Making Better, Stronger Churches Through Organizational Design

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If contemporary churches want to increase their ministry effectiveness and experience enduring success, they must be willing to design and redesign themselves. To do so, they need to incorporate new strategies, structures and systems that give the strategic focus, momentum and operational support needed to thrive in an ever-changing world; while at the same time maintaining the very sacred nature that causes them to be uniquely different from all other organizations. This article seeks to examine organizational design in a ministry context by: 1) arguing its relevance and application to churches; 2) examining five trends that will impact the church over the next ten years, making church redesign efforts a must; 3) exploring design elements utilized by the first century church that are applicable today; 4) examining the critical role of church leaders in designing efforts.

The 21st century is in full swing and the world is experiencing rapid and profound change. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that change is inevitable for most contemporary organizations. Contemporary churches are no exception. Both internal and external forces are continuously in motion impacting churches all the time. Yet, change is often resisted as church leaders choose to hold on to traditional modes of existing and operating, often to the detriment of the successful fulfillment of the mission. A healthier approach to change is viewing it as an opportunity to reinvent something better. An example of this approach was captured in a popular television show of the 1970s called “The Six Million Dollar Man.” Is there a lesson in this television show that could be applicable for the church of today? No child growing up during the 1970s could forget the opening narration of “The Six Million Dollar Man”: 

Steve Austin, astronaut. A man barely alive. Gentlemen, we can rebuild him. We have the technology. We have the capability to build the world's first bionic man. Steve Austin will be that man. Better than he was before. Better, stronger, faster...¹

Maybe the reason the show was so popular was that it embraced change, turning tragedy into opportunity, misfortune into success and used the power of redesign to create a better body for the bionic man than what he had before. Likewise, if contemporary churches want to increase their ministry effectiveness and experience enduring success, they must be willing to design and redesign themselves. They need to incorporate new strategies, structures and systems that give the strategic focus, momentum and operational support needed to thrive in an ever-changing world; while at the same time maintaining the very sacred nature that causes them to be uniquely different from all other organizations. This article examines organizational design in a ministry context by:

- Arguing its relevance and application to churches
- Examining five trends that will impact the church over the next ten years, making church redesign efforts a must
- Exploring design elements utilized by the first century church that are applicable today
- Examining the critical role of church leaders in designing efforts

The Unique and Sacred Nature of the Church

Churches are not just corporations, organizations or institutions. Churches are special. The word church derives from the Greek word ekklesia and originally meant, “an assembly called out by the magistrate or by legitimate authority.”² Although the church is organized into local assemblies throughout the world, it is much more than an organization. It has a spiritual nature that makes it unique from all others organizations.

The first time ekklesia (church) is used in the spiritual sense is in Matthew 16:18, where Jesus promised to build His church (ekklesia). Applied spiritually, ekklesia suggests the called out of - that is, the saved who are called out of the world (John 17).³

The sacred, spiritual nature of the church affects every aspect of the church’s organizational life, from its mission to the structure and systems employed to fulfill that mission. In a spiritual sense, the church is the body of Christ and must maintain and protect the integrity of all that this holy description implies. In other words, the church must be recognized and set apart for is distinctive quality that relates not only to its divine origin, but also to its special function and mission on the earth.
The church is a unique organism in which Christ and the Spirit dwell. The church has a unique source of life, is directed toward particular ends and goals, and is governed by particular commitments and practices—such as prayer, worship, study, witness, and service—that give peculiar shape to the church’s life and ministry. The church cannot be explained in organizational terms alone and must guard against approaches to leadership that merely accommodate to the broader culture.4

The philosophy of this article respects the spiritual uniqueness of the church and seeks only to speak to the managerial aspects of the church, which would benefit from applying the principles of organizational design.

Churches are characterized by both human (organizational) and godly (spiritual) attributes. The church is at once the body of Christ and a human institution. Because of its unique dual nature, the local church requires both spiritual and organizational management. Church management becomes a challenge of blending the spiritual with the organizational.5

Helping church leaders apply the principles of organizational design will help meet this challenge. “Churches must respond spiritually to spiritual challenges and managerially to organizational challenges.”6 Too often churches have failed because of ignorance and under utilization of the latter. However, applying the proven principles of organizational design to a ministry context will help reverse this trend, causing churches to be successful or even more successful in fulfilling their vital missions.

Understanding and Applying Organizational Design in the Ministry Context

While most books on the topic of organizational design focus on business, the topics and concepts are transferable to other types of organizations like churches. In fact, not only is organizational design relevant to churches, but understanding the principles of organizational design is as essential and beneficial to church executives as they are to their corporate counterparts.

Organizational design is a formal, guided process for integrating the people, information and technology of an organization. It is used to match the form of the organization as closely as possible to the purpose(s) the organization seeks to achieve. Through the design process, organizations act to improve the probability that the collective efforts of members will be successful. 7
In laymen’s terms, it is the process of:

- Identifying the organization’s purpose or mission by answering the, “Why we exist?” question
- Developing the organization’s strategy, the plan of action for accomplishing the mission
- Building the structure to support the strategy
- Creating and implementing systems that will help keep things running smoothly so that the mission can be fulfilled

Churches, like all other organizations, must consider these key elements in the design process. Strategy, structure and systems are essential components of church design. In considering church strategy, it would seem that most churches in one way or another primarily exist to address the spiritual needs of people. While the business of every church should be of a spiritual and religious nature, how an individual church approaches conducting this business lies at the heart of a church’s particular strategy.

When defining its strategy, an organization needs to consider whom it wants to benefit, what the essential nature of the organization is, what makes it unique and how it gains its competitive advantage.8 “Today's churches that wish to effectively reach out cannot depend on their "welcome" sign to bring people in…”9 Thus, designing churches needs to be both strategic and deliberate. A church’s carefully planned strategy is imperative because it is the plan and methodology for accomplishing its goals. Metaphorically speaking, it could be characterized as the brains of the organization, giving it the focus and direction it needs for success.

If strategy is the brain of a church’s organizational design, then a church’s structure is the skeletal system that holds the entire organization together. “Organizational structure is the hard wiring of design”10 and can be defined as, “the form of an organization that is evident in the way divisions, departments, functions, and people link together and interact. Organization structure reveals vertical operational responsibilities, and horizontal linkages, and may be represented by an organization chart.”11 Determining structure includes deciding who does what, who answers to whom, who has the decision making power and to what degree there are rules in place to govern what everyone does. Just as the skeletal system provides support to the human body, while at the same time allowing it the agility to move and bend, the ideal structure for a church in today’s world would be one that gives it both the stability and agility needed to meet its objectives in a continuously changing environment. If a clear strategy and a solid structure are essential to optimal church design, then developing effective systems in the church to keep everything running smoothly is equally important.
Organizational systems can be viewed as the circulatory systems of an organization and, “constitute the soft wiring of design.” They are less visible aspects but play a crucial role in determining behavior and performance. An organization’s systems go directly to the heart of the organization, answering questions such as:

- How do people relate to one another?
- How are decisions made?
- For what reasons do people come together?
- How is authority exercised?
- How are people rewarded for value added behaviors?

“Organizational systems are stable, influence everyone's performance, and can be consciously designed.” Churches must evaluate its reward, decision making and meetings systems and make necessary changes to them as the need arises. In fact, churches must evaluate all elements of its current design, identify deficiencies and then redesign for improved effectiveness.

Unfortunately many church leaders believe that making changes to its organizational design to meet contemporary demands is somehow compromising the church’s moral position and function in the world. For example, there are still churches that limit the leadership of women, believing that to do so equates to allowing cultural pressures and influences to dictate church policy. However, the truth is just the opposite. Letting go of outdated traditional designs and redesigning churches for effective ministry in contemporary society both strengthens and expands the church’s moral voice in the world, causing it to influence more people instead of alienating them. Doing church as usual will simply not address the issues and challenges that people are facing. Without making changes many churches will lose their relevancy. How can church leaders determine if redesigning is necessary? How do they know what elements would need to be redesigned for maximum effectiveness? The world is constantly changing and being able to think strategically, recognizing the trends that will affect the church over the next ten years, would prove beneficial and should be considered in any redesign process.

**Emerging Trends That Will Necessitate Churches to Redesign**

In Mark 13:7, Jesus admonishes his disciples to watch for the signs of the times so that they would not be caught off guard by end time events. The word “watch” in this context is used 23 times in the New Testament and is the Greek transliterated word gregoreuo, which means to watch; give strict attention to, be cautious and active. If church leaders take heed of Jesus’ instructions by actively seeking to be aware of the trends and shifts that are taking place all around us, they will be better equipped to lead their organizations through the process of organizational design for optimal performance. Thus, presented here are five key trends and the
implications of these trends as it relates to the future of the church. They include globalization, technology, spirituality in the workplace, the Hispanic population and the leadership of women.

**Globalization**

Globalization is defined as the increasing global connectivity, integration and interdependence in the economic, social, technological, cultural, political and ecological spheres of our society. As a result, the world is rapidly changing from a local to a more global community. People across geographical boundaries are becoming more interdependent on one another. Terms like “the human family” and the “global community” are being coined to describe this growing closeness and interrelatedness. This creates greater opportunities for the church, which has always had the mandate to reach the uttermost parts of the world with the Gospel. Churches must break through global boundaries in order to seize these new opportunities. “Successful firms that work across global boundaries respect and value local differences as a source of innovation”

Many churches are moving outside of local and denominational boundaries, crossing geographic lines by forming strategic partnerships that for example connect churches in North America and Africa and South America together in covenant relationships. With this has come a shift in importance from the local church agenda to what is being called a “kingdom agenda.” This kingdom agenda is referred to as a new “global theology.” It calls for the internationalization of the church, which supports a concern for humanity in all the communities of the world. The local church fits into and addresses the concerns of the larger kingdom agenda. In understanding what this means for designing churches, “we shall likely see a world church emerge that is much more diverse ethnically and culturally; exhibits a greater mutual respect for the leadership, styles, ministries, and traditions of other Christian believers; is increasingly urban; and ministers more intentionally to the poor, oppressed, and suffering.” Church leaders must be aware of this trend, redesigning churches that remove global boundaries and viewing the local church as being intrinsically connected to the larger kingdom agenda of the universal church, connecting believers across the globe.

**Technology**

One of the driving forces behind globalization is the huge advancement in technology. Technology has literally revolutionized the world and ushered it into what is accurately called the information age. At the touch of one button, information can be disseminated all over the world at the speed of light. Technology has literally changed the way people interact and even speak. Most people understand what it means to be blogging, surfing the net and texting. This is the internet generation. The implication of technological advancement to the church is huge. However, in order to fully benefit from these advancements, church leaders must be willing to
think outside of the box. Strategically, the church must find ways to capitalize on the technological capabilities that will allow the spreading of the Gospel more effectively. This will mean a major overhaul of the way information is shared within organizations. “Today's explosion of information means that knowledge is now complex and widely dispersed. Rapid change forces people to seek continuous feedback about what is happening both inside and outside their organizations. Leaders can no longer rely on the small amount of information they alone can gather and remember.” Rapid technology expansion is a trend that the church cannot overlook. The evangelistic implications of this are extremely positive and far reaching.

_Spirituality in the workplace_

Another place where evangelism must be expanded is in the workplace. A growing trend that church leaders should be aware of is the growing relevance of spirituality in the workplace. This increasing interest opens up opportunities for evangelism that until now had not been possible. Some of the traditional ways that evangelism has been done is through crusades, which Billy Graham is most known for. Other popular forms are street evangelism and door-to-door evangelism. However, as society changes these methods may become less effective. People spend so much time on the roads travelling back and forth to work that when they are actually at home, the last thing that they want is an uninvited guest knocking at the door. A wonderful solution is marketplace evangelism. Marketplace evangelism is an effective alternative and is in its simplest form the sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the workplace. This is not a new concept. “Paul practiced marketplace evangelism. He didn't use a program or formula. No, Paul's evangelism was a natural outgrowth of his day-by-day interaction with those who happened to be there. Paul shared Christ at work, because he recognized the marketplace as a mission field.” Practically speaking, the marketplace is where people spend a great deal of time. Spiritually speaking, people are seeking spiritual solutions to life’s many problems. Spirituality in the workplace is an increasing trend. “More than ever, U.S. workers are looking to bring religion and spirituality into the workplace, experts say.” The church must capitalize on this trend and offer seeking employees the spiritual support they need. This will require church leaders to redesign their strategies, breaking through external boundaries to reaching people where they are located, both spiritually and physically.

_The Hispanic population_

Another driving force that will affect the church in the next 10 years is the rapid growth of the Hispanic population in the United States. Hispanics are currently the largest minority group in the U.S. In fact, “as of July 1, 2006, 44.3 million was the estimated number of Hispanics in the U.S. Hispanics constituted 15% of the nation's total population.” According to census bureau projections, this number is expected to continue to grow. It is essential for churches to recognize
this trend and ensure that they are prepared to effectively minister to the spiritual needs of this growing community of people. Such preparation would include, at minimum, taking steps to overcome cultural and language barriers. Churches would need to loosen some external boundaries that “are barriers between firms and the outside world.”24 When external and cultural barriers are removed, collaboration and cooperation with the broader community result. “The Hispanic population is expected to continue its fast growth. With churches actively developing leaders for growing Hispanic flocks, the faith of clergy and church members is likely to play a strong role in communities, politics and public life.”25

The leadership of women

Finally, another trend that will impact the church in coming years is the increasing role of women in leadership positions. Throughout the history of the church, women have played a significant role in the spreading of the Gospel. In fact, in Luke 24 women are centrally located and portrayed positively throughout the discourse. Clearly the leadership of women is seen as an important and effective method of accomplishing the mission of Christ, as they were first to be sent on the apostolic and evangelistic mission of telling others that Jesus was alive. The implications of this for the contemporary church are huge. As the numbers of women in church leadership continue to rise, “the definition of the pastoral role will probably become broader and more flexible as women bring more variety, fresh ideas, differing perspectives and a broader range of leadership styles into church leadership. The emphasis on community, informality and nurture in the church will be enhanced. Theologically and conceptually, more women in church leadership will increase the tendency toward organic and ecological models of the world and the church. More women in ministry may augment the trend toward lay ministry and the equipping of all believers.”26 With these benefits the contemporary church would do well to embrace female leadership, thus expanding its powerbase for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Design Elements Utilized by the First Century Church that are Applicable Today

Scanning the environment to recognize the trends that will affect the future of the church is part of the strategic thinking process that all churches should engage in. Armed with the insight and foresight that strategic thinking brings, churches can design their organizations so that they are placed in a ready position to capitalize on these trends. In the search for the most effective design elements that will secure the enduring sustainability of the church in turbulent times, contemporary church leaders need not look far. The early Christian communities of the first century church provide great insights and parallels from which contemporary church leaders can glean.
The early Christian church also emerged during a time of tremendous change and transformation. Roman roads and shipping routes snaked across Europe, North Africa, and the Near East, allowing for an unprecedented movement of goods, people, and ideas. In this turbulent environment, horizontal coordination rather than vertical control allowed the early church to expand rapidly. As Paul's letters suggest, the movement of couriers, evangelists, and missionaries could only have flourished in a context of mutual coordination rather than centralized control.27

Another key element relating to the structure of early Christian communities is that they did not always meet in one central location. When people are united around a common vision and values, they do not have to meet or be organized in any one location to prosper. In the book of Acts, we see that the early Christians met in both the temple and in the houses of other believers. In this sense, the early church’s structure was looser, fluid and more decentralized in nature. “Luke’s narrative implies a vigorous network of autonomous local churches managing their own affairs and initiating and maintaining their own links with other churches.”28 Additionally, early church communities were neither structured as, “a centralized hierarchy or congeries of disconnected congregations.”29 A good description is that the early church was tightly connected but loosely structured. The overall implication that the early church structure model holds for contemporary organizations is that loose, fluid structures are better designed to flourish in difficult and changing times.

**The Critical Role of Church Leaders in Designing Efforts**

In any thorough discussion of organizational design, organizational change must also be discussed, as the two processes go hand in hand. Effective organizational change does not happen instantaneously; neither does it arise by happenstance. It has been stated that everything rises and falls on leadership. This is certainly the case when it refers to affecting and managing strategic change in organizations. The difference between regular leadership and strategic leadership is that the impact of the latter is much greater. It is felt over long periods of time and is broader in scope, extending beyond the organization, acting and responding to trends and issues in the environment. Strategic leadership usually results in significant organizational change.30 As previously stated, for churches change is inevitable. “Change, not stability is the natural order of things in today’s global environment. Thus organizations need to build in change as well as stability, to facilitate innovation as well as efficiency.”31

The responsibility of guiding the change process rests in the hands of today’s church executives. This role is critical in creating, implementing and sustaining the kind of effective organizational change that is needed to meet the new challenges that are emerging every day. Unfortunately,
some church leaders may not be up to the challenge and are more inclined to maintain the status quo.

Our current church structures are strangling us, but we love them. More than that, they feel holy to us. To change them feels like disloyalty to God—even though we know it's just a chair, just an organizational arrangement, just a leadership position.\(^\text{32}\)

This attitude will likely lead to a loss of relevancy in the world the church needs to reach. Church leaders who understand, embrace and lead change are needed to prevent this outcome.

**Conclusion**

Having a good understanding of the principles and benefits of organizational design is critical for contemporary church leaders to effectively lead their organizations through inevitable change. In order to be effective change agents, church leaders must think strategically by considering emerging and future trends that will likely have a profound impact on the church as it journeys through continuously changing and turbulent terrain. Fortunately, church leaders can look to the design elements utilized by the first century church. The experiences of early church leaders provide a biblical model from which contemporary church leaders can glean. In summation, church leaders who are willing to approach change as an opportunity to redesign a better, more functional church will lead their churches into the future with great success.

Revisiting the example of the six million dollar redesign project of the bionic man, which of course was mere fantasy, the imagination considers the possibilities for churches to become stronger, better and faster through the process of redesign. At first glance a sort of bionic church may sound a bit quirky, but given the critical mandate that churches have of effectively ministering to the spiritual needs of a desperate and hurting world, a church redesigned to perform at an optimal level is an exciting prospect and an appropriate response to a rapidly changing world.

**Endnotes**


5. Be a good steward. In your church’s disaster plan, it’s a great idea to detail a process for expending relief funds that will be donated to the church. It’s also a good idea to plan for collecting funds and thanking donors. Think about how to handle the mountains of supplies headed your direction within a few weeks of the disaster. I have seen churches choose to work independently, but the decision to work with others was one of the best decisions we made as a church. Looking back on what has been and is still being accomplished, it’s clear God has been with us and we have been far stronger together. Most exciting are the 32 new believers who have come to Christ through disaster relief chaplain ministry in our community.