

Is Your Church Running a 20th or 21st Century Operating System? *by Mark DeYmaz*

By definition, an operating system (OS) is the software that supports a computer's basic functions, such as scheduling tasks, executing applications, and controlling peripherals.¹ Similarly, churches too have an OS that if not regularly upgraded will become a limiting factor that constrains capacity, slows or even stops growth and development.

Apart from an upgraded OS, many if not most pastors in America today are only managing decline. Why? Because they are still chasing and measuring success by 20th century metrics more than twenty years into the 21st century. To upgrade the OS, they'll need to change the metrics.

Consider the following comparisons and ask yourself: Is the OS of my church outdated... Are we chasing 20th or 21st century metrics?

1. Explanation v. Demonstration

In the 20th century, the way people were drawn to the church, and ultimately to Christ, was through a clear explanation of the Gospel. Yet in the 21st century, people are not so much drawn to Christ by explanation but by demonstration: Not so much to what Christians say but to what we do and how we live both individually and collectively via the local church. Think about it. In Matthew 5:16, Jesus did not say let people hear your good words. Rather, He said "Your light must shine before people in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." To reach the Nones, Dones, and others far away from Jesus, we should recognize this is a Matthew 5:16 century.

2. Homogeneity v. Multiethnicity

In the 20th century, pastors were taught that New Testament churches were segregated along racial and cultural lines, and to plant, grow, and develop churches focused on a specific people group (demographic). However, in 1978, Dr. Martin E. Marty challenged this notion by asking, "Is the Homogeneous Unit Principle, Christian?" In response the progenitor of the principle, Donald McGavran, wrote to Marty, "Do I beg of you, think of primarily as a missionary and evangelistic principle,"² going on to add, "There is danger, of course, that congregations (misapplying the Homogeneous Unit Principle) become exclusive, arrogant, and racist. That danger must be resolutely combated."³

3. Size v. Influence

In the 20th century, the success of a church was measured by a) numbers (i.e., Sunday morning attendance along with recorded salvations and baptisms), b) dollars (annual revenue and budget), and c) buildings (facilities developed and acreage owned). In the 21st century, however, it's not so much size but breadth of influence that churches should pursue and measure: For the greater a church's demographic diversity (presuming structural health) the greater its influence in an increasingly diverse

community. While numbers say something, they don't say everything. Throughout the country, healthy multiethnic churches typically have an affective impact in the community of churches ten times their size.

4. Buy Land & Build New v. Repurpose Abandoned or Underutilized Property

In the 20th century, church leaders purchased large tracks of land and led multi-million dollar campaigns to develop it, building new facilities to meet the wants and needs of their members. Yet in the minds of many non-believers and more specifically municipal governments, such development is seen as self-serving. Repurposing existing abandoned or underutilized property in the city can be done at a fraction of the cost of otherwise buying or building new and therefore is a much smarter play in the 21st century. In fact, “the latter garners far more interest and appreciation among nonbelievers and can then be leveraged to redeem a community.”⁴

5. Senior Pastor v. Team-based Management

In the 20th century, responsible authority for the church rested in the hands of a single person; namely, a senior pastor to whom all vocational staff reported with governing boards following what was, in most cases, the man's lead. In the secular world, this is often described as an authoritarian or visionary management style. Yet collaboration, empowerment, and diversity are valued traits of the 21st century and critical for leadership in a complex, intersectional society. Today churches are better served by a team of people charged collectively with responsibility for the organization and together that function in the strength of their gifting.

6. Sustaining Innovation v. Disruptive Innovation

In the second half of the 20th century disruptive innovation became a hallmark of the American Church.⁵ Churches like Willow Creek flipped the script by determining to evangelize on Sunday mornings and disciple Christians on Wednesday nights; youth ministry became a vocational profession; and Christian music moved out of the pews into pop culture. While innovation persists into the 21st century, it's more sustaining than it is disruptive. Sustaining innovation seeks to maintain satisfaction and customer loyalty through incremental improvement, while disruptive innovation is fueled by a different set of values than those currently affirmed by conventional wisdom.⁶ Not only to survive but thrive post-pandemic, churches embrace disruptive innovation.

7. Tithes & Offerings v. Multiple Streams of Income

Most households today to have two or more income streams. As households have gone, so too is going the local church. Tithes and offerings alone, then—as if one paycheck in the collective church household—are no longer enough to fully fund, grow, or sustain effective ministry in an increasing number of congregations.⁷ Among other reasons, generational shifts in attitudes and approaches to giving coupled with income inequality and wealth gaps among the changing demographic of American society means churches going forward, in order to advance bold mission and vision, must learn to leverage their assets to create multiple streams of income beyond tithes and offerings.

As it has in the past and again in our time, the world is rapidly changing. To get beyond survival or otherwise mere management of decline, pastoral leaders today and the churches they lead will need to change with it. The OS must be upgraded, the metrics pitched to the 21st century.

¹ This article adapted from the book, *Red Skies: 10 Essential Conversations Exploring Our Future as the Church*, by Rowland Smith (100 Movements Publishing, 2022)

² Gary L. McIntosh, "The Life and Times of Donald A. McGavran," *Church Growth Network*, <https://www.churchgrowthnetwork.com/freebies2/2015/3/13/the-life-and-ministry-of-donald-a-mcgavran>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mark DeYmaz, *Disruption: Repurposing the Church to Redeem the Community*, (Thomas Nelson, 2017), p. 44

⁵ Ibid, p. 3

⁶ Ibid, pp. 7, 8

⁷ Mark DeYmaz and Harry Li, *The Coming Revolution in Church Economics* (Baker Books, 2019), p. 100