

Growing Healthy Churches? Part 1

A short summary of the “Growing Healthy Churches” (GHC) method
of Paul D. Borden from an Adventist perspective

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2009-04-23

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Location: Internet
Delivery: 2009-04-22 16:40Z
Publication: GreatControversy.org 2009-04-23 15:00Z
Type: Article

CITE THIS ARTICLE AS: Tim Matsis, “Growing Healthy Churches? Pt. 1” ONLINE AT:
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This article examines the Growing Healthy Churches (“GHC”) initiative from a Seventh-day Adventist perspective. GHC is the work of Baptist minister Dr Paul Borden. The following section contains a short summary of GHC and how, in the author’s experience, it has been implemented in an Adventist context. It will be followed by a more detailed analysis of GHC in comparison with accepted Adventist ideology.

What is GHC?

GHC is a set of processes whereby a leader is enabled to convince a congregation that they can achieve a utopia of “growth” and “health” in their organisation by undertaking a reorganisation.

GHC is premised on the notion that the key measure of success in a church is “growth”, meaning growth in church attendance and growth in financial contributions. “Health”, the other catchword in its title, is essentially a repetition of the ideals of increased attendance and financial giving. As Dr Borden says, “all healthy churches grow”¹.

A GHC “intervention” typically targets churches where there are some problems, although any church can be used if a pretext for implementing the programme can be established. In most cases, a dissatisfaction with the status quo is sufficient pretext. GHC is presented as the answer to whatever problem exists.

What may happen if my church adopts GHC?

A GHC reorganisation may involve:

1. **A change in pastor.** For example, if the pastor is not in favour of GHC, he may be replaced.

2. **A change in power.** For example, if the pastor's job is to lead the church, more power must be given to the pastor to spend, to appoint and remove church officers and to determine other aspects of church operations.
3. **A change in church structures.** For example, to give the pastor more power there may be a need to do away with or modify the rules for nominating committees or regular business meetings. To give the local church more power in relation to the denomination, there may even be an attempt to establish the local church as a separate incorporated entity. The local church may adopt its own "bylaws" and vote to do away with all or some of the *Church Manual*. Tools such as the *Church Manual* are thought to restrain the pastor's authority and the local church's plans.
4. **A change in church ideology.** For example, to change the way people engage in church activities there is a need to change the way church members think about God, the pastor and the relative values they have. Is the pastor a "shepherd" or a "leader"? Is God "weak" or "strong", a lion or a lamb? What is more important "faithfulness" or "fruitfulness" (increased baptisms and financial contributions)? If a church values "faithfulness" but is not growing fast enough, then they need to be re-educated to value "fruitfulness". If a church is faithfully presenting the message but people are not joining then we need to abandon "culturally irrelevant" methods and use the ones that "work". There may be changes in church sermons, music, or buildings. Change may also be achieved through training, the use of surveys, changes in titles and terms used in church work (e.g. "pastor", or "leader"?), reading books by Adventist or non-Adventist authors and silencing existing personnel who do not support the changes.

5. **A change in local church leadership.** For example, if existing leaders are not fully supportive of changes that the pastor wants to implement, whether this is because of personality differences or because of biblical convictions, those leaders need to be removed to enable the pastor to “lead”.
6. **A change in financial priorities.** For example, it is proposed that the church does not exist to serve the denomination, therefore money for the worldwide work of the church may need to be kept in house to fulfil the “vision” of the local church.
7. **A change in denominational loyalty.** For example, in addition to shelving parts of the *Church Manual*, loyalty to the denomination and to distinctive beliefs is played down so that the local church can feel comfortable with the “vision” it has created for itself. Also, this allows members to be more open minded to non-Adventist teachers who have ideas the pastor wants to implement.

What methodology might be used to bring about these changes?

In order to achieve the above changes the following means may be employed:

1. **Appoint a pastor who is in favour of GHC.** GHC is leader-centred and therefore finding a pastor who will carry out the plan is essential. In an Adventist context, if the Conference leadership is behind GHC they may try to replace your pastor if they think your church membership is open to implementing the programme.
2. **Survey the local leaders.** Find out who is in favour of change and who isn't, who will support the pastor with the new direction and who won't. Encourage them to join in but let them know that if they don't, their leadership future with the church will need to be reviewed.

3. **Create chaos in a church.** This is a major part of the plan. Emotional imbalance and crises are strong fuel for bringing about change. If a church can be frightened by threats of losing their pastor, public opinion surveys, declining membership, financial ruin or just plain lack of unity, they will be prepared to look for a solution. People who have worked together in a church for years will not be prepared to take decisive steps against their “family” members in church leadership unless they have a strong incentive to do so. Creating “emotional imbalance” and uncertainty provides this fuel. In the experience of the writer, introducing suspect forms of worship in the church can help to create this uncertainty and division.
4. **Tell stories.** Leaders tell stories to sell the “dream”. The churches that adopt GHC have good stories, the ones who stick with the status quo, have bad stories. Create a picture in the minds of church members that says they must chose GHC or else their church will die.
5. **Bring in experts.** “Men in black” carry significant weight, particularly with Adventists. A Conference president, a Union president, pastors generally, can all influence a church heavily. Unless a church is united in its views and biblically literate, the uncertainty created will lead the average church member to seek security with those in authority.
6. **Get commitment.** A series of business meetings may be held, where people are asked to vote on the programme and also to change leadership in the church. The church may be asked to pay a fee to the Conference to ensure their commitment to the GHC restructure. Leaders taking office may be asked to sign a pledge of loyalty to the pastor and/or GHC.

What will happen after GHC has been implemented?

Once the church has voted to adopt GHC, it is a matter of keeping the momentum going so that those on board will continue to believe and act in harmony with the plan by undertaking

the required restructuring. This is done by giving positive reports, rewarding the “in group” with public praise and involvement in church life. As numbers have become the key measure of success, and having probably created some turmoil to get this far, the “in group” have likely become fairly committed. The pastor will have to hold them together by keeping the “vision” in front of them and reminding them of the consequences of going back. Those in the “out group” are generally excluded from church life and it is hoped that they will leave and find another church which suits them.

Someone promoting the programme, may be tempted to assure you that, even though there are some objectionable features to GHC, they will only be taking the good parts while leaving the nasty bits. However, by now, you will have seen that the plan relies on aggressive and decisive measures being taken to achieve real “change”. Consequently, the plan suffers from the equivalent of what creationists call “irreducible complexity”. To remove any part of the plan allows dissenting voices to re-emerge, the plan could be derailed, and the church may revert to what it knows—namely, Adventism. This is particularly true in regard to the governance structure of the church, as Borden himself says:

...failure to adopt a new structure will eventually stifle the implementation of a new mission and vision².

Note this also, that if you are promised that if the church doesn’t like it, they can go back to a traditional model after a period of time—this is merely another selling tactic to get your church to sign up. A bit like buying on credit. Even if the leader is sincere, it is possible that things will change so radically under GHC that they can never be reversed. Your church may be demolished and relocated, the local community may gain a negative view of the church and relationships may become so soured with former church members that, even if there is deep and

sincere repentance, the church's work may be seriously retarded and members may be lost from the church permanently.

Conclusion

There are essentially two problems with GHC. The first is that it is unbiblical and the second is that it is against the Adventist rules of operation contained in the *Church Manual*. Both flaws may be effectively exposed in the local church because in an Adventist context, the adoption of the GHC programme is dependent upon churches being convinced that the plan is both sound and advantageous to the church. It cannot be imposed by a Conference.

However, even after adoption, the implementation of GHC is restrained by the binding and detailed procedures contained in the *Church Manual*. This will set the church at odds with the denomination at large. Like all rules, however, there must be a willingness to enforce them and if GHC is being promoted at a Conference level, or in some cases, at Union level, you will need to seek assistance from the Division or General Conference.

Above all else—pray. “He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increaseth strength” (Isaiah 40:29). God has both you and His church under His watching care.

Our next part will offer a more detailed analysis citing material from Dr Borden's book, *Hit the Bullseye*, contrasting that with Adventist polity.

Tim Matsis is a lawyer who lectures in law, leadership and business at the Southern Institute of Technology in Invercargill, New Zealand. In addition to serving in his local church, he has also been involved as a lay member at conference and division levels. He is currently doing further study in the field of Theology and Ministry. He is married to Leslea and has a two year old son named Samuel.

Endnotes

¹Paul D. Borden, *Hit the Bullseye—How Denominations Can Aim the Congregation at the Mission Field*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 16.

² Borden, p. 126.