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The U-Turn Church

New Direction for Health and Growth

by Kevin G. Harney & Bob Bouwer
(Baker Books: 2011)

A Book Review by Jack De Vries

Have you ever been driving down the road and suddenly realised you were heading in the wrong direction? We have. One summer we heading back to Canada from visiting our children in North Carolina. We had to go north, but two hours in our journey, we realised we were heading south. There was only one thing to do – find the closest place and make a U-Turn. Which we did!

In our churches there are times when we need to take a new direction. Kevin G. Harney and Bob Bouwer, in *The U-Turn Church*, share the stories of two churches that experienced healthy transformation over years of walking through a U-Turn strategy. Not unlike many churches in the west, both of these churches needed to move in a new direction. In the introduction to this book, the authors write: “The old way of doing things is just not working. The ‘tried and true’ approaches are not bearing fruit.... In these moments ...God calls us to make a U-Turn and try a fresh new direction. The gospel and truth of God’s Word do not change, but the way we do

ministry, our approach to worship, and how we reach our communities, need to be reexamined. This is the U-Turn moment many churches are facing right now. Maybe it is where you are right now.” (10) And for the next thirteen chapters, Harney and Bouwer take turns describing what this U-Turn moment might be like for a church.

In the opening chapter Harney gets the focus right. “A U-Turn is about the glory of God, the name of Jesus, the health of his bride (the church), and reaching the world that is in desperate need of a Savior.... God longs for His bride, the church to be healthy and vibrant. He wants the local church to be a transforming presence in every community on the face of the earth.” (17, 18) “A U-Turn is first and foremost about lifting up one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.... The holy zeal that will move a church outward and upward is based on a desire to see people from every nation and tongue bow at the feet of Jesus and declare Him ‘Lord.’” (21) Church transformation is not about self-preservation, increased income, or larger attendance. It is about the glory of God. This is such a refreshing focus, something that the authors return to throughout the book. This emphasis by these pastors of Reformed Churches (RCA) will resound well among the churches I serve, the Christian Reformed Churches in Australia (CRCA). Everything we do is about the glory of God and the name of Jesus. As Harney writes: “The church is the bride of Jesus and He is the groom. The bride



must long for the groom and hunger for His name to be exalted and honored in every square inch of creation.” (22) Do I hear an amen?

When it comes to churches growing in health and numbers, do you have sense of urgency? I recall a conversation I had with one of my mission profs at seminary, Dr. Richard De Ridder. He told the story of one of his students who settled somewhere in the Midwest of the USA. In seminary this student was passionate about reaching the lost with the gospel. But when he settled into the pastorate he became quite comfortable with the status quo. His evangelistic zeal was all gone. For someone like my mission prof – this was anathema! De Ridder was passionate about his student’s lack of passion for the spread of the gospel. His challenge to us up- and-coming-preachers was to never lose our zeal for the mission of God.

This passion for God’s mission stuck with me then and continues to stick now. For this reason I resonate with Bouwer’s comments: “When a church is not growing, or is merely maintaining, or even declining, how can leaders say they’re not into the numbers? The numbers could indicate a spiritual issue.... The bottom line is that numbers do matter. Numbers can create a sense of urgency. Those numbers could represent growth, and that would give the body of Christ, the Church, the desire to deal with the issues resulting from the growing numbers.” (30) As Bouwer goes on to say, “A wise church that is seeking to turn around does an honest assessment of their numbers, evaluates them, and asks, ‘What does this tell us?’” (31) I keep asking this very question every time I look at the statistics of my denomination, the CRCA. Healthy numbers communicate good health.

U-Turn churches have a sense of urgency that moves them out of the status quo and beyond the “same old, same old” mindset.

The chapter on vision is spot on! I have discovered that if churches and organisations are going to move ahead into God’s future then they need to have a crystal-clear vision of what this looks like. But this chapter is not just trumping the need for churches to have a vision statement. Harney shares a number of lessons he has learned about vision – such as, *remain biblical to the core* (do I hear another amen!), *get and keep your leaders and key influencers on the same page, remind and review ... often, do less to accomplish more*, and there are more. But one lesson shared that I really liked was: *bless the past as you move into the future*. This is so important. As Harney writes: “Don’t shame the past. Thank God for it, celebrate it, and remember it. But move forward where God is leading.” (50)

Don’t we see this pattern throughout biblical history? As leaders encouraged forward movement among God’s people, they did not forget to look in the rear view mirror. God was there in the past. He was at work. And so churches are wise to “look back and be thankful. Celebrate what [God] has done.” (50) But move forward!

The rest of the chapters in this book go on to describe key aspects of the journey U-Turn churches take. Prayer is emphasized as “one of the most powerful tools God uses to change a church.” (55) The authors share numerous examples of how a church can become a house of prayer. An excellent and most crucial chapter.

Harney and Bouwer also give some ideas how to qualify the differences between what the Bible says are biblical absolutes and people’s personal preferences. I know that many churches struggle with this very issue! It might have to do with music style of worship, church decor and personal attire, the education of pastors, church government, and the list goes on. Every church session would

benefit from studying this chapter and going through the action steps for church leaders which can be found at the end of each chapter. Change can be difficult and create much anxiety in churches, but as the authors point out: “We should remind churches that there are always things that will be changing, but the Word of God will never change.” (86)

In the final chapter Bower stresses that any u-turn in a church begins with a “you-turn” in individual hearts, in the hearts of pastors and church leaders. I found this chapter a bit wanting. It is brief and to the point, but warrants a much deeper and longer discussion. In fact, earlier in the book, the authors wrote about the importance of leader accountability. “Leaders lead. If our leaders are not passionate about their faith and walking close with Jesus, why should we expect our church members to be growing? We discovered this was so important to our board members that we began creating the same kind of accountability and opportunity for spiritual growth for the staff and other key volunteers in the church.” (102)

Recently I spoke with a church leader whose comment to me was: “Our church does not need a u-turn. We are going in the right direction.” But I question this about his church, about all churches, as well as, all church leaders. Our spiritual journey is about constantly making u-turns – turning away from sin and self, turning toward Jesus, and “being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory.” (2 Corinthians 3:18) No church has ever arrived. No individual has ever arrived. I have not yet arrived. More changes are still needed. I like what I remember one school principal saying to a graduating class: “If you think you are green, you are growing; if you think you are ripe, you are most likely starting to rot.” Give that a thought! True, isn’t it?

To press forward in the U-Turn process will demand a tender heart and skin like a rhinoceros. It is easy to have one or the other. It is quite difficult to have both.

Some chapters in *The U-Turn Church* might appear trivial, such as chapter 11: The “Wow” Factor. When I began reading this chapter I thought to myself, this sounds a little trite. I don’t know if “God desires the ‘wow’ factor to be our goal”(164), as Bower suggests. But don’t dismiss this chapter too easily. Keep reading. Keep reading till the end. Harney admits that in his church context, “with a hundred years of history, a rich Dutch heritage, and high value for humility, this concept would have been a hard sell.” (174) Not much different among the Reformed churches here in Australia. Harney goes on to say, “Instead of talking about creating ‘wow’ ministries and experiences, we talked more about excellence. We would seek to do the best we could in every area of our ministry.” (174) This makes proper sense! Doing everything with excellence for the glory of God. Remembering the One we are serving! Excellence for the glory of God! Now that is a goal worth aiming at!

There is one more chapter I like to highlight; every church leader would benefit greatly from it: “Tough Skin and Soft Hearts” (Chapter 8). As Harney writes, “The question is not whether we will face painful moments on the U-Turn road. The real issue is, when we face these times, can we keep a tender heart?” (132) It is true. I know from experience. In every church I served I faced those painful moments. Some with many tears, great heart ache, and lonely moments. Harney has a chapter packed full of wise words for those who face resistance and battles. “Don’t give up. Don’t become hardhearted; stay soft.” (132) Are you in the heat of a battle? Be encouraged! This chapter alone is worth the price of the book.

I would really like to recommend this book to church leadership, sessions, staff and/or

ministry teams. Read and study this book together. Willetton CRC Church Council did exactly that. Check out their story in the opposite column. Each chapter is easily readable in one sitting. The questions and ideas for prayer at the end of every chapter will make you ponder for a bit longer. But it will be well worth it. Who knows, you may find a new direction for health and growth in your church or organisation – a u-turn!

About the Authors



Kevin G. Harney (MDiv, Fuller Seminary; DMin, Western Theological Seminary) led Corinth Reformed Church in Byron Center, Michigan, through a U-Turn experience from 1993-2006. He is currently senior pastor of Shoreline Community Church in Monterey, California. Harney is the author of

Organic Outreach for Ordinary People, Leadership from the Inside Out, Seismic Shifts, Finding a Church You Can Love, and more than sixty small group guides, as well as curriculum and numerous articles. He also does extensive teaching and speaking both nationally and internationally. He lives in California.



Bob Bower (MDiv, Western Theological Seminary) has been leading Faith Church in South Holland, Illinois/Dyer, Indiana, through a U-Turn experience from 1990 to the present. Bower is founder and executive director of U-Turn Church Ministries Inc., which holds conferences to help

congregations and denominations move toward health and growth. He speaks nationally and provides resources for churches and leaders on how to effectively walk through a turnaround process. He is also the visionary leader of The Ravines in Lowell, Indiana, a marriage hospital that creates U-Turn experiences for marriages that need to find a hope-filled way forward. He lives in Indiana.

The story of one church council that used this book: Willetton CRC, WA:

*It wasn't too hard to get all the men on our Church Council (CC) to read Harney and Bower's **The UTurn Church**. We had two pastors who came back excited from the CRCA Recharge Ministry Conference in Sydney and we have a member on CC who manages the local Koorong store in Perth. He made sure we all had a copy in our hands so that we could commit to reflecting on the book and working through some of the valuable lessons learned by both authors. We identified with the Bob Bower's church more so than Harney's but found aspects, positive and negative, of both congregations alive and well among us. Even so it was not going to be easy to change direction. For many years we had plateaued so far as our membership was concerned and for a congregation of 350+ making a U turn was going to be a bit like turning the Titanic around. We wanted to do much more than simply rearrange the deck-chairs, we wanted to address the sin of complacency. With so much at stake for the sake of the gospel and after much prayer we are at a point where we believe a church "transplant" is going to help reinvigorate our congregation. **The UTurn Church** got us thinking in very practical terms about how to minister through the strength of the gospel to the congregation and help them refocus on missions. Now we are maintaining a course that will put us on a journey of taking many U-Turns for the glory of God and for the faith nurture of His people.*

- Rev. Tony Van Drimmelen