

The Salvation Army Leadership Letter

Issue 14:



Te Ope Whakāora

Bill Hybels' Leader's Health Check

Dear Dave

You asked me to comment on Bill Hybels' talk on *These Things We Must Do*—from last year's Leadership Summit; and you particularly want me to say what his talk means for church leaders here in New Zealand.

I loved his talk! I think it's the hardest hitting talk I've ever heard him give; and in drawing out lessons for us, I don't want to soften his words to make them more palatable.

Bill began by noting the sailing magazine he'd read that mentioned the 35 things you've got to do to win sailboat races, the 50 facets of leadership one book said you have to master to lead people, John Maxwell's 21 irrefutable laws of leadership, Jack Welch's eight leadership basics for growing a great organisation—and two colleagues' request to talk at the Summit about the four things (just four!) we must do to grow prevailing churches.

So to help him get clarity and urgency, Bill imagines his colleagues sitting at his deathbed with a microphone as the doctor comes in and tells them Bill's only got four sentences left in him! So his colleagues, Jimmy (Mellado) and Steve (Bell), tell him not to waste words saying goodbye to his family, quoting Scriptures or singing a final song to God—just 'give us the four points, and then die.'

Here's a brief summary of Bill's talk about his 'dying' moments—followed by the reflections you requested.

Keep the vision clear

His first dying sentence to his friends is, 'keep the vision clear', because as Proverbs 29.18 says, 'Without a vision, the people perish'—that is, their dreams of doing something great for God die, although they themselves still live.

Bill paints an alarming picture of the crippling paralysis that sets in within months of vision getting fuzzy, and he warns us that this is what happens to 'God's sons and daughters' when we don't cast a compelling Christ-honouring vision that grips our people—they perish, die on the inside!

Then he comments on how congregations give up believing their pastors and leaders will ever paint a picture that will give them passion about something—as they still gather on Sundays and sing their songs, endure mindless and heartless sermons, and drive away 'wondering why they bother with the whole thing. They just perish.'

So from his imagined deathbed Bill urges us to keep the vision clear, **talking** about it at our team meetings till it burns like a fire inside us, **preparing** for the day we share it with our whole church family 'like prizefighters preparing for a heavy weight fight', and **putting** 'every last ounce of energy and emotion into it knowing it's the most important talk we'll give all year.'



Then he tells us what happens when leaders do this. People's eyes get bigger, their posture straightens, their smiles get wider, and they start to soar—at Willow Creek, standing in long lines at the end of his vision talks as they sign up for the new vision. They're captured by it; and Bill says we owe it to our people because they'll perish without it.

'Vision', says Bill, is 'the most potent offensive weapon in the leader's arsenal So.... Keep the vision clear.'

Get the people engaged

Bill's second deathbed whisper is, 'get the people engaged'—just as in Nehemiah 4.6 'all the people worked with all their hearts.' We're to get every single person in our church working with all their hearts.

Bill illustrated this 'ownership' principle with the amazing story of a U.S. Navy captain turning his 'ship and crew into the most unified, highest performing ship in the U.S. Navy.' Then for the next 10 minutes, 20% of his talk, he walked us through the utter tragedy of his dad that no pastor ever engaged—and what *would* have engaged him!

I've never heard Bill talk so movingly about his non-engaged dad. In the church Bill grew up in, pastors came and went every four years, and as a boy, Bill secretly hoped that just one of these pastors would engage his dad and make him 'a stakeholder of some sort. But it never happened, and he went to his grave without ever feeling the thrill of being a part of a Kingdom dream team,'—although he was one of the best leaders Bill has ever known. Still today, if he thinks about it too long, he breaks down—the utter, terrible waste of a gifted life!

So what would have got his dad on board with a pastor or leaders in a local church? Here's Bill's list.

1. His dad would have needed to be quite sure that 'the pastor of that church was totally committed to the future of that church'—because his dad was a high commitment guy and would never sign on with a low-commitment leader.

Then, assuring us he doesn't want to be disrespectful, but using the strongest language I've ever heard him use with leaders, he tells us if he we're not in the pastorate because we have a burning vision to see God do something in our church, we should 'Just get out because the Kingdom cannot proceed with leaders like that.' His 'dad would never have followed a half-hearted, kind of peacekeeping, neutral individual'; he'd only have responded to someone with a vision firestorm burning inside them.

2. His dad would 'never have signed up for a small dream ... a safe, sanitized, low-risk church vision'—because high capacity people like him don't 'sign up for tidy, little, easily achievable missions.' They need dangerous ones, and we have to provide them.

3. His dad would never have 'stepped forward, just kind of voluntarily, to offer his services', never have raised his hand in a service, or gone to a table to sign up for a little committee—because 'Leaders respond to other leaders, and he would have had to be asked.' To sign up the high capacity people we need so much, we should be up front and ask them for their help. We shouldn't say 'no' for them before they're asked.

4. To become involved in the local church, his dad 'would have had to have had a crystal clear idea of what he was being asked to do'—and the space to do it in. He wouldn't want you checking over his shoulder every 15 minutes.



5. To be a volunteer in the local church, **his dad 'would have needed feedback and evaluation'**—confirming when he was on the right track or helping him back on course when he wasn't.

6. Finally, like every volunteer in every church, **his dad would have needed an occasional reminder that what he was doing 'really, really matters, and it matters for all eternity.'** Volunteers who work at their jobs for 50 hours a week, come home to a host of family tasks, and then pour themselves out for the local church, need to hear that they're 'not crazy' doing this—just as Jesus used to assure his followers that they weren't crazy for giving their lives to follow him.

In summing up, Bill said that if the pastor and leaders of the church had offered those kinds of things to his dad, he would have given his everything for it, and probably pulled in half a dozen of his high capacity business buddies with him. But, sadly, it never happened. Instead, he just warmed a pew his entire adult life, and dropped dead from a massive heart attack at about the age Bill is now. And Bill says there are millions of people like that in our churches—just waiting to give the Kingdom task their best shot ... if only someone would ask them. So he urges us to do something and engage our people!

Make your gatherings memorable

Bill's third deathbed recommendation is, 'make your gatherings memorable'—that is, create such great church services that our people would never think of missing them and 'regularly kick themselves around the block for not inviting more friends with them.'

Bill then reflected on the early days of the Willow Creek story when he went door to door every day, six days a week, for six weeks, asking people why they didn't go to church. People gave him one main answer—they were bored to death by the services; they couldn't stand them, wouldn't subject themselves to them, and found them irrelevant to their lives. Then, he says, 'Things haven't changed.'

Building on Acts 2.43, 'And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe', he illustrated the 'awe' principle from a large service in London—and one at the little church he attends in the summer time. Both were awesome.

Then he added that the older he gets, the more he realises that when people now come to our services, they come hoping against hope that God will touch their lives—that He'll meet them, His Spirit will whisper to them, and something awe-inspiring will happen that day. So, he says, all of us involved in services should 'work really, really hard to make our services as memorable and as potentially awesome as we possibly can', because people don't want services as usual. And using several further illustrations from their ministry at Willow Creek, he repeats his plea to make our services memorable.

Pace yourself for the long haul

Finally, from his imagined deathbed, Bill urged us to pace ourselves for the long haul—that is, 'to run in such a way as to win the prize' (1 Corinthians 9.24).

To make his point, Bill dwelt at length on the Ultra Marathon Man who worked up to running extraordinary distances—and his own ministry crisis at the 15-year mark.



Then he commented how in that 4-year crisis, Willow Creek took the (then) daring steps of going to team teaching, team leadership, and giving him summer study breaks—and how now, reaching the 30-year mark, his passion is to finish well, even as the One he'll stand before one day finished His race well.

So, with the Summit ending, and to drive this fourth point home, Bill told one last story about attending a pastor friend's celebration to mark 50 years of being a senior pastor.

Bill spoke first; then the aging, white-haired pastor rose to his feet, and as he went to walk off the stage the church cheered and applauded him. Then he turned to Bill and the congregation, and told them how God called him to the ministry when they were singing a hymn in the country church he attended as a boy. Then he recited all four verses of the hymn that changed his life ... 'I love thy church, O Lord'—right through to 'For her my tears shall fall. For her my prayers ascend. To her my cares and toils be given till toils and cares shall end.'

And there on the stage, as this aged pastor spoke, Bill broke down as he looked at this man who'd 'given his guts' for the church God loves and calls His bride. For that church, said Bill, ending his talk and the Leadership Summit, is 'The hope of the world.'

What Bill's talk means for us

Dave, nearly a year has passed since Bill gave his profoundly moving talk; and since you'll need something on paper for your leadership meetings, I've written this brief summary so you can talk about it together—then discuss the lessons and questions I've added.

As I've pondered his talk over many months, still moved as much as the day I first heard it, I believe he's touched on four things that deeply trouble the New Zealand Church—and on which its very survival depends.

Starved of vision, our churches are perishing

With a few notable exceptions, our churches are starved of vision—so they languish, with few people finding and following Jesus. Yet God intended His church to be the hope of the world. So what needs to change?

To grow our churches again, we've got to grasp that the visions that change churches (like the vision that burned in the young Bill Hybels' heart as he listened to Dr Bilezikian) start in a senior leader's heart, spread through the leadership team, and burst into flame in the congregation—just as Bill described in his talk, because as he says elsewhere, 'vision is a picture of the future that produces passion in you.'

But even great visions die in 30 days. So when we've found and shared our vision (or dream), and got our people on board, we've got to give great vision-casting messages at strategic times of the year and work at keeping the vision alive and growing in people's hearts—through our praise and worship, our service prayers, our notices, our testimonies, and especially our preaching. When it comes to churches and church services, we reap what we sow!

If you haven't got a compelling church vision or dream yet, start today. Read website Letters 10, 11, and 13; and begin with all urgency because your church's very survival may depend on it. Worsening denominational statistics remind us that more of the same will not do; our churches must change or face a slow and painful death.



Let's each therefore determine that from this moment forward, we'll go all out to find and implement the compelling vision that will change and grow our churches—because the local church is the hope of the world!

Without engaging our people, we'll never win

We know from long experience that a pastor can only care for a small group of people; and today we're a land of small churches—with dedicated pastors pouring themselves out for their little flocks, hoping against hope that something good will happen one day. But as the statistics show, it rarely does, because one person can't grow a church on their own, no matter how dedicated or godly they may be.

Churches grow when leaders find a compelling vision and come to their congregations with the vision firestorm, Bill mentioned, burning in their hearts—and so share it, that the people sign up for it, and gifted individuals like Bill's dad sign up for it when approached to do something 'crazy' for God! And even if you feel you don't have any 'gifted' people at the moment, God can make up the difference ... if your people are on fire for God—like John Wesley's Methodists and General Booth's Salvationists!

So our first challenge is to find a vision that overwhelms us; our second challenge is to so share it with our people that they sign up for it with enthusiasm and commitment.

To grow a local church, we must engage our people—even if we've only got a few!

Without great church services, we'll never grow

Our church services have let us down for years, and are still the biggest reason for people not coming to church—or dropping out of church when they leave.

The great mid-twentieth century theologian and preacher, Helmut Thielicke, wrote about them as the crowds began emptying out of the western churches. Later, people told the young Bill Hybels they were the main reason why they didn't come to church—and as he said in his talk, things haven't changed and may even be worse.

In fact, some years ago, a Kiwi church got graduate business students from the local university to survey the many thousands of people who lived near their church; and the students found 'the overwhelming majority' of those who responded said they'd attend a church like the one doing the survey—if invited by a friend or relative to something special. Out there, it's not the people who're reluctant to come; it's us who aren't ready to receive them!

To grow our churches, we must, as Bill says, work very, very hard at putting on the best services we possibly can—using the great special Sundays of the year to invite people to a service they'll connect with, and closing the 'style' gap between our special and ordinary services because God wants His church to grow.

So we get a compelling vision, we powerfully engage all our people, and we put on great church services to connect with the people we're reaching for Jesus. Without great church services, we'll never grow.



Without pacing ourselves, we won't last

Ministry, whether paid or voluntary, is a marathon—not a sprint.

And whether it's paid, or voluntary, we can launch into it with such energy and lack of self-care that we burn out, and unlike Jesus and Paul, never complete our course—dragging our church down with us because we didn't pace ourselves for the long haul.

So let's lead with vision, engage our people with enthusiasm, put on outstanding services, and so run as to complete our course—these are Bill's 'deathbed' challenges!

The local church—the hope of the world

Dave, I'm glad to comment on Bill's great talk.

And if perhaps it is a far cry from the Leadership Summit and Bill's big church in Chicago, to your small but growing church in New Zealand, the things Bill shared are as important for you here as they are for him there.

You do indeed just have a handful of people at present, but you've started the journey to a new future.

Give top priority now to finding that vision that will transform your church. Share it with your people with all the grace and passion God gives you. Give your services a 'mission wash' so they really reach and hold newer people—as well as holding your present people. And take a little time for yourself out of each day, your day off each week, a little extra time if possible each month, and your full entitlement of holidays each year. Aim, like Jesus and Paul, and Bill and his aged pastor friend, to finish your ministry with joy (Jn 17.4, 2 Tim 4.7-8).

And the Lord bless you—and may all your dreams for your church come true; because local churches like yours, that focus on Jesus, are indeed the hope of the world!

Goodbye.

Gordon Miller

Territorial Church Growth & Development Consultant

Email: gordon_miller@nzf.salvationarmy.org

To discuss at leaders meetings

1. Do we leaders have a compelling vision that we're passionate about—and if we don't, what do we now need to do to get one (go back to Letters 10,11, and 13 and start right now)?
2. Are all our people on fire with the vision, or dream, that God has placed in our hearts—and if they aren't, what will we now do to engage them (list the steps you'll take, once you've got a compelling vision)?
3. Are we putting on outstanding church services that connect well with newer and established people—and if not, what will we need to do to banish the cringe factor and really communicate with everyone present?
4. Are we carrying out our ministry, whether paid or voluntary, in such a way that we will complete our course with joy—and if not, what practical steps should we now take to do so (list them)?

And for denominational leaders

Are we doing everything we can to help our pastors find a compelling vision, engage their people, develop outstanding cringe-free services, and complete their ministries with joy—if not, what steps will we and our denominational colleagues now take to ensure we are (list the steps and begin actioning them at once)?