



In January 2006, Larry Osborne, pastor of the 5,000-member North Coast Church in Vista, California, spoke to a group of Nazarene pastors attending the Large Church Leadership Conference in San Diego. Following his presentation the pastors spent an afternoon at the church campus to learn firsthand about how North Coast goes about its “multisite” ministry. They returned on Sunday morning to attend worship with 6,500 others in one of their several venues.

It’s one thing to read about multisite ministry—quite another to hear about it from Osborne and his staff—even better to attend one of their many worship experiences. Pastor Osborne and his staff never suggested that others could do church exactly as they do it, and I don’t think any of the Nazarene pastors who were there have tried to duplicate North Coast. And yet, a few pastors have since implemented multisite ministries of their own design. The North Coast experience sparked creative ideas that have been adapted to other settings.

That’s an example of learning from best practices—a highly developed methodology in the corporate world. In *Benchmarking for Best Practices: Winning Through Innovative Adaptation*,¹ Christopher Bo-

gan and Michael English describe this learning process as more than a discipline to gain a competitive advantage—it’s a personal as well as corporate way of life. It’s about developing the skill to learn from others, even from those in very different enterprises. They describe how Henry Ford got his idea for assembly-line production from observing the processing of livestock in a Chicago meatpacking plant.

Since most of the information about benchmarking is for the corporate world only, a few in the nonprofit world and virtually none in the religious community have adapted this discipline to their activities. (A Google search for the words *benchmarking* or *best practices* leads to extensive resources and practices common to corporations and government agencies.)

Even though pastors learn from one another, they do not necessarily understand or apply benchmarking for best practices as a learning discipline. Most books intended to help pastors and churches do well are organized around lists of oughts and shoulds—lists of suggested steps from proven experience that will lead to success, if only applied. As helpful as such books may be, that’s not necessarily the way to learn from best practices.

Learning from best practices is learning by observation and (in the subtitle of the book by Bogan and English) implementing “innovative adaptation.” It encourages leaders to find comparables such as a pastor might do in finding and observing a growing church of similar size in a similar setting. It’s knowing *how* things are done as well as what needs to be done and how to distinguish between what can and cannot be adapted to another setting.

For example, it’s more helpful to observe how Pastor Kerry Willis at Harrisonburg First Nazarene has been able to recruit dozens of men as prayer partners than to simply be told that prayer is important in growing churches. Listening to Pastor Willis describe how he used his interest in fishing to lead men into a prayer

fellowship could help other pastors discover ways that they, too, can use their life experiences to connect men to spiritual development.

Pastors of many growing churches will tell you that worship must have flow. I can describe flow as an experience where several components (music, prayer, preaching, drama, video, etc.) are combined and blended into a seamless experience of worship. But I didn't really understand it until I attended worship at the Valparaiso, Indiana, First Church of the Nazarene, as the next chapter shows.

On his Web site <<http://www.bockinfo.com/docs/benchmarking.htm>> Wally Bock suggests that learning from best practices “refers to identifying, sharing and implementing practices that result in improvements in either efficiency or effectiveness. Best Practices programs are continuous quests for improvement.”

He continues, “To find good practices you need to measure your results and those of others. Then you need to go out and aggressively find out who's doing good things. Your business intelligence efforts should help you find out what's being done by others.”

For the last 15 years, through the Church of the Nazarene K-Church training program (churches with average attendance of 250 or more), pastors have learned from the best practices of churches from various traditions and now some of them are teaching others. They've overcome one of the impediments that stand in the way of learning from best practices—that is, being threatened by the success of others. In the church world, competition often results in resentment rather than learning. At their best, pastors and churches are collaborators, not competitors. I've found that pastors of growing churches are more than willing to share their experiences and give their time to teach others.

Ed Stetzer and David Putman in their recent book *Breaking the Missional Code* suggest that pastors and members of churches seeking to revitalize themselves find and visit growing churches. Some growing churches such as the Grove City, Ohio, Church of the

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Nazarene—the largest Nazarene church in the United States, with a 3,500-average attendance—sponsors conferences to which pastors and leaders of many denominations are invited <www.grovecity-nazarene.org>. The First Church of the Nazarene in Colorado Springs is a teaching church where Pastor Gene Grate leads growth seminars and provides comprehensive resources through “The Minister’s Tool Box” <www.realliferesources.org>.

After many years of training denominational leaders and pastors through the United States/Canada Mission/Evangelism Department <www.usacanadamission.org>, we have found that pastors learn best from peer-to-peer learning linked with coaching and mentoring. Learning how to innovate and adapt from the best practices of growing churches is a proven strategy for starting and revitalizing churches.