



DEFINING MOMENTS

Process Tool

Ask Bill

Summary

Recently, *Defining Moments* contacted 400 randomly chosen pastors and invited them to submit a question that they'd like Willow Creek Community Church senior pastor Bill Hybels to answer. In this edition of *Defining Moments*, host Nancy Beach asks Bill their questions on topics ranging from the economic crisis to evangelism and leadership development.

Outline

The Economic Crisis

What advice can you give to pastors who are trying to forecast (e.g. buying property, building buildings) during this economic climate?

- Bill has never seen the kind of economic condition we're in right now, and his friends who work in the financial industry have varying opinions on how long the crisis might last and how bad it could get.
- Leaders can't predict what's going to happen, but they do have to operate in the future.
 - If you're not ahead of where your church is going, that's a problem for the whole church.
 - Follow the advice of Jesus in Matthew 10:16 to be "wise as serpents, gentle as doves."
- Certain eras of leadership call for conservatism, keeping a lot of cash in reserves so you can weather a storm.
- There are other times when the Holy Spirit prompts you to launch aggressive initiatives, and He's going to provide in ways that you'll be talking about with your grandkids.
- It's each leader's job to gather the team, to fast and pray, to look into the future as best you can, to listen to promptings, and to move as God leads.

How do you navigate these difficult economic times when fewer resources are coming into the church while the need to serve "the least of these" seems to grow exponentially with each passing day?

- We have to remind ourselves that not everybody is affected by this downturn.
 - It's easy to listen to the news and assume that not a single person has a dime left to their name, but that's not true.
 - There are some industries that are way more affected than others, but there's still commerce going on and there are still people who have jobs and who have done wise investing.
- Although perhaps not as dramatically as right now, there have been times before when more people were coming to the church for help because they had lost their jobs, but giving to the church had gone down because people had lost their jobs.
- In those times, the challenge has to go to the people who are less affected, those who have been great stewards and have reserves — it's time to ask people who have only been inconvenienced a little to step up.

- It's also time to tell people who have had the rug pulled out from under them, sometimes through no fault of their own, that they need to have the humility to tell the church that they need help, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

Multi-Site Ministry

How do you discern if your church has grown to a point where you need to consider going multi-site?

- Some churches cannot grow simply because they can't park one more car or add more seating, or because of zoning regulations or the cost of land — yet, the Spirit of God is working in a robust way in their church, and they know they still have a lot of “up” left in their ministry.
- That's the best reason to go multi-site.
- What makes Bill nervous is when churches with half-empty buildings want to go multi-site as a growth strategy.
 - If you can't grow your congregation to the point where it's filling the facility you're in, you probably shouldn't run out and expect that you're going to fill four or five others.
 - Arguments can be made that the other side of town needs an expression of your ministry, and that may be true, but your side of town needs your ministry too.

What are your most recent learnings from your multi-site strategy, and what would you say to those who are a few years behind you in the journey?

- Willow's recent learnings are that these multi-site venues require a committed core for them to be viable, as well as a facility that will lead to growth and not instantaneous frustration.
- Adding sites involves operational complexity that often gets underestimated, which happened at Willow.
 - Willow had staff and resources at their disposal, but when they launched three sites back to back, the complexity of all that was involved operationally just about brought them to their knees.
 - They put a freeze on the launch of their fourth site until they built the muscles necessary to know how to think with a multi-site mindset.
 - They had to figure out how to deliver high-caliber children's ministry, junior high ministry, senior high ministry, small groups, and pastoral care across all the venues.
- They've taken a slower growth approach than some churches that have launched far more regionals.
 - Willow hasn't had a failed site yet, and right now they have a quarter of their total weekend attendance (just under 6,000) in regionals.
 - Their strategy has been consistent with the ethic around Willow and Bill's personality as a calculated risk-taker.
 - When a ministry experiment goes wrong, real people get hurt.
 - Bill would rather launch well-planned-out regionals with great leadership, a strong core, and a good capitalization plan so they have the highest probability of succeeding long-term.

Church Plant Boards

I am a leader of a new church, started two and a half years ago. I am sure of the direction that God has given me, but the board keeps pushing me in a different direction. How do I handle this in a Christ-like manner?

- This leader is only two years in and is already having trouble with the board, which begs the question of how the board was formed, and why there wouldn't have been greater efforts to make sure everyone was on the same page before that point.

- Bill would have to have a longer conversation with this pastor to give wiser counsel, but in general, his opinion is that start-up pastors shouldn't assign elders or board members too quickly.
 - If you put people into positions of power before your vision is stabilized and taken on its identity, you're likely to end up with people in those positions who want to change that vision.
 - Bill's general rule of thumb is to try to let a church plant be staff driven for at least two years and then carefully put together an ad hoc financial advisory team (not a board of directors) who can contribute on a project basis.
 - The pastor can also at that point put together a vision team to talk about the future vision of the church, but they should serve at the request of the founding pastor for a period of time.
 - When it all gets stabilized, there's good unity, and you know who you can depend on as senior leaders, then you can start inviting these people into these positions that you will be accountable to long-term.
 - When you let the church be staff driven for the first two years, you can see who's on board and who isn't, and let the vision play out for a while so people know what they're signing up for.

Church Growth

How should those who have ministered faithfully but can't seem to get their own churches to grow very much feel in this era of mega-churches?

- Bill struggles with this question because there are thousands of pastors in places all over the world who will never see what Bill has seen in his years at Willow.
 - Some of them are in rural areas with small populations, and a mega-church there would mean having 100 people.
 - There are other people who are in under-resourced communities where they'll never be able to hire a staff or build a building.
- The prophet Jeremiah was given a very difficult ministry from God — to try to convince a rebellious people to stop rebelling.
 - Every time Jeremiah would open his mouth, he would wind up in stocks or getting beaten or thrown in the bottom of a cistern.
 - Then, he gets hauled off to captivity and writes the book of Lamentations.
 - From what we know from the Scriptures, his life never resulted in any kind of record-setting ministry.
 - He wouldn't have been a conference speaker or a book writer, and yet he was every bit as faithful to God as someone who gets a different kind of assignment.
- For reasons Bill will never understand, God put Willow in suburban Chicago during its most explosive period of growth.
 - All they had to do to grow the church numerically was do a decent ministry in an exploding community.
 - There are so many people who love God as much as Bill does who get a different kind of assignment, and they cannot measure their success against mega-churches.
- The ultimate measure of success is being able to answer yes to these two questions:
 - Did I hear God's mission for my life accurately?
 - Am I carrying it out faithfully?
- If you answer yes to those two questions, then you're going to hang out with Jeremiah and others who have had a hard ministry and there's going to be rejoicing for the rest of eternity.

Ministering over the Long Haul

How have you kept your preaching, thinking, and ministry ideas fresh through the decades?

- You don't stay fresh without doing twice as much reading as you'd like to do.
- You don't stay fresh unless you're interacting with some very bright, thought-provoking people who keep pushing you toward grander thoughts and intellectually rigorous ideas.
- You make a choice about how you're going to spend your normal day, your normal week, and your normal month, and you make those decisions hoping that they will result in a consistent replenishment of your mind and thought life.
- Bill goes to things he wouldn't normally go to just to try to get a new thought.
- He reads things late at night when he'd rather just be reading a sailing magazine.
- Part of staying fresh is enormous intentionality.
- Bill has never been someone who just coasts.
 - It might be from growing up in the family he did or a wiring or temperament thing.
 - If he feels like he is coasting for more than a 24-hour period, he feels unfit to live with himself.
 - Certain personalities are given to too much coasting, and others to too much challenging, and Bill is the latter.
 - A lot of this is self-knowledge.
 - If you tend to over-challenge yourself, you need to take a chill pill once in a while.
 - If you're taking too many chill pills, you probably ought to ratchet up the challenge factor for a while.

From being in ministry for a long time, what are some of the challenges of longevity?

- For the first 15 years of his ministry, Bill thought everything was a sprint — he didn't think about sustainability.
- That thinking eventually ran its course, and sustainability became more important to Bill than longevity, because God is the one to determine his longevity.
- Bill doesn't know if he has 10 more days or 10 more years, but he has to take responsibility for doing ministry in a sustainable way.
 - If Bill is doing the work of God at a pace that destroys the work of God in him, that's trouble.
 - Bill has to monitor this all the time.
 - He has to find a pace of doing the work of God so that His work in Bill can be renewed, so he's leading from a full bucket rather than an empty one.
- Bill remembers talking to a pastor of a large church who had been working at a break-neck pace for years, and that pastor's deepest yearning was for the day when he would be done.
 - That seemed strange to Bill; it seemed to him that after that pastor had put all those years into building this fantastic church for the glory of God that he'd want to do it for as long as God gave him breath.
 - The pastor didn't feel that way; he wished it would all be over tomorrow.
 - Bill challenged him and said that he thought he was doing something wrong — he had to delegate more or take a vacation or use different gifts — because the Bible indicates that living in step with the Spirit leads to life and peace (Romans 8:6).
 - He should be feeling a sense of vitality in what he does and a lower level of anxiety about whether or not he can keep it up.
 - When Bill starts feeling the signs of a loss of vitality, he asks himself if he's in step with the Spirit and if he's doing too much or too little.

- Bill also has to consider if he can see himself continuing with enough inner tranquility that he hopes he gets to continue for another five or 10 years.
- Pay attention to the life and peace you feel in your life.
- Pay attention to the escapist thoughts you have, because they're communicating some message in your inner person that you need to hear and use to make adjustments and have a good run.

Politics

You were a friend of Bill Clinton; will you be a friend of Barack Obama?

- Bill has not asked to be a friend of Barack Obama.
- They've corresponded but not met personally, and it's not something Bill intends to pursue.
- If God wants to have their paths cross, he's open to that.

Learning from Churches Around the World

As you travel all over the world, what have you learned from the churches around the world that you think American and Canadian church leaders should know?

- After traveling for as much as he has for the last 25 years, Bill is still surprised how powerfully God speaks to him when he sees God work in another culture.
- Bill recently returned from a trip to Central and South America where he visited some churches that are in deplorable conditions.
- The lesson that hits him with the greatest frequency is that when there's an anointing on a pastor or a pastoral team, the circumstances don't matter very much.
- Sometimes pastors in resourced countries get the "if only" complex — if only they had that sound system or could build that building or hire that many staff or had a bigger budget, they could have real ministry happen.
- You can have real ministry happen with virtually nothing; it's not dependent on all the stuff.
- Bill mentors 50 of Willow's staff members for an hour every Wednesday, and at a recent meeting, he asked if they'd still show up if their salaries all went away.
 - One of the senior staff members said that he would be willing to work at a convenience store to support himself so he could still do his job at the church.
 - It's a calling to him, and he wouldn't have to be paid to work every bit as hard as he's working right now.
 - Bill sees that spirit around the world.
 - Nancy's husband Warren recently visited a pastor in Costa Rica whose church was substantially affected by an earthquake.
 - The church staff has not been able to receive their salaries since the earthquake, but they've continued to serve their congregation just like when they were paid.
- Bill loves being reminded that what we're in is not just a profession.
 - Church work has become an industry.
 - You can earn a six-figure salary and drive a big car and live in beautiful places in this industry now, but there's never been any other era of church history in which anyone went into it thinking that they could live even a middle-class lifestyle.
 - They chose it because they couldn't avoid it, because the Spirit of God was on them so strong.
 - Things have changed, and Bill sees, for example, young worship pastors who want a high salary and equipment and a recording contract and time off to tour.

- That's something that Bill wants to keep straight in his own spirit and talk to his staff about on a continuing basis so there's no sense of Kingdom entitlement.
- He doesn't want there to be a loss of awareness about the kind of world we live in and the privilege it is to do ministry in a resourced world when our counterparts are doing ministry with as much, if not more, joy in totally different conditions.

Strategic Decisions at Willow

What are the three to five most strategically important decisions you've made in the history of Willow Creek, either personally or corporately?

- The first strategically important decision was deciding on what their ministry model and philosophy was going to be right from the beginning.
 - They had the advantage of having a three-year youth group experience in which they decided they wanted to build an Acts 2 church.
 - In hindsight, having that clarity from the moment they opened the doors at the movie theater where they first met was strategically critical.
 - They knew they wanted to help people far from God come to faith in Christ and to grow them up to be fully devoted followers.
 - They wanted them to be able to experience biblical community and put a serving towel over their arms.
 - They had a model in their heads that came right out of the pages of Scripture, and being clear on that from day one and not wavering over the decades has been a more important decision than most can imagine.
 - Bill wonders how many churches start and they don't really have a clearly-thought-through model in their mind or a picture of what they're trying to become, so they start holding services and then some opinionated person bends them one way and another opinionated person bends them another way.
 - Bill often uses the illustration of three best friends deciding one day to start a restaurant.
 - At first, they're all excited but then they have to start making decisions.
 - The first friend may want it to be a fast-food restaurant, the second wants fine dining, and the third wants Mexican.
 - That's where the real heartbreak happens — not in the general concept of starting the restaurant but in the specifics of what kind of restaurant.
 - They were clear on not only did they want to start a church, but they wanted to start an Acts 2 biblically functioning community that helped lost people find Christ and found people grow up.
- A second strategically important decision was an almost maniacal commitment to a team orientation.
 - They empowered teams of people from day one.
 - They couldn't hire staff, so they empowered volunteers.
 - They knew it wasn't a one-man show; they were going to play toward people's gifts and strengths and let them lead and participate on teams.
 - It's second nature for them to think of the church being built on teams, but that's not the reality for many people around the world.
- Another strategic decision they made was to empower women.
 - Willow would be very different if they hadn't made the early decision to have woman leaders, teachers, and elders.

Evangelism and Social Activism

In the 1960s and early 1970s, many mainline Protestant churches lost sight of the historic gospel and replaced it with a social gospel. In reaction, fundamentalism and evangelicalism in the 1980s and 1990s did a pendulum swing to the point of ignoring social issues. Now it seems that there is a new evangelicalism that embraces people's needs for both forgiveness and food. What can we do this time to make sure that we don't again allow social concerns to overshadow spiritual concerns?

- You need the right vocabulary, because language really matters.
- The right words can cause you to do a quick mental adjustment.
- A phrase that Willow has used for many years is “holistic gospel” — the whole message of Christ for the whole person, which covers people’s redemption and the restoration of a broken world.
- They talk about wanting to “redeem and restore.”
- Keeping phrases like that in mind can help keep you in balance.
- The pendulum swing is a part of human nature.
 - Say a ministry starts doing wonderful work with social justice and compassion issues.
 - People get fired up and go from one challenge to the next and one success to another.
 - It’s not failure that leads to pendulum swing; it’s often success.
 - You start getting further and further on that adrenaline rush of seeing fruit born in that area.
 - Recently, Willow baptized around a hundred people, and there was shouting and celebration for friends getting baptized, and it made Bill feel like all he wanted to do was evangelism for the next year.

In our attempts to be relevant and missional, do you think evangelicals are doing a good job of sharing the gospel?

- Bill is concerned that we’re losing our focus on evangelism.
- One of the things that Bill has written about before is a kind of barter that some people do with God.
 - Say a believer is out there trying to share their faith every day, and they realize after months or years of evangelistic frustration, they haven’t seen any movement in anyone, let alone anyone falling to their knees and praying the sinner’s prayer.
 - So, they make a little adjustment in their head, and they tell God that they can’t live with the frustration anymore, that they’re just not good at evangelism.
 - They hope that if they work in a food pantry or do a short-team serving project that God will let them off the hook on evangelism.
 - They decide they don’t have to worry about the redemption side anymore because they’re on the restoration side.
 - Sometimes when Bill talks to people who are maniacs about restoration and asks them about evangelism, it catches them off guard — they don’t read about evangelism or pray for their lost friends anymore.
 - It’s quite possible to rather innocently gravitate toward something that’s more certain to pay off in satisfaction.
 - When you serve in a food kitchen, people are fed, and you feel good.
 - If you try to talk to your neighbor about God and hear his drunken tirade and resistance to the gospel, it’s less satisfying.
- Christians have to have their heads in the Scriptures.
 - If Bill has any sense of equilibrium about this, it’s because he spends a lot of his devotion time in the Gospels.
 - Bill watches Jesus move effortlessly from the redemption side to the restoration side.

- If Bill can stay close enough to the image of what Jesus did, maybe his swings won't be as wide.

If the church could truly become a missional organism in the coming decade, what do you think it could look like 10 years from now?

- Bill believes the church is operating on a fraction of its missional potential.
- If you have 100 people in a church, there are probably only 15 of them who are on mission, actually living it out outside of the church.
- If the worldwide church only doubled its current missional engagement, you would feel like a revolution happened; it would take your breath away.
- Every once in a while, Bill runs into churches that are operating at an abnormally high missional engagement level, and you can feel it when you walk the halls.
- All pastors have to look in the mirror and ask themselves if they're setting the bar of missional engagement high enough.
- People don't drift into missional engagement.
- Pastors have to challenge them and then they will respond or not.

Cohabitation

How does Willow treat the issue of people who are living together outside of marriage who want one of the pastors to perform their wedding ceremony?

- Bill has wrestled with that question for his entire ministerial life.
- There are two ways he looks at it.
 - If a couple comes to Bill and says that they're living together and want him to marry them, he tries to discover if this is a lost couple who doesn't know better.
 - If they are, and Bill says no, they're just going to go to the justice of the peace and get it done.
 - They'll probably be put off by the fact that Bill wouldn't do it, and they'll think that he thinks he's better than them or something like that.
 - Bill considers the risk of losing the opportunity to engage this couple in a process where they could eventually come to Christ and realize what they had done wrong.
 - If they are Christians who know better and are living in clear defiance of the spirit of God's work in their lives, then Bill needs to challenge them.
 - He might say that he won't marry them unless they spend a certain amount of time living in separate residences and honoring God in their relationship.
 - They're asking him to put a blessing on their marriage in hopes that God will honor it, but how do they anticipate God honoring their marriage if they're dishonoring God leading up to the marriage?
- Bill's sensitivity to the lost couples may be part of his evangelism gift.
 - Bill wants to be very gentle with how he has a conversation with a young couple whose parents lived together and all their friends are living together, who must be seeking at least a little because they came onto the church campus.
- There's a lot of room for honorable disagreement here.
 - Some pastors are more prophetic in their ministry, and they feel their role is to confront every one of these situations in the same way.
 - Bill's evangelism lens doesn't change the reality of what the Bible teaches; it changes how he delivers the truth of the gospel to people who are in seeking mode.

Leadership Development

How do you do leadership development?

- Bill calls his weekly meeting with 50 Willow leaders the “top 50 meeting,” because he wants everyone in that room to know that he considers them to be among the top 50 leaders at Willow.
- Bill purposefully differentiates them from other people in the organization, and he doesn’t really care if that creates a little tension.
- He wants there to be a little stir so people know that he spends an hour a week with the top 50 going after leadership development issues.
- Identifying who you’re going to develop is a big deal.
- Another important thing is having it on your calendar every single week.
- Leadership development is essential to do, but it will fall off everyone’s to-do list if it’s not on your calendar.
- Bill is as committed to leadership development as he knows how to be, but he still groans when he sees it on his calendar, because there are so many other urgent things screaming for his attention.
- Still, every time he leaves one of those meetings, he tells his assistant to make sure he keeps it on the calendar the next week.
- What happens in that room is more than some might imagine.
 - Many times the format is as simple as a question like: What is the most critical leadership challenge in what you’re leading right now?
 - As people share, Bill is assessing them — whether they should be in the top 50, their potential as a leader, etc.
 - Throughout the meeting, Bill is developing the future leadership development agenda in his mind, and after doing the meetings for a while now, he has it very clear in his mind who the people are in that room whom God has destined for more.
 - He also knows who’s probably at their highest level they’re going to attain because they don’t want to get better.
 - Those people don’t come hungry to learn.
 - They’re hoping they’re not embarrassed in the meeting, rather than being willing to pitch their ideas out there.
 - Bill has given book assignments so they can do a book reaction meeting together.
 - Around Christmas they spent a whole session on how to not forget your family when you’re in ministry around Christmas time.
 - All the time, Bill is thinking where a particular person might take a department if he entrusted them with more responsibility.
- The larger a church gets, the less the key staff members tend to see their senior pastor.
 - The senior pastor is out raising money, preparing messages, traveling, or writing a book.
 - Senior pastors of growing churches lose face-time as time goes on.
 - For Bill, forcing this meeting on his calendar so that his top staff gets animated, unedited senior pastor time is very important.

After doing Defining Moments for about a dozen years, why do you still do it?

- Bill continues to do *Defining Moments* because he still gets feedback from pastors who listen to them whenever they come out.
- They’ll tell him that they were in a terrible jam and had no idea where to turn, and God spoke through a *Defining Moments* and gave them some coaching or inspiration.

- Bill was in South America recently, and one night after talking for eight hours in two countries, all he wanted to do was sleep, but he had the opportunity to watch an interview with Jack Welch, former chairman of the board of General Electric.
- Bill has probably read everything Jack Welch has written, but whenever Bill sees him in a talk-show environment, it challenges him.
- Regardless of where Jack might be spiritually, he's one of the best raw leaders Bill has known anywhere in the world.
- So, Bill asked God to give him the energy to try to make it through the interview, and he got out his journal just in case there was something he wanted to write down.
- Jack talked about some issues that were on Bill's front burner.
- One of the things he said is that the kindest form of management is the truth.
 - Be candid with people.
 - Tell them they're doing great or not doing great.
 - Tell them you're going to lay them off or tell them they don't have to worry about a lay-off.
 - Tell them they have a great future with the organization or tell them they don't.
- That and about six other nuggets came out of that interview, and Bill actually got up and kneeled by his bed and thanked God for someone who is ahead of him in leadership who wants to help other leaders.
- On Bill's better days, there's something in him that wants to help other leaders.
- He's been helped by other leaders, and if some of these tapings help leaders in various places around the world, that's all the pay-off he needs.

Process Questions

Bill responded to questions on a wide variety of topics, which are listed in the chart below and on the next page. If there are some topics that particularly resonated with you, pick two or three and take a few moments to jot down your thoughts, insights, and/or next steps.

The Economic Crisis

Multi-Site Ministry

Church Plant Boards

Church Growth

Ministering over the Long Haul

Politics

Learning from Churches Around the World

Strategic Decisions at Willow

Evangelism and Social Activism

Cohabitation

Leadership Development