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The Emerging Trend of Comprehensive Church Consultations

Sam S. Rainer III

About the Writer

Sam S. Rainer III serves as Senior Consultant with the Rainer Group in Louisville, Kentucky. This church-consulting group started by his father, Thom Rainer, now serves a wide variety of consulting needs ranging from major research to church and denominational consulting. Sam also serves as President of Rainer Research, a major division of the Rainer Group. In this leadership role, he is responsible for the acquisition of new clients, the organization of structural paradigms, and construction of innovative demonstrative solutions. He also works in an ongoing consulting relationship with a major denominational entity in the development of research constructs and discipleship paradigmatic values. He is a Master of Divinity candidate at the Southern Baptist Seminary and has graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from the University of South Carolina majoring in Finance and Marketing. In addition to doing church consulting, Sam also manages the procurement of gas and power in the Western United States and Western Canada for an energy-consulting firm that oversees \$4 billion in energy spending of large industrial end-users. He can be reached by e-mail at samr@rainergroup.com or you may write him at Rainer Group, 13505 Rock Bay Court, Louisville, KY 40245.

The phone at our house would sometimes ring with a different cadence. When my two younger brothers and I heard that particular ring, we knew that it was for Dad. Since I was young, my father has owned a church consultation business. What started out as a small, modest practice run just by my father now includes several consultants, myself included. But back then, it was his idea to set up a separate phone line in our house with a distinguishing ring so that we knew not to answer with the typi-

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cal “Yo, what’s up?” Needless to say, the business has grown. And requests still pour in from members and leaders within churches who are concerned about the overall health of their local congregation.

How Great is the Need for Church Consulting?

There are roughly 400,000 churches in the United States today.¹ In a survey conducted by our research team, 41 percent of the churches surveyed mentioned the need for some outside expertise.² If this percentage of churches is indicative of the entire United States, then over 160,000 churches are in some need for the ministry of a church consultant. While an exhaustive study and assessment has yet to take place, our team believes that the number of church consultants in the United States who do some form of comprehensive consultation totals less than 200 to 300. If this number holds true, then there is only one consultant for about every 530 churches that desire some form of church consultation. While the comprehensive approach to church consultation is a major way in which the health of a church is analyzed, I will first give a brief overview of what a general church consultation entails.

Coupled with the fact that there is a paucity of consultants, many churches are also unable or unwilling to utilize consultants. In the same survey, our research team found three major reasons that this reluctance occurs. First, many churches simply do not know whom to ask when they uncover the need for outside counsel. The second reason is that they did not know the qualifications of these consultants. Lastly, they were concerned about the cost. As a result of these reasons, some organizations are forming to help clarify the criteria of one who is called a church consultant. In depth training occurs at these organizations, as well as classes for certification as an expert in the field of church consulting.

Why Should a Church Contact an Outside Consultant?

Church consultation is a broad discipline that covers many facets of church needs. And the field covers churches of any size, from small, rural churches to large, suburban megachurches. Granted, a larger church typically has more resources that allows for a deeper analysis, but consultants also have much to offer the smaller church as well. And the comprehensive consultant is one who will work with a wide range of church sizes, even crossing denominational lines. While I cannot detail every possible way in which a church might seek outside help, I can specify several issues that are frequent problem areas for churches. One of these

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is the breaking through of new growth barriers. My firm, for instance, has completed three separate consultations with Parkway Wesleyan Church in Roanoke, Virginia. Pastor John Ott first called us when he wanted to know how to push the church past the 500 attendance barrier. As the church continued to grow, we helped the leadership team through both the 600 and 700 barriers as well. While growing pains can be a common request, the flip side is stagnant growth. Some churches remain in a rut and need the perspective of an expert to help pull them out of their own inertia. Questions about facilities and relocation are also areas in which many churches seek the aid of a consultant. Changes in leadership or changes in ministry and worship approach can spark the need to request outside help as well. Some churches can experience a multitude of situations and problems at once, and a comprehensive consultant typically covers the spectrum of issues.

My home church in Mount Washington, Kentucky is a great example of a church going through a change in demographics in the surrounding community. What was once a small farming town of only a few thousand has quickly become one of the fastest growing areas of the state. As farmland is sold and suburban development takes place, a whole shift in the dynamics of the community is occurring. The church has assembled an entire team that meets bi-weekly to discuss the possibilities of the future and the steps we are going to take in order to meet the needs of the community. One of the first items on our agenda was to order a demographic study from a firm that specializes in community surveys and census data.

There is a whole laundry list of possible areas in which a church may seek outside help. Other topics include optimum ministry placement within staff and laity, assessment of interim periods as a church anticipates calling a new pastor, and evaluations of certain internal programs, such as Sunday school. I will not continue with an ongoing list, but conclude with the suggestion that any major decision within a church, or any decision with large dollar amounts attached to it, should warrant the discussion of contacting a church consultant.

Who Does Church Consulting?

Earlier, I stated that only about 200 to 300 comprehensive church consultants exist in the United States. The question then arises, who are these consultants and are they qualified for the task? Many of these consultants are bi-vocational, and consulting churches is not the primary source of their income. Those that are bi-vocational typically serve in the area of academia as well

as in the arena of consulting. They are deans of seminaries as well as professors. I am a bi-vocational consultant as well. I do not work in the academic field, but instead work in the corporate world for an energy consulting firm. I have been able to apply many of the principles learned from helping manage *Fortune 500* companies to that of churches. During the five-day workweek, I am doing my duties in the secular world. On the weekends I am traveling to churches. Additionally, a few church consultants own and manage their firm, which is their primary source of income. While these types of companies are uncommon, there are some with such a focus.

Most church consultants, however, are solo practitioners. They are individuals that have experience within churches and have branched into consulting. There are also a few firms that have some level of endowment given to them for the purposes of research and church assistance. Additionally, some denominational leaders serve as consultants. Their income, though, is typically derived from the salary of the denomination and is not driven by the fees of the service.

Where Can a Church Find a Consultant?

The first way in which a church can begin the search for an outside expert is through this organization, the American Society of Church Growth (ASCG). The ASCG publishes a listing of church consultants. Another way in which a church may find a consultant is in a directory of secular consulting organizations. While such a list is not exhaustive, it will contain many good references. Referrals are also commonplace. Lastly, and perhaps the most common way in which a church finds these experts, is through the use of an Internet search engine, such as Yahoo or Google. I quickly performed such a search, typing "church consulting" into a Google search, and got several sites offering an array of services.

A Historical Overview of Church Consultation

The discipline of consultation has been around for a long time. And it was only a matter of time before it carried over to the arena of the local church. Comprehensive consultations are a relatively newer approach, but one can still trace its roots to the first century. So how did the discipline of church consultation start? And what are the historical factors that make it relevant today?

To begin, no one point in time can be attributed as the start date of church consultation. In reality, it has gradually formed since the first century and is still evolving today. In the terms of

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helping churches obtain goals to better health, one could trace the roots of church consultation back to the first century. In a technical sense, comprehensive church consultation existed since the time of Pentecost (Acts 2), and Paul could be one who is penned as the first comprehensive church consultant. For example, he gives insights to the church at Corinth concerning the proper use of spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12. I Corinthians 12:1 states, "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware." (NASB) He also provided leadership consultation advice to Timothy in his two letters to him. To Timothy he wrote, "But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." (II Timothy 4:5, NASB)

For the sake of brevity, I will jump forward from the first century to the nineteenth century. This period of church consultation was characterized by denominational input. For most churches during this time, the denomination played a major role in delivering guidance to the local church. Like the comprehensive church consultant, the denomination served as the hub, or sole contact point, for most local churches. Few, if any, sources for additional guidance existed beyond the denomination.

With the twentieth century came the advent of specialized consultations. Particularly beginning in the 1930s, these specialty firms were companies that existed beyond the denomination. The most prominent consultants specialized in facilities and stewardship. The raising of capital funds with the church was a popular focus among many of these specialists.

In the 1960s and 1970s, comprehensive church consultants began to increase in popularity. Granted, these consultants were few in number, but they laid the groundwork for much of where church consultation stands today. Most of these consultants in the 1960s and 1970s did not have a denominational base. The most well known of these was Lyle Schaller. He is often referred to as the "Father of Modern Church Consultation." He is the author, editor, or co-editor of around 100 books and is still the source of advice within his field. Schaller has also written the only popular book on church consultation, *The Interventionist*.³

So while the field of church consultation is typically viewed as a new discipline, it traces its roots back through much of history, starting with the apostle Paul. Warner Smith notes in a yet-to-be published dissertation on church consultation that there are seven historical factors that have influenced today's church consultant.⁴ The following list contains these factors:

1. The rise of denominations and denominational agents who guided churches during the western advancement

- in America;
2. The foundational work of Harlan Paul Douglass at the Institute of Social and Religious Research with sociological studies of the city;
 3. The post-war baby boom impact, which created the need for more church construction and relocations;
 4. The increased acceptance of Donald McGavran's theories and the church growth movement;
 5. The rise of management and human relations training with business management theory;
 6. The acceptance within some church establishments of the practice of social sciences leading to research;
 7. The decline of mainline protestant denominations.

While these factors may seem independent of each other, Smith notes, "In each factor there is an effort on the part of the churchmen to respond and adapt to rapid social change."⁵

Types of Specialty Consulting

While the comprehensive church consultant is beneficial to many churches facing a number of issues, there are also times when specialty consulting is needed. There are occurrences in which a "specialist" is called upon to perform a very narrowly focused evaluation of one facet within the local church. So what are the types of specialty consulting and how do they benefit the local church?

Like a comprehensive church consultant, some specialty consultants are full-time or bi-vocational. Some specialty consultants are ministers of large congregations, and others work full-time within a firm. The chart below details some of the types of specialty consulting and the benefit to the local church.⁶

Type of specialty consulting	Explanation and benefit to the local church
Stewardship / Financial / Fundraising	Gives advice on financing of facilities and direction for borrowing funds to build new facilities. Offers accounting advice and helps the church to maintain correct records.
Church Health	Seeks to aid the church with the challenge of the Great Commission. Gives insights into how well the church is serving the surrounding community.

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Facilities/ Architectural	Deals with proper allocation of current facilities along with the feasibility of future building projects. Helps with all phases of these projects. Typically very expensive.
Strategic Planning	More long-range in nature, deals with the vision and mission of the church.
Outreach and Evangelism	This consultant works with churches on the task of evangelism. Similar to that of a church health consultant, but more narrowly focused with outreach programs and analysis of how well the church is converting the lost.
Conflict Resolution	Believe it or not, some churches experience internal friction. This consultant's job is finding solutions to existing problems and stalemates within the church. They deal with leaders and laity of the church on a personal level in order to correct dysfunction in the local body. One of the most difficult and complex consultations.
Leadership Development	This consultant provides insights and training for the development of leaders (both lay and ministers) within the church.
Worship	Deals with style, number of services, traditional vs. blended vs. contemporary, choice of music, choir size, and technical issues such as microphones, PowerPoint, etc.
Computer/ Technology	Deals with a gamut of issues including networking of computers, multi-media, web site design, etc.
Administration	Deals with personnel, security issues, hiring and dismissal of staff, implementing procedural changes, etc.

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Demographic Studies	This consultant deals primarily with the research of the surrounding community, trends, population changes, age breakdowns, and the overall needs of the community.
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While the chart above is by no means complete, I hope to demonstrate the broad spectrum of specialty consultations. Each focuses on a specific need and provides the local church with advice pinpointed for certain target areas.

Defining a Comprehensive Church Consultation

While I have briefly touched on the field of church consulting in general, the type of church consultation that is the focus of this article is the comprehensive church consultation. What exactly is a comprehensive church consultation? And how is it beneficial for a local church body? As we have seen church consultations can focus on any number of issues, such as Sunday school or worship issues, facilities, and architectural planning. And there are those who target the demographics of the area surrounding the church, providing leaders an idea of the composition of the community.

A comprehensive church consultant, however, is one who has a broader focus. These types of consultations involve broad brush strokes, touching on many areas within the church at the same time. Areas that are covered would include finance, planning, goal setting, growth barriers, personnel issues, facilities, and long range planning among others. I like to define comprehensive church consultation as *a broad based look at a specific local church in order to provide insights and recommendations for improving its overall health.*

To clarify, one could use a medical analogy. The comprehensive church consultant is analogous to the family physician. My doctor, Dr. Freedom, has been my doctor for several years. He has a broad knowledge of many subject areas. And anytime that I am ill, or in need of a regular check-up, I go to him. Most of the time he has the expertise to diagnose correctly and recommend the proper treatment. Sometimes Dr. Freedom can become the specialist himself, and work to provide me the proper medication. And other times he has referred me to another specialist. In these cases, he has the experience to point me to the best specialist in their respective field.

Such is the case with a comprehensive church consultant. It is the responsibility of this consultant to have a broad based knowledge of many areas that affect the health of a local church.

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If a local church has a specific need, the comprehensive consultant can work to meet that need or refer that church to a specialist. For example, I work to obtain a broad knowledge of many issues that affect the church, but I also have much experience in the specialty areas of research, statistics, and demographics. If a church has a concern about possible community growth or decline, I can typically become the specialist in that area. If a church, however, has concerns about their music program, I will refer them to a colleague as God has a sense of humor and graciously blessed me with the gift of tone deafness.

Another way to view the comprehensive church consultant is that of a "hub." The UPS hub in my hometown of Louisville is a massive facility at the airport in which packages are received and sent out to millions of people at locations across the globe. The third shift comes alive every night as plane after plane arrive and depart full of various loads. All these airplanes are congregated in one location in Louisville, Kentucky. Such is how a comprehensive church consultant works. Local churches come to him or her with a glut of questions and a dearth of answers on many subjects. The consultant then takes on the task of deciphering the best plan of action for the areas that need addressing. The advantage to local churches is that they are able to go to one person or firm (the hub) for most, if not all, of their church health concerns. Instead of having to contact numerous specialists for a gamut of needs, the local church has simply one contact point.

Diagram 1 visually represents this relationship between the local church and the comprehensive church consultant. This consultant, acting as the hub, assimilates data from various sources, pools it, and reports it back to the church in a cohesive and candid report.

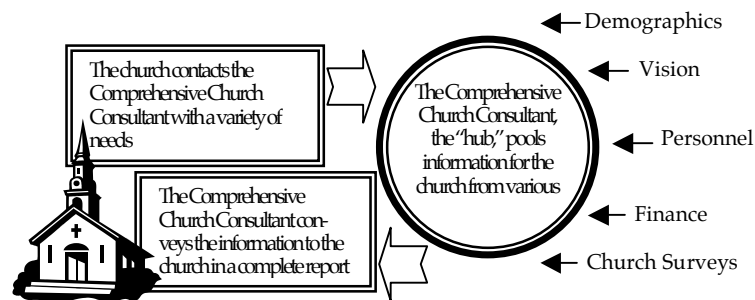


Diagram 1

Database Evidence of Comprehensive Church Consultations

The comprehensive church consultation seems to be a major

part of the overall field of church consultation. At least one church consultation firm provided research that showed over half of all requested forms of consultation were comprehensive in nature. Over a period of eight years this firm reported that 561 of about 1,000 requests for consultations were for the comprehensive component of their product portfolio. Anecdotally, other consultants also point to the large number of comprehensive consultation requests. The popularity of such a consultation makes sense as churches are inclined to want a sole contact, or hub, for all their outside needs. While a scientific survey of the exact percentage of consultation requests being comprehensive in nature has not been performed, we see a substantial amount of church requests now being for a more comprehensive approach. A related trend is that many church consultants are also seeking formal training in the field of comprehensive church consultation as well.

Reasons for the Increased Growth of Comprehensive Church Consultations

As seen with the database evidence, the interest in a church consultation that is comprehensive in nature is quite high. Clearly, this broad look at a church is quite different from the specialists that were consulting churches on a few narrow topics in the 1930's. So what are the reasons for this growth of church consultations that are comprehensive in approach? While one could point to several areas within the past few years that have had an affect on this issue, I want to give what I see as the top seven reasons why this discipline is growing.

The first reason is the increased interest in church health as a discipline. Since Donald McGavran's 1955 book, *The Bridges of God*, leaders within the church have been asking why some churches are growing and others are not.⁷ The church's health is one of the crucial answers to such a question. Today, there are firms that specialize simply in training consultants on the health of the church. What began with a few in the 1960's and 1970's, headed by Lyle Schaller, has become a very large discipline with many different leaders.

The second reason for the growth of comprehensive church consulting is the increasing recognition of Rick Warren and his 1959 book, *The Purpose Driven Church*.⁸ With several million copies sold, this book has touched leaders of churches in many areas of our country and the world. As many know, the primary focus of the book is the health of the church. Through practical insights and a five-point strategy of church health, Warren focuses less on tangible programs and more on process and purpose. The

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sheer magnitude of people that have read this book has caused a paradigm shift towards the attitudes of church health. This phenomenon has facilitated a conscience effort by many church leaders to take a long hard look at the overall health of their church.

An expanding awareness of church consultant generalists is a third reason for this trend. This awareness is coming from within the congregation. Many lay people simply are more knowledgeable about those that conduct general and comprehensive consultations. Their awareness can probably be attributed to the fact that the comprehensive church consultant is a sole point of contact. As more churches conduct request for such consultations, word of mouth spreads that a particular person is capable of performing such a task. Many of these consultants are household names within the Christian community as well. Some have authored numerous books and write for publications that are widely read by not only ministers, but laity too.

A fourth reason for increased growth would be that of a spillover or knowledge of corporate consultation into the church. For instance, most churches have someone in their congregation that is familiar with corporate or management consultation. Many times a pastor or other leader would be familiar with such principles as well. Business consulting is a multi-billion dollar business. And consulting services cover a wide spectrum of topics, from executive-level strategic planning to technical assistance on daily operations. These firms advertise in almost every arena, from magazines to television, and many laity within the church have sought out these services within their companies. It is only natural that these people would seek a professional church consultant when the church comes to a crossroads and needs help with some sort of decision.

A fifth reason is the Internet. This ambiguous and massive connection of computers has been a major source of data assimilation for the past decade. Comprehensive church consulting is no exception. What used to be the impossible task of seeking out various consultants is now made easy with the tools of web sites and search engines being readily available. Some church consultants we have interviewed indicated that a large amount of requests from churches started with a "Google" or "Yahoo" key word search. While many church consultants typically cannot be found in the yellow pages or in a trade magazine, a large number can be found on the Internet.

The sixth reason is the diminishing dependence upon denominations for consultation. Unlike in the nineteenth century, where many churches relied heavily on denominational input,

churches now readily seek help outside of the sphere of their denomination. In the past, a church leader would write or call a well-known denominational leader for specific guidance. While denominations still provide assistance, more and more churches are looking to firms that deal strictly with comprehensive health issues.

Lastly, and probably the most profound, is the declining health of the North American church. While the decline of the mainline denominations has been noted for years, the declining health of churches is not limited to these denominations. For example, the largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, had approximately 375,000 baptisms and 7 million members in 1950. In 2003, the members total approximately 16 million, but the denomination only baptized 375,000, the same amount as in 1950.⁹ Not only do we see the striking plateau in baptisms, but also churches are not as efficient in reaching the lost. In 1950, it took forty members of a church one year to reach one person for Christ. In 2003, it took 85 members of a church to reach one person for Christ in a given year.¹⁰ What is even more amazing is that churches are not even keeping up with the population trends in their respective communities. Our research team sampled over 500 churches, and 94 percent of these churches were either declining or growing less than the community population rate.¹¹

While I could continue with numerous statistics that point to the declining health of churches, the reality is that many of these churches need help. The comprehensive church consultant is one who is trained to help guide the church through a wide array of problem areas. It is this comprehensive approach that has been quite attractive to the local church as this consultant is the sole contact point for many of their needs. We expect with our research that this type of comprehensive consultation will continue to grow in popularity. The comprehensive consultant is equipped to meet the needs of local churches, from small to large, and is trained to guide the church to better health.

NOTES

1. U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001.
2. Survey of 533 churches done by the Rainer Group, 2002.
3. Schaller, Lyle E. *The Interventionist*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997.
4. Warner Smith, *An Analysis of Church Consultation in the North American Church, 1960-2003*. A yet to be published dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, to be completed in 2005.

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5. Ibid.

6. Some of this information is derived from *An Analysis of Church Consultation in the North American Church, 1960-2003* by Warner Smith

7. McGavran, Donald A. *The Bridges of God. Revised Edition*. New York: Friendship, 1981. Originally published in 1955.

8. Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995.

9. *Annual Church Profile, 1900-2003*, The Southern Baptist Convention

10. Research by The Rainer Group, 2002-2004.

11. Ibid.