

Growing Healthy Churches? Part 4
GHC and Leadership

May We Take Over Your Church—Please?

An analysis by Tim Matsis
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Introduction

“Finally, we must get away from the notion that in congregational life everyone has an equal say”¹

Behind GHC’s noble assertions and promises regarding growth and health, there is one recurring theme, namely, the drive for power. Euphemistically parading as a discussion on effective leadership, the agenda for usurping power and obtaining control of a congregation is both aggressive, and deceptive. So aggressive in fact, that GHC proponents would rather have a person leave the church, than have them stay and oppose their plans. Borden acknowledges that:

For a congregation to move from dysfunction to health, it usually requires that those in control can no longer have any say in the direction of the congregation. Yet these people usually perceive themselves to be either the most biblically literate or the most spiritually wise people in the congregation, which is why they think they should be in control. After all they usually have hung around the longest, investing the most time and sometimes the most money in the life of the congregation. The removal of these people of influence will not occur through mediation. Often it takes intervention or confrontation.²

Borden writes, “eventually those who were dissenting to the changes were asked to leave the congregation”.³

This article provides an overview of the type of leadership promoted by GHC and the processes GHC uses to gain control.

The GHC Leadership Model

The centrality of pastoral leadership. Under GHC, the pastor is the leader.⁴ Central to the GHC model is the emphasis on recruiting “growth pastors”⁵ and establishing those pastors as the undisputed leaders in control of local churches.⁶ Since GHC makes pastors responsible for numerically growing the church, it is considered that they should be vested with a corresponding

authority to lead the church.⁷ Borden believes that giving pastors stronger authority not only leads to numerical success but also eradicates conflict in the church. This is because, to Borden, conflict in a church is essentially about who will be in control of it.⁸

Borden, notes his lack of ability within Baptist polity, to compel or use bishop-like authority to achieve the changes he sees as necessary.⁹ However, rather than preaching for revival, Borden incites a church revolution in order to establish a democratically elected dictatorship.

Who needs committees? Borden believes that boards and committees do not lead, individuals do.¹⁰ He writes, “[T]he board [needs] to give up control of leading the congregation to the pastor and the pastor’s staff members.”¹¹ Furthermore, Borden recommends that the pastor be given the power to assign authority to leaders he chooses and if those leaders do not perform, the power to reassign such authority.¹²

The role of the church board then, is to support and protect the pastor. Borden explains that, “Board members were taught that their job in relation to the pastor and the pastor’s staff members were to be their protectors and cheerleaders”.¹³

While the writer acknowledges that there are some church decisions that are better delegated to individuals than committees, in an Adventist Church setting, the mechanism used to select church officers is a democratically elected “nominating committee”.¹⁴ This protects against the abuse of authority which can occur when one person, or a few people, obtain absolute control. The *Church Manual* states:

The church of Christ is in constant peril. Satan is seeking to destroy the people of God, and one man’s mind, one man’s judgment, is not sufficient to be trusted. Christ would have His followers brought together in church capacity, observing order, having rules and discipline, and all subject one to another, esteeming others better than themselves.¹⁵

GHC's Leaders

Borden believes that leadership is amoral in the sense that it is a set of skills and behaviours that can be used either for good or bad.¹⁶ The key determinants when selecting pastors and other church leaders, should be whether or not they possess the desirable *skills* and *behaviours* to increase attendance and giving. These include:

Popularity. Borden proposes a test of leadership. He writes, “leadership has one simple test: is anyone following or not?”¹⁷ Again he says, “We defined leaders as those people who actually had people following them”.¹⁸ Leaders are identifiable because “people are actually following them and positive systemic change is occurring”.¹⁹

Skills. Borden assumes that popular leaders obviously have the skills to lead. In his view, leadership is not a *position*, but a *function* and those most skilful in performing the function, should occupy the position.²⁰ Those most skilful in performing the function include, according to Borden, those who are popular²¹, those who are making positive changes²², and even those who are “matured” rebels. He writes:

Many times in life the best leaders are those who were viewed as mavericks while maturing. These people rejected the status quo of life and with insufficient wisdom rebelled. However with maturity they are often able to channel their dissatisfaction with the mentality of ‘we have always done it that way before’ and lead productive and effective change.²³

Pragmatism. In harmony with other aspects of GHC, “leadership” is characterised by a pragmatic theology that values “doing whatever works”. While accountability for achieving numerical outcomes is encouraged by GHC, that accountability relates to “the accomplishment of goals and results, not the process by which these goals and results [are] achieved”.²⁴

Borden believes that the kind of pastors needed to turn a struggling conference around are those who have experience at running and growing big churches.²⁵ These are pastors who have, “courage, passion, and the willingness to risk, coupled with an understanding of the basic principles required for change and how to lead change.”²⁶ Borden observes that large congregations tend to trust the leader and focus more on the “results that are expected than the process in obtaining those results”.²⁷ Borden even recommends going outside the denomination to attract “growth pastors”.²⁸

The motive for leadership. In addition to the attractiveness of holding outright control in a local church, Borden also uses financial incentives. He writes, “pastors were leaving larger congregations to come to smaller ones, and we believed they should get a raise for this, not take a loss.”²⁹ Consequently, “investment went toward attracting pastors of growing congregations in other parts of the country to come here and lead congregations when openings arose . . . we understood that we needed added financial resources to develop this particular strategy . . .”³⁰ Pastors who achieved their numerical targets were honoured with opportunity and further pay increases.³¹

All Power. Adventists, have rejected titles such as “Father” or “Reverend” when referring to church leaders.³² Instead, Adventists use the title of “pastor” to reflect the spiritual “under-shepherd” role of those entrusted with church leadership. Peter enjoins:

Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock.³³

And Christ instructed his disciples in Matthew 23:8-10:

[B]e not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ.

Borden rejects the “shepherd” metaphor in the belief that it has been misused. Borden writes, “The shepherd took care of the sheep, not for the sheep’s benefit but for the shepherd’s needs”.³⁴ Borden believes that pastor’s must know how to take control and get results, hence, he prefers the title, “leader”.³⁵

GHC encourages church leaders to lay aside the spiritual weapons in the biblical armoury, such as reason, conviction and conversion, in favour of grabbing power and control to establish a harmonious and efficient leadership paradigm. In fact, Borden recommends that a pastor who lacks the courage, wisdom and skills to take control of a local church, using the opportunities provided by a GHC “intervention” or “consultation”, should consider other career options.³⁶

Pastors without the above mentioned skills and behaviours may become qualified to remain as pastors, provided they are prepared to undergo retraining to become a “growth pastor”. This retraining may come from the likes of Willow Creek, Saddleback or from some other megachurch guru with proven success.³⁷

Biblical Qualifications for Leadership

In the Bible, leadership is neither a popularity contest, an intelligence test, or as the disciples once thought, a question of who was the greatest. Nor is it determined solely or even primarily according to *skills*. These considerations better describe the law of the jungle than the

standards of the gospel. The primary qualifications for biblical leadership are *calling* and *character*.³⁸

Leadership a calling. There have been occasions where those that thought themselves *skilful* enough to occupy a position of leadership, have been severely punished by God for assuming the *position* of leader. For example, Korah and his supporters staged a popular rebellion claiming the right to leadership. This claim was based on the premise that they had the *skills* to lead. After all, hadn't God said that "all the congregation are holy, every one of them"?³⁹ Likewise, Uzzah was punished with death for assuming a privilege which God had not committed to him, when he dared to touch the ark, even though it was for a good cause!⁴⁰ Similarly, King Uzziah, was struck with leprosy for assuming the role of a priest, even though he was the king.⁴¹

In the New Testament, employees are told to, "be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward".⁴² Furthermore, Paul says to children, "obey your parents in the Lord".⁴³ The reason given for rendering obedience, is not that parents are always more skilful at being parents but simply because, "this is right".

Character. Paul also writes to Titus regarding the kind of people to appoint to positions as leaders. When discussing elders, he writes:

An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.⁴⁴

In stark contrast to Borden's ideas about leadership, Paul the apostle selects men that are *not rebellious*, but disciplined and self controlled, *not theologically pragmatic* but who will "hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught", *not popular or "wise after the flesh"*⁴⁵ but those who possess good character. Lastly, he commends those who are *not "pursuing dishonest gain"* and teaching what peoples' itching ears want to hear in order to grow the congregation or the budget. On the contrary, Paul the apostle prefers those that "preach the word".⁴⁶

Taking Over a Church Using GHC

In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, changes in church leadership occur as a part of the ordinary course of church life. These changes should be effected with Christian sensitivity and must be within the biblical framework prescribed by the *Church Manual*.

Creating the Crisis. In a church following GHC, leadership changes are effected through a series of well-staged crises, designed to manipulate the membership. Borden euphemistically calls this process, a "consultation".⁴⁷ Essentially, churches are presented with a set of statistics, survey results or other negative reports which indicate that the church is in "plateau", "decline", or perhaps even bordering on death!

It begins with the GHC "consultant" conducting a fact-finding mission by consulting existing church leaders to determine who will be supportive of GHC and who will not.⁴⁸ Following this, a series of meetings may be called to address broadly described "problems" in the church. These problems may be statistical, if the church is not growing (or not growing fast enough), or simply anecdotal, using evidence gathered through anonymous surveys or leader consultations. One may also find that many of the "problems" are actually caused by the

consultant and his assistants, as they push for “change” by deliberately ignoring existing church order.

Removing Objectors to GHC. There is likely to be nothing which would justify any formal discipline by a church *Business Meeting* of those not supporting GHC. However those early identified as being “unsupportive” of the “new direction” are encouraged, or, in some cases, forced, to resign from church leadership. Borden writes:

We believed in strong leadership, which meant that once the mission was adopted and the vision was cast the leader needed to be given the freedom to lead. This meant that the leader could not be second guessed all the time for what she or he was doing to bring a change that would implement the mission and achieve the vision.⁴⁹

As Borden acknowledges, those unsupportive of GHC may be the most biblically literate members who have had significant experience in church organisation.⁵⁰ In the writer’s experience, this is counteracted by the GHC proponents proclaiming unbalanced or unsubstantiated accusations to incite prejudice against the “unsupportive” leaders who are “controlling the church” and “preventing the church from growing”.

Telling stories. The consultant will tell stories about churches that opted for “change” which are now thriving with many young families, while those churches who stayed as they were, ended up losing their pastor, losing their membership, and eventually closing.

Emotional Fuel. All of this builds a backdrop of fear and dissatisfaction in the church and is calculated to provide “emotional fuel” or “leverage”, so that the church will respond decisively when the consultant calls for formal action to be taken.⁵¹ As one can imagine, having such unpleasant things go on in your church is very disturbing, particularly if it appears that the new pastor is being undermined in his efforts to spread the gospel!

Taking Control. When the time is ripe, a meeting will be called. The environment of fear and indignation thus created, is used by GHC consultant as “leverage” to issue a plea for drastic, immediate and vaguely defined, “change”. This “change”, includes a change in leadership.⁵² Borden writes, “When congregations are in decline or on a plateau those controlling it need to be replaced with those who will lead it to grow”.⁵³ “Change” is required in order to return the troubled church to “life”, “growth” and “health” and is urged by the GHC consultant in “non-negotiable terms”.⁵⁴

For example, in one church where this process was implemented, 2/3rds of the existing leaders were removed for refusing to sign a covenant of support, pledging allegiance to the pastor and GHC. This “proved” that they wanted to take the church in a different “direction” than where the pastor wanted to take it. It was urged that the Church, by adopting GHC, had voted to go in the same direction as the pastor.

Get on or get out. Borden recognises that even transferring all power to a pastor and his team of supporters may not be sufficient to silence objectors. In an Adventist context, there is likely to be objection particularly when the Bible or the *Church Manual* are ignored. In these cases, further confrontation may be necessary to deal with those who are “not letting the pastor lead”.⁵⁵ He warns, “[W]e were open to confronting individuals who were unable to make the changes or who even worked against the changes”.⁵⁶ Borden admits that, “eventually those who were dissenting to the changes were asked to leave the congregation”.⁵⁷

Keeping Control. Following a “consultation” the congregation is exhorted to submit its will and judgment to the wishes of the pastor, so that the new “vision” of growth and health can

be achieved. The pastor then selects his sub-leaders, who he expects to respond with loyalty and unquestioning deference.⁵⁸

The last thing the GHC proponents want, is to lose control after having done so much to get it. However there is a real risk that, on becoming more aware of the deceptive and insidious methods of GHC, the congregation may regret their decision. The display of Christ-like forgiveness and reconciliation may heal wounds and restore confidence in fellow church members, as well as in the Adventist message and methods of organisation. Therefore some more lasting change is needed to maintain control and exclude those who refuse to submit to GHC. Consequently, taking control of a church invariably involves changing the system of church organisation.⁵⁹

Categories of Church Membership? The *Church Manual* states, “All church members are considered to be in regular standing unless they are under church discipline”.⁶⁰ However, like many of the megachurches of today Borden promotes the idea that:

[W]e must get away from the notion that in congregational life everyone has a say...the right to speak and influence congregational life and behaviour should be granted in proportion to one’s maturity as a disciple and ministry as a servant.⁶¹

He notes:

[L]eaders also tend to honour their particular denominational way of working, even though the structures often reflect rural thinking that in some cases may derive from seventeenth century Europe, when their ancestors arrived as immigrants. These leaders also want to make sure that every voice is heard. There is a failure to understand that, while every person is equal in his or her standing with and before God, not every voice carries equal weight.⁶²

One method used to maintain control, is to create categories of church membership based on a member’s commitment to the pastor, GHC, and other broadly defined (and easily

manipulated) affirmations. Using this method, a “member” of the church cannot attain to all the privileges and duties of normal church membership without agreeing to something more than their baptismal vow.

In contrast to this the *Church Manual* states:

Ministers or Churches Not to Establish Tests of Fellowship—A minister, an individual church, or a conference/mission/field does not have the authority to set up or establish tests of fellowship for the denomination. This authority rests with the entire church body and is exercised through the regularly constituted organization of the church in the General Conference. Anyone seeking to apply tests other than those herein set forth does not, therefore, properly represent the church.⁶³

One example where this has been attempted in an Adventist church, involved a proposed set of new “bylaws” which distinguished between “active and “non active” members. The “active” members who were entitled to participate fully in church decision making, were those who had affirmed a list of statements regarding their “support” of the church and its leadership through a special commitment ceremony each year.

Further, the proposed bylaws only permitted those who had signed a further covenant and whom the pastor had trained and deemed “eligible”, to serve on the church board. The bylaws provided that they were there to provide “accountability and support” for the pastor.

Shadow Bylaws. In other cases, where local leadership is prevented from adopting its own formal bylaws, local GHC leadership may adopt a set of unwritten policies where they agree to act collectively to maintain control. Consequently, the *Church Manual* may simply be ignored, or used in a way to perpetuate the existing GHC leadership.

While it is true that this can be counteracted by a vote of the church, it takes significant upheaval for church members to vote against their pastor and existing leadership. Many church

members will feel that they are engaging in the same power grabbing promoted by GHC, were they to engage in such political skirmishes. After all, they were originally active in church leadership because of their convictions of duty, not because they wanted “power and control”! Worse still, many of those disaffected by the prevailing spirit in the church may have chosen to leave or transfer to other churches, thus further retarding the ability of the remaining membership to take corrective action.

Conclusion

Rather than using the power of the gospel to change hearts and win support in his efforts to proclaim spiritual truth, GHC ideology encourages the “leader” to act like a king, employing politics, power and control. In this war, the gospel is used as a pretext for wresting power and control from the church membership. With this achieved, GHC proponents hope to use their power to emulate popular megachurches.

Those in positions of church leadership who maintain their moral convictions about the sacredness of our message as Seventh-day Adventists, are seen as a major impediment to church growth. They must be removed.

In contrast to the “power and control” gospel of GHC, Jesus says:

Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.⁶⁴

The GHC leaders hold office at the pleasure of the GHC pastor and answer to him. The GHC pastor wears his crown at the mercy of the conference GHC Consultant and answers to

him. With all this grabbing for power and so-called accountability, one serious issue seems to have been overlooked. Who's going to answer to Christ?

NEXT: Watch for our conclusion in Part 5: "Combatting GHC"

Biographical note: 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

¹ Paul D. Borden, *Hit the Bullseye—How Denominations Can Aim the Congregation at the Mission Field*, Abingdon Press, 2003, p. 142.

² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 18, 50.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 62, 64 and 113.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 98.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 127, 135.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 72, 95, 97.

⁹ For example, pp. 54, 113, 114, 117. Note that the Baptist denomination operates on a congregational basis giving the local church control over pastoral appointments. In the Seventh-day Adventist church, the final say in pastoral appointments belongs to the local Conference Executive Committee. Attempts by a local church or minister to override this are described as insubordination in the *Church Manual* (See pp. 149, 150).

¹⁰ Borden, p. 129, See also pp. 72, 75, 91, 127, 128 and 142.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 96, 98.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁴ *Church Manual*, 2005 ed., chapter 11.

¹⁵ *Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 445 cited in *Church Manual* p. 2.

¹⁶ Borden, p. 57.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 38, 57.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35. See also pp. 65, 70 and 74.

³² Furthermore, Mark 10:42-45 (KJV) says “Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

³³ 1 Peter 5:2, 3.

³⁴ Borden, p. 21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-23.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 97, 111.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁸ Paul writes: “For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty” (1 Corinthians 1:26, 27).

³⁹ Numbers 16:3. Compare Leviticus 20:26 and Exodus 19:6.

⁴⁰ 2 Samuel 6:7.

⁴¹ 2 Chronicles 26:18.

⁴² 1 Peter 2:18.

⁴³ Ephesians 6:1

⁴⁴ Titus 1:5-9 NIV. See also 1 Timothy 3.

⁴⁵ See above, endnote 38.

⁴⁶ See 2 Timothy 4:2-4.

⁴⁷ Borden, see p. 84 onward. It is also referred to occasionally as an “intervention.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-89.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁵⁰ See above, endnote 2.

⁵¹ For examples of how Borden uses emotional “leverage” to manipulate change, see also pp. 66, 68, 85, 101.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 66-76.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 68.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126. For further analysis of this issue, see article three in this series, “Growing Healthy Churches? Part 3: Denominational Loyalty,” published at <http://greatcontroversy.org/gco/pdf/2009/matt-ghc3.pdf> on 2009-06-30 23:37Z.

⁶⁰ *Church Manual*, p. 36. See also pp. 193-200.

⁶¹ Borden, pp. 141, 142.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 61 See also pp. 75, 107.

⁶³ *Church Manual*, p. 196.

⁶⁴ Mark 10:42-45 KJV.