutral. They have direction to them—either going in the direction of life or of death.

You either speak the life-giving words of help, instruction, hope, insight and encouragement, or death-dealing words of harsh criticism, condemnation, sinful anger, gossip, pride and envy.

Words bring life; words bring death; you choose. And so, when you listen in on creation, when you see the dignity and power of words, when you see words used for their best purpose, when you see that words are never misused, you are reminded of this principle again.

Our words become a place of trouble when we mistakenly take words as if they belong to us. You have never spoken a word that belongs to you. They all belong to the Lord. He created them, and He has a purpose for them. And the goal of everything we say must be this: to speak according to His design and to His standard with every word we speak.

When you speak, do you remember who gave you this ability and who owns every word? When you speak, do you speak with purpose and power, or do you take words as your own and use their power for your own purpose?



**SAM HINN's** mission is to love people back to life, to love people regardless of color, creed or past deeds. Throughout his 40 years in ministry, Sam has traveled nationally and internationally, speaking at churches, conferences and leadership events. His passion is to bring healing to a broken church system and restore leaders who have been broken by it. He is the pastor of Genesis Church Orlando, formerly The Gathering Place.

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# Life Before Death

## Live in the grace of today

**EARLIER THIS YEAR I VISITED** one of my business partners in London. As we walked up to the building where we were supposed to have our all-day meeting, I noticed a large sign that said something remarkable. Something profound really!

It said something that not only made me think, but even rethink some of the ways I live my life on a daily basis. In all honesty it disrupted a mindset that I believe many of us are struggling with . . . including me.

The sign said the following words:

“We believe in life before death.”

Obviously, this statement was a jab at the cliché we Christians use a lot.

That is, that “we believe in life *after* death!”

It’s a phrase that, quite frankly, has been overused and that exposes a severe lack of critical thought.

Sure, the idea that after we die, we enter into a reality where we continue to live provides a lot of hope—especially to those who believe (see 1 Timothy 4:10).

Here is the truth, though . . .

Life after death *does not* exist!

I know, I know . . . I need to unpack this a little bit more before I get called a heretic (which would actually put me in good company, according to Scripture).

Life after death doesn’t exist, simply because you’re still alive.

Yes, it may exist for those who have already passed, but that isn’t you is it?

So as long as you are alive and kicking, your life after death only exists in the future.

And the thing about the future is that it is simply not accessible until it arrives (at which point it has actually become the present).

A similar thing is true for the past.

It doesn’t exist either!

Yes, it did at one point, but back then it was called the present.

All of this is to say that the only thing that *does* exist is *now*.

So often the distraction of tomorrow keeps us from being present today. In a similar way, the trauma in our past may keep us from living our lives in the present.

Jesus understood the power of now and was trying to teach His followers to live in the grace of today.



**OFTEN THE  
DISTRACTION  
OF TOMORROW  
KEEPS  
US FROM  
BEING  
PRESENT  
TODAY.**

He said, “Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (John 4:35).

In other words, a harvest four months from now doesn’t exist (not until four months from now, anyway). But those who have eyes to see will be able to recognize that a harvest always exists in this very moment.

Sure, we can (and probably should) learn from the past so we can live more intentionally in the present.

And yes, we should plan for the future, realizing that what we do in the present has the potential to create the future that we envision.

Neither the past or the future can be leveraged for impact as they don’t exist.

So be present.

Brighten someone’s day.

Make someone smile.

Be the light of the world.

Whatever you do, don’t wait for a future harvest. It doesn’t exist.

All that you have is *now!* ■



**MARTIJN VAN TILBORGH** is the co-founder of AVAIL, a strategic marketing architect and a consultant for numerous large organizations and influencers. He is also a minister, author and speaker, as well as a serial entrepreneur. Martijn’s passion to innovate and see God’s plan unfold in people’s lives inspired him to create several successful companies, including Four Rivers Media, Kudu Publishing, Dream Releaser Enterprises, Arrows & Stones and AVAIL. His new book is *Unorthodox: 40 Disruptive Thoughts That Challenge Conventional Mindsets*.

# OLD PARADIGMS WILL CRIPPLE YOU.

**BE A TRAILBLAZER, NOT A FOLLOWER.**



*I now believe that disruption is necessary and unorthodox is the only way.*

—Sam Chand  
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# Rise Above

## Navigating the storms of uncertainty

**EAGLES HAVE LONG BEEN ADMIRERD** as symbols of bravery, determination, courage, leadership and beauty. Their ability to soar, seemingly untouched by life's challenges, captures our imaginations and stirs our hearts. In many ways, the characteristics of eagles are deeply intertwined with leadership and strategy. Why? Because eagles use storms to their advantage. Rather than cowering from the winds or retreating to safety, they allow themselves to be lifted by the storm, rising above it to gain a broader perspective. From that higher vantage point, the eagle can see further, assess the situation and plot its course with precision.

For leaders, this is the core of how strategies are built. When we're faced with challenging headwinds or turbulent economies, we need to rise above them. We must surround ourselves with voices that help us aim higher, see further and dream bigger. So, let me ask you: as you enter your organizational planning for 2025, are you using the storms in your business environment to elevate your perspective, or are you allowing them to keep you grounded?

To navigate through the storms of uncertainty and change, there are three pillars all leaders need to build their strategy. These pillars will help you not just survive but thrive.

**Pillar 1: alignment around the table.** Every leader around the table must be in full agreement with the organization's direction, its specific goals and the tactics needed to get there. This alignment isn't just about being on the same page—it's about being in sync, moving together as one. It's essential that all key decision-makers share a clear understanding of the actions and efforts required for success. Without this collaboration and agreement, success will always remain just out of reach.

When your team lacks alignment, you create disconnects that undermine progress. Perhaps one leader is focused on operational excellence while another prioritizes innovation—both are valid, but without alignment, these goals can pull the organization in different directions. Strategic success hinges on unified vision and collaborative execution.

**Pillar 2: executive ownership.** To ensure your strategies do not lose momentum or drift off course, every initiative must have an executive-level owner. This is a dedicated leader who champions the strategy, keeps it top of mind and ensures that it remains a priority. Without an owner, strategies become everyone's responsibility—and when that happens, they quickly become no one's responsibility.

Here's what we've found to be true: if everyone "owns" it, then no one truly owns it. Assigning ownership means assigning accountability. It empowers leaders to drive



**THE STORM IS NOT YOUR ENEMY; IT IS YOUR OPPORTUNITY.**

progress and navigate challenges with focus. It ensures that every strategy gets the attention it deserves.

**Pillar 3: accountability structure.**

A well-structured year revolves around accountability. Each strategy must have dedicated teams and resources that report regularly on progress. The executive leader, in turn, provides oversight and guidance, driving continuous improvement and goal achievement. It's not enough to simply set goals at the beginning of the year and hope for the best. Accountability is what guarantees your strategies are executed with precision and discipline.

This structure ensures your organization stays on course even when faced with obstacles. Regular check-ins, performance metrics and reporting systems create the rhythm needed to maintain momentum and ensure success.

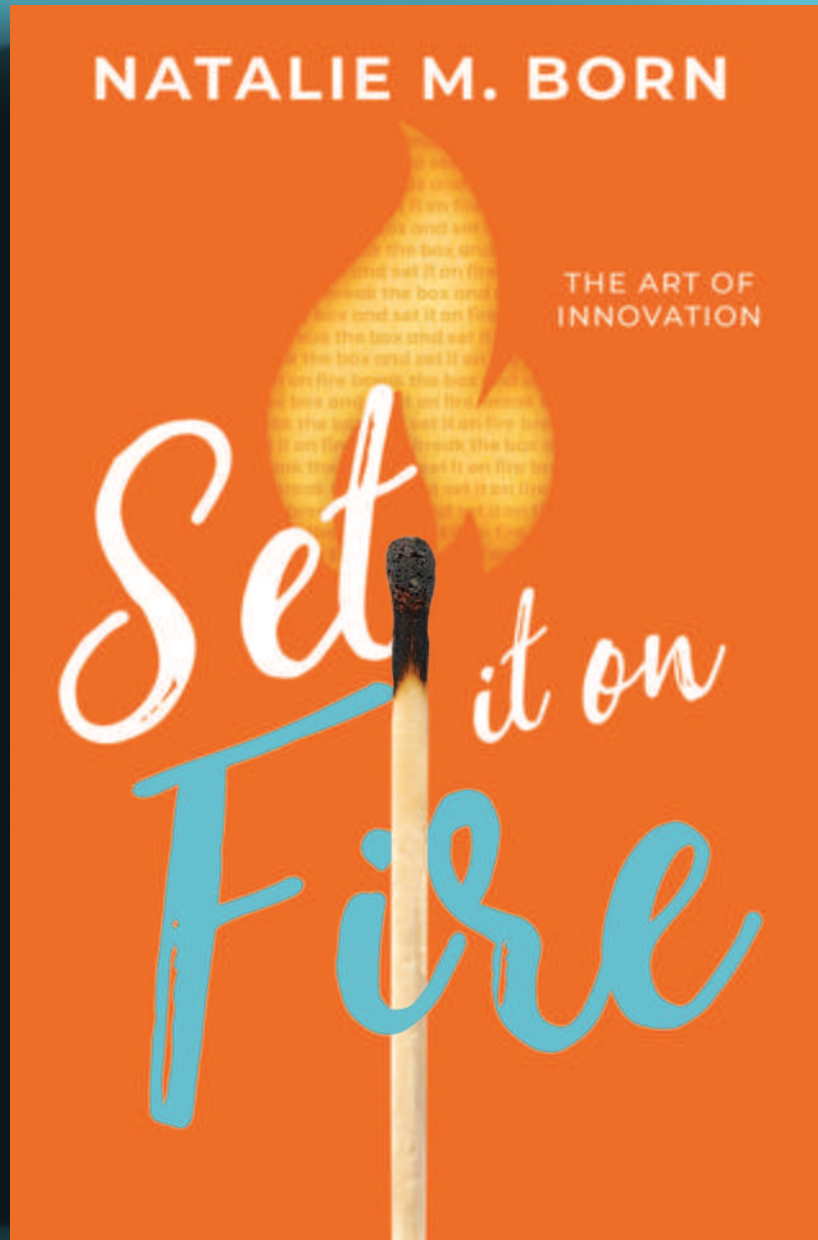
Next time you see a storm on the horizon—whether it's a market disruption, organizational change or economic uncertainty—don't fear it. Instead, allow it to lift you, challenge you, teach you and grow you. The storm is not your enemy; it is your opportunity. Like the eagle, use it to rise to a higher vantage point, to see beyond the immediate turbulence, and to gain the perspective needed to lead your organization.

Power thought: Successful leaders see storms as opportunities for growth. ■



**NATALIE BORN** is a principal consultant with Arch and Tower, the host of a top-25 innovation podcast called *Innovation Meets Leadership* and the author of *Set It on Fire: The Art of Innovation*, from which this column was adapted. Natalie has collaborated on two approved U.S. patents and has more than 20 years of experience leading product development, strategy and innovation teams working globally in more than 18 countries. Follow Natalie @innovationmeetsleadership on Instagram, Facebook or LinkedIn, or head over to [innovationmeetsleadership.com](http://innovationmeetsleadership.com) or [setitonfire.co](http://setitonfire.co) for more innovation resources.

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# Great Expectations

## What Gen Z wants from the workplace

### THE BUSINESS WORLD IS CHANGING.

By 2025, it's estimated that up to 22% of the U.S. workforce will be working in a fully remote capacity. Many industries consider a four-day workweek an inevitable shift in the coming years, and mental health support will soon be a standard way of attracting new hires.

Simply put, the young talent of the 2020s is bringing a host of new expectations to nearly every industry, and each industry's leadership must evolve their working culture in response. Those that do will attract more innovation and creativity to the workplace, as well as align themselves with many of the values and standards that will soon be adopted by every generation.

But what are these expectations? What do Gen Z professionals want out of their workplace? And what do they need to succeed? I've coached multiple generations of successful executives, and I think the latest wave of new talent is craving connection, control and a clear vision.

**Connection: Does your working culture cultivate human relationships?** Many Gen Z workers first entered the workplace in and around the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning a larger-than-usual chunk of their professional lives has been spent at a distance from their coworkers. Not surprisingly, this has dehumanized the workday far too much for many of these young team members. In fact, some surveys indicate Gen Z is increasingly interested in returning to the traditional office to make more personal connections with their work.

The digital world leaves fewer and fewer opportunities for organic social connection. As such, the best leaders look for opportunities to facilitate conversation and collaboration wherever possible. Weekly digital breakouts. Targeted conversations. Rotating collaborative relationships. The path to more personal connection will look different for every organization.

**Control: Do your employees play a part in their own management?** According to a report from Upwork, over 40% of Gen Z and Millennial professionals are now engaged in some sort of freelance work. The flexibility and personal ownership offered by the gig economy are undeniable, and many of the most educated young workers are consequently flocking to those opportunities. These professionals want a direct say in their workload and a more active role in picking and choosing their projects.

A forward-thinking workplace needs to be searching for ways to offer more meaningful control to their team members. A team's leadership is an integral part of this process

“  
**THE BEST LEADERS LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO FACILITATE CONVERSATION AND COLLABORATION WHEREVER POSSIBLE.**

because the transition demands deference and a more passive form of team management. Even when the result is happier employees and greater long-term success, this change can be difficult for leaders who are too attached to their own authority.

**Clear Vision: Is there a values-driven purpose behind what you do?** Wanting purpose out of your work is not a new thing. Still, finding that purpose is becoming increasingly important to workers every single year. By 2018, nine out of 10 workers reported that they would trade a portion of their life savings for more meaning in the workplace. This attitude is even more prevalent with Gen Z and Millennials, who are struggling more and more from work-related stress and thus prioritizing professional goals outside of money and retirement. This young talent wants to know their work means something on a grander scale.

Leaders with a clear vision communicate every objective in a way that is both straightforward and accessible. These executives understand the personal goals of each team member—they've had those conversations—and they seek to connect each company goal to personal motivations and career milestones. After all, the evolution of every team member will serve the evolution of the organization as a whole. ▣



Atlanta-based **DR. SAM ADEYEMI** is CEO of Sam Adeyemi, GLC, Inc. and founder and executive director of Daystar Leadership Academy (DLA). More than 45,000 alumni have graduated from DLA programs, and more than three million CEOs and high-performing individuals follow him on top social media sites. Dr. Sam's new book is *Dear Leader: Your Flagship Guide to Successful Leadership*. He holds a doctorate in strategic leadership from Regent University and is a member of the International Leadership Association. He and his wife, Nike, live in Atlanta and have three children. Learn more at [SamAdeyemi.com](http://SamAdeyemi.com).



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