

# Rebuild Your Church's DNA: Todd Bolsinger Presents "Creating the Church in Uncharted Territory"

Brethren's Church News Feed

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Frank Ramirez

Toward the end of his talk on "Building a Church in Uncharted Territory" during the business session of the annual conference, Tod Bolsinger encouraged everyone in the audience to tell a story from their church's history. The story may be about a hero, about "a treasured moment that is retold over and over again. The one that says, "This is what we really do." The one that says, "That was the moment I was most proud of us." The one that says, "That was when I realized I found my church at home."

The goal, he says, is to separate the desired values of the church from "who we really are."

This story, he says, is "charisma," to use the Catholic term, a grace-filled characteristic that will serve the pain and needs of the community in which each church lives. This is where the church should direct its energies, he says, and it will provide a framework for what it means for each individual congregation when it comes to "the church in operation."

Bolsinger, vice president and professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, suggested that the pandemic is allowing communities to transform to serve a changed world. Most seminaries train leaders for ministry in Christendom, he says, which is a description of what American churches were like half a century ago when Christianity was the default setting. But in this post-Christian world, a different kind of leadership is needed.

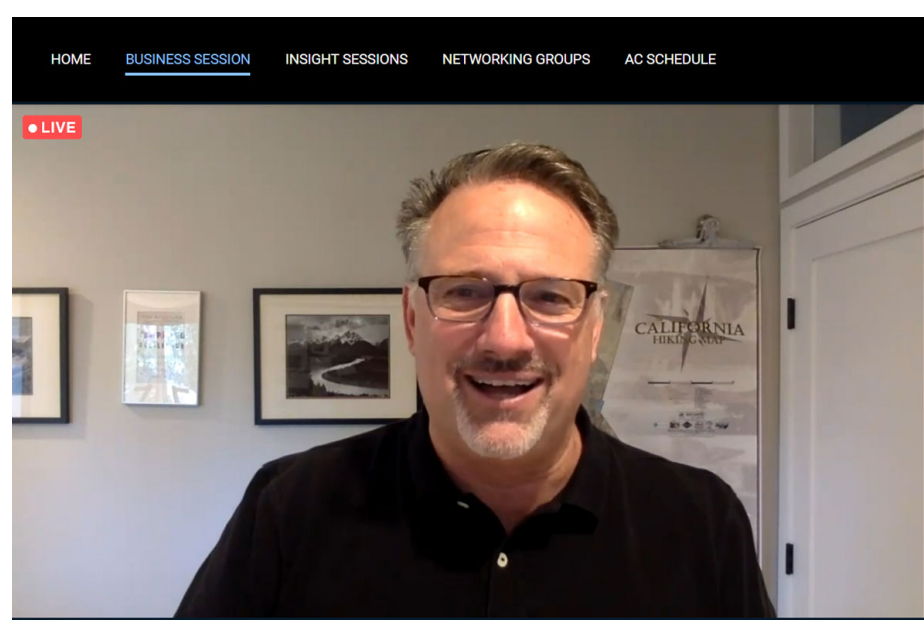
Part of what every church has to do is determine who they really are. The point is not to put in more effort, he told the Conference, but to transform the people in the churches, especially the leadership. Bolsinger gave the example of a man in a canoe stranded in a dry river bed. Row harder won't help.

"This is where we are today," Bolsinger said. "In uncharted territory, adaptation is everything. What will we take with us and what will we leave behind?"

Citing Jeremiah 29 as an example, he asked: "How can we adjust to the exile so that the kingship and rule of God becomes evident? ... When we offer ourselves not as colonizers or men of great power or imposing our will on others, by acts of generosity and love we come to understand how our community can have a positive impact on our world."

It's a process, he said, pointing out that Scripture reminds us that "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature." Like the apostle Paul, "we go."

One of the most important steps is to reclaim who we really are, hence the need to tell stories about our



Screenshot of Tod Bolsinger's presentation at the annual conference.

congregation that define our values. "For the change to last, it has to be a healthy adaptation of the group's DNA, our core values. This is what is needed."

Over the past year, the world has experienced a health pandemic, an economic epidemic and a public uprising against injustice. "All of our churches have been affected and destroyed by this reality, this unified, complex reality that none of us have ever experienced before." Bolsinger said,

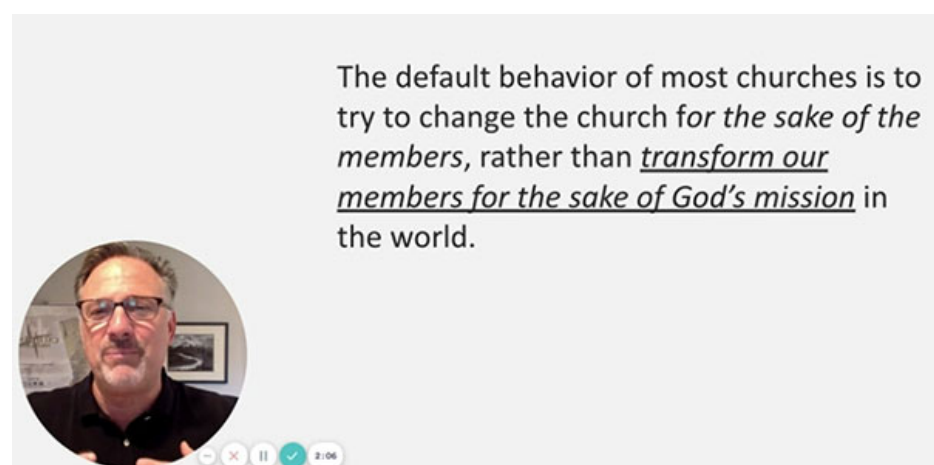
### **Adventure or death. You have a choice.**

In a separate event hosted on the Thursday of the conference week, Bolsinger spoke at a "moderator forum" sponsored by annual conference moderator Paul Mundy.

The choice is great, but the numbers are undeniable. Research shows that when doctors tell people, "If you don't change your life today, you will die," 90 percent will die. They all decide to change, but only 10% succeed.

Bolsinger insists that churches today face the same choice. Change the way we go to church or die. The problem is that most pastors, council chairs, and church members operate on the assumptions of 50, 60, or 70 years ago when Americans lived in Christendom. "Everyone considered law, education and the Christian religion to be the center of culture, even if they were not Christians ... This is a privilege, the advantage of a home site."

Bolsinger himself, as well as most pastors and church leaders, were trained to work in the Christian world, but were actually working in the post-Christian world. Many "go into deep denial." Popular methods of change don't work, he said, citing research by Alan Deutschman, author of *Change or Die*, and others. These techniques are fear, facts, and power. "Fear will temporarily make people change. Fear does not produce lasting change. Facts don't change. We can find ways to argue around facts." As for strength: "You can't force people to change. Maybe temporarily, but not for a long period of time."



### **So what works?**

Bolsinger says churches need to relate, reiterate and reformulate: to relate to new communities, recognizing that immigrant communities are vital and alive; repeat new practices, developing with each other and supporting each other; and rethink how we seek peace by adopting new ways of thinking.

We need radical changes, not just adjustments. "You can't make drastic changes by touching up the edges," he said. "By radical, I don't mean reckless or ruthless. Find the root cause, the key to the task before us." The fundamental task of leadership is to distinguish between what needs to be kept and what needs to be changed.

"The Spirit of God is often ahead of us," he recalled. We advise you to rely on the discernment of the Spirit instead of relying on your own institutional strength. This requires "a kind of humility and openness.... Believe deeply in your heart that the Spirit of God is at work throughout the world."

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