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Is There Hope for Your Church? Evidence from a Real Case Study

"It's so discouraging," started one of my fellow Church Doctor Consultants.

"What's wrong?" I asked, with genuine concern.

She continued, "I just met with the pastor and staff and some leaders of a church near Detroit last night."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I saw that on our team calendar. How did it go?"

"Well, they were nice...and they mean well, but they are just not ready to get help," she said.

"Do they really need help?" I asked.

"Oh yeah," my colleague said, with discouragement in her voice. "But they have people in leadership that are denying reality. Their church has been declining for 10 years. They may even be too late to save it, so...."

"So what's the issue?" I asked.

"They have a few strong-willed, loud, and opinionated people who are set in outdated methods and styles. They're going to hijack this church...to its demise," she said, with pain in her voice.

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- ▶ Forward it to staff and leaders in your church, denomination, network, or fellowship.

Types of Churches

Most churches in North America fall into a few categories. This might be oversimplified, but if you know anything about churches, you'll see the parallels.

Category #1: The denial church. These are congregations filled with nice, Bible-believing Christians who ignore the reality that their churches are on the road to extinction. Like the frog in the pot of warm water, slowly moving toward a boiling temperature, these Christians are unaware that the death of their church is on the horizon.

Category #2: The program mania church. These churches operate many programs. They meet people's needs. They often have great worship and outstanding activities. Yet they have little time or energy for the long-term, seemingly uneventful, quiet but vital movement of discipling. These churches, on the surface, are growing in numbers of people, yet many are transplants from other congregations, driven to programs "our other church didn't have."

Spiritual anemia is a hidden plague in the program mania church. It will eventually cripple the congregation. It has all the surface excitement of a healthy church, but spiritually, it is an inch deep and a mile wide.

Category #3: The flash church. These congregations are guided by an exceptional leader, one with energy and "charisma." These churches grow by the leader's personality. Some members may be growing spiritually. Since numerical and spiritual growth is tied to the leader, the church's vitality is temporary. It is linked to the life of the leader.

Category #4: The activity church. Following the latest emphasis on social justice, these churches get caught up in helping the poor and those treated unjustly. These can be good Christian ministries, but they get so busy helping people, they forget the mission is about salvation. They say, "We have a very active church. Every day some community group is using our building." They get lost in busyness, resembling any humanitarian effort. They overlook the spiritual and redemptive mission Jesus called the church to bring. They have missed the balance of

KEY RESOURCES

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meeting needs and making disciples. They lose the distinctiveness of reaching people for Christ and growing them in discipleship. These churches (and whole denominations) will someday die from loss of members and finances.

Category #5: The healthy, growing church. Nearby every declining, dying, or temporary “flash” church is at least one healthy growing church. It is often identified as a “megachurch” or “the largest church” in the area. God is blessing these great churches. They should be an example, an opportunity for others to learn, and a cause for rejoicing among all Christians.

Instead, there is often jealousy, fear, a sense of competition. Sometimes, uninformed Christians from the neighboring churches declare, “They must not be biblical.” Others may say, “They just entertain people...that’s how they got so large.”

The Painful Reality

An overview of North America reveals many churches that are plateaued or declining and aging. This is especially true of churches in mainline denominations.

Is it because they belong to mainline denominations? No...and yes. Belonging to a mainline denomination is not a reason for decline. However, since many churches from denominations have a long heritage and history of traditions, styles, and methods that have become irrelevant, they are likely to decline for those reasons. There are many mainline denominational churches that have shed the nonessential styles, dress codes, architecture, and music that is common to their denominational history and kept the essential teachings. However, only a minority of these churches are growing. Why? One reason is the pressure many churches feel from those in the denomination who have confused nonessentials with essentials. They are caught in an irrelevant posture that makes it difficult to reach contemporary people.

The Bottom Line

Many Christians continue to attend churches that are aging and declining. They have lost most of the young people. Finances get to be more of a burden with every funeral, one less contributor.

Some well-meaning Christians leave a large sum of money to their church in their wills. Intended to be a blessing, this often creates the curse of a false life support system. It keeps a church comfortable in its mediocrity. This is unintentional enabling. The church misses the opportunity to change ineffective methods and styles of reaching people for Jesus Christ.

Many Christians are concerned about their churches. They feel hopeless and discouraged. The following true story is taken from unsolicited correspondence. This church was consulted in 1994. The first letter, quoted below, was a report in 1996, two years after the consultation. The second letter was written March 29, 2016, 18 years later and 20 years after the consultation!

As you read the following material of both letters, keep in mind a few important issues:

KEY RESOURCES

Guinness, Os. *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Times*. InterVarsity Press, 2014.

Kricher, Lee. *For a New Generation: A Practical Guide for Revitalizing Your Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016.

1. The pastor gives the glory to God, not himself. Of course he was instrumentally used by God, but it is important to keep in mind, it is God working through him.
2. Notice the pastor's reference to some of the issues he identifies as the stumbling blocks that hindered the church.
3. Recognize that this church hived off a group of people to start a new church. This may have been necessary in this particular instance, but it is not always the case. This author

Note: The story shared here is drawn from correspondence written by a pastor and his wife. Their names the names of the churches and the city have been changed to honor their humility and respect their desire to give God the glory. Otherwise, everything below is factual.

has pastored two churches, one urban and one rural, that were revived without a church split.

4. Finally, recognize that this material is not provided as boasting about Church Doctor Ministries' consulting. We have the same attitude as the pastor: we diligently serve God and give Him all the glory when the work is blessed. We are painfully aware that some churches we serve fail to respond to our recommendations and are unable to achieve their potential, for numerous reasons.

A Case Study

This case study begins with a consultation in 1994 for "ABC" Evangelical Community Church of "XYZ, PA."

Letter of April 1, 1996:

Dear Kent,

Just a short note to let you know what has been happening in our lives here in "ABC." As you can imagine, last year was a great heartache and burden for us — yet we have found great comfort and strength in the Lord's unfailing faithfulness. From the first day I came to ABC Evangelical Christian Church as their pastor, I had great hopes and dreams for God's holy anointing upon the body of believers that would move them from the vain traditions of yesterday, into the fullness of life and worship that God would desire all His children to experience. The reluctance, and even opposition to this fresh touch of God's Spirit, grieved our hearts — yet, we saw a growing number of people who wanted to go beyond the mere formality of "playing" church. But their efforts to move into more meaningful and dynamic modes of worship and discipleship seemed to be met with skepticism and even animosity. This resistance was all the more difficult for my wife and me because of the freshness and vitality of church life which we left behind at our previous ministry. My wife likes to make the comparison, that if all you knew was plain vanilla ice cream, it would seem to be pretty good. But once you've enjoyed ice cream, with hot fudge, peanuts, sprinkles, whipped cream and topped off with a maraschino cherry — you hardly want to settle for plain vanilla. We had known the full "ice cream sundae" experience in church life, and we struggled with going back to plain vanilla.

But how we thank God that we are once again enjoying the true "sundae experience." We have been thrilled with what the Lord is doing at "DEF" Church in our new location. This past Sunday we hit an all-time high in attendance of 157. The "bleeding" from "ABC" Evangelical Christian Church has stopped, and the folks we now have coming are new people from the southern part of the county. During the month of March we averaged 19 visitors per Sunday. We have established nine Home Bible Study groups, which last month averaged 70 participants each week.

And then there is the freshness of the worship experience, with a wide variety of people who

participate in worship leadership. I said to my wife on Sunday morning that I am having too much fun in ministry. My preaching has never been so Spirit-filled, and I am experiencing wonderful freedom in the Lord. Our children's ministries have grown to the point, that at least on a temporary basis, we will be moving the Sunday school work to an adjacent property. We have also begun a youth group. Several people have come to know the Lord as Savior, and on any given Sunday, we have a number of people who are unchurched and unsaved in the services. The whole thing has been more than we could have ever dreamed or asked for (Ephesians 3:20).

I am more convinced than ever that God was the author of the "vision statement" which was presented to "ABC" Evangelical Christian Church — but God allows us to make choices, and when we are blinded to the power and creativity of ministry that the Holy Spirit wishes to initiate and bless, God will allow us to have our own way, but we often reap "...leanness to our souls" (Psalm 106:15, KJV).

I praise God that He has brought marvelous healing to our spirits. My wife and I hold no ill will or animosity to those who masterminded the "confidence — no confidence petition," and we are praying that God will bring revival and growth to "ABC" Evangelical Christian Church, even as we are praying the same for "DEF" Community Church. Things are not going all that well at "ABC" Evangelical Christian Church, but I still pray that those with a sense of vision will be able to prevail over those who wish to retreat to the "good old days," or is that spelled "good old daze"?

Sincerely in Christ,

Eighteen Years Later

Letter of March 29, 2016:

Dear Kent,

I felt led of God to update you on what God has done in the ministry of "DEF" Community Church, in "LMN," PA which was a daughter church brought about as a result of your consultation with "ABC" Evangelical Church of "XYZ," PA. "DEF" Community Church was founded in 1995 following

10 INSIGHTS ABOUT RENEWED CHURCHES

1. The birth of renewal, like the delivery of a child, includes pain, struggle, and tears of suffering — as well as tears of joy.
2. Unrelenting grace-full, loving, persistent leadership is an important element for effective renewal.
3. God honors biblical motives about lost people coming to know the Savior and growing in discipleship.
4. God's timing is not your timing. If you are not committed to the long haul, you may not be the right person to lead renewal.
5. God does great work, but it often starts out with a small group committed to conversation with God through prayer.
6. Challenges and obstacles can be expected along the way to renewal.
7. A clear vision, received from God, is an essential element of moving a church to renewal and growth.
8. Every Christian, by definition, has saving faith. However, if you are called to lead a church to renewal, it takes faith to believe God for the impossible. Hebrews 11:1, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."
9. The leader will have abilities to share vision and, in time, coalesce a critical mass of Christians to move together toward desired objectives.
10. Most of all, those involved will operate from a conviction of certainty that where they are going is in the center of God's will.

your consultation work in 1994, beginning humbly with about 35 people in August, 1995. After meeting in rented facilities for 10 years, we purchased property in “LMN” and erected a multipurpose facility in 2005-2006.

This past year, we celebrated our 20th anniversary, and celebrate we did! It is truly amazing what God has accomplished from those humble beginnings. We have seen scores of people coming to Christ and hundreds finding a new and vital relationship with Jesus. We presently conduct three Sunday morning worship services and are exploring the addition of a fourth Saturday evening service. For Palm Sunday, we had about 1,050 people in attendance and for Easter weekend, our attendance was just under 1,400.

Our budget for this year is more than \$1 million, with more than 10% of that going to missions, and we have reduced our initial indebtedness for our \$2.3 million building to less than \$700,000. For the past several years we have run a budget surplus, and we do all this without passing an offering plate — we simply have offering boxes by the auditorium exit doors.

I want to thank you and your ministry for the vital part you played in helping to form a vision for “DEF” Community Church! You and your ministry’s guidance was invaluable in helping us “plant” a successful, thriving church to the glory of God! To “God be the glory, great things He has done.”

Sincerely in Christ,

Your Challenge

So what is God saying to you? And what are you going to do about it?