**Strategic Thinking Excerpts – Tom Bandy**

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**Excerpt 1:**

An important distinction must be made. This book is not about stra- tegic *planning*. The very word *plan* suggests a blueprint, a step-by-step instruction manual, or some other fixed and repeatable process. Modern people imagined a kind of logical assembly line that promised to repro- duce effective churches that were essentially alike if they only followed the instructions. Postmodern people understand that such an assembly line doesn’t work now and perhaps never did. Each church is just too unique. The world is moving too fast. There are too many surprises.

The alternative, however, is *not* to throw up your hands in despair, simply react to whatever happens, somehow muddle through, or surren- der to some authority (individual or institutional) that will tell you what to do. It is possible for leaders to *think* strategically. There is a method for solving problems and recognizing opportunities. There is a way to make good decisions and timely adjustments to get measurable results.

Strategic *thinking* is about drawing a line from organizational iden- tity—through the changing mission field—to a desired mission result. The tactics are not irrelevant, but they are at best secondary and always delegated to whatever team is doing the work at any given time. Planning today is usually done on the spur of the moment, in response to changing conditions. And if a tactic doesn’t work, the last thing you want to do is repeat it.

I usually avoid sports metaphors, but a football analogy seems obvi- ous. The coaches of a football team must think strategically but trust tacti- cally. They combine teamwork and motivation across the gridiron to score a touchdown. The plays they call are on the spur of the moment. And they trust the players to find the ways to get it done. The fullback dances through gaps and avoids tackles any way he wants. The quarterback scans the options and throws the ball anywhere he wants. But they both need

to gain yards and achieve touchdowns. There really isn’t a plan. Victory depends on the ability of everyone (coaches and players) to *think* strategi- cally and adapt appropriately.

Strategic *thinking* always involves an element of risk. The fullback may fumble, and the quarterback might throw an interception. If the game de- pended on strategic *planning*, that would be a disaster. But since the game really depends on strategic *thinking*, these setbacks are only frustrating. We may rage or laugh, but in the end we learn and adapt. We keep trying and experimenting until we win.

Strategic thinking requires self-discipline and organizational disci- pline. It’s work. Unfortunately most churches (and many nonprofit and for-profit organizations) don’t do it.

Excerpt 2:

Churches that sustain effective ministries regularly follow a specific path of strategic thinking. It’s as essential as an annual physical examina- tion with a doctor, an annual maintenance schedule for an automobile, or an annual review of financial investments. Regularity and consistency are important. People are tempted by laziness and inattention to assume “everything is all right for another year” and live to regret their lack of discipline. There are several reasons why regularity and consistency are important.

First, the mission field is changing constantly, and strategies that were relevant one year may be a sidetrack the next. Even small changes in de- mographic trends, lifestyle preferences, or physical and spiritual needs can

make a big difference in the speed of church growth and the impact of congregational mission.

Second, the routine of strategic thinking keeps the foundation of trust as a primary vehicle for accountability. The positive experience of membership growth actually carries the hidden liability that core values, beliefs, vision, and mission may somehow be diluted or altered. Even veteran members are still sinners, and pride and self-interest all too eas- ily supplant mission impact in the programming and budgeting of a church.

Third, the consistency of strategic thinking allows the benefits to be cumulative. The habits of continuous learning, evaluation, strategic ad- justment, and risk taking mature a congregation over the years. It keeps leaders sharp and church members faithful. The more you do it, the more you mature from it, and the congregational reputation for effectiveness grows in the community.

The method unfolds in two parallel paths and involves staff, board, and ministry teams. The first stage (described in this chapter) is the work of the board. They focus on community research, spiritual discernment, and comparative insights between the church and the mission field. The second stage (described in the next chapter) is the work of ministry teams. They focus on assessing the effectiveness of ministries, triage that identifies flagging or irrelevant ministries, and creative new ideas. In practice, the senior staff and board tend to focus on community research and lead the entire congregation in spiritual discernment; and the program staff and ministry team leaders tend to focus on church assessment. Their insights come together in a leadership summit.

This is the way of strategic thinking. Although the information, issues, priorities, and leadership teams change, the process itself is deliberately repetitive. It becomes *routine* for the church. It becomes more and more familiar. At the beginning, it may seem burdensome and depressing, but over time it becomes easily manageable and increasingly exciting. After all, the point of strategic thinking is to boldly go where God wants them be, and to risk all for the sake of God’s mission.

Excerpt 3:

Someone will inevitably ask the hard question: Is it true? Is the re- search accurate at this time in our context or within our own membership?

One reason these questions are asked is that many long-time church members, with long residencies in their communities, have become de- sensitized to the change and growth around them. Church people in par- ticular bond with an inner circle of friends, a continuous thread of homo- geneity that extends over time. They don’t really “see” what is happening around them, or they only perceive change when it is threatening.

Meanwhile, other people ask these questions because diversity has ac- celerated beyond their powers of discernment. People tend to hold on to assumptions, generalizations, and prejudices even though they are no longer useful. They assume “youth” or “seniors,” “men” or “women,” or people of this ethnicity—or that all cohorts behave the same way and share the same ministry preferences. In fact there are many different kinds of youth and seniors today, many different behavior patterns among men and women. Some of these subgroups work well together and some don’t. At the time this book is published, at least ten distinct lifestyle segments include high proportions of African Americans, and twelve distinct seg- ments include high proportions of Hispanic and Latinos. And they don’t all share the same ministry preferences.

Strategic thinkers don’t assume that their research is correct. Culture and populations are changing so rapidly in many urban and exurban con- texts that even the most frequently updated demographic information may still miss important nuances about lifestyle segments in their midst. Some of the methods we once used to test our research are no longer use- ful. We used to do surveys by mail, e-mail, or door to door, but today many people resent intrusions by “marketers” or are simply not home. We used to do exit surveys among church visitors, but today visitors are

*The Way of Strategic Thinking: The Path of the Board*

more likely to reflect cultural homogeneity than heterogeneity, and their comments distort reality. In fact, with the skepticism and cynicism that pervades the current environment, people are more likely to lie (or distort the truth) in order to camouflage their real reasons for connecting or dis- connecting with the church.

One good way to test demographic data is with interview teams. Churches equip a team of two people to make an appointment with some community or business leaders who are in a position to observe trends or compare publics. The teams are equipped with demographic and lifestyle information from their research; share it with key leaders; and listen to feedback that confirms or corrects, nuances and elaborates, the informa- tion. Obviously, productive interviews can include social service, health care, emergency and police services, professionals, and municipal plan- ners. Perhaps less obviously, churches can test perceptions about com- munity trends with business leaders. Retail developers, automobile and appliance dealers, and real estate agents are often in excellent positions to notice benchmarks and trends in a community.

A good way to test lifestyle data is with focus groups. A focus group is not just a gathering of friends or miscellaneous people with opinions. Focus groups selectively invite people who belong to a particular lifestyle segment to talk with a team from the church. The invitation is usually ex- tended to neighbors, work associates, or acquaintances of members. They may be invited to lunch or dinner. They are assured that the church will not seek to convert them, pressure them to join, or ask for money. Focus groups are designed in clusters of at least three, and each group is asked the same questions in order to compare group responses. One team mem- ber leads the conversation, and the other takes notes.

Excerpt 4:

Churches tend to overprogram and underspiritualize their strategic thinking. In other words, they take far too much time researching in- formation, surveying opinions, reading books, and reviewing denomina- tional precedents. They spend very little energy in deep prayer, listening to the public, reflecting on scripture, experiencing the real presence of Christ, and meditating on the identity and purpose of the church. Strate- gic thinking corrects that mistake.

At the same time leaders are researching the primary mission field, the congregation as a whole should be engaged in the thought process. The following exercises are designed to involve as many people as possible. The purpose is to raise awareness of the trust and purpose of the church, immerse members in the mission field, and stimulate discussion about the future direction of outreach. The feedback can be collated and forwarded to leaders in preparation for the leadership summit.

Excerpt 5:

Prayer walking combines personal immersion in the mission field with a simple journaling process. Choose any neighborhood within the primary mission field. This may be a new subdivision, a neighborhood in cultural or economic transition, or particularly busy street, but encourage people to choose an area within the mission field that they *don’t usually frequent*.

The prayer walk group is self-selected and usually not more than 3–6 people. These friends (singles, couples, or families) invest 2–3 hours dur- ing the week to walk. You may wish to take notes or record verbal com- ments into a handheld device. You may want to stop for coffee and con- versation within the group or with perfect strangers, but avoid focusing on yourselves and your friends. Pay attention to others.

• Observe: Look carefully at people, noting their age, culture, afflu- ence or poverty, conversation and behavior. Note signs, advertising, architecture, technologies, and other things that reveal the nature and mission of the place in which people move.

• Imagine: Observe people again, and imagine whether they are mar- ried or single, what occupations they might have, and what life issues and key questions are on their minds. Speculate why people choose to be *here*, rather than someplace else.

• Pray: Look for signs that the Holy Spirit is here, at this place, and among these people. Pray for strangers, and name the gift of grace you hope God will give the people in this location.

After the prayer walk, gather in a place that is both public (where you can see the diversity of the community) and quiet (where you can talk comfortably and confidentially). Answer the following questions.

*What Is the Agony That I See?*

One can substitute words such as *yearning, issues, concerns,* and per- ceived *questions*. I prefer to use the word *agony* to emphasize that prayer walkers are trying to discern the deeper anxieties and desperate urgency that surface unexpectedly in the behavior, language, art, and habits of people in a particular demographic or lifestyle segment.

*What Is the Blessing I Long to Give?*

One can substitute words such as *social service, message, encourage- ment,* and *donation*. I prefer to use the word *blessing* to maximize imagina- tion and deliberately connect our giving to God’s grace. *Blessing* connotes both outward help and inner renewal.

*What Is the Image of Hope?*

Prayer walkers are surrounded by an experience of life, and their two or three hours of walking are like a snapshot from a larger motion picture that preceded their arrival and will continue when they leave. How would that snapshot change if God worked a miracle? If the *agony* of the people and the *blessing* of God intersected, what would that scene look like?

The image of hope may connect with the vision of the church—or it may disconnect with the vision of the church. Either way, this gives strate- gic thinkers food for thought. It is often helpful to conclude the reflection during the prayer walk by answering the question, *If I could rename my church to capture the attention of “strangers to grace,” what would it be?*

Prayer walkers can send their completed journals or key insights to the church office where they can be collated (without naming the authors). Preachers and worship leaders may share selected insights with the congre- gation and with the leaders who will eventually participate in the summit.

These insights shape the prayers of the people and provoke conversations among small groups.

Excerpt 6:

Listening triads are groups of three people who simply observe to- gether. Make a list of many places people in the primary mission field are apt to gather: shopping malls, sports arenas, restaurants and coffee shops, bars, theaters, big box stores, and so on. The goal is to be stationary and invisible, observing people interact with each other and their surround- ings in a public place. The triad is particularly useful for officers, staff, board members, and key lay leaders of the church. Three people are a small enough number to blend into a public place, but a large enough number to see things from different perspectives.

The covenant of a triad can be very flexible. Typically, they follow this exercise over several weeks. Each week they meet at one participant’s home to prepare themselves. They review the commentaries on the minis- try expectations of lifestyle segments found in *Mission Impact*, often con- centrating on lifestyle segments currently non- or under-represented in the congregation. They may read a portion of scripture specifically related to the apostolic “Gentile Mission” and then pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

They then proceed to the gathering spot of choice. (If the location is a store, it is sometimes wise to make your purpose known to security!) Tak- ing notes is usually intrusive, and conversation often sidetracks attention. Observe, listen, and remember naturally, without invading privacy.

• Notice the spontaneous behavior patterns of different groups of people, because these often reveal the positive and negative core val- ues that they reenact at work, home, and play.

• Notice the appearance of individuals (clothing, jewelry and acces- sories, body art, etc.). These often provide clues to their spirituality, religious convictions, or superstitions.

• Notice how people socialize. Watch what they eat and how they eat, how long they linger and how fast they walk, and other socialization

patterns that provide clues for what each lifestyle segment considers relevant or radical hospitality.

• Notice the advertising and signage that surrounds people. Marketers are very sensitive to lifestyles, and the form and media, content and images reveal much about how people communicate and learn.

The exercise of listening might last one to two hours, each week in a different context. At the end, triad members assemble again in a quiet place or perhaps return to a participant’s home. There they debrief and pray aloud for strangers.

These experiences often stir the heart and move people to tears. Since the act of listening is passive and triads don’t intervene to say or do any- thing, their active response is prayer. They should share their feelings and observations with the pastor and designers of worship. Their insights can then shape the prayers of the people, selection of hymns and songs, pro- jected images, and other aspects of worship on Sunday morning.

Community research and spiritual discernment allow the board and pastor (or senior staff) to compare and contrast the relevance of ministries to the current membership with the need for relevance in the community. They can clearly see how the church effectively blesses some lifestyle seg- ments, but needs to make changes or create options of ministry to effec- tively bless lifestyle segments in the community that are underrepresented in the church.

Excerpt 7:

**The Two Principles of Assessment**

It is vital to understand the two basic principles with which church leaders should evaluate any program or leader. These two principles are closely tied to the “ends policies” of the church, and to the measureable outcomes defined by leaders the previous year. Literally anything can (and must!) be evaluated using these criteria, from the smallest tactic (e.g., what kind of coffee to serve in postworship refreshments) to the boldest strategy (e.g., what major outreach ministry will we invest the most of our money and energy to implement).

These same two principles will eventually be used to set priorities for the coming year(s). You might say that the measureable outcomes defined at the beginning of a period of ministry become the means of assessment at the end of a period of ministry. Look at it this way. At the end of the year church leaders (board and staff) must ask and answer this question: *How successful were we this year?*

The questions cannot be avoided by a vague assumption that all that matters is that we try hard and enjoy the journey. Christ clearly expects the church to accomplish something. The answers can’t be based on the wishful thinking of leaders; or the tacit assumption that corporate good feelings, charitable intentions, happy pastoral relations, and a balanced budget suffice for the advancement of the realm of God.

When churches do not evaluate success, they just preserve the sta- tus quo. Their focus is internal and their obsession is with harmony. The church does not grow and becomes increasingly irrelevant to the mission field. Since demographic and lifestyle research is all about focusing the *heartburst* for mission, it becomes clear that the heart of the church only bursts for themselves.

In recent years, a false dichotomy between church growth and so- cial action has needlessly divided the church. Some leaders and members want to grow the organization; other leaders and members want to bless the community. In fact, both are right. The church cannot sustain and expand social service unless it grows as an organization, and the organiza- tion cannot grow unless it is relevant and beneficial to the surrounding community.

The *Principle of Acceleration* is the first key criterion for assessment. I sometimes call it the “Principle of Zoom.” Every program and leader of the church should effectively grow the church. This may mean numerical or financial growth, or relational and spiritual growth. It may mean more worshipers, the multiplication of small groups, or the swell of new volun- teers. Acceleration happens when churches exert themselves to learn more, try different things, welcome new people, raise the bar of accountability, increase resources, and generally get bigger and bolder.

The *Principle of Impact* is the second key criterion for assessment. I sometimes call it the “Principle of Punch.” Every program or leader of the church should effectively change the world for the better. This may mean personal transformation or social transformation. It may mean incremen- tal social change or dramatic social change. It may be known to a few or known to the entire community. The community will be different because the church existed this year. It may be a little better or a lot better, but it will be better.

Exactly *what* ministry team leaders evaluate to measure acceleration and impact may vary from church to church or context to context. For example, one church might want to evaluate the number of Hispanic/ Latino participants in worship (acceleration) and the extent to which the standard of living for Hispanic/Latino immigrants is improving (impact). Another church might want to evaluate the multiplication of midweek small groups (acceleration) and the percentage of congregational members personally volunteering in outreach ministries (impact). *What* is evaluated is clearly related to the measureable outcomes that the church set out to achieve.

Regardless of *what* is measured, the *method of measuring* is basically the same. There are three ways to measure anything.

*Statistics*

Statistics are the most obvious form of measurement. Quantities and percentages, trends, and other numbers can reveal a great deal about the relative success or failure of a church in acceleration and impact. Consider the first example above. If the church sets out to increase Spanish-speaking participation by 20 percent in a given year but only increases participation by 5 percent, then the church is not accelerating very successfully.

*Stories*

Counting stories of a certain kind is a way to assess qualitative change that can’t be easily quantified. Consider the second example above. It may be difficult to measure the participation of all members, in all kinds of outreach, within and beyond the church, over a given year. However, you can gather mission *stories* as you overhear excited conversations about the joys of service, and print them in your newsletter. If the church sets out to mature members to higher commitment in service, and the Mission Mo- ment in worship suddenly lasts longer than the sermon, the church must be doing something right.

*Feedback*

Intentionally gathering feedback from other church and social ser- vice partners is another way to assess both quantitative and qualitative change. Board and/or ministry team leaders can make appointments with nonprofit CEOs, health care specialists, and other community leaders. If the church sets out to increase the standard of living of immigrants in the community, and social service partners are aware of and enthusiastic for the outreach of the church, then church leaders know that they are suc- cessfully impacting the community.

Whether you measure acceleration or impact, you must count some- thing. And as you gather statistics, stories, and feedback, you can begin to develop an overall “score” for the relative success of your church.

Excerpt 8:

t should be obvious by now that strategic thinking is a team effort. It is not enough for the pastor to think strategically or for a few board

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*All leaders need to think strategically.* In fact,

members to think strategically. In fact, this is a condition of leadership.

Churches often make excuses for their staff and board leaders, or al- low staff and board leaders to avoid responsibility for strategic thinking. Staff members may claim to be too “intuitive” for strategic thinking. They convince themselves that it is acceptable to lead solely by charisma or ex- pertise, and expect the church to simply trust their guesswork or blindly obey their instructions. Board members may claim that their role is lim- ited to some specialized knowledge about finance, technology, music, or other expertise, and expect the church to allow them an automatic veto if any plan or idea upsets their assumptions.

It only takes one staff or board leader to undermine the strategic think- ing of an entire church. Imagine a formation of geese flying in a straight line from their winter habitat to their summer habitat. All the geese col- laborate, taking turns to fly at the point of the V formation. When the leader turns, all turn together. When the leader lands or takes off, all do it together. But imagine what would happen if just one goose decided they did not have to travel as a team and veered one way or another, landing or taking off at different times. Chaos ensues.

When strategic thinking breaks down in a church, the reason is that arrogance has combined with complacency. The pride of one leader is matched by the complacency of the other leaders. And indeed, this is precisely what has happened in so many churches in every tradition over the past decades. Staff and volunteer leaders compete for control of the budget, develop their personal core of volunteers, and manage programs independently of one another. The annual gathering of leaders is usually called a “retreat.” As the name implies, the leadership retreat is a time to relax, maintain the appearance of harmony, and reflect on abstract ideas or discuss theological or ideological issues. The retreat doesn’t focus on the changing needs of the community or assess the effectiveness of the church. Participants don’t leave with clear priorities to improve programs, initi- ate creative ideas, terminate ineffective tactics, or anticipate the stress of change. They may love each other, appreciate their church tradition, and have more theological insight. But they come unprepared, and they leave unprepared, to lead the church to make a difference in the world.

The annual gathering of leaders is not a “retreat.” It is a “summit.” It is much the same as the highest level of diplomacy among governments. Clearly, a summit is *not* about micromanagement. It doesn’t tinker with programs that are generally doing well. It concentrates on solving un- solvable problems, terminating ineffective tactics, and forwarding creative ideas. The outcome of many retreats was to entrench caution and preserve the status quo. The leadership summit is not about preserving status quo but about aligning ministries to vision and measuring success.

Once again, we see the distinction between strategic *planning* and strategic *thinking*. Strategic planning is a mechanical activity that merely organizes and resources programs led by relatively autonomous leaders. It encourages turf protection and preserves the status quo. Strategic think- ing is a diplomatic activity that sets top priorities but also counts the cost of discipleship and anticipates the stress of change. It breaks up fiefdoms, eliminates competition, and celebrates relevance.

The summit is a combination of prioritization and perspiration. Staff, board, and ministry team leaders come together once they have done their homework and summarized their insights. Staff and board members come

prepared with an honest appreciation of the gifts and anxieties of the con- gregation and are able to interpret the evolving physical, relational, and spiritual changes of the community. Ministry team leaders come prepared to brief the gathering on underperforming programs, new ideas, and inef- fective tactics; and they can recommend actions and explain the rationale for them.

The leadership summit answers two questions and concentrates on two activities. The two questions are, *Were we successful last year? What will it take to be more successful next year?* The two activities are

• Prioritization: Leaders focus on important programs that are not functioning effectively; new ideas; and old and ineffective tactics. First they explore *why* they do any program or why they should imple- ment any creative idea; clarify *who* is ready to take responsibility and authority to do it; and define the *measureable outcomes* that should determine success. Second they explore key issues about *when, how,* and *where* programs and ideas will be implemented.

• Perspiration: Leaders discern the true *cost* of the program or idea. The true cost of any program involves more than money. It can also in- volve change to tradition, attitude, organization, leadership, technol- ogy, and property. Once leaders understand the real cost of disciple- ship, they can anticipate the stress that any change might bring.

The timing of the process varies from church to church. Many churches appoint their leaders and set their budgets at the beginning of the year, so the leadership summit is usually scheduled in the fall. Other churches appoint leaders and set budgets in mid-year (June). The summit is usually scheduled for late winter or spring. Whenever it is scheduled, it should become an annual routine for the church. Leaders will be *expected to participate in the* summit as a condition of their office with no excep- tions (except for health). This is a crucial moment in the life and work of a vital church.

Excerpt 9:

trategic thinking is all about drawing a straight line from identity to outcome. Organizational identity is defined by trust and vision. Organizational success is defined by measureable outcomes. Everything that happens in between—community research, spiritual discernment,

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and church assessment —are crucial steps along the way.

Strategic *thinking* is different from strategic *planning* because it fo- cuses on outcomes, not processes; and success, not tactics. The temptation for many churches today, however, is to become obsessed with tactics. This is because from the very beginning they are unclear about their identity. Lack of trust means that all forward thinking becomes a negotiation or competition. Every tactic needs to be micromanaged to satisfy all of the factions or personalities of the church. Lack of vision leads to program silos and turf protection, and creative thinking never goes beyond the boundaries of traditional “sacred” programming. Churches become so ab- sorbed in strategic *planning* that they never question their lack of success. Or to put it another way, success is only measured by sustained harmony rather than effective ministry.

Strategic thinkers can’t allow themselves to get stuck on tactics. They aren’t concerned about *how* things get done, nor even about *what* things get done. They are concerned about why things get done and about *what outcomes* should result no matter what is done. It’s not that

tactics are unimportant. These can be delegated to trusted teams who are able to innovate ideas and use resources in whatever way works. It is more important for them to accelerate church growth and change the world than preserve harmony and protect turf. Indeed, true unity doesn’t depend on tactical agreements but on shared identity and the celebration of success.

Strategic *thinkers* understand that no program (especially no program silo) is sacred. For example, if the traditional Sunday school is still use- ful (as it is in many places in the Midwest), then strategic thinkers will trust the traditional Sunday school superintendent and his or her team to tweak it rather than waste their time micromanaging it. However, if the traditional Sunday school is no longer useful (as it is in many places in the Northeast or Northwest), the strategic thinkers will simply cancel the Sunday school, dismiss or reassign the superintendent, and invest their time thinking of an alternative way to educate Christians. For strategic thinkers, the only thing sacred is the mission. Everything else is mere tactics.

Strategic *thinking* is essential. Strategic *planning* is optional. Plan- ning can be delegated to trusted teams. And indeed, even they may not do strategic planning. Many authors, consultants, and leaders have pointed out that fixed programs, rigid timelines, itemized budgets, and work routines are often unhelpful in a time of fast change and unpre- dictable events. Better to trust tactics to a team capable of quick think- ing and timely creativity than a committee with slow deliberations and engrained habits.

Ironically, the success of an organization today actually depends on the failures of its teams. It is only when teams experiment with tactics, fail, learn, and innovate until they get results that the organization itself becomes relevant and effective. For the success of a church, tactical fail- ures are not only an option but a necessity. Strategic *thinking*, not stra- tegic *planning*, is crucial. Organizational growth and mission impact are only possible if leaders follow a straight line from identity to outcome. If that fails, the church fails, no matter how perfect their tactics might be.

If that succeeds, the church succeeds, no matter what failure might occur along the way.

Remember that there are two major goals for every leadership sum- mit. The first goal is to set priorities. The second is to measure risk and anticipate stress. The leadership summit is about *prioritization* and *perspiration*.

Remember that the ministry teams have already completed their own evaluations for programs within their sphere of influence—and may have investigated creative new ideas. All this is forwarded to the summit par- ticipants, but the focus of the summit is clearly on *underperforming ongo- ing programs* or *creative ideas*. Programs and creative ideas that are already effective or successful are left with the teams. Why waste time with micro- management?

And remember that there may be exceptions. The summit partici- pants may want to take a closer look at borderline programs. They may also want to re-evaluate creative ideas in light of changing organizational priorities or because the cost of discipleship and potential stress call for closer scrutiny.

Excerpt 10:

Strategic *thinking* is what high-trust churches do. High-trust churches spend a great deal of energy building and embedding a consensus of core val- ues and bedrock beliefs, and clarity about motivating vision and measure- able mission. They never even spend energy planning a program for which the rationale, leadership, and outcomes are unclear. They resist micro- management and focus on tactical essentials. And when it comes to count- ing the cost of change they always *start* with the cost of changing attitudes and work their way down through the next five cost centers, discussing the financial cost last of all. This is why strategic thinking for these boards and ministry teams isn’t a burden but an exciting adventure.

Excerpt 11:

t would seem logical that the *way of strategic thinking* would automati- cally lead to the *sustainability of strategic thinking*. And if church leaders

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get in the habit of annual research, spiritual discernment, and assessment, this connection does happen. Unfortunately, the habit of strategic think- ing too often breaks down.

The reason it breaks down is that churches today confuse strategic thinking with institutional survival. In a sense, that is an easy mistake to make. After all, strategic planning focuses on program development. This leads to anxiety about finances. And institutional survival is necessary in order to provide financial resources. Strategic planning usually bogs down when churches believe they can’t afford current programs or innovative ideas.

The body of Christ is addicted to church institutions. The addiction began in the fourth century with the emergence of Christendom, and it continues today among established churches of all traditions and denomi- nations. We aren’t conscious of it, but we continually return to it. Just as a drug addict can’t even conceive of daily living without the combination of personal obligations, financial expectations, and the drug “fix” that will buy time to meet obligations; so also today’s church can’t even conceive of a Christian year without the combination of sacred programs, financial needs, and the institution that will buy time to perpetuate the programs.

Originally, the body of Christ was never addicted to institutions. But it was dependent on leadership succession! There was an organizational theory behind their strategic thinking, but it had nothing to do with buildings, repetitive programs, salaries, or denominational polities. Yes, these *might* be useful tactics for future leaders to use to pursue God’s mis- sion; but they were not *essential* to the mission. The only essential was the ability to hand off responsibility and authority to emerging leaders who would carry on the good work. In the fourth century, apostolic succession became confused with institutional survival, and the mistake has contin- ued to this day.