

October 2011

## Building Below the Waterline

### Shoring Up the Foundations of Leadership

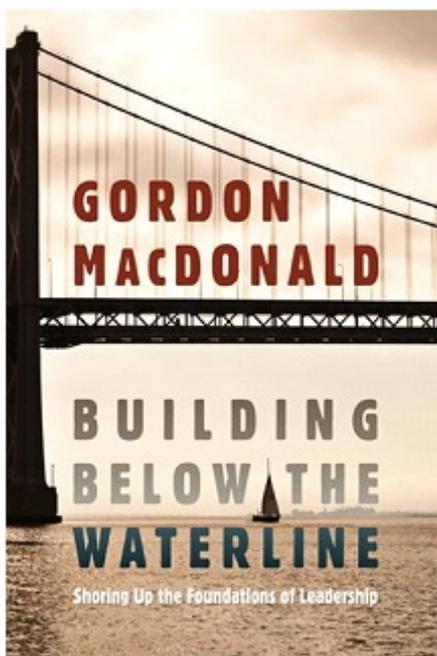
(Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2011)  
by Gordon MacDonald

A Book Review by Jack De Vries

If there is one current book every pastor and ministry leader ought to read it is Gordon MacDonald's latest, *Building Below the Waterline*. This is by far the best book on church leadership I have read in 2011. Anchored in biblical truth, this book is packed full of practical suggestions and challenging words of wisdom from an experienced pastor, writer, and seasoned church leader. This book is also ideal for church councils/sessions to work through. Each chapter is easily read in one sitting and comes with thought provoking questions. But why the accolades?

Well, first of all, the premise of the book. The premise is hinted at by the book's structure. It is divided into two sections, "The Inner Life of a Leader" and the "The Outer Life of a Leader." As the title of the book suggests, the most important work of a leader is done below the waterline – in a leader's soul – the inner life of a leader. MacDonald refers in the book to the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, which took thirteen years to

complete. Long before anybody saw work being done above the water, there were years of work below the waterline. As MacDonald points out: "The construction team did their most patient and daring work where no one could see it: on the foundations of the towers below the waterline. It is one more illustration of an ageless principle in leadership: the work done below the waterline (in a leader's soul) that determines whether he or she will stand the test of time and challenge. This work is called worship, devotion, spiritual discipline. It's done in quiet, where no one but God sees." (1) This theme is carried throughout the book. The most important work in ministry is done below the waterline.



Some years ago I had the privilege to spend a week with Gordon MacDonald and a few others at a retreat. Reading *Building Below the Waterline* was like sitting again with Gordon during lunch and hearing him divulge timely tidbits of spiritual wisdom gained after a lifetime of

ministry. In many ways, this is typical of MacDonald's writing, in this books and his editorials in *Leadership* or *Christianity Today*. As he admits at one point in this book, he is like a spiritual father to pastors and others in church leadership. Chapter after chapter I came away with fresh and/or renewed insight into my personal walk as a Christian or my professional journey as a church leader.

For example, in one of the early chapters MacDonald writes about the importance of

maintaining one's spiritual center. By that he means knowing oneself through daily self-examination against God's righteousness and the discovery of sinful motives, to engage in spiritual reflection and prayer. Without that "what results is an accumulation of knowledge without wisdom. You get leaders who operate on charisma instead of spiritual power.... We can't maintain the pace unless we pray, study Scripture, and read heavy doses of the classical spiritual literature." (9)

This chapter reinforced for me the importance of what I try to do everyday – to spend time in the Word and prayer. But it challenged me to spend more time on spiritual reflection. In a subsequent chapter he writes about the practice of journaling. This is a practice I have picked up again through reading this book, something I did daily for many years at the genesis of my spiritual awakening. But picking it up again has helped me do the necessary work of spiritual reflection.

I also found the chapter on motivations for ministry very applicable for pastors and other church leaders. What truly motivates you to do what you do? MacDonald bares his soul as he shares about a time in his life when his motivations in ministry were somewhat skewed. The questions at the end of the chapter gave me some pause as well, especially this question: "As a leader, are you motivated by a true desire to assist others, or are there other hidden motivations that drive you?" Imagine a meeting of a local church council/session where this question would form the basis for honest reflection on our respective roles and ministry. To examine one's heart – an important exercise for all church leaders.

The rest of part one of *Building Below the Waterline* underlines the importance of things

like building trust, the private times of leaders, personal sabbaths, extreme faith, just to highlight some of the topics. But again, each chapter focuses on the importance of building below the waterline – those spiritual disciplines that few people other than God notice. It is about, what MacDonald refers to,

a "knee-driven ministry."

Rather than following popular trends in and outside of the church, church leaders are given this advice: "Only on your knees will you and your leaders find the answer. There is a way for you and your church; but don't let anyone get between you and God as you seek out what it is." Solid advice.

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*How do you grow large, healthy, and authentic churches without growing the soul of a leader, which sustains the efforts over the long haul? (page 16)*

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The second part of the book deals with the outer life of a church leader. This section covers a whole range of topics such as the power of public prayer, what to do with ministry interruptions or when things get ugly, saying the hard stuff, handling church conflict, knowing when it is time to leave, again, just to name a few. This is where *Building Below the Waterline* can be so useful as a tool in developing church leaders. It covers the whole range of church issues – real issues that those in the throes of everyday church life face.

## How a Mighty Church Falls

Two chapters in this second half of the book I found very insightful. The first one is entitled, "How a Mighty Church Falls." Gleaning from the research done by Jim Collins, and rooting this research in Biblical truth, MacDonald identifies five stages of church decline. The first is **hubris born of success**, "a state of overconfidence in ourselves, our systems, and our successes." (177) These make church leaders blind to points of weaknesses that are already bubbling up within the church.

The second stage of decline is **the undisciplined pursuit of more**. It is “about overreaching, getting larger and larger, more and more expansive, even if it costs the organization its soul.” (178) Compare this to Jesus’ strategy of making disciples rather than building large organizations.

The third stage of decline is the **denial of risk and peril**. This stage of decline emerges “when leaders and organizations ignore or minimize critical information, or refuse to listen to things they do not want to hear.” (180) In my denominational role, one of my greatest challenges has been to get leaders to accept critical information and listen to things they might not want to hear. Can the decline in the CRCA over the past three decades be linked to church leaders refusing to face the facts and listen to things they do not want to hear? What can we as a denomination do to reverse this trend?

The fourth stage of decline is **grasping for salvation**. By this Collins and MacDonald are referring to “the temptation to go for the overnight revival, the special program, the high-performance staff member.” (182) Churches often fall into this temptation. To help a church make a u-turn they look for gimmicks, “be it a presentation, a person, or a program.” (182) By far, what the church needs to do is become more and more centered on the lordship of Christ – engaging in core realities such as caring for people, discipling leaders, introducing people to Jesus, and worshipping God in spirit and truth. No gimmicks, please.

The final stage of decline is what Collins calls **capitulation to irrelevance or death**. This happens when churches run out of faith and spirit. Death becomes inevitable.

These are all great questions for further reflection. I found them helpful as I reflect on the state of the CRCA. In the words of MacDonald: “Great questions. Ignored, the mighty fall.” (183)

## Ten Conditions for Church Growth

The other chapter I appreciated was the one on church growth. MacDonald identifies “ten conditions for church growth.” He believes, as do I, that healthy churches are growing churches. So if you want to grow – in spirit and in number – then, become healthy. His “ten conditions” are not similar to NCD’s (Natural Church Development) eight characteristics of a healthy church nor Mark Dever’s “ten marks.” Yet they give a nuanced focus to the “healthy church” discussion. He suggests conditions such as building for growth, pursuit of excellence, systematic

pulpit ministry, disciplined membership, bold decisions, just to mention a number of them. Any pastor, church leader, and/or church council/session would benefit greatly if they would read this chapter, and engage in the “church health” discussion prompted by this chapter.

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*Ministry is not about the church but about equipping and encouraging people for life during the week – in the home, in the marketplace, at school (page 198)*

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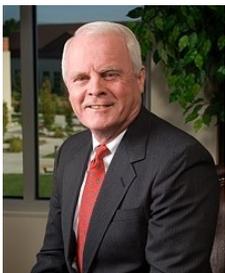
So whether you are a seasoned pastor or just starting, a large or small church, a traditional, contemporary, or emerging congregation – *Building Below the Waterline* is a must read, an excellent addition to any church library, and a worthwhile text book to inspire a church leadership team. I would put this book into the category with David Watson’s *Called and Committed* and C.S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity* – the category of books worth reading and rereading on a regular basis.

But I will allow Gordon MacDonald to have the last word. In his “Afterword” (249-50) he

gives four principles that will shore up the foundations of leadership throughout a leader's lifetime. These would be great bullet points to post in your diary or journal – as daily and weekly reminders:

1. Experience conversion on a daily basis
2. Support your life with daily discipline
3. Live out of a sense of call
4. Develop community around you

#### About the author:



**Gordon MacDonald** is a highly respected author, speaker, and teacher as well as Pastor Emeritus of Grace Chapel in Lexington, MA, where he was the senior minister for twenty years.

He currently serves as an Editor-at-Large for *Leadership Journal* and writes a column for *LeadershipJournal.net*. In addition, he frequently addresses both church and business leaders at conferences across the world.

He and his wife, Gail, live in Canterbury, NH, and have two married children and give grandchildren.

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Luisa Plaja loves words and books, and she used to edit the book review site Chicklish. Her novels for teenagers include Split by a Kiss, Swapped by a Kiss and Kiss Date Love Hate. She lives in Devon, England, and has two young children. What Is a Book Review?

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