



Designed to Fail . . . Driven to Succeed

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The following appeared in the Washington Post, Monday October 24, 2005: *NEW ORLEANS -- Within a space of 15 hours on Aug. 29, three massive, concrete floodwalls in separate parts of the city suddenly fractured and burst under the weight of surging waters from Hurricane Katrina. The breaches unleashed a wall of water that swept entire buildings from their foundations and transformed what might have been a routine hurricane into the costliest storm in U.S. history. Today, exactly eight weeks after the storm, all three breaches are looking less like acts of God and more like failures of engineering that could have been anticipated and very likely prevented.*

In short, the catastrophic flooding of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina may have been the consequence of a design failure.

As much as I hate to admit it, our system for starting new churches as Baptists has a fatal design flaw. [And this problem isn't limited to Baptists.] To start a new church we usually require a well-trained church planter/pastor, a core group of committed folks, who will begin meeting together, reach out to others, grow, eventually purchase property and build a building. Typically, growth is slow, takes a long time, and costs several million dollars. If population growth is slow and resources are plentiful, it's a good model. But is that the case?

What's happening in the city while our new church gets started? The city is growing rapidly. The greater Houston area grows about 100,000 people per year. That's a million every ten years. Just to keep up with the growth we'd need to start hundreds of new churches *every* year. The truth is that we don't have enough money. Our seminaries and colleges aren't training enough pastors. Consequently, even though UBA is the largest association in the SBC, we can't even keep up with the growth of our city. Our current way of doing things was designed for/during a time when growth was slow and resources were plentiful. That's not the times we live in today.

That's the problem, so what is the solution? We brought together key representatives from some of our strongest church starting churches across the city. New ideas were generated. A "failure is not an option," we'll do whatever it takes to succeed mentality was present. Over the next few months, the associational staff will be working with some of our key churches to develop a strategic plan for starting new churches that will be the next major step in our Pentecost Houston initiative. The focus through Easter 2010 is to make it possible for every person in the greater Houston area to hear the gospel in their own language. Many of these folks will come to Christ. They will need to be discipled. They will need church homes. We need to be ready.

When I first began writing this article, the tentative title was "designed to fail." It's true -- some of our systems, like our church starting system, were designed in an era of slower growth. While they were right for that time, that's not the times we live in today. That system, which once worked well, today is designed to fail. Consequently, we need to change the system and we are. That's the message I wanted to convey. Our current system may be designed to fail, but we are driven to succeed because the Great Commission is our mandate.