

“BEYOND THE BOX: INNOVATIVE CHURCHES THAT WORK”

By Bill Easum & Dave Travis
(Group Publications, 2003)

A Review & Summary
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Bill Easum (Former United Methodist Pastor now working as a Church Growth Consultant – easumbandy.com) and Dave Travis (Former Southern Baptist Pastor now working with the Leadership Network – leadnet.org) have combined to author an quick to read but none-the less inspiring overview of what they call “Beyond the Box churches and Church leaders.” I read this easily in a Sunday afternoon and it left me with all kinds of good ideas and challenging thoughts. Not bad from two aging boomers, raised in the modern era – they seem to have their finger on the pulse of what appears to be emerging in what may be the church next.

The theme of the book is that the future belongs to churches that understand that healthy growth comes not through addition but multiplication. A corollary theme is the healthy church leaders focus on contributing to a larger kingdom movement rather than growing a single institution.

They describe three kinds of churches: (i) In the Box, (ii) Out of the Box, and (iii) Beyond the Box. Most churches in North American can be described as “In the Box churches.” They tend to be stuck or in decline; tethered to property; wanting to protect heritage; a bit controlling; formal membership is important; and staff are doers. (Among other things.) “Out of the Box Churches” are the churches that are *thriving and growing today*; they often relocate or expand; they invite the public in (I suspect they mean ‘seeker sensitive’); are good at training key leaders; comfortable with change; tend to ignore constitutions; focus on volunteers rather than members; and staff are equippers.

The third type of church is what this book is all about, “**Beyond The Box Churches.**” These are churches that live and lead as if the box doesn’t exist. Some of their characteristics:

- They are radically innovative.
- Not tethered to property, and often multi-sited.
- They pursue opportunity with a missionary mindset.
- Think broadly in terms of kingdom rather than institution and heritage.
- Multiplies rather than adds in terms of leaders, ministries and new churches.
- Not just comfortable with change but embraces change.
- Rather than being a slave to the constitution or ignoring the constitution like “Out of the Box Churches” they develop flexible guidelines.
- Rather than a focus on formal membership or the deployment of volunteers, the focus is on disciples servants. (I found some contradiction here because they were willing to talk about covenant but not formal membership – perhaps they saw covenant as simply a “strong relational word?”)
- Instead of staff as doers or staff as equippers, the whole church is an equipping culture.

They make the claim that “Beyond the Box” Churches are far closer to what you’d expect to find in early Christianity, at least in contrast to “Modern In The Box Christendom,” It would easy to cynical of such a claim, doesn’t everyone say that about their approach to church??? However take a look at some of the parallels the authors draw with the early church that they believe typify “Beyond the Box churches”:

- The early church was led by nonprofessional missionaries who traveled in teams.
- Early Christians didn't set out to establish a form of organized religion.
- The early church was more of movement than an organized institution.
- The early church "happened" wherever two or three Christians gathered together.
- The early church didn't need any formal agreement of the people participating, or formal membership, or some sort of dispensations from a head office.
- The purpose of the church was to model and proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God, telling the story of Jesus to anyone who would listen.

To unpack all this the authors focus on five issues – two leadership issues and three ministry practices. And they do this by looking what they see are specific working models of "Beyond the Box" churches. All of the churches they chose were American – despite the fact that the Leadership Network that Dave Travis is a part of, is very conscious of serving Canada as well as the U.S. It could be that the authors just didn't look beyond the border, or it could be that they just couldn't find what they were looking for in Canada. Both in fact may be true.

I suspect by the definitions found in this book that my church, Redwood Park would be considered an "Out of the Box Church," which might dabble with a few "Beyond the Box" ideas, but we're not there yet. Perhaps further along the continuum towards "Beyond the Box" might be Dave Fowler's multi-site congregation based out of Clarington Community Church, or perhaps Bruxy Cavey's multi-site, "Meeting Place," moving out from Oakville to Hamilton and beyond. But even those two might still be more "Out of the Box" than "Beyond the Box."

KEY THOUGHTS FROM EACH OF THE FIVE CRITICAL ISSUES/CHAPTERS:

Issue One: *Beyond One Person Leadership – Shifting to Teams*

While the authors affirm that the senior pastor is a key element in the equation that leads to strong church and kingdom impact, they want to undo the myth of the heroic leader, that everything rises and falls on the senior pastor. Rather everything rises and falls on the quality of the team, with a Senior Pastor who is a "Level 5" leader, to use the Collins term, they quote from "Good To Great." In "Good To Great" a Level 5 leader is someone who "channels their ego needs away from themselves into the larger goal of building a great company... While they are incredibly ambitious leaders, their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves." These level 5 leaders intentionally build up other leaders round them so that the leadership does not all fall solely to one person.

The authors also see a problem with church boards who function like boards of directors for businesses or professional sports teams who too easily "fire the coach." Often this is because they buy into the myth of the heroic leader (who doesn't measure up), rather than seeing themselves as a part of an effective team with the Senior Pastors using some sort of coherent team strategy. (These guys would clearly reject the Carver governance model for a local church.)

In their call for a shift from one heroic leader to team, they call the church to three areas of leadership empowerment:

- (I) Enlarge and empower both paid and unpaid staff by:
 - Recruiting most of your staff from within. (And being incredibly careful when asking someone to join the team from the outside.)

- Letting the ministry leader closest to the new staff person choose the staff member for his or her team. Often this would be the role of the Senior Pastor, but that would change as the church gets larger.
- Expand the concept of “staff” to include a mix of paid and unpaid. (And don’t see a big distinction between the two.)
- Expand your staff team through internships – high school, college, recent grads, and any age!

(II) Build your board members into an accountable leadership team.

- They note that most senior pastors/church leaders don’t spend enough time selecting, training, nurturing and developing board members.
- Board members serve because of their prior leadership and their demonstrated commitment to the vision and values of the congregation.
- Senior Pastors should treat board members more like unpaid staff than permission withholders. (Or guardrails, to use a Redwood term.) They are invited to be a part of staff planning processes. They are invited to come with their spouses to retreats and meetings with staff. (*Note for Redwood Readers: I read this book after our current proposal to change the staff/board structure and the two groups interact or perhaps didn’t interact!*) The idea is for the staff to not see the Board as that “other group” or vice-versa, (an issue we’re trying to address at Redwood).

(III) Give lay pastors the power they need for ministry.

- The focus here is on deploying an army of equipped servants within the congregation.
- We need to see everyone in the congregation as having the potential of being a lay pastor.

Issue 2: *Beyond One Team – Moving to a Culture of Equipping*

- The call is to stress the value of equipping everyone in the congregation to serve, whether on or off teams.
- Words create worlds, so watch your language! Two words that hinder the development of a culture of equipping are *staff* and *volunteer*. Get rid of the class distinction! Move to words like *team member*, *teammate*, *worker*, and *leader*. Above all, just stay away from the V word!
- The key measure of a leader is his or her effectiveness at reproducing ourselves. (More than what appears to be the current success of the ministry, its numbers, and so forth.)
- Service can precede salvation. People bring their unbelieving friends and say, “Come help me, as I serve at my church.” We need to find place for brand new people to serve.
- Think training more than academics. Think apprentice when you do training. This is not to eliminate academics, but knowledge without practical training is just not useful.

Issue 3: *Beyond My Church – Thinking Kingdom Community*

- Recognize that our communities/ cities are not likely to be changed by any single congregation or leader. Instead they will more likely change as God’s people band together to be “the body of Christ” to every corner of our community/city. That is we are to think city church (the term Redwood uses) or church in a city. (the preferred term of the authors).
- Even though a particular congregation may be one’s calling, it is never the whole of one’s ministry – it must include a view of the whole community or city.
- The call is to work cooperatively with other churches for the sake of the growth of the kingdom in the city.

Issue 4: *Beyond a Single Location – One Church in Many Locations*

- Rather than a single congregation being tethered to one location, begin thinking about a church that meets in many locations but has the same core values, mission, administration, budget, treasury, and staff as a single-site church. Think one congregation growing in multiple locations.
- Mission rather than space, determines the agenda.
- Multiple sites allows a large church to feel smaller, while maintaining many of the advantages of a large church. Creates better stewardship of funds and resources.
- Each location feels like it is a part of something bigger.
- From a statistical perspective, multi-sites are responsible for more converts than relocation.

Issue 6: *Beyond Church Planting – Planting Churches That Plant Churches*

- *This is by far the most visionary and challenging of the chapters/ issues covered.*
- The theme here is that we must focus on planting reproducing churches that will become the centers from which other churches will be planted. We're talking developing a movement that results in the multiplication of churches, not just the addition of churches.
- Churches plant churches not denominations or parachurch organizations.
- Church planting is not an end in itself but rather a means by which we reach more souls.

In so many ways the book is not radical to those of us who like reading about where the church is headed. This book simply points us to the visible evidence of what God is doing in a number of churches that appear to be trend indicators for the future. These are trends that the authors are convinced will strengthen the church in her mission to reach and disciple the lost. From my perspective and what little I've attempted to figure out, they are not too far off.

The book concludes by giving a description of a "Beyond The Box Leader" that is quite consistent with the statements above. One extra comment about a Beyond The Box Leader caught my attention: *"Because they are sailing uncharted waters, none of these leaders has or follows a strategic plan. Instead they have a clear destination in mind and make up their strategic map as they go. Think of strategic mapping not has a highway map that says "this way" or "turn here" but as a topographical map in which explorers and surveyors fill in the hazards, the terrain, the canyons, the streams – contours of the culture. They make up a lot of it as they go. For these leaders, methodology is relatively unimportant compared to the one driving criterion: Does it transform people and community?"*

The book is worth a Sunday afternoon to read, particularly the visionary chapter on planting churches that plant churches and the challenging examples of churches that are doing that. It's insight into where God is leading His church, or at least portions of his church. It paints a bright picture of what the church may be in the not too distant future.