

## ***Introduction: Why Church Leaders Need Systems Thinking***

Leadership is hard. Church leadership is even harder. Unfortunately, too many church leaders are “trying harder and harder without attaining significantly new results.”<sup>1</sup> Just like other organizations in their twenty-first-century contexts, many church leaders are stuck, and their churches are stuck, too, because there is a paralysis that infects both.<sup>2</sup> The thesis of this work is that stuck churches and burned out leaders are systemic issues. They result from a misunderstanding of how to lead congregations and misunderstanding the nature of the church. The fundamental misunderstanding is this: The church, a congregation of Christ-followers, the body of Christ, is a *system*, and its leaders must understand that and lead from a *system* perspective. This is important because “the way change leaders view a congregation has a direct bearing on how they assess situations and formulate solutions.”<sup>3</sup>

It seems that too many churches are still looking for heroic leaders, and church leaders are frequently looking for silver bullet solutions and magic formulas rather than doing the hard work of leading personal and corporate transformation. There is no criticism of these churches or leaders intended in these pages. I succumbed to these misunderstandings myself as an inexperienced church leader, and I write to share the lessons I have learned that transformed me as a church leader and contributed to getting stuck churches unstuck. Indeed, the pressures and expectations in ministry are almost inexplicable to those who have not experienced them.

Church leaders—pastors, elders, deacons, ministry team leaders—are not only responsible for organizational outcomes, such as church health and success, but they are also called to lead people to willingly participate in Kingdom work, people who need ministry as much as they need to minister to those outside the church. Leaders create church culture. They set the tone of ministry and are presumed responsible for the success or failure of the church. They are expected to be superior servants, communicators, motivators—leading the congregation into missional work that benefits the community and expands the Kingdom of God. Multiply all of these expectations with the changing demands on leaders as we begin the third decade of the twenty-first century, with the rapidly changing cultural context, and with the challenge of post-Christian values and priorities. The result is that church leadership can seem overwhelming, if not impossible. Amid this challenging mix of congregation, culture, compassion, and calling, many leaders are feeling stifled, and many churches are stuck, unable to progress beyond the old patterns and programs of ministry that worked years ago but are not working now. Perhaps this is

all that must be said to get the point across. All of these factors can easily combine to produce stifled leaders and stalled churches.

### **Stifled leaders**

The dictionary defines “stifled” as being unable to breathe, “to suffocate (someone).” That is an excellent way of thinking about what the weight of ministry leadership can do to church leaders, especially pastors. All of these weighty responsibilities and expectations can virtually suffocate them. Centuries ago, the practice of executing people by crushing them was not uncommon. The most egregious method was called “pressing,” in which the victim was forced to lie on their back while heavy weights, stones or iron, were placed on them until the weight became so heavy, they could not breathe and died from asphyxia. This rather harsh word picture comes to mind when I think of stifled leaders. As ministry leaders, they are under such an enormous weight of duties, responsibilities, and expectations, both realistic and unrealistic, that many are stifled, unable to breathe as God intends.

The problem is that when I feel stifled, I start losing energy to meet the demands of the day. I succumb to what John Ortberg calls “spiritual entropy,” the gradual dissipation of spiritual life, or soul health.<sup>4</sup> His idea resonates with my experience. There is no neutral in the spiritual life; we are either growing or declining. Why? Because souls need regular nourishing, our spirits need constant refreshing, and our minds need ongoing transformation. Entropy explains how being a stifled leader can produce burnout.

Of course, no one sets out to be stifled in ministry leadership. And churches do not intentionally contribute to stifling their leaders. But it happens anyway. Why is that? Why do church systems produce stifled leaders when they do not intend to? How do church leaders and congregations recognize the signs of stifled leadership? And what can be done to prevent it? This book is an attempt to begin to answer some of these questions. Perhaps the greater goal is to acknowledge that churches are producing stifled leaders. Simultaneously, for leaders who might feel stifled—those who are experiencing or have experienced being “pressed” by the ministry—I hope that you will recognize that Christ died for your church, so you do not have to. God wants you to find the freedom to breathe every breath he provides, growing and flourishing in ministry as you express your God-given uniqueness to accomplish the works God intended for you (Ephesians 2:10).

## **Stuck churches**

There is a corollary to stifled leadership. In my experience, when I see a stifled leader, there is almost always a “stuck” church involved. What I mean by that is a church that hasn’t been able to make forward progress; they are stuck in a rut of their own making. They’ve become too focused on maintaining the status quo or perhaps on keeping the members happy. Missional outreach, gospel, evangelism, discipleship, and spiritual growth have plateaued, and there is a sense of being in spiritual neutral. A stuck church contributes to stifled leadership for these very reasons. Being stuck in neutral is hard on leaders. Expecting a pastor, or any church leader, to prioritize keeping the membership happy above all other priorities is a death sentence—it presses them. Based on my observation and study, an inwardly focused church is much more likely to produce stifled leaders than an outwardly focused church. And, although the reasons for becoming internally focused may begin with good intentions, the eventual outcomes are unhealthy and destructive.

Years ago, I worked with a church that had grown quickly in their community but was facing a downturn in attendance, and the leaders had a sense that something wasn’t right. The church’s mission statement declared the congregation’s passion and intention to reach out to their community with the gospel and their desire to see people coming to salvation in Christ and growing as disciples. But, no one had come to Christ as a result of their ministry in several years, and members of the church felt that they weren’t growing as disciples. How did that happen? How can passion and commitment fail to achieve such noble goals? I don’t know any church leaders who intend to be ineffective and unproductive. And yet, many church leaders I talk to say they struggle to understand why they aren’t accomplishing their “one thing,” their most important goal. They wonder, “What is really happening here?”

That question is why I wrote this book. As a church leader, I did not understand why all the vision casting, mission training, and equipping wasn’t making the congregation more effective in accomplishing the mission. And, as a result, I would get frustrated and start looking for answers in the wrong places. Maybe the vision wasn’t clear enough or the mission statement wasn’t motivating enough. Perhaps the weekly sermons weren’t meeting needs or weren’t relevant enough (self-condemnation). Or, maybe there was a counter-culture in the congregation undermining the mission (conspiracy theory). Or, maybe it was just plain apathy or complacency

(blaming). Obviously, I needed to preach on the Laodicean Church (Revelation 3:14–22) again! There is nothing as counter-productive as blaming the congregation when problems appear! Or, as Peter Senge put it, “when results are disappointing, it can be very difficult to know why ... all you can do is assume that ‘someone [messed] up.’”<sup>5</sup>

Every church leader knows the complexity of discovering what is really happening in a congregation. It’s difficult to answer the question of why intended outcomes and goals—our vision, our mission—are not being accomplished. Although self-condemnation, conspiracy theories, and blaming may appear, on the surface, to be valid responses, they never solve the problem. In fact, they are merely superficial reactions to the symptoms of an underlying problem. The problem is systemic because the church is a system. So, the solution to the problem must be systemic, not just a superficial quick fix that may appear to provide some short-term relief, but in the long-run creates unintended consequences that worsen the original problem.

Systems thinking relieves church leaders from the need to find someone to blame when things don’t go as intended. The system is to blame, not any individual. This means the enemy is not “out there” somewhere.<sup>6</sup> Again, the church system produces church problems. A church doesn’t fail to accomplish its purpose merely because the culture is changing. Perhaps the church is unable or unwilling to make the necessary adaptations to be effective in a changing culture. Systems thinking emphasizes that within a system, the problem and the solution are intertwined, impacting each other. Whenever you find that solutions are not solving the problem, or that some issues just seem to persist no matter how you try to solve them, you are experiencing the reality of the interrelatedness of complex systems. Whenever you find that your “solutions” are producing more problems or making the original difficulty worse, you are bumping up against a systems problem. Also, whenever leaders are tempted to find blame outside the church, the solution will likely be found within the church system. While it is common to search for the enemy that is “out there,” that is most often “an incomplete story,” according to Peter Senge.<sup>7</sup> He explains that the ideas of “out there” and “in here” tend to be interconnected parts of the same system.<sup>8</sup> However, the “learning disability” of looking “out there” for someone to blame decreases the ability to find “leverage” within the system to resolve issues that “straddle the boundary between us and out there.”<sup>9</sup>

We must not underestimate the culture’s impact on the church, however. No doubt, rapidly changing values and priorities of our culture have pushed the church to the margins of

influence in this century.<sup>10</sup> Church leaders face cultural conditions that are new to North America, but reminiscent of post-Christian Europe. Understanding how the church, as a system, can engage the culture is essential to effective ministry in the future.

### *The Burnout Epidemic*

In the face of the changes and challenges confronting leaders, perhaps it should not surprise us that leader burnout has reached epidemic proportions in the church. In my opinion, a stifled leader is a burned-out leader, or at least well on the way to it. No single factor seems to cause leader burnout. Stuck churches certainly contribute to leader burnout. Yet, the problem appears to be as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous as the contexts in which leaders lead. Whatever combination of forces drives it, burnout is a significant danger for ministry leaders. I think of ministry leader burnout as spiritual Ebola. Like Ebola, burnout incapacitates every leader it infects and “kills” too many of them. And, like Ebola, addressing burnout requires a multi-pronged approach. In other words, there is no silver bullet quick fix to the epidemic.

My daughter is an epidemiologist, a professional trained to deal with epidemics. Epidemiologists are experts at distinguishing symptoms from underlying problems. My daughter taught me that their procedure is to treat victims as they identify the boundaries and the pattern (movement) of an outbreak, and then work to hone in on the source to remedy the underlying problem(s) that started the epidemic. This process includes recognizing an unusually high number of occurrences, geographic clusters, and initial correlations of conditions, circumstances, and relationships. Perhaps it is wise to take the same approach to leader burnout.

Numerous researchers and writers over the last few decades have clearly demonstrated the high prevalence of burnout among church leaders. But, interestingly, there are no clear boundaries. Leaders across denominations, faith traditions, and nationalities are equally susceptible. Anglican clergywomen in England, priests in Norway, and Australian pastors all experience burnout equally. That means the most common factor isn't nationality, gender, or denomination—it's the church. The church itself is somehow a factor in burnout.

In accordance with good epidemiological practice, this book attempts to track down the source or sources of burnout within the church. The purpose here is not to provide restorative help. There are many excellent resources currently available. My goal is to provide preventative

help to church leaders and their churches in identifying the contributing variables within the church, which are producing burnout as an undesirable outcome. Undesirable outcomes are the primary indicator that there is a systems problem.

In 2011, an outbreak of listeria that killed 33 people became one of the deadliest foodborne epidemics in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Epidemiologists assigned to the case traced the outbreak back to its source—a Colorado cantaloupe processing facility.<sup>12</sup> They discovered that conditions within the facility had combined to produce contaminated melons. The owners were using a cleaning machine intended to clean potatoes, but it did not include a “catch pan and chlorine spray” to clean the fruit.<sup>13</sup> The result was the unintentional contamination of cantaloupes that killed 33 people. Even the owners of the processing facility didn’t recognize the system failure until it was too late.

The sad reality is that no one intends to start a listeria epidemic. But epidemics, like other bad things, sometimes happen because systems produce unintended consequences. No church leader means to burnout in ministry. And no church intends to burnout their leaders or get stuck in ministry. But these happen repeatedly. Just as conditions combine to produce a listeria epidemic, conditions in the church can combine to produce burnout and other unintended consequences. In a sense, church leaders need to be good epidemiologists. They need to distinguish between problems and symptoms.

Like professional epidemiologists, competent systems leaders do two things. First, they treat the symptoms of the disease. Second, they find and eliminate (or at least minimize) the source of the disease. Too often, churches attempt to treat symptoms—which usually end up being quick fixes—but do nothing to identify the cause of the problem. And, as I will argue later, too often the church blames the victims of burnout rather than taking a good look in the mirror. Imagine the impact of Ebola or cancer if we only cared about treating symptoms without trying to find and solve the problem source. Imagine the long-term result of blaming the victims of Ebola or condemning the victims of cancer for their disease.

In this book, I examine burnout from a systems perspective. No single factor causes it. But there seems to be a familiar pattern surrounding many cases of burnout. The pattern involves the combination of stifled leaders and stuck churches which produce unhealthy outcomes, and burnout is only one of them. To more accurately understand what is happening in these churches, we have to see the church as a stuck system.

## *VUCA and the Church*

As a former Army officer, I can confirm that the Army loves its acronyms. When I first encountered the acronym VUCA, I thought to myself. *This has got to be a military thing.* I was mostly right. Senior Army leaders in the late 1980s were wrestling with the changing leadership environments they were experiencing around the world. In contrast to previous decades, the contexts were more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). The acronym was such a succinct and accurate summation of changing leadership contexts that it became a widely-known, almost universal term. Business leaders consider the VUCA context in their planning. Educational leaders, healthcare, and government leaders talk about VUCA environments. Church leaders, too, must consider how the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of current leadership contexts impact the “what” and “how” of leadership.

There is something particularly challenging about leading an organization of volunteers to reach people in a culture characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. One writer described the VUCA leadership context like this: “Hey, it’s crazy out there!”<sup>14</sup> The rapid pace of change makes leadership challenges more volatile, unexpected, and lasting for “unknown durations,” which places heavy burdens on those responsible for leading change.<sup>15</sup> Uncertainty means that even when the cause and effect of a situation is known, the impact of other factors does not assure change will occur; the situation may not respond as expected.<sup>16</sup> “Despite a lack of other information, the event’s basic cause and effect are known,” writes Bennett and Lemoine.<sup>17</sup> Complexity means that the many interconnected parts and variables present in leadership today, coupled with the low probability of predicting their behavior, can “easily overwhelm leaders.”<sup>18</sup> Even though information may be available, the uncertainty of how it applies to the multi-faceted problems of today is unclear.<sup>19</sup> If that were not difficult enough, the ambiguity of modern problems means that “causal relationships are completely unclear,” forcing leaders to face unprecedented situations in which “unknown unknowns” are the only constant.<sup>20</sup> Not only is the leadership context within the church challenging to navigate, the external leadership environment which leaks into the church in every member also presents unprecedented challenges to church leaders. Perhaps it is not surprising that church leader burnout has reached an epidemic level.





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- <sup>1</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 144.
- <sup>4</sup> John Ortberg, "Intercepting Entropy," *Preaching Today* (July 2008).  
<https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2008/july/interceptingentropy.html>
- <sup>5</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2006), 19.
- <sup>6</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 20.
- <sup>7</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 20.
- <sup>8</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 20.
- <sup>9</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 20.
- <sup>10</sup> Terry Coy, *Return to the Margins: Understanding and Adapting as a Church in Post-Christian America* (Abbotsford, WI: Aneko Press, 2014).
- <sup>11</sup> Tom McGhee, "Colorado Brothers Plead Guilty to Listeria Outbreak that Killed 33," *Denver Post*, October 22, 2013. <https://www.denverpost.com/2013/10/22/colorado-brothers-plead-guilty-in-listeria-outbreak-that-killed-33/>
- <sup>12</sup> McGhee, "Colorado Brothers."
- <sup>13</sup> McGhee, "Colorado Brothers."
- <sup>14</sup> Nathan Bennett and G. James Lemoine, "What VUCA Really Means for You" (Reprint F1401C). *Harvard Business Review* (January-February 2014): 1.
- <sup>15</sup> Bennett and Lemoine, *VUCA*, 2.
- <sup>16</sup> Bennett and Lemoine, *VUCA*, 2.
- <sup>17</sup> Bennett and Lemoine, *VUCA*, 2.
- <sup>18</sup> Bennett and Lemoine, *VUCA*, 2.
- <sup>19</sup> Bennett and Lemoine, *VUCA*, 2.
- <sup>20</sup> Bennett and Lemoine, *VUCA*, 2.