

There is Hope: Church Revitalization

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Abstract: Current statistics indicate that many churches are in a period of decline and no longer impacting their community. Current statistics reveal that 85% of all North American churches are in a state of decline and many of those eventually close. While the process of turning a church around is often slow and challenging, there is hope for every church in need of revitalization. A church can move from “survival move” to a renewed place of thriving by implementing a strategic development team, investing in young leaders, renovating worship, implementing change slowly, and preparing to handle difficult people. Church leaders should also plan strategies when churches refuse to adapt to changes.

Key Words: Revitalization, Growth, Change, Decline, Mission

Introduction

As Peter stood face to face with the Savior of the world acknowledging that he is the Christ, the Son of God (Matt 16:18), our Lord revealed his plan for the ages: he would build his church and nothing including the very efforts of hell would thwart its advancement. That universal promise more than two-thousand years ago still stands as God continues to offer hope to a lost world through the primary instrument of his church. And while God is blessing his church and remains committed to using her for a special work, the church easily grows passive toward the mission she has been entrusted. In America, churches can be found throughout metropolitan and suburban areas and yet

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the eternal impact of its presence seems to be waning. According to Kevin Ezel, there is a triple crisis in North America today:

First, our population continues to grow and become more diverse, yet we are not starting enough new churches to keep pace with that growth. Second, we are losing a shockingly high number of churches every year that simply close their doors and disappear. Third, even more of our existing churches have stopped being outwardly focused and are no longer lights for the gospel in their communities.²

Consider the following statistics that indicate the church is losing its ground as a mission outpost within society:

- Only 15% of churches in the United States are growing and just 2.2% of those are growing by conversion.³
- 10,000 churches in America disappeared in a five-year period.⁴
- The number of people in America who do not attend church has doubled in the past 15 years.⁵
- Roughly three-fourths of established churches in North America either are declining or are on a long-term plateau.⁶

² Kevin Ezel, forward to *Can These Bones Live?: A Practical Guide to Church Revitalization* by Bill Henard, xiii–xiv (Nashville: B&H, 2015), xiii.

³ Andy McAdams, “The Condition of the Church in America,” *Poikilos*, December 19, 2005, <https://wmson.wordpress.com/2005/12/19/the-condition-of-the-church-in-america/>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 20.

- The Southern Baptist Convention, one of the largest denominations in America, loses more than nine hundred churches every year.⁷

Most churches that are in a decline are not even aware of the deadly erosion that has taken place in their congregation. Others fail to accept that there is a problem and that important changes are necessary to experience the vitality the church once enjoyed. One of the first questions pastors and leaders must ask is, “If the church closed its doors today, would anyone but its own members notice? Would the city be saddened because such a great community-transformation partner—a missionary of impact—as gone?”⁸

Why should we be interested in church revitalization? Because we want to be more effective at making disciples and fulfilling the Great Commission. Church revitalization is not just about having more people and building larger buildings; church revitalization is about returning the church to her purpose of making committed followers of Christ and being effective at pointing people to Jesus.

The following pages provide a diagnosis of church health in order to understand why many churches experience decline. It follows with a modest proposal to help in restoring dying churches to greater health and kingdom impact.

PART 1

THE DIAGNOSIS: DYING OR GROWING?

Doctor visits may seem mundane and hideous, but the reality is that people who desire to remain healthy understand that prevention goes along way. For individuals, health exams tell us how we currently are doing and what we need to do better in order to live healthier lives. The same goes for the church as an

⁷ Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 3.

⁸ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 5.

organization. Before we can expect to see any growth, we must do an honest health assessment of the church.

Symptoms of Dying Churches

Research and evaluation on church health indicate that all churches that have closed and those who enter a period of decline experience similar symptoms that tend to plague the church and ultimately lead to her demise. While not intended to be an exhaustive list, the autopsy of deceased churches and the symptoms experienced in sick churches all share similar traits. These churches became focused on themselves instead of the Great Commission, operated from a faulty leadership structure, lacked vision for the future, and experienced a slow almost unnoticed decline.

Inward Focus

It is ironic that declining churches who have turned their focus inward at one point in time began as a church plant with an outward focus. New churches are very effective at evangelism because they are born out of a passion to reach the community with the gospel. The new church has little resources; it lacks attractive and comfortable buildings. The church plant has limited personnel resources and cannot pour its energy into running big programs. Perhaps there is some truth to the saying that “There is more in less.” As the church becomes well established with its permanent buildings and programs in place, it begins to shift toward maintenance mode further sliding into an inward focus. As a result, members fail to recognize aging facilities and needed building improvements as long as they are comfortable. Henard comments, “What the world sees is that church members care less about God’s house than they do about their own houses.”⁹

⁹ Henard, *Can These Bones Live?*, 79.

Dwell on the Past

Inwardly focused churches tend to hold on to the past. There is a certain bit of stability that we all desire because this provides a sense of security. Declining churches spend more time reminiscing on the past rather than dreaming about the future. There can be a variety of reasons why the inwardly focused church clings to the past. For some churches, the past brings them back to the “good old days.” Older church members may remember when the building was full of people and ministry programs were effective. And so, for them, the methods of the past are sufficient for today. For other churches, new equates to compromise. These churches live by the lyrics to the hymn *Old Time Religion*—if it’s good enough for mama, it’s good enough for me!” Inward churches tend to elevate a particular methodology to the same level as scripture. In other words, while doctrine is unchangeable, any change in methodology is seen almost tantamount to changing the truth of Scripture. As Rainer observes, “Yes, we respect the past. At times we revere the past. But we can’t live in the past.”¹⁰

Preference Driven

Another symptom of dying churches that have become inward focused is holding on to preferences and a certain way of doing church. Preferences come in a variety of forms including worship styles and programs even though these may no longer impact the lives of others. Some believers refuse growth because they prefer smaller churches over larger churches. It seems selfish to want the church to perform according to our preferences at the cost of advancing the kingdom of God. In actuality, the preference driven church is more concerned about protecting the way they do church rather than reaching the community for Christ. Thom Rainer’s evaluation of deceased churches revealed that dying churches often cling to their preferences and refuse to let go even to the point of preferring death over change: “So what did the deceased churches cling to? What did they refuse to let go of facing certain death? Worship styles were certainly on the list. As were fixed orders of worship

¹⁰ Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, 21.

services. And times of worship services.”¹¹ Fighting over preferences of music, teaching styles, or the correct way to do ministry is a form of idolatry. When we value preferences over our love for Jesus and his mission, we are revealing certain idols that serve our desires for church. Many churches declare that they want to reach their community for Christ, but they expect the community to look exactly like them and hold to their preferences and traditions.

Not Reaching the Community

If there is one characteristic that summarizes all dying churches, it is their inability to connect with the community. The only way for churches to reach new people (both saved and unsaved) and recover from a pattern of decline, is for churches to gain an active presence in their communities. As the church grows inward, it becomes more consumed with ministry programs and events designed for Christians. As a result, the church spends all its energy and resources on programs tailored to its members, never reaching beyond the walls of the church. When churches experience a financial decline, the first ministries that are usually cut from the budget are those that are not essential for the members. Outreach and missions are usually the first ministries to be cut when these are the most important for adding new members. Many churches in decline have attempted to offer ministry that is assumed to be wanted by the community. However, in reality, what is offered is the same approach that the church has always offered (preference again?). Until the declining church makes a diligent effort to understand what will reach the community, it will continue down a similar path of decline it has already taken. Rainer observes,

With most of these churches, somewhere in their histories they have become satisfied with the status quo. They resist change and often seek to minister only to those inside the church. They have some or many programs. They may even have large budgets. But they are not making a significant impact on their communities, nor

¹¹ Ibid., 22.

do they see significant numbers of changed lives in their congregations.¹²

The church must prove to the community that it has something valuable to offer and that the community is better off having the church in its neighborhood. It must prove that it has a relevant message to be heard.

Entitlement

Churches that have an inward focus often develop a consumeristic approach to ministry. Members expect the church to meet their needs and when the church fails to provide care, these members usually become discontent and may even threaten to leave the church. Because there is a lack of outward focus, the dying church has a difficult time showing compassion toward others and putting the mission of the church before one's own personal ministry desires and preferences. Older members of the church may feel that their voice should be valued above others because they have invested more time and money into the life of the church over the years. Servant leadership willingly places the needs and desires of others before oneself. Only as members submit to one another and recognize that the primary role of the church is not about meeting their needs, will it return glory to God and advance his kingdom.

Avoid Change and Growth

“No one would ever argue that doing the same things the same old, anemic ways would ever produce different results, although most of the time that is what we see. Yet, many are unable or are afraid to face change.”¹³ And while congregations grow accustomed to a certain way of doing things and cringe at the mention of change, every person recognizes that change is a part of life. All people recognize that change is an element of life. We move, change neighborhoods and schools, and accept a new position of employment. People know that “what got them

¹² Rainer, *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 23.

¹³ Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 19.

their job five years ago is not sufficient to get them their next promotion. If they hope to get ahead, they must take classes to update skills, attend seminars to network with clients, or sign up for training to raise their level of expertise.”¹⁴ The same holds true for the sports realm and “it is equally valid that what brought a church to its current level of ministry fruitfulness will not get it to the next level of growth and vitality.”¹⁵ If churches wish to reach new people, they must start new ministries. Programs and ministries become less effective over time. Yet studies reveal that leading a church through change is one of the hardest things for pastors to accomplish.

Many pastors feel as though they are cornered and unable to lead the church toward any real significant growth because of the challenges that come with leading change. Pastors are stuck because they do not want to create waves, or they are not sure how to lead change in the congregation. Many churches have operated under a specific methodology for many years and see no need to consider change. These same churches have grown suspicious of any changes in the ministry as a church growth gimmick. Christian Schwarz observes, “To them it seems to present simplistic rules and principles ‘that don’t work in the real world, anyway.’ From their point of view, mere people are trying in their own strength to do what only God can do. Whether or not this impression is right, it is the image the church growth movement has in the eyes of many believers...”¹⁶ Churches that are leery of change often point out the many bad examples of churches that compromise biblical truth. The assumption is that if the church goes down a road of change, it may go farther than it should. And while biblical faithfulness is always a concern when changes occur, churches cannot afford to resist change as the world around them changes. Rainer points out, “Most churches in America fit one of two categories:

¹⁴ Gary McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What God You Here Won’t Get You There* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 15–16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶ Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 6.

Traditionalist/Resistor or Innovator/Embracer. The former model represents churches that avoid nearly all changes, and the latter describes churches that continually chase the latest fad.”¹⁷ Wise churches learn to steer clear from extremes when it comes to pursuing a process of change. Furthermore, research in church growth indicates that it requires an average of seven years to implement any significant change in the church.¹⁸

Congregation Lacks Diversity

Another mark of a dying church is the congregation is made up of one ethnicity or one generation. While location certainly has an effect on congregation demographics, dying churches that have turned their focus inward often make little effort to reach people who are different from them. Older, established churches typically have a large percentage of older believers while younger churches tend to have a higher ratio of young people.

The difference between an older and younger church is related to two aspects of life: controllability and flexibility.... Older churches typically have numerous policies and guidelines that create controls that keep the church stable. Younger churches have lower controllability, fewer rules and regulations that allow younger churches to try new ministries, stop investing in programs that don't work, and move in new directions.¹⁹

The church model of the New Testament is one that is composed of both younger and older believers. The church needs the energy and innovation of the youth as well as the wisdom and guidance of previous generations. Dying churches struggle to provide a ministry that is multi-generational and multi-ethnic.

Frequent Conflict

A final symptom of the dying church that has become inward focused, is frequent conflict. Because the dying church struggles

¹⁷ Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, 164.

¹⁸ McIntosh, *There's Hope for Your Church: First Steps to Restoring Health and Growth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 69.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

to understand the value of diversity, one area of conflict is between those who are different and who do not agree on church ministry. The younger generation often blames the older generation for the church's lack of growth, and the older generation blames the younger generation for attempting to hijack the church and take it toward an unwanted direction. Conflict exists because there is no unifying direction for the church. When leaders attempt to lead the church through change in a much-needed direction, there will always be conflict. Because there is a sense of loss experienced during the change process, some people will naturally buck against the process even if properly prepared by leadership. And there will always be a group of people who desire to take the church back to its "good ol' days." Individuals and groups who attempt to create disunity should not be tolerated. The church must make it clear that it will not ignore divisive attempts to undermine the church or the leaders who have been called to lead the congregation.

Ineffective Leadership Structure

Dying churches tend to have complex leadership structures which often prevent the church from moving forward. Most of the challenges in decision making have been created by God's servants with good intentions. For example, at its infancy, the church generally relies upon the pastor to do most of the work of the ministry. As the church becomes established, the desire is to involve more people so various committees and teams take on many leadership roles. Larger churches shift back to a centralized model of decision making by pastoral leaders. Growing churches recognize that the church will have to adjust its leadership structure at different stages of growth.

Confusion on Roles

In many older, declining churches, the assumption is that the pastor is the hired hand to do ministry. These members expect the pastor to be a part of every ministry in the church and to personally minister and care for every member. According to Henard, "They like having the pastor be available for hospital visitation, home ministry, and counseling. These issues create a

huge dilemma for the church. To grow, it must change its structures, but a change in structure means that the delivery method of ministry changes.”²⁰ Understanding the pastor do be the primary “doer” of ministry is both theologically inaccurate,²¹ as well as unrealistic. “This fact alone demonstrates why many small churches cannot get over certain attendance barriers. One person can only meet the needs of so many people, then the ministry begins to fail.”²² The church must come to understand that the pastor functions more in the role as a coach rather than a performer of ministry and that ministry tasks are to be shared by the congregation. Churches that wish to grow should invest their time in raising up ministry teams. Many seminaries train pastors to function as scholar-chaplains instead of scholar-leaders. For churches to grow, pastors will have to lead others to take on responsibility that he cannot accomplish alone. The other extreme as far as leadership structure is concerned, is when boards and committees take on a role that should be accomplished by a single leader. Stetzer notes, “We’re amazed at how many churches will put their best leaders on boards to decide things that one person should be empowered to do.”²³

It has already been mentioned that effective pastoral leadership is about equipping others for the work of the ministry. However, there is no other leadership position that can replace the God-ordained office of the pastor. Pastors and elders have been ordained by God to oversee all the affairs of the church (1 Tim 3), and they are the only ones in scripture that are held accountable (Heb 13:17) for the decisions of the church. By the very nature of their role and level of responsibility, pastors and elders should be a part of decision making and leading the future of the church rather than functioning primarily in an advisory role.

²⁰ Henard, *Can These Bones Live?*, 179–180.

²¹ Ephesians 4:11–12 defines the role of pastors as primarily equippers.

²² Henard, *Can These Bones Live?*, 178.

²³ Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 216.

Misplaced Leaders

An interesting finding by the research of Aubrey Malphurs and Gordon Penfold revealed that many of the pastors who were able to revitalize a dying church had a similar personality and giftedness.²⁴ What this might reveal is that God has gifted pastors for a particular ministry context. For example, some pastors may be better wired to start churches while other pastors would be best suited to provide stability operations in already established ministries. If it is true that certain giftedness and leadership styles have a bearing on the type of ministry pastors will be most effective at leading, then it must also be true that not every pastor will be effective at leading churches through revitalization. McIntosh notes, “As a church ages and changes size, it demands new approaches to leadership, change, programming, training, and presents a host of new challenges that must be faced.”²⁵ It requires a different leadership style at each juncture of church growth. “Unfortunately most leaders are not able to freely bounce back and forth between differing styles of leadership, which requires a succession of pastors coming and going at each transition point.”²⁶ According to Malphurs and Penfold’s estimation, 75 to 90 percent of pastors are non-re-envisioning pastors.²⁷

Plateaued Leaders

In many declining churches, pastors have exhausted their efforts at church growth. Their initial vision has waned as they have struggled to keep forward momentum.

If the church’s leaders are not experiencing a vibrant and passionate ministry, this will always trickle down to affect the congregation. The pastor “loses his dream. It may be that he had a dream for the first ten years of service. Those dreams have been fulfilled or dashed, and he has not developed a new dream.

²⁴ Aubrey Malphurs and Gordon Penfold, *Re:Vision: The Key to Transforming Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 126–131.

²⁵ McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level*, 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁷ Malphurs and Penfold, *Re:Vision*, 126.

Therefore, the church falls into stagnation because the pastor has plateaued himself.”²⁸

High Pastoral Turn-Over

Declining churches often experience a high turnover rate of pastoral leadership. When churches struggle to hold onto pastors, this is a sure sign that problems are in play in the church. Rainer’s evaluation of churches that closed their doors revealed, “For the majority of the churches, pastors came and went at a pace of every two to three years, especially in the two decades leading to the deaths of the churches.”²⁹ A pastor would come to the church, attempt to lead the church forward, which naturally resulted in change. The people would become upset over the changes and create a difficult time for the new pastor. Eventually the pastor would give up and resign, and the cycle would start all over with the next pastor.

Lack of Vision

Declining churches often lack direction for the future of the church. Perhaps the church had an original vision in the past but as everything around the church began to change, the church failed to adapt the vision to more effective ways of reaching culture. It is important at this juncture to understand that the church’s mission never changes. The mission is what Christ has called the church to do: a timeless responsibility to reach people for the gospel and lead people to Christlikeness. However, vision involves a God-inspired vision of where a church believes it is headed to fulfill the mission. The congregation and the staff must align themselves to the church’s vision. If people are moving in multiple directions, it typically results in a church split.

No Clear Purpose

One of the first questions the church must ask in defining its vision is to determine its purpose. Why does the church exist, and what does it seek to provide for the community? The purpose is

²⁸ Henard, *Can These Bones Live?*, 54.

²⁹ Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, 55.

much broader than the church's mission and vision, but it is the starting point. Without understanding the purpose of the church, it will not be able to arrive at a clear God-inspired vision. The purpose of the church involves its overall intent to glorify God (Rom 15:6; 1 Cor 6:20), whereas the vision paints a clear picture of the future of the church and what it can and must be.

No Clear Discipleship Strategy

The discipleship strategy or assimilation plan provides the means by the church attempts to accomplish its vision. The discipleship strategy explains the process by which the church will lead people to become more Christ-like. It is specific and can identify where every person is currently in their relationship to Christ and what the next step is in the discipleship process. Clifton comments, "In reality, dying churches don't primarily have an attendance problem, a giving problem, or a baptism problem. They have a discipleship problem."³⁰

Slow Decline

In most cases, except for instances of a church split, dying churches experience a slow and almost unrecognizable decline. Rainer describes this process: "Slow erosion in a church takes place over a period of years, and until the leaders and members are willing to admit that a problem exists, no remedial effort is taken. Thus further erosion and even death of the church are likely."³¹ The tendency for declining churches is to cut programs that do not directly benefit the members of the church. Outreach and evangelism programs are often the first to be cut when these are actually the main source of potential growth and vitality the church needs.

Church decline comes in a variety of ways including a drop in attendance as few new members are added and older members begin to die, dwindling finances because of low attendance, and then a cut to ministry programs due to lack of personnel available to help keep the ministry running. Declining churches truly enter a downward spiral that becomes difficult to correct.

³⁰ Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 7.

³¹ Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, 79.

Characteristics of Growing Churches

There is certainly no enjoyment in studying dying churches. The good news is that God is still using his church today and it will grow as it returns to his mission. Research gathered on growing churches reveal a common set of characteristics present in churches that grow.

Outward Focus

While dying churches tend to have an inward focus, growing churches tend to place value on being outwardly focused. This is not to suggest that these growing churches care less about discipleship (although some do); however, they have a noticeable passion to reach the unreached people in their communities. Their focus is often evident by their participation in community efforts. “When churches lovingly serve the communities around them, the unchurched very often are motivated to come to Christ.”³² Outward focused churches recognize that there will be a percentage of unbelievers present at the worship service, and so they find ways to connect with these unbelievers without compromising the quality of worship for believers.

Dwell on the Future

Instead of living in the past, growing churches live for the future. These churches are not committed to their past methods, but rather are open to change if it will help them to minister more effectively. “The church should continually be sensitive to the possibility that what it is doing today may not be what God would have it do tomorrow.... The community’s needs will probably change over time.... Therefore the church must be sensitive to God’s new directions and paths.”³³ Wise churches will recognize the need to regularly evaluate their methods rather than jump to the newest fads and church growth tactics. Growing churches recognize that what is considered new today may eventually become outdated and become the new “tradition.” Only by

³² Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 64.

³³ Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, 126.

having a watchful eye toward the future can the church make carefully planned and effective transitions.

Know Their Cultural Context

Those churches who are making the greatest Kingdom impact are those who spend time studying and understanding the culture that they are trying to reach. Malphurs and Penfold write,

The external environment that the Bible sometimes refers to as the world bears down on churches and can pose a threat to their very existence. Thus it is critical to the church that it learn how to cope with that constantly changing external environment. The culture that works hard at reading and adapting to these changes is more likely to survive them. If it can't or does not know how to change, it will not survive. But the church that reads and adjusts to the culture will not only survive but thrive spiritually.³⁴

Some well-meaning Christians have a misunderstanding of culture. They associate societal customs and practices with worldliness, and this has led to unfair criticism of a certain style of ministry. The misunderstanding comes in thinking that culture is inherently evil, yet culture has been around long before the fall of mankind (Gen 3:14–19). In fact, even before sin entered the world, God said that everything he had made was good and this includes culture. The very act of Jesus becoming incarnate and taking on flesh indicates that he clothed himself with culture. Jesus lived in a Jewish community, followed Jewish customs, and even dressed like those in his Jewish neighborhood. “We see that the Godhead related to and operated in a cultural context (Acts 4:24) and evidence indicates that culture will be an intrinsic part of our future in heaven (Rev. 7:9-10).”³⁵ Every one of us has been influenced by the culture in which we have been born (for good or bad), and we cannot separate ourselves from culture. We use culture to interpret our experience, order our lives, and assess appropriate behavior.

³⁴ Malphurs and Penfold, *Re:Vision*, 169.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

Culture, whether a past one or a present one, has an impact on every church including its traditions. How we worship has been influenced by culture. For example, the traditional church has been modeled after a European church model with a set order of worship and buildings that include stained glass and steeples. For people influenced by this culture, only buildings that look like a church are acceptable for worship. The challenge is that even in America, churches must learn the culture where they minister. Culture extends beyond just speaking the same language. As Stetzer and Dodson observe,

Just as we'd need to learn the language, culture, context, and accepted avenues through which we could communicate the gospel overseas, we need to adapt our church to the changing culture in which God has placed us. Even though we may know the same language, we may not be speaking in ways that people can hear, understand, and believe. We never change or compromise the gospel (1 Cor. 4:6), but we communicate it clearly and with a sense of urgency to our changing culture.³⁶

Growing churches try to understand the culture of their ministry context not in order to be cool but to better connect the message of the gospel. Many churches lose their influence in their community because they have failed to recognize and adapt to a new culture.

Accept Change

Effective churches have come to expect change and have prepared themselves for change. These churches approach change not with resistance but with caution. They are careful not to change everything at once, and the things they do change always aligns with their vision. If the church fails to change, many will move on to a church that offers relevant ministry. It is easy to become defensive toward those who leave the church over consumeristic tendencies and a lack of commitment to the church. However, the reality is that we live in an American

³⁶ Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 56.

society that values quality in every aspect of our daily life. People do not hesitate to change their favorite restaurant or department store over a bad experience or poor product. Henard provides this analogy: “The analogy I use is the health club. If I am a member of a health club and a new one moves in across the street, and its equipment is better, the hours are more convenient, and the dues are the same, I am going to change my membership.”³⁷ Pastors must lead their people toward a biblical commitment to the church, yet if the church fails to offer a ministry of excellence in all that it does, people will be drawn to a better option.

Develop Effective Leaders

Growing churches multiply by multiplying their leaders. As the church grows, pastoral work becomes more demanding for full-time staff. The church will not grow if it does not learn to turn over ministry tasks to trained individuals within the church. In fact, according to Stetzer and Dodson’s research, those churches that experienced a major comeback in growth had pastors who changed their perspective on ministry from doing most of the ministry themselves to training others to do much of the pastoral work.³⁸ In addition to restructuring their ministry tasks, 62 percent of pastors who had experienced a turn-around in their churches indicated that they reached outside themselves to find the answers to revitalization.³⁹ Some of these pastors relied upon mentors or coaches, and others invested themselves in reading and research to reach the next level of growth. The bottom line is that these pastors recognized they could not take the church to the next level with their current level of understanding. Effective leaders are lifelong learners especially in a fast-changing society. Growing churches have developed an effective leadership training program so they can multiply workers and reach more people.

³⁷ Henard, *Can These Bones Live?*, 152.

³⁸ Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 42.

³⁹ Malphurs and Penfold, *Re:Vision*, 194.

Passionate About Vision and Goals

Growing churches know where they are going and never take their eyes off the vision. The vision is the motivator—it paints a clear picture of what the church will look like when it arrives or accomplishes its mission. While mission and vision are similar, the vision creates passion to accomplish the mission. Churches often have a number of mission statements, goals, or biblical purposes on paper, but this does not necessarily indicate that the church has adopted a vision. Vision is more than a statement on paper; it is an overwhelming conviction within to make disciples of Christ. If the average member of the church cannot recite the vision of the church without the pastor’s input, it is likely the vision has not been received even though it may be published in church documents. Every area of the church’s ministry is influenced by the vision.

Grow by Being Small

As churches get bigger over time, the close family feel becomes lost in the increasing structure and size of meetings. Growing churches understand that growth generally happens when people are in close relationship with one another. The worship service is not designed to offer discipleship even though the Bible is taught. The biblical model of discipleship is one that incorporates others into our lives for edification and growth. While corporate worship is a function of the church, pastors of growing churches understand the value of small groups. Rainer comments, “Breakout churches understand that church members must get connected with a small group for them to grow in spiritual health and to remain connected with the church. Members who are involved in worship services alone tend to drift toward inactivity.”⁴⁰ Because there is such a great emphasis on small groups, many churches are now hiring small group pastors to ensure that the small group ministry reaches the goals of the church. It is becoming rare today to see a large, growing church without some form of small group ministry.

⁴⁰ Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, 106.

PART 2

UNDERSTANDING AND PURSUING GROWTH

Churches go through various stages of life as they age and develop into more sustainable ministries. Pastors should become aware of the unique needs at each stage of the church's development to prepare the church for potential challenges and to help it remain healthy during the growing process.

The Church Life Cycle and Growth

Every living organism goes through a particular life cycle which includes birth, maturity, and eventual death. Churches and organizations also face a similar situation. "One major difference exists between the human life cycle and that of an organization. In the human life cycle, decline is inevitable.... In the organizational life cycle, decline is not inevitable—only probable."⁴¹ Pastors often find themselves stuck in the ministry, unable to move beyond the current stage of growth. Understanding the church life cycle helps pastors in the following ways: (1) if they are on the growth side of the life cycle, they will be aware of the pitfalls and challenges ahead of them; (2) if they are on the decline side of the life cycle, they will understand what got the church there in the first place and then the uphill battle they must resolve in order to lead the church back to growth. A number of stages have been presented for the church life cycle; however, most agree that the following stages below are included in the life cycle.

⁴¹ McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level*, 25.

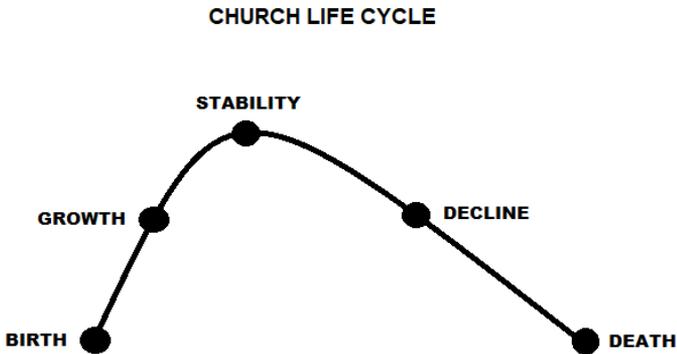


FIG. 1. The Church Life Cycle⁴²

Stage 1: Birth

The birth stage of the church life cycle is a very exciting time in the life of the church. This first stage is usually a life transforming experience for the founding pastor and the launch team. A lot of work goes into discerning the first vision of the church as well as the structure plans to make it happen. The significance of this stage is that the church begins with a clean slate without any prior traditions dictating how the church should minister. The values, goals, and purpose of the church are clearly defined. Because of the clarity of purpose, there is generally intentional outreach and effectiveness at generating interest in the community and attracting new members. The challenges in this stage mostly consist of proper planning, limited space and resources, and thinking toward the next stage of greater growth and impact.

Stage 2: Growth

The second stage of the church life cycle is usually characterized by increased membership, activity, and funding. The church's mission and vision are further shaped as it begins

⁴² For more information about the Church life cycle, see McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level*, 30.

to lay permanent roots in the community. Building programs and renovation are a reality and the church refines its programs and ministries to meet the needs of the congregation. New ideas are welcomed, and creativity is needed to reach families who are becoming a part of the church. Increased ministry demands additional staff members, and the church becomes more formalized as an established organization.

Stage 3: Stability

By this stage, the church has acquired a permanent facility. Energy that was once devoted to outreach begins to shift toward maintaining the current ministry. Traditions and practices become more established and routine. Growth has leveled off at this stage; however, decline is not a real concern because there are enough people still coming to replace those who leave or die. Finances are adequate to operate the church's ministry and provide for staffing needs. Facilities are adequate for the number of people who are attending the church. Members are generally satisfied with the way things are going without any need to make changes. The stability stage is a very dangerous phase of the church life cycle. Because the church appears to be operating smoothly even with periodic high points, the church fails to identify ways in which it is growing sluggish and monotonous which becomes clearly obvious to newcomers.

Stage 4: Decline

If the church does not become aware of the potential pitfalls and challenges of stage 3, it will inevitably experience stage 4. The church begins to struggle with a decreasing membership which results in budget shrinks, deferred building maintenance, staff cuts, and few professions of faith and baptism. Because this stage is often a long and slow decline, the problems may go unnoticed for a period. As an institution grows, it moves through phases toward increased institutionalization characterized by increasing bureaucracy, eventually becoming less effective and

collapsing under its own weight.⁴³ Denial becomes a coping mechanism for those long-time church members who have seen better days in the life of the church. Leaders blame the community for a lack of commitment to the church and conclude that people are no longer interested in spiritual growth. Divisions often erupt over what has led to the decline with many members holding on to past days of success. The warning signs can only go ignored for so long before the church must come to grasp that it is operating in survival mode.

Stage 5: Death

Unfortunately, churches that were once influential and thriving in their communities do die. This can be a very difficult process for long-time members who have witnessed the past days of the church. While death ends the life cycle of the church, it does not have to be a totally negative experience. First, death is a natural process that is characteristic of every living thing. We can appreciate the accomplishments and the ways in which God used the church to further the kingdom by reaching people for Christ and providing discipleship during its lifetime. Second, when a church prepares to die, it can make some important decisions regarding leaving an inheritance that can serve as a lasting legacy. “Like other organisms, churches tend to grow fastest in the earliest stages, reproduce frequently during their maturing years and hopefully assist as wise, generous, and loving grandparents during their final years.”⁴⁴

Natural Church Growth

Many pastors and churches are uncomfortable talking about church growth. To these believers, church growth means focusing on the externals using a business-like approach to church ministry. Yet, growth is a natural process for any healthy living organism. We do not make ourselves grow, that is an automatic process no matter how much we eat or how many

⁴³ David O. Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution: The Sociology of American Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 118.

⁴⁴ Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, xvi.

supplements we take. “In applying this idea to the life of a congregation, it indicates that certain developments appear to happen ‘all by themselves’ or ‘automatically.’ Christians, however, know—even though it cannot be proven empirically—that the fruit that develops seemingly all by itself is, in reality, a work of God.”⁴⁵ Natural church growth development is not so much focused on creating growth, but on healthy environments that will foster natural growth. Natural church growth focuses on quality, recognizing that higher quality directly results in higher quantity. Farmers cannot make their crops grow; however, they can address issues that contribute to growth such as soil quality and proper husbandry. Natural church growth development recognizes that church growth is a by-product of a healthy environment, whereas decline is the by-product of an unhealthy environment.

If quality is so essential to the health of the church, then how do we measure a church’s quality index in order to assess the health of the congregation? “Since fruit—according to both biology and the Bible—is visible, we are able to check on the quality of an organism (or church) by examining its fruit. Natural church development has two levels of questions about fruit. One level is quality: How high is the quality index? The other level is quantity: Is the church growing or multiplying?”⁴⁶ Church health and not numbers, should be the measuring tool by which churches can gauge the spiritual life of the congregation. Increased worship attendance is not the end goal, but increased worship attendance is a natural by-product of quality improvement. Church quality control must become a routine function to determine the health of the church. Some church leaders may have a difficult time admitting that the church needs to be evaluated. Yet, church evaluation happens all the time. Consider the couple who in conversation on the way home discuss the service or the issues in the children’s department. The reality is that church evaluation happens every Sunday whether we accept it or not. If you want to know how your ministry is doing, check the vital signs.

⁴⁵ Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 12.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

Revitalizing Dying Churches

The statistics tell us that there are more declining churches today than growing churches. How can pastors lead their churches back to fruitfulness and growth experienced in the early stages of the church's life cycle?

Understand the Challenges in Church Revitalization

Even though pastors love their congregations and want to see them flourish, they must discern whether they are the ones to actually lead their church toward revitalization. Not every pastor is wired to lead a church through the revitalization process. Some pastors are best equipped to be a church planter and others to lead growing ministries. They must discover if they are gifted to be a revitalization pastor and then they must decide if they can handle the unique challenges that come with turning a church around. Clifton observes, "Pastors risk their reputations, their livelihoods, and their emotional health when they get involved in struggling churches."⁴⁷ Revitalization pastors are putting themselves into conflict as any attempt at change will necessarily create resistance among the congregation. Church revitalization certainly isn't for the faint of heart, and it will exact a toll on both the pastor and his family.

Develop a Renewed Vision for the Church

While the church most likely had a vision at some point in its early history, a renewed vision will be needed to move the church forward. McIntosh tells where vision begins: "Rarely does God give vision to a committee, a board, or a team of people. These groups are important, but they typically serve to help a leader shape and form a vision rather than discover it. So if you are a pastor, vision begins with you."⁴⁸ "Committees, deacons, trustees, and Bible study teachers all play an important role in a church. But none of these are called to exercise oversight for the Chief Shepherd as those who will give an account (Heb. 13:17).

⁴⁷ Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 12.

⁴⁸ McIntosh, *There's Hope for Your Church*, 76.

Only pastors are given that charge.”⁴⁹ The vision must include an outward focus and desire to get back to reaching the community. The pastor will lead the way in creating a new culture in the life of the church.

Implement a Strategic Development Team

Malphurs and Penfold give advice for establishing a development team: “Once you have determined your new culture, you will need to implement it. You accomplish this by recruiting a strategic development team, consisting of no more than nine key leaders in the church. Next, use this team to discover your core values and develop your mission and vision statements along with a strategy to implement them in the church.”⁵⁰ The role of this team is to evaluate the church in light of its vision and mission and to determine the church’s weakness. The team will report to the congregation on the results of its investigation and propose ways the church can move forward in growth. The team will assess everything in the life of the church that could be posing as a stumbling block to growth including facility deficiencies and ministries that may need to be overhauled or discontinued. An alternative would be to hire an outside consultant who would be able to give the church an analysis of its problems.

Deal with Difficult People

Once the church has embraced its new vision, mission, and purpose, difficult people will begin to appear who oppose the new direction of the church. Revitalization requires leaders to make difficult decisions. Leaders must not tolerate divisiveness and difficult people. They must make it known that such behavior will be dealt with accordingly. Pastors tend to avoid conflict, hoping the problem will go away; however, rarely does a problem get resolved until it is addressed. “Accept any and all resignations immediately whenever someone threatens to leave.

⁴⁹ Brian Croft and Harry L. Reeder, *Biblical Church Revitalization: Solutions for Dying and Divided Churches* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 65.

⁵⁰ Malphurs and Penfold, *Re:Vision*, 181.

Thank them for their service but accept the resignation.”⁵¹ The goal is to move forward with those who come on board with the church’s new vision.

Restore Passionate Worship

In almost all declining churches, worship has become mundane and no longer passionate. Growing churches have enthusiastic worship services where people leave having experienced a freshness from God. Passionate worship does not have to be contemporary in style, but it must be creative and draw people into the very presence of God. “Almost all comeback churches identified their mood of worship as celebrative and orderly (96% and 95%, respectively) with a significant emphasis on being informal and contemporary (81% and 69%, respectively).”⁵² When worship is inspiring it will draw people to the services.

Invest in Young Leaders

Many churches overlook the potential in training young leaders. Churches tend not to involve young adults because of their immaturity and lack of knowledge. However, young leaders will be able to help the church read the culture better and understand vital areas the church can use to have a more effective presence in the community. If churches do not provide opportunities for young leaders, younger individuals will eventually leave and find a new ministry where they are given the opportunity to lead.

Implement Change Slowly

Before pastors can lead their churches in the revitalization process, they must prepare their people for change. They must help their people with the reality that unless something changes in the life of the church, the church will continue toward a path of decline and eventual death. Revitalization pastors recognize that the established church is deep in traditions and customs, and

⁵¹ McIntosh, *There's Hope for Your Church*, 112.

⁵² Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 78.

they know that change will take time. Pastors must remove the hazards that effectively stand in the way of making it difficult to proceed and they cannot do it alone. A theology of change consists of understanding function, forms, and freedom. Function is what the church does such as worship, evangelism, and fellowship and addresses the purpose of the church. Function never changes. Forms, however, must change to stay relevant to current culture. Forms include the church's worship style (traditional, contemporary, etc.) as well as outreach and discipleship methods. Freedom refers to the flexibility in how the church decides to accomplish the functions.⁵³ Many people are uncomfortable with change because of the fear of pragmatism. Leaders will need to provide assurance to the congregation that all changes will fall within certain biblical parameters. Pastors must rely on other leaders in the church to support and implement the process. Even as leaders make changes in the church, they cannot completely remove the past. The right approach involves holding on to the old church while simultaneously building a new one. It may take a minimum of seven to ten years to revitalize a dying church.⁵⁴

Decide to Stay as Long as Possible

Because it takes time to make any significant progress in church revitalization, the pastor must determine to commit to staying with the church as long as possible. It is unfair to assume that he should never leave because the church may enter a new stage of life that requires a new leader with different capabilities who can take it to the next level. However, pastors should realize that short tenures often stunt church growth especially if the church is already in the process of change. Of those breakout churches studied by Thom Rainer, the staff had an average tenure of 12.5 years.⁵⁵

⁵³ Malphurs and Penfold, *Re-Vision*, 208.

⁵⁴ Henard, *Can These Bones Live?*, 89.

⁵⁵ Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, 98.

When the Church Refuses to Revitalize

Perhaps what is most discouraging is not that churches die, but rather that churches choose to die rather than revitalize. It is easier for churches to close their doors than to admit a problem exists and deal with the challenges that have led to decline. These churches would rather close their door than deal with change.⁵⁶ God can only revitalize a church as the congregation becomes willing to make difficult decisions regarding the future and seek his glory and direction above all. If the church cannot come to a place of agreement on revitalization, a few options are possible.

Replant

In a replant, the church closes for a time with the intent to restart at a later date. The difference is that the replant is essentially a new church. Everything about the original established church is put aside as the church operates from a clean slate. The replant involves a change in leadership, includes building renovation or relocation to have an effective presence in the community, and a new vision for the church. One of the greatest challenges to this option is that the original church must reach an agreement to disband and re-assemble under a new method and direction. Replant church candidates are often churches that have declined to the point of desperation as closing the church becomes a reality. The church decides to make a last-ditch effort to save what it has or face imminent death.⁵⁷

Death with Dignity

The final option for the church that refuses to revitalize is to die with dignity. The church agrees to totally disband as a church and give away its building and remaining assets. “This thought should not be threatening at all, if the given church or group has produced four ‘children,’ sixteen ‘grandchildren,’ and fifty-four ‘great-grandchildren! In God’s creation, the ‘genetic

⁵⁶ McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level*, 79.

⁵⁷ For additional information and resources on replanting a church two helpful organizations are North American Mission Board (www.namb.net/church-replanting) and Acts 29 Network (www.acts29.com/what-is-replanting/).

information' remains and reproduces itself, though individual organisms may die."⁵⁸ The church can give its building to a new church plant in the area, or it can donate it to an existing church that could use the facility.⁵⁹

Either option is a very painful choice for the dying church, but it is choosing to invest in ways that benefit the Kingdom by sacrificially giving so that another church may live.

CONCLUSION

Missiologist and church health researchers Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson believe that "most of the churches in North America need a new approach, a new philosophy, and a new passion. Yet, most will not make the change. Most of those that try will not succeed. Why? Because too many pastors will see the need for change but will be unable to convince their churches to make the changes that are necessary."⁶⁰ Satan would have nothing more than to see that the Christian church become less effective for the Kingdom and enter a phase of slumber in the Christian life.

Church revitalization is not about building larger buildings that can hold more people. Church revitalization is about making an impact that reaches beyond former days of ministry. Revitalization is a very challenging task, but it is not an impossible one. "Churches can experience renewal at any point in their life cycle. However, the older a church becomes and the later in the life cycle renewal is attempted, the more difficult it is to see true resurgence of growth and vitality."⁶¹

Churches must come to understand why they have reached a point of decline and then be willing to take the necessary steps toward greater health and Kingdom impact. God is faithful to his church, and as the church returns to a vision of disciple-making and pushing back the darkness in the community, it can then

⁵⁸ Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 69.

⁵⁹ For further information on closing the church and donating its resources, see Stephen Gray and Franklin Dumond, *Legacy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: Churchsmart Resources, 2009).

⁶⁰ Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 29.

⁶¹ McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level*, 33.

expect to experience growth unlike anything in former days. “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).