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The Broken Body of Christ: The Anatomy of a Declining Church

“He who is not busy being born is busy dying.”
— Poster, Abbey Press

The phone call came with a tone of urgency: “We’ve got a church in our denomination, in my area of supervision. It is on the verge of dying. We tried to get them to ‘pull the plug’ and give the facilities and land to a growing church that is looking to start a satellite venue. But the people of the dying church wouldn’t consider it.”

“Many churches in the U.S. are in that position,” I said, “or will be soon.”

“It’s ironic,” the denominational leader said. “This church is located in an ideal place, on a major road, very visible, and the community is one of the fastest growing areas in our state – mostly young families.”

I jumped in, “Any young families in this church?”

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“No, not really.” He continued, “They are running out of money. They have about a year left. They’re living off some inheritance money, but when that’s gone, their part-time pastor will be gone, and that will be the end. Anyway, we can’t get anywhere with this church. You and your consultation work are highly respected by the leadership in our denomination. You’ve worked with a number of churches in our state. We thought perhaps you could do an analysis and help them to do something. The clock is ticking – and – well, I don’t think they will survive long.”

— A true story, including the details.

Reality Shock

Thom Rainer says, in his book *I Am a Church Member*, “Based on our research...nine out of ten churches in America are declining or growing at a pace that is slower than that of their communities” (pp. 4-5).

Sooner or later, decline leads to a wake-up call. In fact, our extensive research in the U.K. predicts a significant increase of U.S. churches *finally* realizing that there is a moment in their future when they can no longer afford to operate, due to dwindling membership. It is interesting: Jesus talked a lot about money, and money seems to be the panic button for so many congregations. God will do whatever works to get His people back on mission!

One of my mentors for consulting churches was Lyle Schaller. Schaller said, “Churches die because it is easier to die than it is to think.” I’ve often wondered what he meant: Think about what? I believe it is that churches die when they drift from thinking about what it means to be the biblical church Jesus intended.

Five Stages of Death

It seems like nothing puts the “fear of God” into people like the fear of death. Death, and fear of death, has been the subject of numerous studies. It may be surprising, but death comes in third place as the most popular fear, right behind the fear of snakes! I suppose, thinking of the Garden of Eden serpent, there could be a theological connection with dying churches. The number one fear people have is the fear of giving a speech! Perhaps that could be tied to the lack of witnessing your faith. That concept would certainly contribute to a church’s demise!

Years ago, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross summarized the generally accepted five stages of grief and loss. I’ll summarize them and explain how I’ve seen these stages reflected in declining churches. (Whether or not church people would relate “declining” to “dying,” the signs are present.)

1. *Denial and isolation.* It’s amazing how long church leaders refuse to face up to the declining numbers of people and the dramatic loss of young adults. An added symptom is the negligible growth of the church from those who were non-Christians.

Church leaders are often busy running programs for the faithful and making everyone as comfortable as possible. “God forbid we do anything to lose that family!” the pastor said. Rather than leaders of mission, many pastors have become managers of maintenance.

Meanwhile, churches are isolated from other congregations in their area — a sure sign of insecurity. Local pastor groups meet for a monthly luncheon, and no one wants to talk about the elephant in the room: Most of their churches are, collectively, losing America.

2. *Anger*. When the awareness of empty seats becomes obvious and “business as usual,” the pain moves past denial surfacing as anger. Often, the pastor is the lightning rod: “If we only had a pastor like that megachurch down the road.” “Why isn’t our pastor reaching out to all the unchurched people around here? Isn’t that why we pay him?”

Anger can reach the level of irrationality. This isn’t all bad, except for those who are recipients. It demonstrates a wrestling with reality. It can be the beginning of restlessness and the end of “business as usual.” Discussions can lead to holy humility: “Maybe we need to get someone in here to help us.” That’s what occurred in the story about the church mentioned earlier.

At Church Doctor Ministries, we wonder if the increasing calls for help are a potential sign that God is getting the attention of American churches. If they are, we are definitely beginning a *season of revitalization potential*.

One of the more unpleasant signs of anger rises up in the “church bully.” Most churches have at least one. Often, they are loud and over-enthused about the value of their own opinions about church. They can encourage or disrupt others in the church.

A valuable dimension of anger is what we call “holy discontent” or “spiritual restlessness.” We’ve even analyzed the elements of this spiritual side of anger. We have developed an analytical tool to identify those in a congregation who have it. We believe it is the work of the Holy Spirit. It can initiate renewal or “revitalization of Christianity.” Those with “holy discontent” or spiritual restlessness are “early adopters.” They can become a catalyst for the congregation to increase Kingdom culture – and grow again!

KEY RESOURCES

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3. *Bargaining*. The bargaining stage is the reaction to feelings of helplessness and vulnerability. In a declining church, it is the “what if” or “only if” stage. It looks like this: “What if we would have started that contemporary worship service we considered for awhile five years ago?” Another reaction is: “If only Pastor Jim hadn’t retired early.”

This is a stage of potential vulnerability. This is how it sometimes works. The pastor attends a conference where a great speaker talks about the next latest, greatest 10-week program. It’s amazing how naïve desperate Christians are about turning a church around!

Wise leaders will seek outside counsel, looking for help that diagnoses the issues behind the issues. An objective “outside” expert can provide direction. A diagnosis requires careful investigation. Churches rarely die overnight. There is usually a collection of missteps over a long period of time.

John Maxwell, in his presentation, “The Seven Habits of Highly Defective People,” reflects on one causative issue: “Churches stop growing when the price gets too high. The price might be change or expansion, risk or sacrifice. It could be anything. But churches stop growing when the price gets too high” (adapted).

We see this often. Our prescription for a declining church is a 36-month focus on spiritual growth, called *Healthy Churches Thrive!* The documented evidence shows it works. But for many churches, the price is too high. It’s not the money — the financial cost is paid outside of the church budget. The real price is the 36 months of spiritual growth. Many people want a complete turnaround in a short amount of time. If church leaders don’t act in stage 3, stage 4 will usually do it for them.

4. *Depression*. As bad as it sounds, God can use this step to get the attention of church leaders as well. This is the stage where most people in the church can do the math and calculate in what year the church will financially default.

Remember the prophets of the Old Testament? They would visit a town and proclaim, “Repent,” which actually means “turn around.” In the early stages of a turnaround, the prophet is often “run out of town” or “stoned to death.” In our time of history, the prophetic voice is just ignored, scrutinized – or challenged: “What does he know?”

Yet, in the depression stage, God often gives divine courage to leaders and members with holy discontent. In the recovering church, if members haven’t caught reality before, they will now. The future life (or death) of their church is in their hands.

5. *Acceptance*. This is when dying people become withdrawn or calm. This stage rarely occurs in churches, which is a surprise to many. It’s hard to kill a church!

It is easier for a denomination to die — and some appear to be on their way to that end today. The greatest power of God’s people is the enduring strength of the local church.

One of the great dangers at this point is the common strategy of merging with another church. I consulted two Presbyterian churches in Memphis, considering a plan to merge together. I told them it would never work. It didn’t matter that they were both Presbyterian. Each had its own unique culture. I warned that if they merged, in a short time, the combined size of the new community would equal the size of the largest of the two. It occurred just as I said. Who do you think left the newly combined church? People from both groups!

The Bottom Line

The issue of church decline is a spiritual issue. If you think that's too simplistic, then you are a dangerous church member. What kills churches is a slow drift, over time, away from the Kingdom culture taught by Jesus. As Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger said in their book *Simple Church*, "...dying churches are filled with spiritually anemic people" (p. 229). These church members are not bad people. Most actually love Jesus and their church. The drift is subtle because the enemy is subtle.

TEN ISSUES TO HELP A PERSISTENTLY DECLINING CHURCH

1. Look closely at the five stages of grief and loss. Where are you, as a church? Is everyone in the same place?
2. Do your people feel the church is in crisis mode? If so, it can be a positive sign. In every crisis, there is great opportunity. Those in crisis are receptive to get help, often for the first time.
3. As churches decline, the negativity grows. Develop a discipline that regularly focuses on what is beneficial in your church.
4. Monitor the amount of time and energy focused on the past rather than the future. This is a signal that you may need help to identify God's direction so leaders can cast a vision for the future.
5. Every church has a few church bullies. When churches turn downward, their level of volume often goes up. They often cast blame, usually toward the pastor and leaders. Bullies need special attention and discipline in the declining church.
6. When a church is in decline, more people play the blame game. It is likely their assessment is inaccurate. Most people tend to focus on the symptoms rather than the causative issues. This approach is dangerous, because the people may spend more time, energy, and money on solutions that will not help.
7. Remind everyone in a declining church that the Body of Christ is resilient. It is hard to kill a church! Most family businesses will go "out of business" long before a church. This is not a reason for complacency.
8. Strategic options for a declining church include: (1) Join another healthy and growing church. (2) Invite an infusion of people from a healthy church, making sure they have the DNA of outreach. They can bring an outreach mentality most likely lost by the declining church. (3) Sell the building, or give it away to a strong and healthy church. (4) God is in the resurrection business, even for declining churches. A church can turn around.
9. The leadership must be willing to get outside help. They should remain positive and be willing to learn and lead change.
10. At the heart of every declining church is the issue of spirituality. Church decline is related to the spiritual temperature of the people. Most of the spiritual decay has to do with a decline of living a spiritual life, a loss of passion to reach the lost, and/or strategies of outreach that do not work in a secular culture.

I love the cartoon I saw on a bulletin board in a Lutheran church in Cleveland. The preacher was standing before a handful of people gathered in the sanctuary of mostly empty seats. He took a breath and said to his congregation, "God is calling us to evangelism. The bank that holds our mortgage has mentioned it, too!"

Oh, that it were as simple as an evangelism program! But it isn't. To allow the decline of the local Body of Christ requires subtle drift in dozens of areas. It takes time, but every church can experience a resurrection. This is what God does well. It takes expert guidance, but the resurrection rate is very high. When a core group of Christians in a church experiences the resurrection that births a New Testament church, God moves the movement to a tipping point. It's hard to believe that God would ever want a local church to die.