

## **Church Turnarounds #1: Four Keys, Five Ideas**

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Research on church turnarounds—churches that were strong at some point, and then declined significantly before finding renewal. Four factors have surfaced as of prime importance in the research.

#### **-1- Leadership**

It requires a certain kind of catalytic activity or series of events to enable churches to be strong again and that is a function of leadership. Usually, it is the result of a new person becoming the leader—risk-taking, critical-thinking, vision-casting. There are many great servants who are not leaders. Good skills and spiritual gifts and help people, but such people are not leaders in the sense reflected in the research.

The best leadership model employs a team approach. No one person is the answer, but the group learns to function together. It is not easy. In the church we have a model of church leadership, and we have taken the Bible teaching and used it to develop corporate boards over the past 50 years. Our leaders spend most of their time making decisions. They have little time for program superintending or people shepherding.

We have to develop this leadership component, we have to see it modeled; 60-70% of the behavioral change that takes place in a person's life in the US is based on finding someone they know, trust, and watching what they do, and imitating their behavior. What are we modeling? Good leadership models support biblical preaching.

#### **-2- Preaching that Encourages Discipleship**

Preaching is huge, but only if followed up by authentic discipleship. Throwing good information at folks is not the panacea. There are 100s and 1000s of good teachers and preachers. The difficulty is, from the research, when people walk out of the service, "What did you get from that experience?" Well, I got a few good tidbits. The vast majority of people in our world make decisions without considering the Bible or faith. They primarily ask, "What do people expect of me?" They may ask, "How can my religion help me have the greatest influence in the business world?" Good preaching seeks to expose people to all the elements of scripture that help us understand what it means to be truly Christian—what it means to become a Christian, what it means to act like a Christian in values, lifestyles, moral perspectives, behaviors. Lack of such preaching has brought us to a point where in our world there is virtually no difference between Christians and non-Christians in these areas.

We want the label of Christian but do not want the responsibility. We revert to the religious game—more programs, more people in the seats, bunches of buildings. The world says, "Ah, that's success!" Some Christians think that is success. That has nothing to do with God's equation for holiness, obedience, serving, Christ-likeness.

Less than 10% of families study the Bible or pray together. Most families depend exclusively on the church to raise their children spiritually. We are up against major influences—TV, movies, internet, publishing, public policy...

#### **-3- A Church that Connects and Is Connected**

A place to feel comfortable, fit in, relate to other people in significant way, belong, children will have positive experience, get help to lead more productive life.

The mega-church is not the church of the future. They will continue, but more mid-size places with easier connections, where real value gets added to life through meaningful ministry will be the trend of the future.

#### **-4- Putting God's Mission and Purpose First**

Not culturally driven, but looking at God's vision for the church. A leader is driven by a vision; a teacher is driven by an audience that can be affected by information. Why has God called us here? What is this church supposed to be about?

These are four important questions—leadership, preaching, identity, purpose. These are essential to people living their lives around the notion that we exist to know, love and serve God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

## **Take Aways**

### **A. The church must become more spiritual, more Jesus centered, more worshipful, and more committed to living in, sharing and telling the story of Jesus than in advancing their own story.**

Reconsider the God-centered life. We have tried to soft-peddle our religious nature over the past few decades. In order to gain favor with the world, we have tried to appear as little more than a Christian social service agency or a Christian social fellowship with programs to enrich all ages. We forget that the church is the only place with the spiritual answers to meet the needs of those spiritually hungry in this world.

I am convinced of two truths:

- People are hungry to know Jesus. The fields are still white unto harvest.
- If Jesus is lifted up, He will draw all people unto himself. When the leaders and the ministers and the people spend more time focusing on Jesus, loving Jesus, lifting up Jesus, the church will turn around.

### **B. The church must go out of its way to develop new efforts of warmly expressive love.**

The biblical church is relational. Many churches are considered to be cold by outsiders. Internal needs are met since members have known one other and loved one other for years, but members do not realize that they are not welcoming or accepting of new people. The minister can do a lot to change this perception. It is important for the entire leadership team to be the pacesetter in expressing love and in giving out warm welcomes.

### **C. The church must major on the majors, not the minors**

The church must recommit itself to discipleship, regardless of where that leads us. Some churches have a reputation for "watering the lawn while the house burns down." Since we only have a limited amount of time and energy, the devil would like to get us to waste our resources on secondary matters.

One way we major on the minors is by concentrating on "fruit issues" instead of "root issues." If I have an apple tree that is producing bad apples, I can pick all of the bad apples or cut it down at the root. Our root problem is that we are not walking with Christ. If people walk with Christ, He will take care of the side issues. A second way we major on the minors is by being dogmatic over secondary issues. The "majors" are those things that determine a person's eternity. I must allow diversity in options in other doctrinal matters within the church. It is wise and biblical to allow differences under the unity of allegiance to the Lordship of Christ.

### **D. The church must fan flames instead of throwing water on people's fires**

We must recommit to growth—individual growth that leads to body growth. I believe in the body concept that is taught in the New Testament. Every member has a gift and a special contribution to make to the body of Christ. Some today give the impression that the preacher has a pipeline to God, that if God is going to speak to a church it has to be through the preacher. I believe that same Holy Spirit who lives in the preacher lives in every Christian in my church.

Most of the new ministries started by churches I have worked with were not my ideas. I developed a "permission giving atmosphere" where people felt free to dream and step out in faith. By fanning flames, instead of throwing water on people's ideas, God has birthed many new ministries that have aided the growth of the church.

### **E. The church must never forget that its purpose is to reach out and serve others**

No church will ever be a perfect church. God has chosen to place his heavenly treasure in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7). If you look long enough at any Christian or any church, you will see some clay. A wise minister tempers his idealism with love. Ephesians 4:15 tells us to "speak the truth in love." I am to hold up God's word without compromise, yet I am to love the people right where they are, unconditionally. If you stay at most churches long enough, you will find areas in which members are not willing to change or groups will not cooperate. Rather than spending all of our time fighting battles that cannot be won, plow around those stumps, love those who will not change, and work with those who want to go further. Since God called you to that church, and since you have done all you could, the problems that cannot be fixed are now God's problems, not yours.