

Everything But Preaching

Dick Hardy

Podcast Transcript

Paul Marin: How Can a Pastor Transition a Church from the 1970s to 2010?

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Dick Hardy: Hey Paul, it's great to have you here today.

Paul Martin: Great to be with you, Dick. Looking forward to chatting some things through with you.

Dick Hardy: Yeah, you know you and I have bantered in our time of knowing each other over the last well, what has it been? Seven or eight years. Of course we've known of each other longer than that. This whole business of the church...you and I love the church. We know the local church is where it is at, God's instrument here on earth. Talk to me a little bit about some of the characteristics of a church that's had great history but has to transition into the newness of the days the Lord has ahead for us.

Paul Martin: Well, I think, Dick, and obviously you've already alluded to it, but let me restate the obvious...we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone on before us, and ministries such as churches I have pastored have incredible history. It needs to be celebrated, but it is a rear-view mirror look, and you can't drive a car looking out of a rear-view mirror. You have to look out the windshield, so you have to embrace the present and the future.

Dick Hardy: Right.

Paul Martin: I think what happens is we fail as a congregation to continually recalibrate our target. For example, if you have a church that 30 years ago really had a boom time and they had great growth and young families and 30- to 35-year-olds coming in with little kids, and Sunday school programs growing, and all the rest of that, what happens is that group just kind of goes through the timeline together, and 30 years later, they're doing church that is comfortable for 60 and 70 year olds.

Dick Hardy: Right, right.

Paul Martin: So they didn't recalibrate the target. They came here 30 years ago because there was stuff for young families and they were accepted and it was what was going on, but as time goes on, all of a sudden now they are targeting a 40-year-old...now they are targeting a 45-year-old, and they keep shifting the target to their comfort level as they go through.

Dick Hardy: Right.

Paul Martin: I think as a pastor what we need to do is about every year, two years, just get the blank sheet of paper on the table and say, "Okay, what does a 35-year-old look like today?"

Dick Hardy: Right.

Paul Martin: You have to recalibrate your programming and your target to that 35-year-old because it's kind of like a bell curve, if you're hitting the 35-year-old, you're going to reach the moms and dads and grandmas. If you hit a 35-year-old, you have the high school kids and the kids, so most of your programming like a bell curve needs to be for that 35-year-old. Now that takes leadership intuition to continually recalibrate.

I had a youth pastor one time who was there, had a great ministry, but the youth pastor had followed the junior high ninth graders through the bubble and seven years later we got a young adult group and, oh, by the way, where are the junior high kids? Well, don't know.

Dick Hardy: Yeah, don't know...yeah. Exactly.

Paul Martin: You continually have to recalibrate this thing.

Dick Hardy: Is that just kind of...I suppose that's just human nature? I mean, all of us would fall prey to that. We just flow to our comfort zone. I mean you think of these people in the church in your illustration earlier of good people in their 30s back 30 years ago...I mean, they're not bad people, but apparently leadership was not able to keep them recalibrated.

Paul Martin: Yeah, well it's our comfort level, and then you throw a pastor in the mix where the pastor is up here with these people, and we're just one big happy family growing old together.

Dick Hardy: Yeah, alright.

Paul Martin: We forget that. For example, then you turn around and you look and say, "Well our kids are AWOL on God. They're prodigals. What's going on here?"

Dick Hardy: Yeah.

Paul Martin: The fact is they're at a church down the street or maybe not at any church at all because human traditions have been emphasized over principles of God's Word.

Dick Hardy: Yeah. Well, what kind of obstacles...I mean, you know it's one thing to say, "Yeah, let's just get a blank sheet of paper out here and get going on it." But you're still dealing with the entrenchment of people over the years. What kind of obstacles are you going to deal with when you try to make... I mean this is a warp change if they're stuck 30 or 40 years ago.

Paul Martin: Right. I think first of all, you have to...the main obstacle is personal preference, personal comfort level. That's the main obstacle. When you allow a personal preference to guide a church, whether it's mine or Joe Blow's or whoever, you have a problem, because you can't lead a church based on 'I like,' 'I don't like.' You have to get down to bedrock principles of God's Word.

Once that happens, then you have to help people overcome them. If a person understands that the eternal significance of prioritizing *my* comfort and *my* preference over biblical principles, if you understand the eternal significance of that, you're not going to go there because man, there are souls there are kids and grandkids and there are young families that are never going to come into a church that smells like the 70s. It's just not going to happen.

Dick Hardy: Right, right.

Paul Martin: You may keep some of your own, but you're not going to continue to build a congregation. How do you overcome that? Man, what I've seen is you just have to pace it, you have to tell the stories, you have to talk about change, and I tried this one time in a group I was talking with. They were an elderly group, and I said, "You guys love change." "No, no." I said, "Okay, give me your microwave and go back to chopping wood and boiling water in a wood stove." Of course, nobody was ready for that.

Dick Hardy: Right.

Paul Martin: Because they love change when it helps them.

Dick Hardy: Right.

Paul Martin: Well, if we can get them thinking outside of themselves and saying, "We have some eternal issues at stake here, and if we don't follow through with this change, we're not going to have anything to hand to the next generation." So pacing change, I think, is really important. It's a process. Leadership has to go through this process with them. It's kind of like going out to the garden in the middle of August and grabbing a hold of your carrot and giving it a jerk. You're going to end up with a top, but you're not going to get the carrot.

Dick Hardy: Right.

Paul Martin: You have to get in there, loosen up the soil, and you have to prep it for that change. Otherwise you're just going to be alienating people rather than helping them understand. There are so many things that culture, just culture out there teaches us. For example, the sociologists talk about a third space. They've been writing on that for probably 10 years or more. This third space...well, there are lots of businesses and commerce that have capitalized on that. It used to be that it was pretty much just the bar that was a third space for some guys. Well now it's Barnes and Noble; it's where ever. They have all kinds of third spaces, and the reason for the need is our front porch has gone to our back deck.

Dick Hardy: Right.

Paul Martin: When I was a kid growing up, you had a front porch. "Hey Joe, how are the kids over there in little league?" There was a sense of community. Look at the subdivisions today. You push a button, drive your car in, push the door down, then you go in your back deck with a nine foot privacy fence, and you don't know anybody.

Dick Hardy: Right.

Paul Martin: So we were made by God for relationships.

Dick Hardy: When you talk about that third space, what's the first and second space?

Paul Martin: Home and work.

Dick Hardy: Okay, home and work, and then there's this third space. Okay.

Paul Martin: I'm saying I've always contended that, "Hey come on church..." Enter church. The church should be the third space.

Dick Hardy: Yeah.

Paul Martin: This is the community. This is...the Bible word is koinonia. This is where I know and am known. Alright? So our architecture needs to reflect that. Our programs need to reflect that. You know, if we just line people up in rows and look at the back of somebody's head for an hour and fifteen minutes a week, you are not creating a third space.

Dick Hardy: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Paul Martin: Everything we do about programming and architecture can help with that. That's just an example of (I think) how we can overcome some of this.

Dick Hardy: Well, you know, you've been...if I can give you this commendation, you seem like the eternal optimist, and I'm thinking of, again, I call these folks good folks that are in the 60s and 70s...I mean, you really believe that these people can be taught, coached, convinced that this new way of doing things can be good for them?

Paul Martin: Oh, yeah.

Paul Martin: Oh yeah, absolutely. Yeah, my 84-year-old mother-in-law (about five years ago) jumped on the internet and computer and she's doing e-mail and sharing pictures of great-grandkids and everything else. I mean, I absolutely believe that. I had the opportunity to pastor a great church in Illinois, and there was a large segment of I think we had over 500 people over 65 years old.

Dick Hardy: Wow.

Paul Martin: One of the things I did...I jumped on their 9:00 Sunday School class which was the older adults, and basically (this is not intended as a put down at all, just reality), it was a service niched in the 60s and 70s. They had three songs out of the songbook, prayer requests, and preaching. I thought, "You know what? I grew up in this. I understand this. I took that for a year and a half, the Sunday School class and had a service 1960s style.

Dick Hardy: Alright.

Paul Martin: In the process, man, I was talking to them about all of these things and change, and the reason we have to have a café in the front of our church instead of the back hallway of the basement of your church. The reason is your front porch is now your back deck. I spent a whole year and a half talking about that. When it came time to make some major renovations in our facility...the older builder crowd, they were lock step with me. I had no problem with them at all because they understood it.

Dick Hardy: Wow. Well, give me a shot here on...you know, we talk about this, but what are some signals that victory may be within reach for this kind of a church. I'm picturing a pastor out there listening to this and saying, "Okay, sounds good. Maybe I could do that. How will I even know as a pastor that, wow, we're starting to turn some corners here?"

Paul Martin: Yeah, first of all, the absolute conviction that renewal of vision is always possible.

Dick Hardy: Wow.

Paul Martin: It's not just enough to wake up some night and have some thoughts. That's called a dream. You have to take your dreams and you have to be able to put them in communicable forms; that's vision. Then you begin to cast that vision, and the goal is to have others carry the vision. I landed here in this church a month ago, and I'm already strategically taking people one on one, (influencers) and just talking it through with them. I spent an hour on Monday with a 75-year-old man who is a huge influencer in this church.

Dick Hardy: Yeah.

Paul Martin: Just talked through with him..."What do you need me to do?" "I need you to help me." "What do you need me to do?" I said, "Be a cheerleader of this."

Dick Hardy: Yeah.

Paul Martin: So you just one by one, you get guys onboard, get gals on board. Help them understand, and then...what signals? Well, they get it, man. The light goes on. They get it.

Dick Hardy: Yeah.

Paul Martin: I had a discussion with our church council last week. I talked about the 35-year-old target that we need to recalibrate, and we talked about that for maybe 15 to 20 minutes, and one of the deacons...I could just see when the light went on.

Dick Hardy: Wow, wow.

Paul Martin: He has kids. He has grandkids, and some of them aren't even here anymore.

Dick Hardy: Yeah, yeah.

Paul Martin: So, yes it's possible and you just...the light goes on, and they get it.

Dick Hardy: Yeah. I'm sure it probably goes without saying that when you're making this kind of a transition, it's not going to happen next week.

Paul Martin: You have to pace it.

Dick Hardy: You have to pace that thing, don't you?

Paul Martin: Yeah, it's just like pulling the carrot, man. You have to do the work ahead of time and tell the stories and use illustrations they understand. I remember one time, I was trying to bring a group along of elderly adults...bring them along, and I (just a one-man drama) did getting gas in a gas station in the 1950s.

Dick Hardy: Yeah.

Paul Martin: So I drove up. *Ding, ding*. Of course anybody over 70 knows that I just drove over the little bell wire that was out in the driveway. Then you have a mechanic come out with a greasy rag and smear your window and, \$2.00 fill her up, and he does all of that. I said, "Okay, do you get gas that way today? Do you bank that way today? Do you do anything today the way you did it 40 years ago?" The answer is, "No."

Dick Hardy: Wow, wow.

Paul Martin: I said, "Well, why do we want to do church the way that we did it 40 years ago?" So you just use the...

Dick Hardy: Well, what do you do with that statement, because the Word of God is timeless? The Word of God is timeless.

Paul Martin: Yes, the Word is timeless, and God's principles are timeless, but paradigms can and must change.

Dick Hardy: Yeah.

Paul Martin: Programs can and must be renewed. After a while, you know, you can only refry the beans so many times, and you have to start over with fresh beans, man.

Dick Hardy: Wow, wow. That's good, Paul. Any parting shots? You have these guys out there who are pastoring good churches, they have all of this. Any parting shots...a word of encouragement you'd want to give these guys?

Paul Martin: Get really close to the ones who you have to influence. There is a tendency to avoid contact with people who don't understand, but if you're going to lead, you have to get really close to the people you need and want to influence.

Dick Hardy: Right.

Paul Martin: Man, hang out with the seniors. Hang out with the young people. If you have issues with... "Well, I'm not going there, man. That's old stuff. I'm not going there." They need to change their head on that.

Dick Hardy: That's right.

Paul Martin: So you hang out with the young people, because most of these young people today, they are crying for connection with other generations.

Dick Hardy: Boy they are, aren't they?

Paul Martin: We've exacerbated the problem by carving up our church, and we have this group and that group and the other group and then they become silos and it exacerbated the problem. Whatever group you want to or need to influence, just hang out with them. Get close to them. Help them to understand. Try to understand them. Clarify the vision. "This is where we're going and this is why it's important." It's a process; it's not an event. People who think change is an event are in for trouble.

Dick Hardy: They're in for it. Hey Paul, thanks very much for taking time to hang out with me on this podcast.

Again, Paul Martin is the lead pastor of Berean Assembly in Des Moines, Iowa. If you want to contact Paul or Berean, go to www.berianag.com.

If you want to contact Dick Hardy and the Hardy group go to www.thehardygroup.org.

On behalf of the Hardy Group and Paul Martin, thanks for listening.