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The Good to Great Pastor  
An interview with Jim Collins.

Jim Collins's book *Good to Great* has been a favorite among church leaders since it appeared in 2001. Six years of research resulted in a well-crafted and captivating account of what enables some companies to go from good to great and what prevents others from doing so. The popularity of the book, coupled with his ability to craft clear explanations for complex issues, has helped Collins become the dean of corporate advisers.

Though the research for *Good to Great* focused on businesses, the book found traction in the not-for-profit world. Leaders of churches, hospitals, schools, museums, and charities sought to adapt these lessons from the business world to their organizations.

After learning that about one-third of those buying *Good to Great* were dealing with the unique dynamics of the non-profit world, Collins recently published a 35-page monograph, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*. We interviewed Collins to ask about the implications for churches.

How did you learn about great church leadership?

Well, I have to begin by understating my expertise when it comes to churches. I don't presume to know the church world better than those who live and lead in it.

What I did for the monograph was take the framework of *Good to Great*, and puzzle with people from churches, be they good or great, and ask, "How are your contextual realities different, and what would you want to know the answer to?" I wanted to know how the lessons of *Good to Great* look in social sector organizations where their fundamental contribution to the world cannot be priced at a profit.

How do you define "greatness" in a church?

Greatness does not equal bigness. Big is not great and great is not big. In fact, the bigger you become the harder it may be to remain great.

For my purposes, an organization must have three things to qualify as great:

1. Superior performance relative to its mission in the world.
2. A distinctive impact on its community. So you'd say, "If this church disappeared, it would leave a serious hole in this community."
3. Endurance. Making an impact over a long enough time, so that it's not dependent on the personality of one leader. If a church is effective during one pastorate, it may be a church with a stellar pastor, but it is not yet a great church.

How does business sector greatness differ from church greatness?

The biggest distinction is the role of money. In the business world, money works both as a fuel to achieve greatness and as a measure of greatness. By definition, you're not a great Olympic runner if you don't win gold medals; you're not a great NFL team if you don't win Super Bowls; you're not a great company if you don't deliver great financial returns.

But in a church, money is only a means or an enabler of true performance, which is successfully reaching people with the message, creating a sense of community, and contributing to the community.

The subtitle for your monograph is "Why business thinking is not the answer." How is business thinking misapplied in the social sector?

The mistake social sector organizations often make is to implement "business practices," but they imitate mediocre businesses.

For instance, bringing in an outside change agent. That's what many average companies do, but great organizations have the discipline to grow leadership from within. There's also the practice of using incentives. Average companies spend a lot of time incentivizing desired behavior. Great institutions discipline themselves to get people whose character is naturally to exhibit great behavior.

Since discipline is so key, where do you most often see breakdowns in discipline?

Not being rigorous about who's put in leadership roles. In churches and other social sector organizations, the work is too important to let key seats on the bus be occupied by the wrong people.

Second is being unclear about your goals. You must ask, "What do we mean by great results?"

Your goals don't have to be quantifiable, but they do have to be describable. Some leaders try to insist, "The only acceptable goals are measurable," but that's actually an undisciplined statement. Lots of goals—beauty, quality, life change, love—are worthy but not quantifiable. But you do have to be able to tell if you're making progress. For a church, a goal might be: Young people bring other young people here unprompted. Do they talk about the church with their friends? You may not be able to measure that, but you can assess it.

Third is undisciplined action, most commonly seen in the inability to stay with a coherent program long enough to get flywheel momentum.

Average organizations constantly lurch from one initiative to another. They're always looking for the next big thing, when the next big thing might be the thing they already have.

What role does leadership play in great churches?

One of the things from Good to Great that really resonated with church leaders was the Level 5 Leadership finding, that leaders who took companies from good to great are characterized by personal humility and by a fierce dedication to a cause that is larger than themselves.

I was delighted how the Level 5 concept took hold, and yet the deeper I got into it, the more I realized that Level 5 Leadership looks different in a non-business setting. A church leader often has a very complicated governance structure. There can be multiple sources of power, constituencies in the community, and constituencies in the congregation. With all of that, you're going to run into trouble if you try to lead a church as a czar. Church leaders have to be adept in a more communal process, what we came to call "legislative" rather than an "executive" process.

What's the difference between legislative and executive leaders?

If you walked into the Senate, as one of a hundred senators, thinking, Okay, here I am. I am going to lead this place as if I'm CEO, you're going to fail because you don't have that kind of power. Whereas if you're Sam Walton at Wal-Mart, you can say, "I am Sam Walton; this is my company; this is what we are going to do," and it will work.

Legislative leaders are in a complicated body where you have to bring together multiple pieces. Executive leaders don't ultimately have to convince other people to go along. Concentrated executive power is far less prevalent in the social sectors.

How does a legislative leader display "rigor," a key word in your book?

You might think a legislative leader just looks for consensus and therefore lacks rigor. But that's not Level 5 legislative leadership. Good legislative leadership requires no less rigor than executive leadership. In fact, it may require more.

Lacking the concentrated executive power, the legislative leader must generate power in order to accomplish the mission. Take Francis Hesselbein, the highly successful leader of the Girl Scouts of the USA. She learned the power of language and how to find the coalitions and how to connect different groups and shared interests. Without concentrated power, the leader has to be smarter in order to create the conditions for the right decisions to be made. That's rigorous.

Also, legislative leadership is not about unanimity or making sure everyone feels good. The legislative leader asks, What needs to happen to produce the best results relative to our mission? I know everyone won't like it and it might be hard on some people. And I know I don't have the power to just make this happen. So where can I find the sources of power that allow me to get what needs to happen to happen, even if it isn't popular?

I've never found an important decision made by a great organization that was made at a point of unanimity. Significant decisions carry risks and inevitably some will oppose it. In these settings, the great legislative leader must be artful in handling uncomfortable decisions, and this requires rigor.

How does a good church begin moving toward greatness?

By getting the right people in key seats. These right people then ask, "What are the brutal facts we must confront?"

Notice what I did not say. They do not begin with a vision to rally people around. They say, "Let's get some strong people in key seats who care about the cause we're engaged in. Even though we don't know the strategy or the end vision, there is an allegiance to the mission. Then

they confront, Why aren't we great? What do we need to do to move the flywheel toward a higher level of performance?

That's a very different approach from saying, "I am going to be a charismatic leader who lays out a vision and motivates everybody to go there."

So where does vision come into the process?

Much later in the process than most assume. To become great you basically extrapolate from the results you're already getting, ask, How far could this take us? and then commit to doing it. The vision emerges from small successes. This is something we didn't understand when Jerry Poras and I wrote *Built to Last*. We thought you set the vision and build momentum toward it. What actually happens is you build momentum and see that something is actually working and then you see how far it can go.

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Spring 2006, Vol. XXVII, No. 2, Page 48