



Moving Beyond Comfortable Leadership *The Price of Unsticking Stuck Churches* *A Travel Free Learning Article*

By

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Many organizations, people and churches are stuck these days. Stuck is living in created places with values and beliefs that make us feel secure. Stuck is about being primarily inward focused and narcissistic in concerns, use of resources, and attention. In churches stuck is probable after cycling programming and practices to preserve rather than impact. Being stuck also suggests a larger percentage of time and energy is focused on those already connected to the church rather than those beyond membership and walls. Stuck also emerges when leaders and churches are fearful of taking risks due to disappointing or agitating their base.

As I write this we are seeing this in the stalemate in our government. Neither political party wants to make a decision for fear of losing their base and possibly their jobs. Unfortunately or fortunately deadlines are around the corner. Seems they are willing to jeopardize the financial stability of our country just to preserve their identity and jobs. How scary and sad. Finally, many leaders and churches who are stuck often choose to be stuck. They choose to stay in their comfort zones, living in and with the familiar that creates a safe and secure spot to live.

Many churches face this same stalemate: finances and membership decline, growing apathy in the pew and pulpit, and become less and less an influence in the community. The problem is that living safe and secure works for the short-term, but for the long-term it often leads to apathy, diminishing commitment, atrophy of needed muscles, isolation, and insulation that typically leads one to dysfunction and death.

Let me be quick to say, I understand wanting to feel secure, be safe, take few risks and desiring to preserve peace, and often a job. I have been there on several occasions. Certainly no one wants to be seen as trouble maker or someone who stirs up trouble just for trouble sake. In tough economic times, who wants to risks losing a job! The issue is one of impact, influence and effectiveness. Do you want to be a leader or church with impact, influence and effectiveness or to be seen as church that is safe, secure and insulated from others? How does that line up with the mandate for believers and churches found in the Great Commission?

It seems the Christian message is all about being people of faith (Hebrews 11); willing to go to a place we know not of (Genesis 12); and, putting our hand to the plow and not looking back (Luke 17). The scripture is replete with the commands to fear not. Over 170 times! Yet, believers, leaders and churches choose to stay safe, secure and take few risks—certainly not risks that are so uncalculated that we must call upon faith—a faith that is dead without works (James 1).

I can hear some of you saying, "This guy is calling us to be reckless!" It seems to me that is the challenge of Christ, who broke all kind of stereotypes and barriers, and pushed through fears on every hand that others might know!

What keeps leaders and churches stuck? It seems the core of this might be found in three human emotions that challenge us: loss, fear and comfort. These three basic emotions manifest themselves in such powerful ways in lives, families, classes, churches, and even denominations. We choose safe, secure over fulfillment, obedience, faith, risks, and effectiveness. Our motto often becomes—*Safe at All Costs*—when Christ calls us to take up our cross daily and follow Him. He even told us it would be lonely, difficult and interrupt our daily norms, be risky, and be like sheep among wolves (Luke 10).

Consider the chart below and do some self-assessment reflecting on your patterns of behavior as leader and church, and what often guides and dictates your reaction to moving from comfort to challenge; from safety to success; from fear to fulfillment. What paralyzes you? What keeps you living in comfort and could be keeping you from greater success and fulfillment and from being more aligned with Christ's calling on your life and church?

Challenges That Keep Churches Stuck

How Challenges Often Manifest Themselves

Loss	Fear	Comfort
Of identity in church and community	Of being seen as unfaithful to tradition	Needing stability in a world filled with change
Of position/status in church if it grows	Of the unknown – new standards/strategies	Knowing & trusting protocol, procedures and policies
Of personal preferences in style, music, worship, Bible, hymnals, etc.	Of displeasing God and our history and founders	With beliefs in the God I know
Of family or community respect	Of what others might say	With traditional programming, buildings, etc.
Of hymnal, organ, choirs, etc.	Of technology, worship teams and instruments	With familiarity of music style, message and delivery
Of comfort zone with lyrics, translations, etc.	Of having to learn new lyrics, styles	With verbal messages in a visual world
Of permission to 'rest in our safe, comfortable 'sanctuaries' removed from the uncomfortable world	Of being called to be people of faith, who risks and stretch into God's call	With things as they are and see no need to change. "It's good enough for me!"

Coaching Questions

1. Where do you find yourself in the above chart? Circle all that identifies you?
2. What insights are you getting from the chart?
3. What would you challenge or add?
4. What is the way forward for you?

So many churches and leaders are seen as having little, if any impact and influence. They simply exist, doing what they do that makes them feel good, faithful, and safe. In the meantime, families are falling apart inside and outside the church, life issues are becoming more and more complex and simple, and pat answers are not sufficient anymore. Relationships are brittle at best in many communities as we all learn to live in more diverse communities.

A growing number of people of color coming from all around the world, bringing a variety of beliefs, values, music styles, worship styles, traditions that make many uncomfortable. Yet the reality is that in a decade or less people of color will be the majority in the USA. What are the implications? Many. But for now suffice it to say this is the world God has given us to work with and in and it is likely to stretch the best of every people group. Let's get started. We have the opportunity now to retool, realign and refresh our faith, structures and strategies of doing church in this 21st century world.

Stories of Hope for the Church—It Can Be Done!

I am drafting a new book with the tentative title of ***Recovering Hope for the Church: From Apathy to Engagement***. Exploring what's working and not working in churches of various sizes in various locations and with variety of contexts for ministry is invigorating to me. Here are some of my discoveries. I would love to hear your success stories of moving from stuck to unstuck. Lessons about recovery come from my personal and professional journey that has been filled with struggle, pain, fear, loss, comfort, discomfort, blessing, healing and hope.

I find great encouragement and hope for the church as I discover churches and leaders who are taking risks, moving forward and opening themselves to the move of the Spirit. An old downtown traditional church has spent 20 years retooling themselves from inside out. Now they are looked to by the city, other churches and community leaders as a church of impact and influence. Visit www.fbcwilmington.org to learn more.

I find hope when I hear stories and observe significant shifts of a once small congregation that is 30 miles from nowhere and is between cow pastures and cemeteries. Their long-tenured pastor has demonstrated courage, vision, and leadership as he has re-invented himself, the church, the facilities, the programming and strategy. He told their story in ***Can this Church Live Again?*** Now they have 80 percent of their adults in small groups. They meet as a multi-site church in three worship services and continue to grow spiritually and numerically. Their impact and influence reaches across the USA, denominational lines and into Honduras. They are truly a missional church that moved from maintenance to mission! Visit www.missionchurch.org for more information.

An inner-city downtown church overwhelmed with rising maintenance costs on an old building their congregation was rattling around in as their attendance and morale dropped. Now they have a new vision, they are impacting the poor, lonely and elderly in their community. They opened their Thanksgiving meal to the community. God blessed and continues to bless as outsiders visit, join, give and become partners in ministry. www.parkstreetbaptistchurch.org

This is only an excerpt from a chapter in forthcoming book, ***Recovering Hope for the Church***. I discuss these issues and other models at length in ***Spiritual Leadership in a Secular Age: Building Bridges Instead of Barriers***. www.transformingsolutions.org

Important Things to Know

Eddie Hammett is a Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership. He is a certified coach with the International Coach Federation. Recent books of which he is the author or co-author are ***Reaching People Under 40 While Keeping People Over 60***, ***Spiritual Leadership in a Secular Age***, and ***Making Shifts Without Making Waves***. He is available for speaking and coaching with leaders, congregations, denominations, and parachurch organizations. His personal web site is www.TransformingSolutions.org. His work is also highlighted at www.cbfn.org.

The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. *Travel Free Learning* is a leadership development emphasis of The Columbia Partnership. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.