

This series of articles were written by Rev. Amos Glenn while pastor of the Pittsburgh New Church and published in 2010 in The Reporter, the newsletter of that congregation.

Natural success and spiritual success may not be the same thing. Can we use one to measure the other? What does the spiritual success of a community look like?

Church Health and the Bottom Line

Rev. Amos Glenn (2010)

Church communities and other non-profit organizations have much to learn from successful businesses. While non-profits have been wandering through the world trusting in their own dedication and in the goodness of the cause, businesses have been exploring and charting, trusting mainly in data and proven principles. Non-profits relegate themselves to mere wandering when they don't have a destination clearly defined. Progress, as opposed to wandering, comes only from clearly defining what "success" looks like, measuring the distance between it and you, and figuring out how to close the gap. Too many church communities and other non-profit organizations never make any real progress because they don't have a final destination.

Businesses have this figured out. Entire printing presses seem to be dedicated to producing books on business success: strategic planning, goal setting, risk management, etc. Of course, not all of these books agree on the best methods, but they do all agree on the overarching goal of every business and the definition of success: the bottom line.

A business is successful when it has a healthy bottom line. This may be something of an oversimplification and there are certainly many, many other measurements of a business's progress, but a for-profit enterprise that is not regularly turning a profit is not going to exist too long.

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What can a non-profit take from this fundamental principle of successful business? By definition a non-profit doesn't have a healthy bottom line, there isn't supposed to be a profit (hence the name). However, most non-profits can replace a "bottom line" that counts dollars with one that counts something else.

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Netting Nations is one good example of a non-profit organization with a clear bottom line. Here's a snippet from their website, nettingnations.org:

"Netting Nations is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose mission is to combat the global spread of malaria through the purchase and distribution of insecticide-treated mosquito nets (ITNs)."

Netting Nations must measure a lot of things to be successful, but they ultimately measure their progress by counting the number of nets they have distributed. Everything they do comes down one bottom line: giving out nets—the more nets, the more success. Any organization without clear and measurable goals is going to have trouble in the long term.

What does this mean for a church community? How do we measure the health of a church community? Does it need a bottom line?

The trouble church communities have in this area, particularly New Church communities I believe, is the fact that they are trying to effect change in spiritual terms, terms that are inherently not measurable. It's not that it's difficult to measure spiritual things, it is impossible to measure them with the tools of this world. How do we reconcile the fact that our goals are not measurable with the need to have some measurable bottom line?

Obviously, the two needs are irreconcilable. A church community cannot have spiritual change as their ultimate goal and have any sort of bottom line. No number of dollars, nets, or even baptisms will give any indication of our success in spiritual change. The ultimate health and success of our church community cannot be measured in terms of a bottom line.

This leaves us with a choice. Either we accept that we are without measurable goals and wander in whatever direction seems good for the moment until we eventually fade away; or we adopt some sort of measurable—and thus natural—bottom line.

Most people in church leadership and marketing will quickly choose the latter and get to work without further hesitation, growing whatever bottom line they have chosen. Listen to what one experienced and "successful" church marketer has to say about making this choice:

"One of the problems church staffs have with setting up these goals is that they don't seem very "spiritual." But broader, spiritual indicators, while noble, are difficult to measure. We'd all love to see more people grow

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closer to Christ as a result of our marketing efforts, but how will we know if that happens? Our specific indicator may not be eternally significant, but its purpose is only to measure the effectiveness of the marketing effort and keep us from wasting money. Keep this in mind when setting your specific, measurable goals (<http://tinyurl.com/of56vz>)."

His advice is to abandon the real and "noble" goal of a church community ("growing closer to Christ") because it is difficult to measure, and replace it with another more measurable—if not "eternally significant"—goal. His reason for doing this is simple: how will we know if our marketing is effective or just a waste of money if we can't measure its impact on some bottom line? In other words, in order to adopt the "business model" for success, spiritual interests are replaced with natural interests.

This certainly isn't what we want for our church community, and it probably isn't what the author above wants for his either. But faced with the choice between inevitable extinction and the adoption of a new model, who wouldn't choose the latter?

The trouble is, though, our church marketer above isn't making this choice consciously, but has assumed a "specific indicator" or bottom line is necessary and believes, therefore, that the choices are limited simply to which measurable indicator to focus on. As he says, if you want to know if your marketing efforts are not a waste of time, spiritual indicators should be rejected out of hand because they are not measurable. Ultimately, he has assumed—without thinking—that the business model is the only effective model.

What about the Pittsburgh New Church or the General Church? Are our outreach efforts a waste of resources? Do we know? Should we know? If the General Church or our church community believes itself to be facing rapid decline or even extinction, should we not adopt a new model, one that has a proven track record?

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Church Health and the Bottom Line: Part 2

Rev. Amos Glenn (2010)

When is it acceptable for a church community to replace its spiritual goals with natural goals?

While thinking in Part 1 about the difficult choice between measurable (natural) and un-measurable (spiritual) goals, we saw how church marketers and leaders are adopting the business model of the measurable (natural) bottom line without a second thought.

This decision wasn't always so automatic. For much of its history, the Christian church's outreach goals had as much to do with the Lord's command to serve the neighbor (the poor, sick, imprisoned, etc.) as the Great Commission to baptize all nations and teach the commandments.

When we think of a "traditional" mission statement, we usually think of Europeans or Americans bringing education and health services to third world countries (and subsequently being eaten by cannibals).

That basic goal of Christian outreach changed with the rise of the Church Growth movement in the 1950s and 1960s. During that time, Donald McGavran, often called the Father of the Church Growth movement, published several books and articles advocating a shift in the focus of Christian congregations and missions away from providing human services and refocusing on using sociological data to convert whole populations en masse, interpreting the Lord's command to make disciples of all nations quite literally.

That basic goal of Christian outreach changed with the rise of the Church Growth movement

This shift continued until McGavran published the seminal book, *Understanding Church Growth*, which fully embraced numerical growth, measured in number of conversions, as the essence of a mission's or congregation's success. Called the "numerical approach," McGavran openly adopted the basic principle of business success, the bottom line:

"The numerical approach is essential to understanding church growth. The church is made up of countable people and there is nothing particularly spiritual in not counting them. The numerical approach is used in all worthwhile human endeavors. Industry, commerce, finance, research, government, invention, and a thousand other lines of enterprise derive

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great profit and much of their stability in development from continual measurement. Without it they would feel helpless and blindfolded."

Of course, McGavran is right in claiming that there is "nothing particularly spiritual" in disparaging the importance of numbers. But he is foreshadowing the advice of the successful church marketer from Part 1 by making the conscious decision to abandon what was the essential purpose of a mission or congregation, assistance to a local community, for the sake of numerical growth. McGavran purposely adopts business methods because his goal is the growth of his bottom line. He would comment on this conscious decision in a later work:

"Setting goals for membership increase is beyond the thinking of most Christians. They set goals for their business activities, the number of cars they will sell, the amount of steel they will produce, or the number of new buildings they will erect; but not for the number of converts their church will win. To be sure, evangelistic campaigns are mounted and pastors call on prospects who visit the church or move into the neighborhood, but before 1972 it was a rare congregation or denomination that had studied its past growth and made faith projections as to future growth."

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In other words, it was rare for a church to use the business model before McGavran published *Understanding Church Growth*. Afterwards, tens of thousands of pastors and leaders thought they understood church growth for the first time. McGavran didn't help these people understand church growth as much as redefine the term "church growth" into something new that anyone could easily understand.

Interestingly enough, in the same decades that McGavran was developing his redefinition of church growth in terms of the bottom line, Peter Drucker, one of the most influential business consultants of the 20th century, was teaching "management by objectives." Among other essential features, Drucker promoted the idea that having clear and measurable goals—SMART goals—is closely linked to an organization's success. Drucker's seminal work in this field, *The Practice of Management*, was published in 1954—the year before McGavran published *The Bridges of God*, his first work defining his own new focus on objectives.

McGavran changed the whole mission of a large part of the Christian church by applying the business model to official doctrine, especially that most diabolical one, salvation by faith alone. Referencing this doctrine, he demonstrated that the Christian church did have a clear and measurable bottom line: the number of conversions. The doctrine of salvation by faith alone allowed him to easily measure the growth of

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Christianity by counting those people who professed to accept Jesus as their personal savior and were thus both Christian and saved. This makes good sense—assuming the church's job is to save people and salvation consists in confessing one's faith.

Arguing that developing the fruits of salvation was God's job not the church's, McGavran convinced pastors and leaders that "saving" as many people as possible was the essential or even the only role of the church and everything should contribute to that clear and measurable bottom line. He wrote:

"Nothing focuses effort like setting a goal. As Christians seek to do effective evangelism, they need to set membership goals. This focuses their efforts on the main task.... It forces them to arrange their priorities aright. It locks them onto their polestar. It is essential that Christian leaders align their basic purposes with the eternal purpose of God, to save unbelievers through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the first step in the consequent growth and development of the church. Goal setting helps implement such alignment."

With this fanatical devotion to the bottom line, McGavran and his followers developed the megachurch, the intended result of the application of business practices to church purposes. Megachurches use proven business practices to convert as many as possible as efficiently as possible. Rick Warren's Saddleback Church is a good example of this philosophy. Perhaps most famously, Warren developed "Saddleback Sam," the imaginary but meticulously described person who represents the "target market." Having a target market allows Saddleback Church to tailor its "product" and thus attract more "customers" from a specific "market segment." Rick Warren knows when his church is more successful: when there are more people, particularly more "Sams," attending one of the church programs. Everything Saddleback Church does is aligned (McGavran might say "locked in") to making church easy and attractive to "Saddleback Sam." Once a church has a clear bottom line, it is simply a matter of applying the time-tested processes used by businesses to learn what works and implement new features and programs.

McGavran changed mission of a large part of the Christian church by applying the business model to salvation by faith alone.

It's easy to accuse the Church Growth movement of caring about nothing but the bottom line and thus not being a "real" church. McGavran, however, points out the difference between counting and saving and admonishes those who would avoid counting people for some pseudospiritual reason. He explains:

"To be sure, no one was ever saved by statistics; but then, no patient was ever cured by the thermometer to which the physician pays such close

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attention. X-ray pictures never knit a single broken bone, yet they are of considerable value to physicians in telling them how to put the two ends of a fractured bone together. Similarly, the facts of growth will not in themselves lead anyone to Christ. But they can be of marked value to any church that desires to know where, when, and how to carry on its work so that maximum increase of soundly Christian churches will result."

To be sure, there are plenty of churches that willingly trade compassion for numerical growth, but that is not what McGavran was advocating. He wanted to give as many people as possible the opportunity to become Christian and to challenge missionaries and pastors to realign their passion and resources towards success. Making that happen, though, required a redefinition of "success" in natural terms instead of spiritual.

Interestingly, however, McGavran's new ideas were widely ignored in "traditional" American church communities through the decades prior to the 1970s. Before that, pews were full, congregations were comfortable, and missions were regularly funded. Then, attendance and donations began to decline dramatically. As churches faced extinction, or at least loss of significant influence in culture and politics, pastors and leaders began searching for new methods of attracting people to church. And of course, Church Growth and McGavran were ready and waiting.

And this returns us to the horns of our original dilemma. As church attendance declined into the 1970s, anxious missions and congregations faced the choice of undirected wandering into extinction or progressing towards a clear, measurable goal, between failure or getting a bottom line.

Megachurches based on the business model were growing exponentially, while traditional community churches continued to decline and disappear.

Today, it is difficult to find a church that has not adopted some clear and measurable bottom line used to gauge success. The business model is so ubiquitous in our culture that it is almost totally assumed to be the best, even the only, means of success. And success means numerical growth in terms of program attendance and budget.

So how about our church community and the General Church? What can New Church congregations take from Church Growth ideas and literature if the movement is based on a false doctrine, or should we say THE false doctrine, the dragon itself? But might this not be a case where "stealing from the Egyptians" is warranted, as when the Children of Israel took gold from the Egyptians to later use in building the Tabernacle?

Making that happen required a redefinition of "success" in natural terms instead of spiritual.

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Church Health and the Bottom Line:

Part 3

Rev. Amos Glenn (2010)

In part one of this series, we clarified the dilemma church communities apparently face—adopt a measurable and natural bottom-line or face extinction—and saw how many church leaders and marketers embrace the business model without thinking too much about it.

In part two, we saw that this choice was not always so automatic. The origins of the use of the business model in church communities can be attributed largely to the Church Growth movement, which in turn is based mainly on the idea that counting baptisms is one and the same as counting Christian conversions and souls saved.

This third and final part examines the dangers New Church communities face when also assuming the business model and looks for potential signs of making this choice for ourselves. Finally, this article suggests avenues for exploring different models on which to base a church community's operations and advocates defining "success" in spiritual terms and severing the definition of church health from a bottom line.

In spiritual endeavors, we are to use an understanding of the world to support our spiritual work.

In the New Church, using worldly ideas in the service of spiritual uses is sometimes called "borrowing from the Egyptians." This phrase is taken from the story of Exodus when the Children of Israel were instructed to ask their Egyptian neighbors to borrow vessels of gold and silver and then flee the country with them. This precious metal was subsequently used to build the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle, the center of the Lord's church for hundreds of years.

Here, the "Egyptian vessels" represent the facts we learn and understand. These purely natural bits of knowledge can be used to support the spiritual church, represented in the story by worship at the Tabernacle. Defenders of the business model draw permission from these correspondences to use ideas developed in secular contexts in church contexts. And indeed this is one of the lessons the Lord teaches with this story. In spiritual endeavors, we are not to ignore the information reflected in the natural world, but are to use an understanding of the world to support our spiritual work.

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There is also a converse perspective taught here, one discussed in the Arcana Caelestia in greater length and detail. Instead of focusing on gathering information from natural and secular resources, the Writings for the New Church focus on the need to remove knowledge of spiritual things from people stuck in natural thinking. It's not so much that the Israelites need the stuff, but that the Egyptians need to lose it. The idea that these gold and silver vessels enriched the Israelites is not lost, but the reason they were permitted to steal them in the first place was for the sake of the people represented by the "Egyptians" and not for their own purposes.

So while there is no need to fear these vessels, this secular knowledge, we should not overvalue merely possessing them. Borrowing the vessels didn't turn the Israelites into Egyptians, but neither did it turn them into anything else. In the same way, learning secular things doesn't make one more natural, but learning spiritual things doesn't make one more spiritual either.

These bits of knowledge are in themselves neither good nor evil, but, like money, they take on the quality of the uses or purposes to which they are applied. Both knowledge and wealth can be used to help and to hurt, depending on the will of the owner. Secular knowledge need not be feared as antithetical to spiritual understanding, but it is essential to clearly define the purposes to which the "borrowed" ideas or practices are to be applied. The clear purpose must gather the necessary resources and we cannot allow the available resources to determine the purpose.

It is very tempting to adopt what works in the natural arena and then apply spiritual purposes to them. The danger, though, is in the natural goals and processes taking over the grafted spiritual purposes.

Remember our church marketer from part one? He said, "But broader spiritual indicators, while noble, are difficult to measure. We'd all love to see more people grow closer to Christ as a result of our marketing efforts, but how will we know if that happens?"

Notice that he is suggesting the use of facts—measurable indicators—to accomplish something, the quality of which is determined by the use or purpose to which they are applied. So what is the purpose to which those facts are attached? Not spiritual. He freely admits that it would be great to have a spiritual purpose, but since he can't use these facts for that purpose, he'll select a different purpose—just one that is not "eternally significant". He adjusts his goals in order to accommodate the available facts of the natural world.

The clear purpose must gather the necessary resources and we cannot allow the available resources to determine the purpose.

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But the facts are not supposed to choose their own purpose; the purpose is supposed to choose the facts. The spiritual brings order to the natural. This church marketer's advice is a clear example of how the pressure of a predetermined natural or factual model forces spiritual thinking to give way to natural thinking. This marketer didn't choose the business model because it was the best of what the "Egyptians" had to support his spiritual purposes, but he let his chosen model (natural ideas) determine his purpose, forcing the natural goals to replace his original spiritual goals.

We, too, can be tempted to claim spiritual growth as our goal while measuring natural growth as a substitute in deference to the natural model we've adopted. Though we may say our real purpose is helping people grow closer to the Lord, adopting the business model and its hunger for growth in natural and measurable terms, forces us to replace that higher purpose with numerical growth because our adopted model requires a bottom line.

We hope that when people come to church they are growing closer to the Lord, but that is unknowable to us. We hope that when people donate money to the church it is because they freely wish to acknowledge the importance of the Lord and His church, but we cannot know that. The need for a bottom line leads to measuring natural behavior in the hopes of judging the spirit behind those actions. We should remember, however, any spiritual judgment of others is folly.

The effects of confusing natural behavior with spiritual indicators can be far-reaching and ghastly, as we can see in some churches that have wholeheartedly adopted the business model for some time.

Remember Donald McGavran from part two of this series? Remember how the business model was applied to church growth by calling on the false doctrine of salvation by faith alone, that it doesn't matter how or why a person is "saved", only that they are baptized? When success was redefined fully in terms of numbers of baptisms, churches are freed to develop innovative ways to gather people.

The Christian prosperity doctrine is a clear and vile example of one extreme. LifeChurch.tv, for example, offers a money-back guarantee for their Three-Month Tithing Challenge: give them 10% of your income for three months and if God doesn't satisfactorily bless you, they will return all your money. We might expect God's blessings to come in many ways, but LifeChurch.tv is treating tithing as a financial investment. Here is a quote from their website about a person who took the Three-Month Tithing Challenge:

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"There is a single mom that was... struggling to pay for groceries and medications. She asked if God would still have her tithe in the midst of her strenuous circumstances. I let her know that as Christ followers we are all called to tithe, no matter how much this will stretch us. She made a decision that weekend to take the three-month tithing challenge, and she dropped her first check in the bucket. That next week at work she was offered a promotion, doubling her salary!"

In another extreme, Mark Oestreicher (ysmarko.com) gives a "worst idea of the month award" to a pastor who decided to pay his staff based on the number of people attending their ministry events in order to encourage "self-motivation." One reader wonders how much Jesus would have been paid for only 12 disciples. Another suggests starting a "cultural observation" ministry and count people walking through the mall. A final reader suggests offering visitors a cut of their raise to attend events. These readers' sardonic suggestions point out the absurdity of the situation that business models can impose on church organizations.

The danger of adopting the business model for church purposes is real. This is not to say that the adoption of the business model is the sole cause of the abandonment of spiritual thinking in a church, but the business model is a substantial source of significant pressure towards secularization.

How do we know when we are adopting the business model? Here are a few possible examples taken from *Vision Summary for the Capital Campaign* distributed by the General Church Development Office:

- When we talk about students as customers, we are clearly adopting the business model.
- When we think of membership in terms of contributors, we are adopting the business model.
- When we give the label "challenges" to congregations that are "not self-sufficient or producing members who contribute financially" and give the label "healthy" to churches that are self-sufficient, we are adopting the business model.
- When the "core of the current planning is a broadly-shared conviction that the declining numbers... will lead inevitably to diminished quantity and quality of Church and Academy programs" we are adopting the business model.
- When we believe that the "overall long-term health of the Church and the Academy will depend directly on a much broader and diverse base of contributors" we are adopting the business model.

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To conclude, let's return to the original questions: Does a church community need a bottom line to be healthy? In other words, is the business model the right model for our church? How do we reconcile the fact that our goals are spiritual and thus not measurable with the need to have some measurable bottom line?

The seemingly irreconcilable choice turns out to be a false dichotomy. The difficult choice is not inherent in the operation of a church community, but comes out of the insistence in thinking naturally and in terms of the business model. Stop thinking in terms of customers, returns, and bottom lines, and the issue disappears.

Though our culture would seem to suggest that the business model is the only way to be successful, there are alternatives. Try thinking about a church community with other metaphors: the cycles of nature, the story of creation, or walking a path. All of these are models taught by the Lord for a variety of spiritual activities, both in the individual and in the community.

Perhaps the most powerful model the Lord uses regularly is the organic human body. Think about the purpose of our bodies— they give the mind a way to interact with the natural world, they provide a natural foundation for the spirit. This is very similar to the function of secular models. The idea needs exploration and development beyond what this article can do, but some of the more obvious components are very interesting. For example, our bodies are growing all the time, but the goal is not always to grow bigger; we have clear hygienic needs; and we have systems for supplying energy and removing waste as well as healing methods. Medicine has a variety of measurements to determine the body's health and efficient operation. Could these be used to guide a church community's decisions without lowering its spiritual purposes? What should a healthy church look like then?

Sometimes healthy churches aren't able to balance the budget. Sometimes successful church communities dissolve due to lack of membership. Sometimes successful congregations have the same attendance figures for over 100 years.

On the other hand, sometimes congregations with growing rolls are failures. Sometime wealthy churches are unhealthy. Sometimes failed churches spawn new congregations. Spiritual success in both an individual and in a community often appears as a worldly failure. And worldly success is all too often gained at the cost of spiritual corruption. It is our task to maintain the focus of the church community on what is spiritual.

"It is enough if there is a church which possesses the Word, even though it is composed of relatively few people. The Lord is still present by its means throughout the world, for the Word creates a link between heaven and the human race" (*True Christian Religion* 267).