

How the Mighty Stumble. And Rise Again.

Reflections on This Week's Global Leadership Summit

By J. David Schmidt

Twenty-six summers ago, John Pearson* and I sat with Bill Hybels on the lake shore in South Haven, Michigan. We spent a warm afternoon on a cottage deck with a yellow pad scratching out a simple vision. What if there was an organization that could amplify the way God's promise of redemption was being played out at Willow Creek Community Church? Could we establish an organization that would tell the story of how this unique church was helping people of all types, make life-giving connections with Jesus Christ? Could we build a system to manage the huge number of inquiries coming from across the country and around the world about Willow Creek's way of doing church? We dreamed of teaching and equipping church leaders how to think differently. The Christian faith community in the early 1990's was at the end of an era. Models and methods were tired. A handful of new effective models of doing church were appearing. Willow Creek was one of them.

The point of that afternoon meeting was simple. Dream of a preferred future for faith communities and how we could serve them. By afternoon's end, that deck felt like sacred space. To quote the late Bob Buford, "Something was trying to be born here."

The next morning, Bill would take our yellow pad work to a visit with western Michigan manufacturing entrepreneur, Ed Prince. Ed would be the first person to catch the vision we had outlined. That day, he wrote the first of five \$250,000 checks to help launch the Willow Creek Association.

Out of that summer afternoon conversation grew an enterprise that eventually spawned the Global Leadership Summit (GLS), an annual idiosyncratic leadership training event accessed by at least 150,000 individuals annually in the US and more than twice that number around the world.

Diverse Tribes

Tom DeVries, the new president of the Willow Creek Association, will stand in front of the 23rd GLS. His task and the moment won't be easy. We are now in deep waters, and the dark night of the soul has come upon a community not just a set of individuals. The news stories over the past weekend have made many heartsick. We will be longing for something to sooth the underlying strain of "the Hybels story" at this difficult moment in the history of the GLS. And frankly, I'm not so sure I want to hear Craig Groeschel or any other contemporary leader. My heart longs to be led in that first session in quiet reflection, lament and prayer that models to our unchurched guests we aren't tone deaf to the failures of our own leaders or ourselves and the only thing we know to do in these times is to go to God. Not "the first up" GLS speaker.

Tom will stand in front of somewhat fewer people in somewhat fewer venues scattered across the United States than he and others hoped and prayed and worked hard for. (Despite the farcical and venomous speculation by a handful of ill-informed, naysaying tweeters who have tweeted and retweeted their own nonsense, the GLS is far from collapse. That said, it is not business as usual either. The future of the GLS is in play now and how WCA leaders and its Board respond to the organizational issues it faces, will help to determine its fate.)

Tom will not stand in front of a homogeneous group of people seeking their annual infusion of leadership insights. Instead, it will be his job to pastor a diverse mix of groups—more like tribes actually. The backstory will be on the minds of many and the hearts of some. For the past 22 years it was Bill Hybels who stood on the GLS platform to kick off the event with a talk on leadership that almost always garnered the highest rating of all the speakers. For those of us who have been stakeholders in this enterprise Bill's absence will be palpable. Stunning. Mystifying. Painful.

The tribes? There are multiple but here are several to note:

- One tribe, overwhelmingly the biggest, are those who have little knowledge or a low-grade interest in the gut-wrenching saga that has occupied the minds and hearts of many since painful allegations interrupted the Willow storyline earlier this year. Sanguines, pragmatists and Enneagram 7's, many in this tribe will attend simply because they were invited or out of personal desire to strengthen their own leadership no matter what the host organization is going through. Some in this tribe may care but are able to compartmentalize enough to embrace what the GLS has to offer.

While their hearts are committed to serve all the tribes present, this is the tribe the GLS leadership has in the center of their bullseye. The tribe that keeps the machine running.

This tribe is somewhat like the people who were behind the counter at a convenience store in the middle of South Carolina back in February, when a friend of mine walked in one morning and said, "Did you hear the news?" And they said, "What news?" Replying, my friend said, "Billy Graham died this morning." And they turned to him and said, "Who is Billy Graham?"

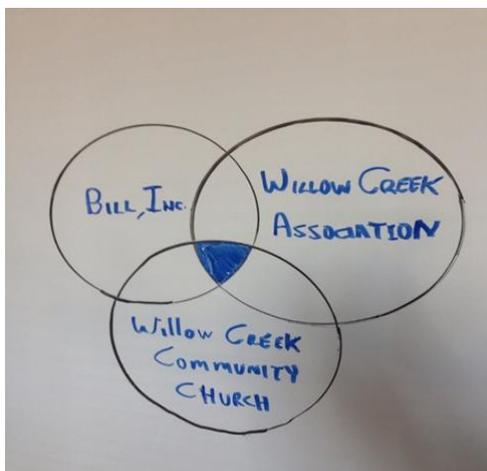
- There's a second tribe, a bit more in denial maybe, made up of people much like a friend and long-term Willow member and volunteer who said, "I can't deal with this story at the top of my church. Someone else must figure it out. I'm just focusing on doing church with my section (small group)."
- Paid workers and volunteers in and around Willow and the GLS system, past and present, constitute another tribe. They have faithfully soldiered through, as one of them said, "all this allegation stuff." Does blind loyalty or job security concerns force them to shrink the story to that? For some maybe, but too wide of a brush to paint all of them with. Likely struggling with their own mix of loyalty, woundedness, disillusion, and pain, yet faithfully persevere? A better-sized brush. These are good people. Holding on to hope in the face of difficulty, they will bring you the GLS this year—in spite of. Calls for punitive resignations of some of these staff and volunteer leaders and the resulting upheaval such an action would bring, are short-sighted and unlikely to accomplish the hoped for result. Wisdom calls for reason and reality, failure and renewal, to live in tension here. Redemption no longer comes in epic floods or wholesale slaughter of enemy tribes. In a non-denominational church especially, the path is different. Like the 12 steps of recovery, it comes from unlearning and relearning—relearning a new way to respond to the redemptive invitation of Jesus, to next time, follow Him a bit more closely on matters of leadership care.

- Another group attending the GLS will be one whose members have their own secrets. Those with their own failures and struggles, some fresh, some out in the light, some still buried, some still not processed all the way to healing--they will be there too.
- And, there will be a bewildered, hurt tribe, who feels redemption is so possible, just ahead—but not here yet. Some have the will and constitution to attend as one such friend told me, “I’m coming to support Tom (DeVries)”. Others simply can’t come. Somehow a “rah rah sis boom bah”, event feels tone deaf. At least for this year. This tribe cannot get their heads and hearts around this story of a leader and enterprise they trusted and thought would be the least likely to stumble, has. This tribe has likely cried the most tears for everyone involved. They have anguished with friends and colleagues. Perhaps in less denial and more in touch with their own frailties, they have been slow to point fingers at those who made visible what was invisible, Bill or the Boards of the church or WCA. They both fully understand...and don't understand what has happened, why and how it has been handled. Digital screaming isn’t their style. Reflection is. They want to see the goodness of God prevail in the land of the living. They have prayed for and seek healing for every person, in every direction, starting with Bill. I’ve talked to some of these people. I know them by name. Not a vindictive bone among them. Hurt? Yes. But this tribe hungers for authenticity in process. They long for Bill and board members and others to lean in toward healing—to recall another leader who stumbled. King David of ancient Jewish history, *after* he committed adultery with Bathsheba *and after he confessed his wrong-doing*, went on to write perhaps seven of the greatest Psalms—laments that have encouraged tens of millions of Scripture readers down through history. He was called a man after God’s own heart before *and* after his failure and repentance.

We Need a Word

As I have wrestled with this story and my personal and close in experience with so many who have been named in it, I have struggled with my own thoughts and feelings—and searched for a word to help me process it all. I landed on redemption—how can I/we collectively buy back what has been lost? Be set free from the pain of being let down by leaders, processes and systems?

My mind went back to the years I was actively consulting with the Willow Creek Association. I recall vividly, more than once, drawing a simple graphic on a whiteboard:



Three overlapping circles, each with their own label: In one, Bill, Inc.—all things Bill Hybels, his books, outside speaking, mentoring, and fund-raising. In a second, Willow Creek Community Church. And in the third, Willow Creek Association. Bright and dedicated people would wrestle with how those 3 entities related, what value they each delivered, who they should be governed by, the brand promise of each. It was complicated. There was and still is overlap everywhere—a thicket of causes, people, funds, and programs. (Even today, the Global Leadership Summit depends heavily on the volunteer labor of Willow Creek Church attendees to pull off the home event which is broadcast across the country.)

Over the past several months as I thought about what brings deep and abiding redemption to this story, my mind has gone back to that graphic. Early on it seemed to me that the wisest course of action was that the three entities on the whiteboard would best be served if each would disconnect from each other and walk their own path of redemption. This is easy to diagnose and so much harder to make happen. Organizational muscle memory is a real thing. Pragmatically it made some sense. Each was on its own trajectory anyway. Bill was stepping away from his leadership role. Willow Creek Community Church, is now, especially with Teaching Pastor Steve Carter resigning a few days ago, in the throes of a significant reset that leadership succession triggers. Plus its innovation energy had largely atrophied and it was no longer making news like it once did. Thus, the Willow Creek Association no longer had a reason to put a megaphone on Willow Creek to amplify its story. And, it had drifted substantially away from its original narrow vision on the church to become all things leadership in both the church and marketplace. (Mission drift, by the way, is not always a bad thing—it's only bad when the drivers of it are suspect.) An individual. A church. An association. Each seemed better served if they respectively would make the difficult choice of moving away from each other, give up the overlap, and walk the road of individual redemption.

How the Mighty Stumble

But as I have reflected on that graphic on the whiteboard it seemed out of date. Incomplete. The graphic seemed to need more circles with additional names and enterprises written in them.

If redemption is the invitation to Bill, Inc., and Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association and GLS, then the invitation is for others too. Including me.

Jim Collins (who has spoken at two GLS's) eloquently outlines in his book, [How the Mighty Fall](#) a sequence of events for how organizations—and each of us—fall from a place of meaning and effectiveness. It starts with:

Hubris Born of Success, which leads to

Undisciplined pursuit of more, and then

Denial of risk and peril, followed by

Grasping for salvation, then

Capitulation to irrelevance or death, or

Redemption (my add)

The current Willow Creek story with its 41 years of history is in this sequence somewhere. I am. AND, each of us, in some area of our lives either are now, or sometime in our lives have been or will be, on Collins' continuum.

I have no role in this current Willow story. But somehow, I know I am a part of it. As a consultant I too got caught up at times in inattentive blindness—paying attention to something that obscured what is more important. When things are hopping, and we think “God just *has* to be in this” and the American and sub-culture drivers of “up and to the right” and “fill the room plans” catalyze decisions, it's all too easy to sing along. Looking back I wonder if I could have spoken up more clearly and frequently about the dis-ease I felt when the focus was on human endeavor, with a “Yea God!” thrown in. Times when I sensed that “buzz” overshadowed the still small voice of God's Spirit leading differently. Operating in a culture that has some history of confusing scale and impact, prestige with humility, controlling power with unleashing it, can get disorienting. The truth is I liked listing the Willow Creek Community Church and the WCA as clients. The opportunity to teach and write about what I saw there. The perk of a perennial seat at the GLS. In my own way, in pursuit of organizational effectiveness and impact, I contributed, as we all do, to the organizational cultures we work in. One former employee said to me, “I've replayed the video tape dozens of times of my years at Willow and WCA. Many, many times...I should have been more courageous to speak up and speak out.”

And Rise Again

A wise friend said to me earlier this year, “You can only redeem what you weep over, and you can only weep over what you name.” Some have named the state of male-female work relationships that needs to be redeemed in this story. Fair enough. We need all the help we can get in this arena. But for me, this is most assuredly not the elephant in the room and GLS speakers who bears down narrowly on this will likely do some good—but miss the point for me. Whatever we name it, questioned or broken trust, unchecked power, privilege run amuck, dilapidated governance, arrogance, organizational breakdown, poor process to resolve an issue, paradigm paralysis, faith not lived out—these are the elephants I see in my own life and at times, in the organizations I am privileged to serve. This is what has brought me to tears. What I ached about. And it all needs what redemption gives: freedom. Buying back what we find invaluable.

Naming the right thing—telling the truth at the start, sets the trajectory for healing. Redemption begins as it always has, with humility—the humility to name what needs to be redeemed.

An eyewitness to the life of Jesus, John, captured in writing a striking story that might help us. When Jesus and a handful of his closest friends encountered a disabled man who couldn't see, his friends asked Jesus, “Who sinned? This man or his parents?” Jesus responds, “You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. *Look instead for what God can do.*” (From [The Message](#).) And with that he touched the man, and freedom came.

For all of us who have watched the Willow story closely, this might be a good moment to take our eyes off all the individuals in this story, putting those people in God's merciful and good care and then asking, the right question as Jesus challenges. The question is not, What about Bill? What about the Board? What about the WCA's actions? What about? What about?

No, for me I believe the right question is, What about me? Who am I? Really?

Not Either Or But Both And

One of the things I've learned as a consultant and more recently as a husband and dad, is that personal honest reflection—the kind that is uncomfortable when executed in truth and humility—will do something for our souls that no two-day leadership conference will ever do. If you are headed to the GLS this year, perhaps the greatest gift you can give yourself is to take some personal time either before or at the GLS to set aside the meta Willow narrative and name what needs to be named in your own story. Skip a session. Walk. Breathe. Reach for the right question.

For such reflection we can turn for guidance to The Gift of Being Yourself, by author David G. Benner who says,

“...people who are afraid to look deeply at themselves will, of course, be equally afraid to look deeply at God. Knowing God and knowing self-are therefore interdependent. Neither can proceed very far without the other.”

In our own right, we each are mighty. Some of us have been over-trained to think that, as John Phillip Newell has said, “What is deepest in us is opposed to God.” But it is also true that “what is deepest in us is “sacred and of God.” The invitation is to live in dynamic tension between the two. And work to allow what is sacred and of God, shine. As this year’s GLS will emphasize, we all have influence. Perhaps the influence we steward, begins with actually influencing ourselves to see ourselves more clearly in the light of God’s redemptive love. This is what emotionally healthy leaders do.

For those of us longing for redemption “in every direction” for the Willow story and everyone involved, only good can come when we each open ourselves to the redemption God continually offers us—for what is seen and what is unseen. There is an invitation here whatever tribe you find yourself in, for you and for me. In the words of Brennan Manning,

“Sin and forgiveness and falling and getting back up and losing the pearl of great price in the couch cushions but then finding it again, and again, and again? Those are the stumbling steps to becoming Real, the only script that's really worth following in this world or the one that's coming.”

*John Pearson was heading up Willow Creek’s church relations department at the time and was the first President of the Willow Creek Association.

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