

## 7. Real Churches Turn Around

**A decline in our attendance is discouraging our church.**

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to preach the good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to release the oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

The destiny of some churches is death. The life cycle of the church is complete. One of the great gifts a dying church can make is to become a *Legacy Church* (Gray 2009) that invests its remaining resources as seed that falls into the ground and dies for the planting of new churches. In the Montclare neighborhood of Chicago, Grace Church died. The congregation celebrated a long and fruitful history and they gave their assets and property to the Great Lakes District of the EFCA for a new church. An elder oversight team from neighboring churches called a gifted young couple to start a new church in that location and thus a dying church left an enduring legacy.

God's design for other churches is to turn around. The classic definition of a plateaued or declining church is a church with weekend worship attendance that has not increased by at least ten percent over the past five years. There are almost 200 churches in the Great Lakes District of the EFCA. We study the reported attendance of our churches every year. Two-thirds of our churches are plateaued or declining. The American average is said to be 80%. Here are five *strategic directions* for the turnaround church.

### **Turnaround churches build trust**

"Simply put, trust is confidence. The opposite of trust is distrust or suspicion. When you trust people you have confidence in them—in their integrity, in their good intentions, and their abilities. When you distrust people you are suspicious of them—of their integrity, their agenda, their capacities, or their track record." (Covey 2006, 5)

When there is trust, everything speeds up. Decisions don't drag. Discernment freely flows. Ideas are welcome and innovations are not a threat. People are open to one another. When trust breaks down, everything bogs down until there is a focused effort to restore trust. Repentance and forgiveness must flow before trust can return. Distrust breeds gridlock. Just look at Washington, D.C. Even with a good structure, distrust will gum up the works. Churches need a culture of trust. We see this in the life of Moses. God called him to lead in Exodus 3 at the burning bush. God established trust between him, the leaders, and the people in the crossing of the Red Sea.

But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground; with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant. (Exodus 14:29-31, emphasis added)

Trust builds in a church when the leaders preach Christ and people come to the Savior. Trust builds in a church when leaders are truthful and transparent about future plans. Trust builds in a church when leaders teach the Bible with applications and people pray.

Rusty Hayes became pastor of the First Evangelical Free Church of Rockford, Illinois, after years of church decline. The once-vibrant church of 2,000 people was little more than half that size. Rusty led a turnaround. There is new hope. There are people coming to Christ. There is the sound of construction in the building as repairs and improvements are made. Yet, Rusty told me over lunch that his first job was to restore trust. He did this by loving the people. And he was aided in this by a demonstration of the power of the Spirit, who transformed people by the gospel of Christ and the teaching of the Word of God.

Building trust, and through it turn-around, takes time and competency. Gary McIntosh in his fine book, *There's Hope for Your Church: First Steps to Restoring Health and Growth*, gives a good estimate of the time it takes to see a turn around.

Revitalization leaders are committed to stay at their church for an extended period of time. It normally takes five to seven years to

revitalize a church in a city. It takes much longer in a rural situation, say, about ten to fifteen years (or longer!). (McIntosh 2012, 32)

### **Turnaround churches become outwardly focused**

There can be good reasons for decline: economic downturns, bad soil, winter seasons. But, as a rule, Paul Borden is right. He taught “Turnaround Churches” in the Doctor of Ministry program at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and he laid out two assumptions.

- *Assumption #1: If something is healthy, it grows.* A lack of growth in making new disciples and fulfilling the Great Commission proves dysfunction. The issue is not size. Many large churches are not growing by making new disciples, and they are not healthy. Many small churches are growing by making new disciples.
- *Assumption #2: The purpose of the church is to attack the gates of hell.* A church not making new disciples is disobedient and dysfunctional, and is failing to see people delivered from spiritual death through the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are to take the gospel to the gates of hell. We are to obey the Great Commission and have a church of disciples who make disciples who make disciples, (my summary)

In his home synagogue, Jesus of Nazareth announced: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me because, he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor,” and he promised help for the prisoners and the oppressed. His home church was furious. They did not like a Messiah who was a doctor for the diseased. They wanted powerful signs, wonders, and miracles to entertain them, not more poor and oppressed people.

A self-satisfied church does not see the needs of the brokenhearted. Parents plan only for the safety and security of their own children; they do not want new kids with tattoos and cigarettes around. Patriarchs and matriarchs pray only for church families and they do not want poor immigrants from the community around.

Turnaround churches preach not just their favorite subjects, but the good news that attracts the down and out. Review your sermons for the past two years. Are you preaching Christ? Is your pulpit anointed to preach the good news (2 Timothy 2:8)? Are you connecting with the

disadvantaged of your community and bringing Christ to them?

The EFC of Crystal Lake, Illinois, experienced a decline in attendance. Bob and Linda Page led a difficult turnaround that focused on preaching Christ to broken people. They started Celebrate Recovery every Friday night. The church turned around. To make, mature, and multiply disciples is our calling. As we love one another, shepherds also take to the streets with our Savior to seek lost sheep and orphan children.

Paul Borden's main point is that turnaround churches need an external focus. Too many churches worry first about themselves. He advocates for the first agenda item of every elder's meeting to be: "How do we serve people who are not yet here?," rather than "How do we meet the needs of our own people?"

One of Paul Borden's plans for a turnaround church is to schedule six events each year for the people who are not yet in the church, with four of these on Sundays. Here are some ideas to increase the flow of newcomers into the church:

January	Public-School Teacher Appreciation Sunday
Februar	Marriage Appreciation Sunday
March	Grandfather and Grandmother Appreciation
April	Easter Celebrations
May	Mother's Day or Woman's Day
June	Father's Day
July	Singles Sunday
Septem	Firefighter and Police Officer Appreciation
October	Friend Day
Novem	Thanksgiving
Decem	Advent and Christmas

One man cannot make this happen. This kind of new direction requires new leaders. Dysfunctional churches often drive off potential leaders. They marginalize mavericks that could start a new ministry. Mavericks are often immature, but have great potential for hard labor among the lost. Entrepreneurial leaders in the body of Christ are looking for the opportunity to work with a church that will take a risk.

When I attended graduate school, I visited five churches before finding one interested in evangelism. The fifth church did not have any leaders for an evangelism ministry, but they were open to me, and they

turned the whole outreach ministry of the church over to me. I gathered a team of students and we visited homes and invited people to a Moody Science film that we showed in the community center. One girl on our team made a deep connection with a downcast family and ultimately led one of the children to a personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

Turnaround churches need ministry teams that take responsibility for the outward focus of the church. It takes time to meet with the people and discover where they are motivated to invest. Sometimes there is a couple willing to lead the greeters and another that is willing to call new people. Sometimes there is a family that will work on the Christmas celebration and another family that will organize Friend day. This is part of the adventure of following the Holy Spirit and using the gifts he gives us to serve others.

### **Turnaround churches welcome guests**

The small church is a family. People know each other, care about one another, and respect the patriarch and matriarch. New people either fit into the existing church family or find another church. Healthy churches grow from being one family into a church with many “families.” As the church grows, it becomes more like a tribe. Tribal leaders emerge who represent the interests of their “family of families.” In the small church every new person “fits into the one family or leaves.” This is called the single-cell church, and the challenge is to welcome new people into the single cell and create new cells. In the midsize church, opportunities exist to find a tribal leader you can follow. When the patriarchs live in peace, the church grows. There is always the danger of tribal warfare until a strong leader unifies the tribes.

The small, family church and the mid-sized, tribal church both need to work hard at *welcoming* guests if the church is to grow. New people who visit a church know if our love is sincere and if our love welcomes “the stranger.” If at least 16% of your local guests are not coming back, it is time to study and apply Gary McIntosh’s 2006 book, *Beyond the First Visit: The Complete Guide to Connecting Guests to Your Church*.

It is useful to distinguish between the *guest* and the *newcomer*. The *guest* is the person who checks out a church for the first few times. The *newcomer* has crossed the line of wanting to connect with the church. In a training session, church consultant Conrad Lowe observed that the challenge for churches of under 500 people is to *increase guest flow*,

while for churches of over 500 people, the challenge is to *connect newcomers* to the life of the church.

Preparing for Sunday worship takes careful calculation. Let's do some math based on averages from Conrad Lowe.

- The average church can plan on at least a 10% annual attrition rate.
- The average church (with a plan) can plan on 30% of local guests returning.
- Healthy churches can plan on a 10% growth rate per year.

**Question 1:** A church of 100 people in weekend worship attendance trusts God to grow their church to 110 people in the next year. How many first time guests will the church need to prepare to serve?

**Answer:** 60 people, or around one new person each Sunday

**The Math:** You are praying and working for 20 newcomers, not 10 (since 10 are expected to leave during the same year). Since around 30% of guests return, plan for 90 guests.

**Question 2:** A church of 500 people in weekend worship attendance trusts God to grow their church to 550 people in the next year. How many first time guests?

**Answer:** 150 people, or around three new people each Sunday

**The Math:** You are praying and working for 100 newcomers, not 50. Since around 30% of guests return, plan for 300 guests.

In one strong church I know, there is an accurate count of the people in the worship services every weekend. The pastor encourages guests to fill out an information card and give it to him in the guest center to receive a free gift (a mug, a CD, and a small bag of coffee). Names are recorded and a series of contacts begin.

A letter is sent on Monday.

A phone call from a team member is made in the first week.

A monthly letter and phone invitation to "Lunch with the staff."

"Lunch with the Staff" is the key marker of moving from being a guest to a newcomer. The director of New Connections is responsible for this event. The goal is to move 70% of the newcomers into one of four ministries:

- Small Groups
- Serving
- Giving
- Membership

Larry Osborne astutely observes why we need to keep the front door to our churches wide open. Cell multiplication works best in cultures where walking into a church would be as strange as going into a Buddhist temple is for us.

For the average non-Christian in America, its far more threatening to walk into a home Bible study than to walk into a worship service. That's because virtually everyone has a vague familiarity with church buildings—even if its only an occasional wedding or funeral (Osborne 2008, 143)

Since Christmas and Easter are times when the de-churched pop into church, Adam Hamilton, in *Unleashing the Word* finds that a carefully-crafted sermon series immediately following the holidays increases visitor retention.

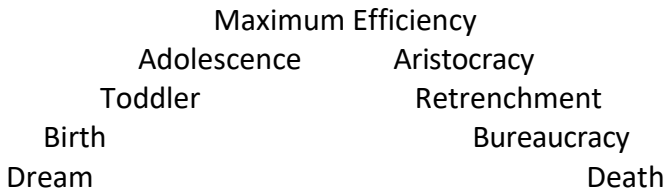
I plan sermons for January-February that will attract the multitude of visitors who come out for candlelight Christmas Eve services, motivating them to return. If we have done our job and kept them through February, then we move on to try and deepen their faith. (2009, 25)

The pastor and his preaching is the number one reason un-churched people stay.

The pastor and his preaching were overwhelming reasons that the formerly unchurched came back for another visit... I fear that as we begin to report the critical role of pastoral leadership in reaching the unchurched, new and unreasonable expectations will be placed on already overburdened pastors... The formerly un-churched told us nine out of ten times that the pastor was key in their entering the ranks of the churches. (Rainer 2001, 21, 54, 56)

### **Turnaround churches follow the Spirit into “s-curves”**

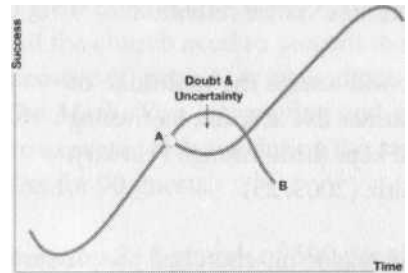
Every church has a life cycle - from the dream to the death of the church. Bob Gilliam describes ten stages of a church leadership life cycle:



Here is his explanation of the complacent aristocracy stage:

- Description: Focus shifts to relational unity and stability, budgets, organization, unity, fellowship.
- Goal: To insure satisfaction without sacrifice, the focus is inward, pastoral care, youth and children.
- Problems: Outreach stops; church stagnates, becomes irrelevant, is closed to outsiders, and plateaus.
- Solutions: Must infuse new vision, new role; leaders need therapy, not surgery; don't fire first, but leaders must be capable of pro- active approaches. (Gilliam, notes provided to EFCA, used with permission)

Every turnaround church needs to find a God directed “s-curve” change. See Chapter 4). The best time to move into an “s-curve” change is before the church reaches maximum efficiency. Past the peak, it is harder and harder to turn.



Charles Handy, an English structural theorist, developed what he called the ‘sigmoid curve.’ This curve derives its name from the 18th letter of the Greek alphabet, *sigma*... Most versions of the basic bell curve focus on taking strategic action just after high noon prior to the slippery slope territory. Handy’s theory argues that such action is too late. Change must be initiated before the peak point. (Cook 2000, 48)

*An “s-curve” is a Spirit-led new vision.* In the church, an “s-curve” change is not just our bright idea or someone’s best practices; it is a work of the Holy Spirit to give a heavenly vision. For some examples, see Chapter 4.

*An “s-curve” is a Spirit-led new vision that first brings a scary downturn.* Even when we follow the Lord into the future, the new direction can be down. Moses was called by God. He took steps of obedience. The Israelite slaves were then forced to gather their own



straw for making bricks, where before straw was provided to them. Now Moses was in trouble.

When a church follows the Holy Spirit into the “s-curve,” people leave. Some make a stink and some generous contributors can move to other churches. Numbers decline, and the budget suffers. People are unsettled. Some are angry. The church board can face tremendous pressure to go back to Egypt. However, the church that follows the Holy Spirit through the “s-curve” can emerge into a new season.

### **Turnaround churches understand change**

There are many theories about how to “do” change. Many originate with leadership and change management guru John Kotter. A professor at Harvard Business School and world-renowned change expert, Kotter introduced his eight-step change process in his 1995 book, *Leading Change*. An article on MindTools.com outlines this process, which is summarized below (Mind Tools).

#### **Step One: Create Urgency**

Develop a sense of urgency around the need for change. This isn’t a matter of showing people poor statistics, but an open, honest, and convincing dialogue about what’s happening. Seventy-five percent of the organization needs to “buy into” the change. Spend the time to build this consensus.

#### **Step Two: Form a Powerful Coalition**

Change takes strong leadership and visible support from key people within your organization. To lead change, you need to bring together a coalition, or team, of influential people whose power comes from a variety of sources, including job title, status, expertise, and political importance.

#### **Step Three: Create a Vision for Change**

When you first start thinking about change, there will probably be many great ideas and solutions floating around. Link these concepts to an overall vision that people can grasp easily and remember. A clear vision can help everyone understand why you’re asking them to do something.

- Develop a summary of what you “see” as the future of your organization.
- Create a strategy to execute that vision.

- Ensure that your change coalition can describe the vision in five minutes.

#### **Step Four: Communicate the Vision**

You need to communicate it frequently and powerfully, and embed it within everything that you do. Talk about it every chance you get. Use the vision daily to make decisions and solve problems. When you keep it fresh on everyone's minds, they'll remember it and respond to it.

- Talk often about your change vision.
- Openly and honestly address peoples' concerns and anxieties.
- Apply your vision to all aspects and tie everything back to the vision.

#### **Step Five: Remove Obstacles**

If you follow these steps and reach this point in the change process, you've been talking about your vision and building buy-in from all levels of the organization. Hopefully, your staff wants to get busy and achieve the benefits that you've been promoting.

- Identify, or hire, change leaders whose roles are to deliver the change.
- Look at your organizational structure, job descriptions, and performance and compensation systems to ensure they're in line with your vision.
- Recognize and reward people for making change happen.
- Identify people resisting the change, and help them see what's needed.

#### **Step Six: Create Short-term Wins**

Nothing motivates more than success. Give a taste of victory early in the change process with results that your staff can see. Without this, critics and negative thinkers might hurt your progress. Create short-term targets, not just one longterm goal. You want each smaller target to be achievable, with little room for failure. Your change team may have to work very hard to come up with these targets, but each "win" that you produce can further motivate the entire staff.

- Look for surefire projects that you can implement.
- Don't choose early targets that are expensive.
- If you don't succeed with an early goal, it can hurt your change initiative.

- Reward the people who help you meet the targets.

### **Step Seven: Build on the Change**

Kotter argues that many change projects fail because victory is declared too early. Real change runs deep. Quick wins are only the beginning of what needs to be done to achieve long-term change. For example, launching one new church using a new system is great. If you can launch ten churches, that means the new system is working. To reach that tenth success, you need to keep looking for improvements.

- After every win, analyze what went right and what needs improving.
- Set goals to continue building on the momentum you've achieved.
- Learn about *kaizen*, the idea of continuous improvement.
- Keep ideas fresh by bringing in new change agents and leaders.

### **Step Eight: Anchor the Changes in the Culture**

Finally, to make any change stick, it should become part of the core of your organization. Your church culture often determines what gets done, so the values behind your vision must show in day-to-day work. It's also important that your company's leaders continue to support the change. This includes existing staff and new leaders who are brought in. If you lose the support of these people, you might end up back where you started.

- Tell success stories about the changes.
- Include the change ideals and values when hiring and training new staff.
- Publicly recognize key members of your original change coalition.

### **Final word for turnaround churches**

Kevin Martin gives a quiz to quickly place a church.

I suggest that leaders create a scale from one to ten. If a leader scored a congregation as a one, he or she would be saying, "I am not sure why I even bother to attend here." On the ten scale, the leader is saying, "This is one of the best caring, loving and Christian communities in the country!" I then average the score of the leaders. I have consistently found that a church whose score is a five or below is in decline. A church where leaders score it above six is almost always growing.

Curiously, leaders are often very loyal and committed to

congregations even when they score them low on the scale. These congregations function like an alcoholic family. Members of the family may love one another and remain loyal, but they will tend to isolate the family and not invite strangers into it." (Martin, 2005, 33-34)

A dysfunctional church family that feels no urgency today, will one day. "People in the pews eventually tire of the lack of fruit and drift to another church where harvest is evident" (Woods 2001, 28). According to Titus 1, the starting point to turn it all around is biblically-qualified leaders. Paul's word to Titus was to start with the elders in order to straighten out the dysfunction. Then, the pastors must preach Christ - not a personal agenda - and together with the elders lead the church into a new season of the ministry (Acts 6).

With these foundations in place, the single most important change for moving a church beyond the 200 barrier is more *healthy cells* (small groups, Sunday schools, ministry teams, all kinds of groups). The church needs to move away from being a single cell.

The major difference between a church under the 200 barrier and one over the 200 barrier is (multiple cells). The group dynamic theory that underlies this is the rule of 40. Forty people are the ideal size for everyone to maintain face-to-face relationship with everyone else. In a church setting the group can expand to 80 and sustain most of the interpersonal qualities. However, when it goes past 80 toward 200, the relationships are increasingly strained. By the time it gets to 150 most groups are so stressed out that they can no longer handle the thought of strangers entering the group and thereby increasing the stress. Without knowing they are doing it or without even wanting to, they relate to strangers like two identical poles of magnets. (Wagner 1990,130-131)

If there is a commitment to multiplying cells, the church will grow and the building will eventually be too small. Once you are over 70% of capacity it is time to read Charles Arn's *How to Start a New Service: Your Church Can Reach New People*.

The single most important change for moving a church beyond the 400 barrier is more *healthy leaders*. The church board needs to move from powerfully doing the ministry to empowering more leaders to be involved in the work of ministry. The base of the pyramid (quantity and quality of the leaders) must be enlarged for the church to become a larger size. The pastor of the middle-sized church must lead the other shepherds. The board of the middle-sized church must empower the

pastor to lead the staff to care for the people.

With these foundations in place, the single most important change for moving a church beyond the 1,000 barrier is *heavenly vision from the senior pastor*. The senior pastor must lead into green pastures. The larger the church, the more critical vision becomes. In any turnaround church, vision is a constant concern. Vision is necessary to catalyze leaders into a future that is conversant with the present reality.

### **Final word for turnaround pastors**

Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer. (2 Timothy 2:3-4)

*Wounded soldiers cannot be turnaround pastors.* There are always wounded soldiers in an army and it is no disgrace. But, a turnaround church needs a battle-tested soldier who is ready to go to war. Some declining churches need a chaplain to help them die; but a church that is called to turn around is not the place for a leader to work on his own wounds. Shepherds who need to spend a season by the still waters can serve in staff positions rather than leading the charge into the middle of the battlefield. After a season beside the still waters, proven pastors can be excellent turnaround leaders, especially for a church that is half the size of their previous church. They understand the changes that are necessary for the church to grow to the next size.

*Turnaround pastors cannot be ready to retreat, they must be ready for the battle.* God does not entrust new vision for a church to a leader he is moving to another role. Dr. Norman Shawchuck taught at Trinity International University. His powerful lectures remain in my memory to this day. According to Shawchuck, there are three kinds of pastors who cannot lead a turnaround.

***“The dysfunctional”:*** Dysfunctional (staff), failing to be healed, enter into ministry, bringing deep psychological disturbances with them ... they should be healed before they harm others.

***“The mal-functional”:*** Mal-functional staff functions—perhaps over functions — but almost always leaves the congregation smaller, weaker, and more discouraged than before he functioned. At the root of malfunction is the fact that the man is not a learner and is not reflective. He takes no time or effort to further his professional growth. He makes no effort to plan and organize for effective ministry. He does not reflect on his experience, therefore he malfunctions in the same ways, over and

over again, without knowing it.

***"The nonfunctional":*** The Navy chaplains have a term for this type of person: RIP, "Retired in Place." Some staff retire while still on active duty. It is the "devil of the noonday sun" or "spiritual sun stroke" in those who have lost their passion. No longer does the "fire burn in the belly. Leaders in their middle years are especially vulnerable, when life has been daily for a long time and promises to be exceedingly daily for a long time into the future. (Shawchuck and Heuser 1996, 20)

*Turnaround pastors must pay the rent and must pay the price to lead.* Paul Borden says that the price the pastor must pay is being "willing to lose one's job" (Borden 2006, 33). With the fixture in God's hands, the pastor must pay the rent in three ways.

- Preaching and leading the worship service
- Pastoral care (doing it and then delegating it)
- Organization (leading and managing the organization)

(Glasse quoted in Schaller 2000, 116).

The failure of a pastor to pay the rent may be "a lack of professional competence, poor health, the burden of family or marital responsibilities, a produce of personality traits or boredom, a consequence of poor work habits, or of uncertainty of call" (quoted in Schaller 2000, 117). Turnaround pastors pay the rent and are willing to lose their jobs in order to make the changes necessary for the good of the church.

*Turnaround pastors must pay the rent and pay the price of outward focus.* The turnaround pastor must lead his church with a compelling, God given vision, and clear, approved outreach goals that fit the community. The pastor who concentrates only on paying the rent will often define the workload for the coming week in terms of tasks and relationships. Monday morning is surgery and sitting with the family in the hospital. Tuesday is a funeral. Wednesday is writing the Sunday sermon and the Doctor of Ministry paper. Thursday has two marriage counseling sessions. He promised to teach Sunday school for the next six weeks and speak at a church banquet. His time is devoted to the present church family, not people who are yet to come.

The turnaround pastor pays the rent with half his week. Then, he devotes 'discretionary resources to the formulation and accomplishments of specific, attainable, measurable, and highly visible goals. Since the number one goal of growing the church is to reach younger families with children at home, he spends his week identifying

allies who will actively participate in improving their building, meets with patriarchs who need to be on board with all the changes, and recruiting and training volunteers to lead the new ministries that serve the young families who enter the front door” (Schaller 2000,116-120).

In at least three out of five congregations, the newly arrived pastor who (a) accepts and affirms the importance of fully paying the rent and on time; (b) settles in with the expectation that this will be at least a ten-to-thirty-year pastorate; (c) recognizes and accepts the need to revise the rule book before or concurrently with the introduction of innovative practices; (d) allocates most of those discretionary resources to identifying, enlisting, and motivating allies; and (e) leads those alliances in the formulation and implementation of new ministry goals can enjoy *a doubling in the worship attendance every seven to ten years*. (Schaller 2000,121, emphasis added)