

I graduated from college in 1972 as a psychology major, after which the U.S. Navy, in its inscrutable wisdom, decided to make me an “engineer.” Not an honest-to-goodness engineer, you understand—they made me an engineering manager.

At the ripe old age of 22, I was made the Main Propulsion Assistant to the Chief Engineer on an aging destroyer, responsible for the boilers, steam turbines, and auxiliary equipment related to fuel, fresh water, and making the ship move through the ocean—together with the men who operated all this machinery. The work was altogether different from anything I had ever experienced before, and the truth is that I rather enjoyed it.

It was in those fire rooms (where the boilers were) and the engine rooms (where the turbines and gears were) that I learned never to ignore a sound or a smell I didn't recognize, because that was often the first sign that something was amiss . . . and virtually every piece of equipment was potentially life-threatening. Most of the time, of course, everything worked pretty well; and I loved to listen to the sounds, smell the smells, and feel the heat as this complex, dangerous, and fascinating dance went on around me.

The turbines were particularly interesting. (The photo shows the rotor of a low pressure steam turbine.) The power that drives a shipboard turbine comes from high-pressure steam. The steam enters the turbine at the small end, being directed against each blade of the first stage in turn, and transferring energy to each blade. The blades of each subsequent stage get longer and longer in order to provide more surface area against which the depleted steam can act.



Aboard ship, when the steam leaves the high-pressure turbine it then moves to the low-pressure turbine, which is still larger, and for the same reason. Low-pressure turbines often route the steam in opposite directions at the same time in order to gain more purchase, the blades on each side being oriented opposite to each other such that they transfer energy to the shaft in just one direction. That's what you see in the photo. This rotational energy is then geared down bit by bit until it is applied to the huge “bull” gears on the main propeller shafts, which turn only a few hundred times per minute even at full speed.

While analogies always have limitations, it seems to me that there are several similarities between such a propulsion system and the Kingdom of God. In the Church, the Power Source is the “wind” or “breath” of God's Spirit (Genesis 1:2; Ezekiel 37:9; Acts 2:2). The various sizes of the stages might be thought of as people of differing ages, with each stage being an age cohort, and each blade representing one person in that cohort. The bi-directional path of the steam might represent the fact that when all is as it should be in the Church, everything that we do, though sometimes seemingly unrelated, ultimately pushes in only one direction and toward only one goal.

Now the faster machinery turns, the more critical it becomes to properly lubricate the bearings on which it turns. The lubrication of the Church is a divinely-designed combination of life-changing love and deep and durable forgiveness. And individual congregations might be thought of as separate turbines, all connected to the main shaft and imparting torque in the same direction, moving the Kingdom of God forward in both time and eternity.

While I know that these analogies are imperfect, they expand on an idea I first discovered in a non-religious book, Jim Collins's *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*.¹ Thom Rainer, the President of LifeWay, applied these principles to the local congregations in *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap*.² Both are well worth reading.

Collins uses the image of a huge, heavy flywheel where I am using the image of a turbine. He points out that when an organization needs to reverse a period of decline, a key word is "reverse." Energy must be directed against the blades in such a way as to slow decline and begin to move in a positive direction.

In the beginning, such efforts require massive infusions of energy with little obvious effect. Little by little, though, negative motion slows, and, before positive motion can begin, the turbine must move through "stop," a brief time when there is no motion at all. What often happens at that point is that the systemic anxiety generated by the slowing down becomes so great that there is a push to return to the old ways in order to feel less anxious about an uncharted future.

Those companies (and those churches) that "make the leap," though, are willing to stay the course even in anxious times. With "every blade of every stage" continuing to push in the same direction, the turbine eventually begins to move ever-so-slightly, and with continued application of energy in the same direction, the turbine's inertia eventually begins to work with, rather than against the new direction.

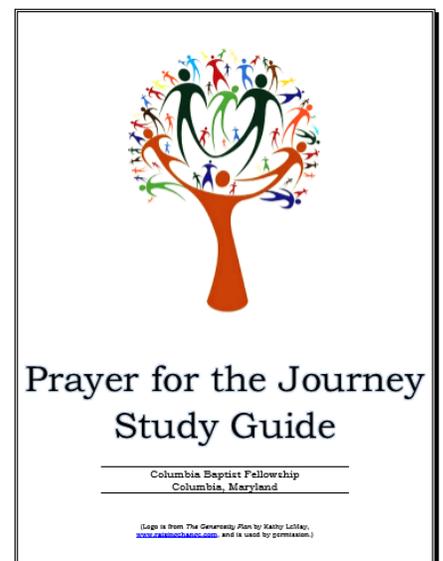
The process of changing organizational or institutional direction requires persistent, coordinated effort in the same direction, even if the change desired is not particularly great. We have to hold a steady course through the discomfort of the unfamiliar until it becomes familiar—a "new normal."

The process of spiritual discernment that we begin together this Sunday through our *Prayer for the Journey* groups that will be organized following morning worship is one that will help us discover together God's guidance for "the next chapter." We need persons of every age, from high school through senior adulthood, listening, talking, praying and waiting together for God's purposes to become clear. I hope that you will choose to be a part of the journey, so that **"every blade of every stage will move together in our dance with God"**!

Paul put it this way: "*I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven"* (Philippians 3:13-14).

Dave

P.S. Pretty soon we'll be trying some new room arrangements on Wednesday nights in order to be able to accommodate more people. One other change we need to make is the addition of more volunteers who can help with kitchen cleanup. If we had a good number of volunteers, no one would have to miss the program time very often!



¹ Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (HarperBusiness, 2001).

² Thom Rainer, *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).