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## A Historical Overview of Church Growth Consulting

Carl George

### About the Writer

*I first met Carl George face to face following a seminar at the Crystal Cathedral in 1994. Introduced by a mutual friend, Dr. David Rambo, I was excited to meet this man I had come to admire through his writings and resource materials. That meeting began a long-term friendship which as a doctoral student allowed me to participate with Carl in dozens of church growth consultations throughout the U.S. and Canada. Perhaps, the best known of the church growth consultants Carl George was Director of the Charles E. Fuller Institute for Church Growth and in the late 1980s pioneered with Dan Reeves one of the first programs in the country to train consultants called "Diagnosis with Impact." Author of a number of books, tapes, self-study kits, and audio-video resources and popularizer of the Meta-Church concept Carl George brings his experience as a church planter, pastor and researcher to bear in his church interventions. With academic interests in social psychology, systemics, leadership and organizational development and biblical studies Carl George continues to develop new tools and strategies to help churches grow. His current research focus is on how to manage rapid growth in churches and how to discover and deploy new group leaders on a fast track. Carl and Grace are parents of six children and have four grandchildren. They reside in Diamond Bar, California, twenty-five miles due east of downtown Los Angeles. For more information go to [www.metachurch.com](http://www.metachurch.com).*

### Progress Report

This question set was prepared as an outline for an article, but morphed into a script useful for a table talk video telecast. I started by imagining that I would create a TV interview, using the questions listed as prompts. My assumed readership is pre-

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consultants and prospective clients who are trying on the idea of using a consultant. Experienced consultants will recognize the realities informing my advice.

*Concept:*

What are the questions about the congregational consulting enterprise that I have frequently encountered (over the past 25 years)?

Experience teaches consultants to begin their answers to questions with these words... "IT ALL DEPENDS..."

*1. Why this article?*

My longtime friend and colleague, Alan McMahan, asked for an article that would sum up my observations of Church Growth consulting over the past twenty-five years. He wanted it to be helpful to practitioners. His interest in interventions can be seen in his doctoral thesis at Fuller, when he examined my Meta-Church mapping system as one aid to visualizing congregations. He wanted to understand how to help congregations in Indonesia, but political events there prevented his return to that mission field. Today, he ministers in courses taught in the Empire State Building as part of King's College, preparing young ministers for the international mission field that is Greater New York City.

*2. How does one become a church consultant? Who gets to be a consultant?*

- a. Traditionally, most congregational consulting has been done by denominational executives. Most district leaders have oversight of dozens of churches, and are frequently the first line of help for most congregations. Trans-local ministers, including revivalists and Bible teachers, were next most likely to be called on for help. The seminary professors of senior pastors may have been the next group. Para-church agencies which brought programs for deployment within local churches are frequently involved. These might include Campus Crusade, Navigators, The Leadership Center/Willow Creek Canada, Focus on the Family and many others.
- b. Increasingly, networks championed by very visible or very large churches are involved. The most prominent of the high visibility offerings would have included the widely used Evangelism Explosion and a more contemporary evangelism model, the Alpha Course. The most prominent of the very large church networks would be Schuller's Churches United in Global Mission which

grew out of his Hour of Power television broadcast, the Willow Creek Association and Saddleback's Purpose Driven Church initiative. Ministry partners to these very large churches are coming alongside with some creative helps. Ministry Advantage, related to WCA and Life Together, published through Zondervan and compatible with both Willow and Saddleback philosophies of ministry, are impressive newcomers. Christian magazine publishers, internet portals, and Bob Buford's Leadership Network have served to disseminate best practices. Centers aligned with seminaries serve many churches, most visibly Asbury's Beeson International Center program under Dale Galloway and Church Central under Tom Ranier. John Maxwell's Injoy Group drives leadership development themes and crosses over into marketplace inspiration. Churches with expansion needs are served by a host of capital fund raising consultants. A growing number of web-based software houses are providing piecemeal help for various back-office management tasks, helping churches to be more efficient in connecting people. The lawyers, architects, and accountants who serve churches are too numerous to list.

- c. Since no generally recognized certification for church consulting exists, the personal credibility of a consultant or the goodwill engendered by the organization with which the consultant is aligned serve in place of credentials. How one achieves visibility and credibility often involves serendipity, authorship, appearances at pastor's conferences and well-placed friends whose recommendation often carries more weight than any advertising medium. When a prospective client opens a conversation with "My friend, pastor so and so, told me I should call you. You were really helpful when you were with them," you don't have a credibility problem to overcome.
- d. When I am approached by aspiring consultants, I have to confess that I am probably not the best source of advice for how one can enter this field. My own calling came after fifteen years as a local church pastor, when God took away my peace for a period of weeks and brought me and my wife to the realization that my gifts were very much in the area of church consulting. It was an emotional experience for us to come to grips with this and to surrender, in prayer, to the God who was calling us to undertake this kind of work, even though we had

no idea how to initiate it. When Peter Wagner and John Wimber called from Pasadena, California, the next morning, Wagner's opening question was "What's God doing in your life, these days?" That led to seventeen amazing years at Fuller Institute, during the time when Donald McGavran was still living among us, and when the Fuller Institute for Evangelism and Church Growth grew to the point it was ministering to ten thousand pastors every month, in tapes, training materials, seminar events, and satellite downlinks. Those years saw the rise of the megachurches internationally, and the raising of the bar in the North American church to unprecedented levels. That was the era when attendance in the largest North American churches moved from 5,000 or so to beyond 20,000. (As of now, the high bar is at 30,000 in the U.S. Of course, as before, the numbers run much higher overseas.) Since leaving Fuller, in 1995, I have been engaged full time in congregational consulting, speaking and leading seminars, and developing coaching practices that can facilitate another generation's ministry to advance the Kingdom announced by Jesus.

*3. What part has the Church Growth Movement played in your consulting career?*

My contact with the larger evangelical church in the world was so limited that I was a most unlikely candidate for consulting anyone. My roots were fundamentalist and Baptist, in a separatist part of that movement. My aspirations were to be a faithful pastor and Christian day-school administrator in the city where I had been called to plant a new church. I bought cemetery property there, in Gainesville, Florida, and expected nothing beyond whatever missions sponsorship might bring. Reading Peter Wagner's book, "Your Church Can Grow," opened my eyes to a set of concepts that led to my taking graduate work in social psychology at the University of Florida. It was while there, studying social movements and pondering recent church history, that the Lord prepared me for the call and subsequent service at Fuller. What I brought to Fuller in terms of spiritual formation, practical experience and academic studies were foundational to my appreciating the pioneering work in applied cultural anthropology and missiology that informed McGavran's works.

*4. How can a consultant enhance his/her skills?*

For business consultants, formal course work in organiza-

tional behavior is the most acknowledged source of instruction. Reading in the extensive literature of business, non-profits and Church Growth and congregational studies is another. My advice to consultants in training is to read everything they can get their hands on by Lyle Schaller, Peter Wagner, Donald McGavran, Thom Ranier and a dozen others. Visits to exemplary congregations and participation in seminars for pastors exposes one to a broad spectrum of information and activities that cater to church leaders. The key is this: only a select number of pastors are interested enough in congregational growth and health to be reaching for insights about how to go beyond where they are. These pastors disclose their predilection by enrolling in such seminars.

*5. What gifts are involved in consulting? How does one ascertain whether these gifts are present?*

- a. The gifts most frequently mentioned by my clients, who find value in consulting, are wisdom and prophecy. When I first began "consulting," I did not know I was, and had no credential. My information sheets detailed our movement's efforts and relative effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) in church planting. Since these were prepared and distributed at pastor's fellowship meetings at my own initiative, they were largely refused or ignored. The effort was noted, however, by a few in leadership, who eventually named me to a previously nonexistent post, that of "Fellowship Statistician." From that public mention onward, everything I produced was accepted, read and used to provoke conversation, mostly constructive.
- b. It has been instructive to learn from my clients, as they would describe my work to others. One said I was a "parish analyst." Another, that I was practicing "social architecture." Perhaps the most valuable appellation was from several groups to whom I was introduced as a "friend of their movement, interested in helping them to be more effective in evangelism." Peter Wagner's practice of affirming what he found good in each movement powerfully prepared me to express appreciation and consequently, to be appreciated by their leadership.

*6. What basic information do you want to know, before you encourage a prospective client to retain you, or offer even a word of advice?*

- a. Who is wanting the help? Who are to be the key internal client(s)? How the consultant will be connecting them

- with the consultant?
- b. How old the ministry is, since inception?
  - c. Circumstances of launch.
  - d. How long the current leadership has been in place. How old the leaders are. How much ministry experience they had before coming here.
  - e. Current attendance and giving levels, children and adults. Growth history. Housing arrangements, now and previously. Seating capacity of main hall. Parking capacity controlled by client and other parking. Construction project history. Capital gifts campaign history and plans.
  - f. Other consultants used and their reports.
  - g. Governance. Relationship of boards, staff, volunteer leaders. Points of tension within the organization or with its context. How family life of staff affects relationships. Who on staff are interrelated?
  - h. Disasters in the church's history and the state of recovery from them.
  - i. The presenting condition: what are the challenges leading to this inquiry about help. How did the consultant come to be recommended?
  - j. What is the time frame preferred for the consultation to take place?
  - k. What kind of budget expectations does the client have?
  - l. What the decision process for retaining a consultant looks like. By whom and when will the consultant be retained? What other consultants are under consideration?
  - m. What is the immediate next step the consultant/client representative will take to arrive closer to a decision to commit to a consulting episode? Are suitable calendar dates available? When will the budget be agreed on? How will advance data gathering be arranged for? What exhibits, if any, does the client need to take the next step toward retaining the consultant?

*7. Minefields. Where is a consultant likely to be blind-sided? What explorations need to be made before assumptions?*

- a. I try to determine what advice a congregation has received before getting involved with me. I ask for copies of previous reports.
- b. I also want to know what they have done before to try to solve the problem and how they feel about their attempted solutions. I carefully avoid suggesting solutions they have already tried and rejected, unless I can make a case for why they failed and why it is time to try it

again.

8. *Are there some kinds of cases/assignments that a consultant should not take? Does the ditty "fools rush in..." have relevance for consultants?*

Some cases are not going to be helped, and the consultant's presence will not make much of a difference, if any. Examples: A church in a changed neighborhood with aged and inflexible leadership. L\_\_\_\_ and T\_\_\_\_. A church with defective theology. P\_\_\_\_. A black church with one anglo staff wanting a biracial ministry. P\_\_\_\_. A city church with many gay congregants wanting young family ministry. L\_\_\_\_. A fundamentalist pastor wanting to reach upper class churchgoers. R\_\_\_\_ and G\_\_\_\_. A pastor who is leading a double life, including keeping a harem or selling porn. D\_\_\_\_ and W\_\_\_\_. A pastor who takes much more than his due and mistreats staff. D\_\_\_\_ and H\_\_\_\_. A church lay leader who was certifiably insane. M\_\_\_\_. Pastor professes to want to grow; yet refuses to focus or even stay in town for expansion deal meetings. N\_\_\_\_ and D\_\_\_\_. Pastor professes to want growth; becomes enraged and slanderous when confronted about untruthfulness. P\_\_\_\_. Such cases are clearer in retrospect than they are as they unfold..

9. *What part does theology/Christian experience play in various consulting cases? How flexible are you? What are your theological non-negotiables? What are the non-negotiables of your prospective clients?*

- a. Some cases involve discerning that the consultant could not work in good conscience with the client. Examples: Client holds cessationist view of charismatic gifts; consultant rejects cessation. Consultant insists on tongues as initial evidence, client is cessationist. Consultant is rigorously pro-life; client refuses to take a political position on abortion. Consultant is conservative activist; client refuses to politicize anything. Consultant does not endorse gay unions; client is accommodating of gays.
- b. The principle of avoiding a sell-out of conscience. A consultant must be aware of his/her own bias and know something of the limits of their flexibility. Consultants should not try to help what they cannot endorse. The guiding question for me is this: "At the end of the day, will people who come into this congregation, if it grows, be better off for the association?" If my answer is no, I want to stay away or get an agreement to focus on internal issues before expansion issues.

10. *What moves a congregation/leadership to seek the help of a consultant?*

- a. Someone of influence has to be discontented with the ways things are. They may be experiencing conflict and decline. They may aspire to much greater influence and effectiveness than they are achieving. They may be frustrated by lack of results in spite of effort. Until the dilemma they face is profound, they will resort to in-house remedies.
- b. Some communions expect their pastoral leaders to be the Answermen for whatever problems the congregation faces. To consider help is beyond their imagination. Such are not good candidates for consulting. The movement from which I came does not have a tradition of utilizing consulting help. Had I not been called away from it, I would have had few invitations to consult, no matter what quality of insights I might possess. There is a category of people who will learn, but they will not be taught. Encouraging them to enroll in formal educational programs or perhaps making visits to exemplary congregations may influence them. In my experience, most of the outside help for congregations of this kind comes from informal advice offered over dinner from guest speakers or visiting missionaries, whose consultant role is unacknowledged.

11. *What place does preaching/teaching have in consulting? How do seminar presentations fit into a consultation episode?*

Preaching is an art that many pastors have perfected. Pulpit supply is a calling. My experience leads me to value the pulpit as a way of raising the visibility of the consultation, so that references to the consultant as a way of explaining the adoption of certain recommendations make sense to the members. If my visibility is not important to implementing changes, I am content to not preach.

12. *Can consulting be done without visiting a church? Observing weekend services? By telephone or e-mail?*

In fact, I have consulted with churches without attending their weekend services. I prefer a weekend observation, but sometimes have substituted videos of services and focus group appraisals for a personal visit, with few bad effects. Some clients have utilized telephone calls as preliminary, or as follow up, and occasionally, in place of, face to face consults. With the emerging practice of coaching of staff leaders, regular telephone appoint-

ments are gaining favor.

*13. How do you guide a client to prepare for a consultation visit?*

Let me share what I have done for more than two decades in congregational consulting. (see Appendix A)

*14. What confidentiality is expected/required of a consultant? How may consultant's convey to clients their ability to maintain confidences?*

Clients tend to be very sensitive about sharing of private information with outsiders. Any use of client provided information can violate the clients reasonable expectation of confidentiality. In the business world, this is the stuff of lawsuits. In the church world, it so diminishes consultant credibility as to be seen as a career killer. Consultants must take care in passing information about clients, even in the case of public information, lest they be seen as tale bearers. Whatever a consultant says to a client tips that client off as to the style of sharing the consultant is likely to do about the client. Clients are very aware that if any unflattering information is disclosed inappropriately, the consequences for the client in terms of denominational politics or even damage to their leadership influence within the congregation can be disastrous. Whenever a consultant receives information from a client, it should be treated as belonging to the client and not to be used without written advance permission from the client. The rule is, "It is strictly between us."

*15. What enhances a consultant's credibility? What diminishes credibility?*

Positive results. Getting it right. Saying it graciously. Encouraging without flattering. Dispelling doubts. Sympathetically facing up to the hard stuff. Being candid without judging or shaming.

*16. What kinds of reports do you provide to your clients?*

In the early years, while still in the thrall of academia, extensive documentation was the rule. Fifty to seventy page reports, including lengthy exhibits and much boilerplate language in appendices. We were encouraged to demonstrate value by serving up reports by the pound. The problem with that approach became apparent over time. Lengthy reports got shelved, not implemented. Clients would call back and ask for executive summaries of no more than a couple of pages. It took me several years to develop the skill of writing a two to four page "letter of findings and recommendations." It was harder than longer re-

ports, but it held my clients attention better and produced more concrete results than the former encyclopediac ones.

*17. What aspects of a congregation do you routinely examine as part of your consulting with them?*

- a. Using the SWOT analysis, I review with them their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This gives them a balanced view of themselves, lest they become discouraged from overly focusing on problematic aspects of their ministry.
- b. Using a four pane window, I classify factors into local versus national, crossed with organizational (internal operations) versus contextual (external conditions). They come to realize they have little control over any but the organizational factors.
- c. Using simple line charts, I lay out before them their attendance history and giving history over as many years as they have it.
- d. Posting the locations of their active households on a map of their city, I help them see from how many miles around they are drawing people. Sometimes this overview helps them identify high potential branch church or daughter church locations.
- e. With permission, I sometimes share the workstyles of selected staff leaders, especially when those styles are widely known to be operating. Problematic dimensions of how those styles interact can be managed better, once they are disclosed.
- f. When tensions have been uncovered, I carefully unpack the assignable causes and sometimes act as mediator in helping people to better forgive one another and commit to more constructive interactions in the future.
- g. Above all else, I try to help them find a way forward that honors their gifts, resources, history and vision for ministry. Most churches only need a handful of well conceived steps to take them to a better place than they are now.

*18. Kinds of consulting. Program, process, operational and/or situational diagnosis, vision planning, conflict resolution, deliverance. Four patterns of consultation are popular:*

- a. Program implementation - training seminars and courses for implementing publisher packaged kits for Bible studies, evangelism classes, gift finding activities. Examples include Stephen Ministry (lay pastor training),

the Alpha Course (evangelistic suppers), Finding your SHAPE (Spiritual Gift and personality surveys), Freedom in Christ (deliverance from spiritual bondage), Promiseland or Awana (for children), Sonlife or 180 degree (for youth), Purpose Driven Church (churchwide pulpit driven small groups as part of "40 Days of Purpose" campaigns), Life Together (connecting via host led, DVD guided small groups), etc.

- b. Refocusing processes - usually two or three years of participation by Senior Pastors in a cluster or support group that meets in person and by telephone, using a combination of forms and instructional inputs. Useful in cases where crisis is not apparent. Popular business books might be required reading, such as Good to Great, Seven Habits, Visionary Leadership, etc. Examples would include T-Net, Ministry Advantage, CRM, Beeson Institute, Willow Creek Association's Prevailing Church emphasis..
- c. Survey driven action planning - leaders are polled as to their opinions and compared with answers provided by a selected group of survey respondents. Instructional materials encourage leaders to remedy weaknesses as highlighted and prioritized by the tabulated survey results. A method to get leadership on the same page, moving in the same direction. A good and widely used example of this: Natural Church Development surveys and publications.
- d. Diagnostic analysis - provides both a strategic overview of operations and a focused group of recommendations to implement immediately. Process relies on consultant expertise and negotiates a consensus among decision makers with promise of positive outcomes. Examples of practitioners include Lyle Schaller and myself. My appreciation of McGavran's emphasis on obedience to the Great Commission and the Church Growth paradigm informs my approach, along with practices developed within the organizational behavior and organizational development academic communities. John Wimber got us started, and Dan Reeves and I worked together in demonstrating and sharing this approach beginning in the early 80's.

*1. Are there operational areas that you routinely examine?*

- a. Processes are important as congregations grow in size. Only very small congregations can rely on the

personal attention of a church secretary or pastor to see that the right things are done in a timely manner.

- b. Processes include: Attraction (marketing to the community outside the membership); Assimilation (from curb appeal to connection within some subgroup); Ascension (moving from spectator into volunteering into leadership into leader development); Annual planning (for programs and budgets); Advance planning (multi-year expansion plans including property, facilities and financing for them); Assurance (quality of experience for all household units);

2. *When you prepare a report of your findings and recommendations, what do you try to cover?*

- a. Reports usually start with a brief recap of the church's history and current situation, followed by a recounting of the presenting problem, tactfully stated. Then I give a digest of findings, with positive as well as problematic aspects of their situation. Here is where I try to outline the most critical issues that must be addressed. I call it the problem statement. If we cannot get agreement around the problem, there is little likelihood of getting agreement about solutions.
- b. In my recommendations section, I frequently try to find a way to visualize their future under a variety of conditions. On difficult issues I try to guide them to a preferred solution without forcing one particular option. In other words, I try to give them several workable ways forward, showing the benefits and drawbacks of each. Usually I try to present three to five options.... If you do A, then you are likely to experience X; If you do B, then you are likely to experience Y; If you do nothing at all, you are likely to experience Z. I will often recommend one of the options as appearing to be the most advantageous, but keep reminding myself that they must own the solution and the consequences, and they must implement the required decisions, often without my being there when they do it.

3. *What trends in consulting have you seen emerging over the past decade?*

- a. In the early 1980's, consultancy was shaped by what

we knew from the big seven accounting firms. We would speak of the "Arthur Anderson model" to hitchhike on the popularity of the reigning corporate best practices. Strategic planning was all the rage. Pfeiffer's University Associates provided resources for trainers and consultants. The use of personality descriptive instruments was also developing. I.Q. Tests had long been used, but in education, not business. A new set of tests, predictive of personal workstyles evolved. Among the more widely used were the Meyer-Briggs, the Personal Profile (DiSC) and the 16PF. I found the DiSC to be the most useful in my work with multi-staff teams.

- b. In the 1990's, surveying, taking advantage of the spread of data crunching micro-computers, became a favored tool. In time, the appearance of simple to administer and simple to understand generic surveys rose in popularity. The best example of this may be Christian Swartz' Natural Church Development, available in a variety of languages and with beautifully illustrated interpretation materials.
- c. All along, from the mid-80's until now, systems approaches that walk clusters of pastors through organizational development modules are in use. These are partly educational (personal development) and partly do it yourself brain surgery [;^]> (organizational development). They have proven to be quite helpful at reasonable cost. They are generally regarded as giving medium to high impact and requiring medium to high change management skills. They have been effective in mostly in moderate growth potential situations. High potential situations tend to be too dynamic to allow the leisurely approach to change management facilitated by the modular approach.
- d. Since the turn of the century, millennium, or whatever, a growing emphasis on execution or implementation has been felt in both the corporate world and the larger churches. As part of a consultation or as follow up to it, key staff are requesting personal coaching to keep them on track in pursuing the goals they have set as consequence of their call, their situations, and/or the consultation. This willingness to request and accept coaching is unprecedented, in my view. I see it as evidence of a new level of self-

confidence and security on the part of senior leadership, perhaps even evidence of humility and a sober realization that no one can know it all. The wise man is the one who assembles the right cast of counselors and employs them in a decision process that allows the wisdom of many to inform the path undertaken. A recent publication describes shared intelligence. It says "Together we are smarter than any one of us." The boundaries of your knowledge are expanded by every knowledgeable person you know. The price of knowledge is the humility to ask.

4. *What trends in the churches are you watching?*

- a. Bigger than ever, growing faster than ever.
- b. Video venues and video-based branch locations
- c. Rapidly expanding connections through Life Together type home groups, led by hosts who play DVD video lessons with discussion questions built in. This rapid connection methodology piggy backs on the popular "40 Days of Purpose" series now used in perhaps 19,000 congregations. (13,000 alumni congregations; 6,000 currently involved; some overlap because some of the 6,000 are doing it for a second time.)
- d. Image magnification via video screens in large meetings, much as public address systems proliferated in prior years
- e. Increased use of video as worship and communications aids
- f. Growing awareness of every congregation's obligation to turn outward and expend its energies beyond its own membership to address real world needs around them
- g. Proliferation of on-line educational resources can make every church a branch seminary
- h. Much more people to people short term missions trips
- i. Polarity around key issues. In past decade it was abortion. Now it is gay marriage.
- j. Post Christendom requires a shift to cope with a pluralistic religious environment. The terms of apologetics are shifting. It is no longer about modernism, it is about the incarnation of Jehovah in Jesus.
- k. Continuing coarsening of society is felt in the

churches as lewdness in music lyrics, frankness about hedonism, and mainstreaming of pornographic images and personalities abound. Rising numbers of accountability groups are helping people cope with the rising tide of sub-Christian communications widely available.

- l. Planting new congregations with a charter to become church planting centers is an encouragement to leverage entrepreneurial personalities into more church plants. The strategy is being watched to see if it lives up to its promise, but early results are favorable.
- m. The practice of hiring staff for rapidly growing churches from within the ranks of members who are volunteer leaders has taken a leap forward with the introduction of the concept of part-time positions. A staff position salary is divided into several parts, giving staff the ability to hire five or six part time marketplace people of known character and productivity. Some of the part-timers are emerging as called to become full timers, with very encouraging results. Credit Brett Eastman or Life Together with this bit of pioneering, too.

*5. Are some clients more likely to benefit from consulting than others?*

Absolutely, but the phenomenon is not new. Even in Proverbs we read of this: "What is that foolish person doing, standing in line to buy advice from the seer, holding the price of wisdom in his hand?" The implication was he was wasting his time and money.

*6. What value does an outside consultant bring?*

Clients cannot know about themselves what outsiders can know: how much alike other congregations/leaders they are and how they differ from most others, uniquely. An outsider does not have to know everything to know something useful to the client that the client either does not know or does not realize is actionable now.

*7. What's next for you? What do the next decades look like, Lord willing, from where you stand today?*

- a. My journey began in premillennial dispensationalism, right out of the King James Version Scofield Reference Bible. It took me years to get to the place where

I could embrace the perspective of a World Christian and accept others whose views differed strongly with mine. My background rooted me in Calvinist theology, cessationism regarding spiritual gifts, and rationalism above supernaturalism. I knew from direct experience that Satan was alive and well, but thought God preferred anonymity in His dealings with us, choosing to work through circumstances routinely, but only occasionally with contemporary guidance. That meant that prophetic ministry was confined to scholarly interpretation to get at truth. It also meant that prayer was mostly about listing and reciting a variety of asks, not listening with an ear to the whisper of the Holy. From my standpoint, living in constant expectation of a pre-tribulational rapture, as illustrated in the popular "Left Behind" series, I allowed myself no thinking about any future beyond the weekend, or the end of my days on earth.

- b. Now, having lived longer and gaining a greater sense of the grandeur of history, I find myself called to embrace a different vision of the future. Presumption that God will appear on my timetable has been set aside. The command was "Occupy 'til I come," with no stipulation as to the time of that coming. My most vital experiences of the past three or four years have led me to begin to imagine a future that requires me to undertake projects that cannot be completed within my lifetime. Projects that will be planned for many decades or centuries of endurance. Projects that turn the membership-serving focus of our congregations outward toward the sea of non-believers surrounding us.
- c. I have become aware of mission fields in our own backyards, where hundreds of thousands of unconverted people live in close proximity to us. In one such area, the Greater Pomona Valley/Inland Empire region of southern California, nearly two million people live within a thirty minute drive of a central point. Another two million are projected for the area over the next twenty years. Those already living here include a hundred thousand college students from 120 nations, many of which are bilingual because their native lands do not speak English from birth. These represent the rest of the globe. The eco-

conomic, justice and health needs of a large immigrant population already here cry out for compassionate fulfillment and we who believe are well endowed to respond, if we had the awareness and will to do so. Thousands of new churches will be needed. Most of the existing churches will need to be renewed and refocused.

*8. How important is authorship to a consultant? Is the writing of books required?*

How a particular consultant comes to be considered for a case is partly notoriety, partly intellectual competence, partly recommendation, and partly divine serendipity. Writing books that are published gives one a measure of credibility and potentially puts one's name and ideas in front of a wide audience. In my experience, most requests for consultation have tended to come from live appearances, where pastors can assess the communication skills of the consultant and decide whether the chemistry feels right for an invitation to consult.

*9. How does the practice of consulting differ from the study of congregations?*

Consulting processes include an emerging dynamic in which investigation, analysis, suggestion, re-perception, recommendation and implementation are continually recycling. Studies only begin after a congregation has wrestled and arrived at an outcome. Then, in the comfort of a library, academically skilled reviewers enjoy a perch that is remote from the perils of the scene of action, in the way video editors do, when they go into the edit room to retell the story of shooting a river's rapids, using scenes captured by on-board cameras. Studies know the end from the beginning. Consultants cannot.

*10. How important is the way findings are presented to the impact of a consultation? Are there preferred ways to bring findings and recommendations to clients?*

Simile is a powerful tool. To say "this church is like..." is to open a window into a new way of seeing that will persist long after a consulting episode is over. An example: is your church sometimes more like a little league for soccer or a rock concert?

*11. What do you do when a client pushes back on recommendations?*

Client resistance to recommendations is actually healthy. The clients most likely to do something with recommendations

are those who insist on examining them carefully and testing them enough to own them. If a client does not push back, I worry about their grasp of the implications for change that recommendations carry. That is one reason why I prepare my oral presentation of findings and recommendation to take only half of the time available for meeting with the board and key staff. I want them to wrestle with what I present, so that they can commit themselves to implementation with a full awareness of their promise and consequences.

*12. What is on a consultant's must do list? Even after decades of consulting, I find that checklists are helpful in preparing myself for dealing with my clients.*

- a. Do clearly lay out in writing what the calendar and financial expectations for the consultant's services will be, including the time frame for payment of invoices.
- b. Do carefully check facts that validate impressions and intuitions before building a case on them. Keep field notes with important details securely.
- c. Do prayerfully invite the Holy Spirit to give the wisdom needed to understand what is going on and what will be helpful. Not only the what but the how of presenting findings is important.
- d. Do ask who else has ever consulted with this congregation and where their reports are. You will be amazed to see how few things change over time in some congregations..
- e. Do carry good reports from client to client. Be sure you have permission before you share details.
- f. Do bring along relevant reading materials to share with clients. A good recommendation is valuable to already busy leaders.
- g. Do observe courtesies by writing thank you notes for hospitality extended, such as meals in homes, etc.
- h. Do recognize that some information shared with you will lead to negative recommendations or unpopular remedies. Be sure that when serious matters are disclosed to you that you do not minimize or otherwise mislead the person you are interviewing into thinking you are not concerned, even alarmed by the information you have just received. At the very least, collar your people-pleasing tendencies enough to say something like "That sounds like a

very serious allegation! If it all checks out and contributes to a larger picture which validates your concerns, someone may be in a very difficult place!" If you imagine a negative outcome to your follow through, you must drop one shoe at the time you receive the information. Otherwise the person you are interviewing will think you are accepting of their position and will come to feel betrayed by your objections later on. Better for them to have an early warning by your expressing concern.

- i. Arrange for pressing clothing after unpacking it. Carry and use breath mints. Use a mirror after dressing to refine your appearance and to practice smiling. Ask the question "Would I buy me?"

13. *What is on a consultant's must not do or never do again list? This list usually involved pain for someone and I do not wish to experience it.*

- a. Do not rush ahead of a client, answering questions even before they are asked.
- b. Never criticize one client to another, or carry tales of private matters.
- c. Do not fail to deliver promised forms or reports in a timely manner.
- d. Do not put into writing matters that are better dealt with in personal/private conversations. Some forms of advice should not be memorialized. Better to leave a suggestion to be acted on as clients are able to find a way to fit the changes into their lives.
- e. Do not pledge confidentiality when receiving information. You must retain your ability to utilize whatever information you receive in whatever manner your best judgment tells you to.
- f. Do not circulate resumes for staff or solicit staff for positions elsewhere, unless or until you have been told by the senior staff you are free to do so.

*Diagnostic Analysis form of consulting.*

When I am approached by a representative of a congregation, I know that a decision process must be supported in order to engage my services as a consultant. Over time, I have learned that church leaders vary widely in terms of their comfort levels in inviting outsiders in to assist them. To help the staff and board members get on the same page, I have found myself explaining certain things over and over. What follows is a draft of

a letter I might adapt for a prospective client. It sets a perspective on how helping comes about, suggests a path that encompasses many of the activities that will occur, and sets expectations for deliverables and remuneration.

*Appendix A*

(Address details go here.)

Dear Pastor and Leaders who desire growth:

You have asked for some general information that would help your church leadership make a decision about consulting help. Many of the church leaders with whom I have consulted have found it helpful to see an overview of a typical consultation. This will illustrate one possible way we might work together. A consultation is a *process*. It usually has several phases, which take place over a period of time, from several weeks to several months, and includes at least one trip to your city to visit with your staff and leaders on your site. At every point in the process, prayers for God's guidance are appropriate. I cannot stress too much the importance of acknowledging our dependence on God for wisdom and love throughout the time we work together. We are dealing with *the church* which is the local manifestation of *His body*.

*The phases usually include:*

1. *Dilemma phase.* This is when church leaders come to realize that some of the problems/opportunities they are facing are going to require solutions/strategies that may not be obvious to them. In some churches, in spite of sincere prayers and earnest discussions, a way of going forward is not understood or cannot be agreed upon, and an opinion from someone who is not so close to the situation comes to be desired. For example, outsiders can help clarify what is to be done next, or help sort out the personal from the organizational aspects of a problem. As the leaders look for ways to resolve their dilemma, they usually examine and engage a series of resources, each one escalating in terms of time and budget. The series usually includes:

1. Articles and books.
2. Self-study kits.
3. Academic courses.
4. Seminars attended by staff.
5. Seminars attended by key lay leaders and staff.

6. Counseling with denominational executives and program agencies.
7. Advice from colleagues and mentors, such as former professors.
8. Advice from itinerant revivalists or Bible teachers who have previously or are currently ministering in their church.
9. Professional services from psychologists, attorneys, accountants, architects, land-use planners, and financial stewardship or fund-raising firms.
10. Finally, paid consultations with organizational planners or conflict resolution specialists or church growth experts.

As helper selection is considered, it is significant to identify the bias found within each of the specialties. For example, *as a church growth consultant, I have an evangelistic growth bias*. I seek to encourage the numerical growth of congregations, especially encouraging evangelism of unchurched people, with attention to developing leaders to provide the follow-up care that discipling such new believers requires.

2. *External resource contracting phase*. At this point, if a consultant is preferred, he or she may be invited to submit a proposal. How extensive the proposal will be varies from church to church, depending on the agent's authority to make a decision. In some places, the Senior Pastor has the authority to select helpers and commit funds, without further approvals. In other places, a staff team may need to agree. Sometimes committees and boards are involved in the selection and budgeting. Often, the cost of a consultation is underwritten by a single individual, one who senses the potential helpfulness of a consultation. In some cases the initiative is led by the staff, in other cases, the board, consisting of business people familiar with using consultants, is driving the demand for outside assistance. The more people involved in making the decision, the more necessary it is to prepare a written proposal. A proposal typically will include such matters as a restatement of the presenting problem, the scope of the consultation (what issues will be examined), who will do what in preparation for the episode, when the various activities will occur, what form of consultation report will be expected, and an estimated budget with appropriate allowances for travel, time, supplies, communications, etc. Then, in most cases, a letter of engagement is prepared, confirming calendar dates and requesting payment of an appropriate retainer.

3. *Pre-visit data gathering phase.* In the days or weeks before a field visit, the church staff or a task force (a) organizes the field visit events, (b) calls for appropriate prayer support and (c) gathers information of a kind that we have found to be helpful in other consultations. (A preliminary set of questions is available on my web site at [www.metachurch.com](http://www.metachurch.com) entitled Preliminary Data for a Consultation.) Additional data gathering may be requested, depending on the particulars in a given situation. I will usually request that program staff complete some kind of work-styles profile. I have found the Performax Personal Profile, commonly called the DiSC test, to be quite useful for becoming rapidly acquainted with staff. Some data can be analyzed ahead of time, in order to facilitate certain discussions during the field visit.

4. *The field visit.* Usually a field visit takes place over a three-day period which includes two or three evenings. This allows for time on the first day to travel to the site, meet with key staff in an initial orientation to city and facilities, and have a get acquainted meeting with board members and other key leaders. The second day includes a meeting with senior and program staff, interviews with selected staff and lay leaders, and especially the Senior Pastor and spouse. In the evening of the second day, we most often ask to meet with a couple of selected focus groups, usually one group consisting of both long term and short term members and the other a cross section of volunteers and non-staff leaders of classes and groups. We find that an hour and a quarter is just about the right length for such groups. The third day includes additional interviews and planning sessions with selected staff to lay out key issues and develop a sense of priority and strategy for addressing them. Some time is reserved for the consultant to reflect on all of the information gathered to date. Then, in the evening of that third day, a very important meeting is set, when boards, some committees and key lay leaders and staff are re-gathered for an intensive briefing on findings and preliminary recommendations. Experience has taught us that final, written recommendations seldom vary significantly from the presentations made on this occasion. Sometimes, on the following day, depending on travel plans, an early morning follow-up interview with key staff/leaders is set to reflect on the field visit process, and to set final expectations for report delivery and/or follow-on consultation, as appropriate.

5. *The follow-up phase.* Depending on the outcome of the consultation, some form of follow-up may be recommended. It usually starts with a letter report which may include some exhibits of highly relevant data. It often includes a set of checkpoint

measurements to track progress over the following twelve to twenty-four months. Recommended follow-up may include further data collection, study material, training seminars and even additional on-site visits, as appropriate. In some cases, a Vision Planning process is launched, starting with the information developed in the initial diagnosis.

*Usual time frames and budgets.*

From consultant selection to completion can be a two or a six-month process, taking into account the time required for data gathering and scheduling ahead of the field visit (usual minimum of two weeks) and report preparation and delivery following the field visit (usual maximum of four weeks). In some cases, follow-up contacts and progress monitoring is requested, to assure that staff leaders stay on target in bringing about desired changes. Fees for a consulting episode can range from a few thousand dollars for a single visit, to tens of thousands of dollars, depending on the length and number of visits and report documentation requirements, plus study materials, travel and expenses. The amounts and payment schedule for fees, materials and expenses are stipulated in advance, so there will be no surprises. In many cases, I have found that church leaders have not had enough experience to know how to think about fees. If they will examine what they have been spending or will likely spend with legal, accounting, architectural, capital fund raising, real estate, or construction management consultants, then church growth consulting will seem like the least of those costs. Another way churches can get a handle on such fees is to examine how much is spent on staff salaries. An entire year of consulting support seldom comes to the level of even a modest staff compensation package. The economic benefits from a growth enabling consultation can be projected to justify consulting fees from a number of angles. If a consultation saves the church from just one poor hire, the cost savings are considerable. If it helps find a way to break through a ceiling, the additional gain in revenue from the new growth is a permanent benefit to the church operational budget. If it is found that special studies or exhibits are recommended, costs for them are quoted separately, if not included in the overall proposal at the outset.

In the letter of engagement or memo of agreement, I usually request a retainer of ten percent of the quoted fee, plus the cost of any advance data-gathering materials. Travel expenses may be invoiced as they are incurred, separately from fees.

*Frequently Asked Questions*

Since starting this article, I have developed an additional set of questions that I intend to put in a FAQ page on my website. You may wish to join me there from time to time and even request automatic updates when pages change. Feel free to submit additional questions as they come to mind. Questions are the most important learning tools we have.

1. How important is data gathering? What data do you need? Is it best to gather it in advance of a visit?
2. If you had to rewind and start all over again at the beginning, what would you hope to do differently?
3. Have you ever seen a client that was stuck and could not get unstuck, in spite of being involved in a consultation? Did you ever figure out why?
4. What makes the difference among clients who do use or who do not use consulting well? What makes a client an effective user of consulting help?
5. In retrospect, what consulting outcomes have been encouraging, surprising, disappointing? What outcomes would you have preferred?
6. What should be known about setting fees for consulting?
7. How candid can/should a consultant be about disclosing wants and needs to a client?
8. What kinds of assignments have churches requested?
9. What is consultative selling?
10. What are some knockout factors that result in a consultant becoming not recommendable or being rejected by clients?
11. Under what conditions can a consultant disclose an opinion about a non-client congregation or ministry? What are the dangers involved in such sharing?
12. When would dogmatic, high assertion statements from a consultant be warranted? When would a consultant be irresponsible not to deal with a matter that could be harmful to a client's ministry?
13. How important is errors and omissions insurance? Can consultants be sued?
14. Where do clients come from? How does a consultant get enough business to stay in the field?
15. What are the most important principles for consulting that your clients have taught you?
16. What are the biggest mistakes in consulting that experience has taught you to avoid?
17. How does prayer work in the context of a consulting practice or a case?

18. Does Christian spirituality play a role in consultations? How is that seen?
19. In managing one's business, what are the essentials for each case, for one's practice over the course of a year?
20. Where does spiritual warfare come in?
21. How do family systems issues influence congregational functioning?
22. Do different denominational families have differing needs? Do they require differing approaches?
23. What are some of the books you have found most helpful?
24. What ideas about consulting or about church life have you found it necessary to discard, either because they were unhelpful or downright hurtful to your clients?
25. What does a failed consultation look like?
26. What does a successful consultation look like?
27. How do you cope with your own emotions when a client ignores your advice?
28. Have you ever said "I told you so" to a client? Have you ever been tempted to do so?
29. What does consultant behavior look like when the consultant is not walking in the spirit?
30. Who is the client in a given consultation? How candid may/must one be in disclosing the findings/recommendations of a case?
31. Are there consulting activities that do not show up on the written reports?
32. Are written reports always desired/required?
33. How can a consultant be the bearer of bad news without becoming victim of an episode of "shoot the messenger."
34. Does the practice of consulting have any potentially negative effects on one's family life or personal well-being?
35. What value do written findings and recommendations have for a client?
36. How do you deal with fears of your own inadequacy? How do you find the courage and confidence to engage a client or a situation?
37. Are there clients to whom you cannot bring help?
38. How does your assessment of a client's ability bear on your recommendations?
39. What is the role of a consultant regarding trends and innovations? Where does the sharing of best practices enhance a consultation?
40. How does a consultant reconcile the same-

- ness/uniqueness dimensions of a case to arrive at a positive outcome?
41. How does the prophetic element influence a consultation? Prophetic style and substance are quite different.
  42. Precognition: what place does it serve in a consultant's career or an particular case?
  43. What is an appropriate level of certainty for a consultant's observations?
  44. What skills are required to conduct an on-site consultation visit?
  45. How long does/should it take for a consultant to start a consultation? How long does a typical consultation engagement last?
  46. What can a consultant do to add value to a consultation episode? Have you developed any sort of checklist which you follow in preparing yourself for high impact, high value interactions?
  47. When a church puts an experienced consultant on staff, does that mean they will no longer need the services of a third-party or external consultant?
  48. Do you have any regrets about investing so many years of your life in the role of a consultant? Would you recommend this role to others?
  49. What have the appraisals of others taught you about yourself and your potential for helpfulness?
  50. What are some of the key questions that are used frequently in a consultation?
  51. Roles of a consultant. How do you distinguish between a consultation versus an assignment? Between diagnosis and implementation. Between analysis and advocacy. What risks do the various roles carry?