

Critical Issues in Church Revitalization

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INTRODUCTION

George Barna, founder and president of Barna Research Group, has been studying Christian churches in America for thirty years. In 1998, he wrote his twenty-fourth book – *The Second Coming of the Church*. The result of four years of research, Barna called this book more personal, more strategic, and more intense than any of his previous books. Consider his first paragraph:

“As we prepare to enter into a new century of ministry, we must address one inescapable conclusion: Despite the activity and chutzpah emanating from thousands of congregations, the Church in America is losing influence and adherents faster than any other major institution in the nation. Unless a radical solution for the revival of the Christian church in the United States is adopted and implemented soon, the spiritual hunger of Americans will either go unmet or be satisfied by other faith groups.”¹

Barna was certainly not the first to sound the alarm concerning the plateau and decline of the church in America. The first decade of the twenty-first century is not yet

¹George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 1.

complete, and more intense study and examination of church and denominational revitalization is occurring now than at any other time in American history. Lyle Schaller has studied congregations and denominations for over fifty years. He is America's leading interpreter of congregational systems and their vitality, and a prolific writer on the subject. In 1996, he wrote *Tattered Trust: Is There Hope for Your Denomination?*² In 2005, he answered his own question: "Those mainline Protestant denominations in the United States that are both able and willing to design, adopt, and implement a turnaround strategy should be able to double or triple the size of their constituency by the end of the twenty-first century. The keywords in that optimistic statement are *able* and *willing*."³

In 2005, Thom Rainer (<http://www.churchcentral.com>) conducted research on 50,000 American churches to determine how many had broken out of a slump marked by a definite "breakout point." The research produced only thirteen churches that met the following six criteria:

- 1) The church has had at least 26 conversions annually since its breakout year, applying the premise that any healthy church should be reaching at least one person with the gospel every two weeks.
- 2) The church has averaged a membership to baptism (conversion) ratio no higher than 20:1 at least one year since its breakout year. A ratio of 20:1 suggests that it takes 20 members one year to reach one person.
- 3) The church had been declining or had plateaued for several years prior to its breakout year.
- 4) The church broke out of this "slump" and has sustained new growth for several years.

²Lyle E. Schaller, *Tattered Trust: Is There Hope for Your Denomination?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

³Lyle E. Schaller, *A Mainline Turnaround: Strategies for Congregations and Denominations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 2.

- 5) The slump, reversal, and breakout all took place under the same pastor.
- 6) Since the breakout point, the church has made a clear and positive impact on the community.⁴

In 2007, Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson published *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around And Yours Can Too*. They identified and then studied 324 American churches which met the following criteria:

- 1) The church experienced five years of plateau and/or decline since 1995 (worship attendance grew less than 10 % in a five-year period).
- 2) That decline or plateau was followed by significant growth over the past two to five years which included a membership to baptism (conversion) ratio of 35:1 or lower each year and at least a 10 percent increase in attendance each year.⁵

The key differences between the research of Breakout Churches and Comeback Churches involve the membership to baptism ratio (Breakout church = 20:1; Comeback churches = 35:1) and the issue of pastoral leadership. Rainer suggested that while the typical solution to stagnated churches is to replace the pastor, there are not enough “breakout pastors” to lead even five percent of American churches. “We sought stories of changed leadership values rather than stories of changing leaders.”⁶ However, Stetzer and Dodson confirmed that forty percent of Comeback Churches changed without changing their pastors.⁷

⁴Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 15-21.

⁵Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around And Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), xiii. To examine the research project and findings, see www.comebackchurches.com.

⁶Rainer, 21.

⁷Stetzer and Dodson, 178.

In 2006, Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger joined to develop Simple Church. Their research involved a Process Design Survey and utilized random stratified sampling to select churches in two strata: a vibrant/growing church strata and a comparison/nongrowing church strata. The results produced were termed “highly significant.” The vibrant churches were much more simple than the comparison churches. In general, the Simple Church research overwhelmingly concluded that churches with a simple process for reaching and maturing people are growing and vibrant, and churches without a process or with a complicated process for making disciples are struggling and anemic.⁸

The most groundbreaking research to date was unveiled in 2008 by David Olsen in *The American Church in Crisis*.⁹ Olsen is director of The American Church Research Project (TACRP). For the past twenty years, TACRP has compiled comprehensive data on the state of the church in the United States. The database includes attendance figures for more than 200,000 individual Christian churches.¹⁰ The research also provides reliable church attendance numbers for each of the 3,141 U.S. counties, for each state, and for the nation as a whole.¹¹

⁸Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 243-48. The authors propose a four-step process for becoming a Simple Church: Clarity – Staring with a Ministry Blueprint; Movement – Removing Congestion; Alignment – Maximizing the Energy of Everyone; and Focus – Saying No to Almost Everything.

⁹David T. Olsen, *The American Church In Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

¹⁰This research project studies only “orthodox” Christian churches. It does not consider non-Christian religions or nonorthodox Christian churches, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Jehovah’s Witnesses; Unitarian Universalist churches; Church of Christ, Scientist; and a few other small groups.

¹¹For a detailed description of the research methodology, see www.theamericanachurch.org/ResearchMethodology.

TACRP data measures weekend church attendance, since a growing number of religious researchers believe that weekend church attendance is the most accurate indicator of American's spiritual climate. While the Gallup and Barna polls both indicate American church attendance in the fortieth percentile, TACRP data shows actual weekly church attendance at 17.5 percent, a decline from 20.4 percent in 1990. When regular participation and active membership percentages are factored in, the total of attendees and members is 37 percent.¹² In no state did church attendance keep up with population growth! Evangelical church attendance nearly kept up with population growth. Church attendance in Mainline and Roman Catholic churches experienced sharper and more accelerated decline.¹³

This paper will present five critical issues in church revitalization. The author has thirty years of pastoral leadership experience, as a pastor of three local Southern Baptist churches, as a regional director of missions for the Louisiana Baptist Convention (Southern Baptist), and as a co-director of the Doctor of Ministry Program and professor

¹²Olsen, 23-36. The definition for "regular participant" is a person who attends church at least three out of every eight Sundays - another way of saying more than once a month. "Active members" comprise those who have some level of occasional connection to the church, attending once a month or less and occasionally contributing money.

¹³Ibid, 37. The division into evangelical, mainline, and Roman Catholic denominations is based on the typology found in the Glenmary Religious Congregations and Membership Study. Mainline denominations are the older historic denominations that tend to espouse more liberal theology. In general, evangelical denominations are more conservative in theology and more conversionist in practice than mainline denominations. All African American denominations are considered evangelical in this typology. Evangelical churches grew faster than population growth in 28 states and declined faster in 22 states. While Evangelical attendance grew numerically in the 10 Southern states from North Carolina to Texas, the population grew faster, so the attendance percentage declined in each of these southern states. Mainline churches did not grow faster than population growth in any state. Catholic churches grew faster than population growth in 6 states and declined faster in 44 states.

of leadership and pastoral ministry at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS). One pastorate lasted fourteen years and involved a ten-year revitalization and turnaround strategy. As denominational leader and seminary professor, the author has worked with numerous churches in revitalization and turnaround as both consultant and interim pastor. While these five issues are not exhaustive, they do represent “critical” issues essential for church revitalization.

REFOCUSING PASTORAL LEADERSHIP AND LONGEVITY

A leadership vacuum exists in American society, and the church is no exception. Why is this, when a browse through any bookstore indicates an overwhelming number of leadership resources?¹⁴ Why is this, when the population pool in American is over 300 million people?¹⁵ Why is this, when 295,000 Christian congregations currently exist in the United States?¹⁶

Because of this leadership vacuum, returning to biblical pastoral leadership has never been more crucial to church health and church revitalization.¹⁷ Pastoral Leadership defines a field of study, along with Pastoral Ministry, Pastoral Theology, and Pastoral Care. Pastoral Leadership connects “pastor” with “leader.” These two words define two of the prominent biblical images of pastoral leadership. “Pastor” translates a word in both Hebrew and Greek, meaning “shepherd.” The “shepherding”

¹⁵In Colonial America on the eve of the American Revolution, the population was approximately 2.1 million people. (www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0004979.html, accessed February 25, 2008) Compare the quality of leaders produced by that population pool to America’s current leader to population ratio.

¹⁶www.theamericanchurch.org/researchmethodology, accessed February 25, 2008.

¹⁷Of the 23,639 Leadership resources from the Barnes and Noble search, only 17 resources had “Pastoral Leadership” in the title or subtitle.

method is the most visible biblical model for pastoral leadership.¹⁸ In the Old Testament, Psalm 78:72 described David as a shepherd - leader, who shepherded Israel according to the integrity of his heart and guided them with skillful hands. The prophet Jeremiah castigated the shepherd - leaders of Israel for not properly performing their function.¹⁹

In the New Testament, three words are used interchangeably for the role or office of pastor. *Poimen* is translated both “pastor” and “shepherd,” utilizing the shepherding image defined by Jesus in John 10:1-18. *Presbuteros* is translated “elder” or “priest,” and is the most common New Testament designation for the function of pastor. In his classic work *Pastoral Theology*, Thomas Oden asserted that “the images associated with *presbuteros* cannot be artificially separated from those associated with the caring shepherd (*poimen*).²⁰ The third New Testament word defining pastoral function is *episkopos*, translated “bishop,” and referred to guardianship, oversight and management.²¹ Synthesizing these three biblical words with the servanthood model imaged by Jesus in John 13:1-17, pastoral leadership involves shepherding, overseeing, and serving the church. In his book *Pastoral Leadership*, Robert Dale posits servanthood as the primary biblical model of leadership.²²

¹⁸For a comprehensive examination of the biblical shepherding image, see Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

¹⁹Jeremiah 10:21; 23:1.

²⁰Thomas Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1983), 70.

²¹1 Peter 5:2-3 utilizes all three words – *shepherd*, *elder*, *overseer* – interchangeably. Acts 20:28 presents *shepherd* and *overseer* interchangeably. These biblical texts, combined with Jesus’ shepherding images in the Gospel of John, lead this writer to conclude that all three New Testament terms refer to the same pastoral leadership position, functioning in the local church.

²²Robert Dale, *Pastoral Leadership* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 25-35.

Herein lies the crisis in 21st century pastoral leadership. In *The New Guidebook for Pastors*, James Bryant and Mac Brunson raise a valid concern:

“Is it possible that in our day of ecclesiastical drift, denominational demise, and megachurch melt-downs, we have confused leadership with lordship and substituted success for servanthood? We have looked to a business model for leadership for kingdom work. While we can learn from the business world, the church is not a business; it is a bride.”²³

Ironically, while churches are searching the business sector for leadership styles and techniques, the business sector is discovering that raw power is not leadership. Jim Collins, author of the best-selling book *Good to Great*²⁴, asserted that more true leadership exists in the social sectors than in the business sector:

“How can I say this? Because, as George MacGregor Burns taught in his classic 1978 text, *Leadership*, the practice of leadership is not the same as the exercise of power. If I put a loaded gun to you head, I can get you to do things you might not otherwise do, but I’ve not practiced leadership; I’ve exercised power. True leadership only exists if people follow when they have the freedom not to.”²⁵

Linda Thaler and Robin Koval opened an ad agency in 1977 with only one customer. Today they service some of the largest accounts in the world with billings in

²³James W. Bryant and Mac Brunson, *The New Guidebook for Pastors* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2007), 71.

²⁴Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap....and Others Don't* (New York: Collins, 2001).

²⁵Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 12.

excess of a billion dollars. Their business insights are shared in the book entitled *The Power of Nice*. The subtitle? *How to Conquer the Business World with Kindness!*²⁶ Ken Blanchard's *One Minute Manager*²⁷ has sold over seven million copies and has been translated into twenty languages. Dr. Blanchard is a businessman, consultant, speaker, trainer, and author on management and leadership. In his recent book *Lead Like Jesus*, he affirmed that the world is in desperate need of a different leadership role model: "There is a way to lead that honors God and restores health and effectiveness to organizations and relationships. It is the way Jesus calls us to follow as leaders: to serve rather than to be served."²⁸

In *Comeback Churches*, Stetzer and Dodson discovered that leadership is the most important factor in churches making a comeback: "Pastors have to be leaders....and we found that leadership was the number-one factor associated with turnarounds."²⁹ Olsen's TACRP also positioned pastoral leadership as the key reason why churches thrive or decline: "Authentic spiritual pastoral leadership is one of the great challenges in the church today."³⁰

Leading revitalization and turnaround in a church takes time, and thus, the other critical factor involving the role of pastoral leadership in church revitalization is pastoral longevity. "Tenure is power in leadership - the longer a pastor stays at a

²⁶Linda Kaplan Thaler and Robin Koval, *The Power of Nice* (New York: Currency Books, 2006).

²⁷Ken Blanchard, *One Minute Manager* (Berkeley, CA: Berkley Trade, 1983)

²⁸Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 3.

²⁹Stetzer and Dodson, 36.

³⁰Olsen, 139.

church, the more the leadership of the congregation will belong to him.”³¹ Schaller has deduced that while long pastorates do not necessarily produce growing congregations, it is “rare to find a congregation that has enjoyed years of sustained numerical growth without the benefit of a long pastorate.”³² Studies show that pastoral leaders typically experience their most effective impact during the fifth through fourteenth years of tenure. However, the average tenure of a senior pastor in American churches is currently only 3.6 years.³³

In the *Comeback Churches* survey, the average age of comeback pastors was forty-eight. Seventy-five percent of the pastors of Comeback Churches were more than forty years of age.³⁴ The average pastoral tenure of the *Breakout Churches* survey was 21.6 years. Rainer concluded that though long pastoral tenure was not the single answer to struggling American churches, “long tenure is one of the key requisites for churches to move from mediocrity to goodness to greatness.”³⁵

REEVALUATING CHANGE PROCESS

Churches change when the pain of not changing becomes unbearable.³⁶ The key to implementing change in a congregation involves creating a climate for change and understanding change process. The terms already utilized in this paper image change:

³¹Bryant and Brunson, 209.

³²Schaller, *A Mainline Turnaround*, 90.

³³Rainer, 57.

³⁴Stetzer and Dodson, 187-88.

³⁵Rainer, 58.

³⁶Stetzer and Dodson, 176.

revitalization, transition, turnaround, comeback, breakout. None of these are possible without implementing change. For change to occur, churches in America must engage with three critical transitions: Our world used to be Christian, but it is now becoming post-Christian; our world used to be modern, but it is now becoming postmodern; and our world used to be monoethnic, but it is now becoming multiethnic.³⁷

Creating a climate for change involves a delicate balance between logic and leverage. Logic is defined as “reasoned and reasonable judgement.”³⁸ Dan Southland affirmed several logical principles involved in implementing change. First, focus on one change at a time and celebrate every change as a major victory. Second, arrange changes in strategic order. Recognize that the order of change is different in every church. Third, build on strengths instead of maximizing weaknesses. The secret is doing better what is already being done well. Fourth, go slow! Most churches make changes too fast. The speed of change is determined by the scope of the change, the size of the church, the age of the church, and the toughness of the leaders.³⁹

Logic is only one side of the balancing act of change. Logic must be balanced by leverage. Leverage is defined as “strategic advance and the power to act effectively.”⁴⁰ Before change can be implemented, a sense of urgency must be created. Urgency is the fuel that launches the change process. Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr have determined significant benefits of creating urgency. They include creating a clear picture of the church’s current state that is widely shared by the congregation,

³⁷Olsen, 162.

³⁸www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/logic

³⁹Dan Southerland, *Transitioning: Leading Your Church Through Change* (Littleton, CO: Serendipity House, 1999), 97-109.

⁴⁰www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/leverage.

providing a driving force for change and a willingness to accept new initiative, making the status quo unacceptable, and giving insight to the church's leadership about potential priorities for the change process.⁴¹

Once urgency has been created, leverage involves managing the conflict that change produces. Opposition and distractions are to be expected. Stetzer and Dodson are right: "Change sounds great until you start to experience it."⁴² The response and reaction to conflicts will determine the effectiveness and success of the attempted changes.⁴³ This writer has learned the hard way to become a proponent of the new instead of an opponent of the old. One of the most effective responses to opposition is to enlist and respect the "legitimizers" in the church.

People don't like endings. Yet, change causes transition, and transition starts with an ending. Effective change is leveraged by dealing directly with the losses and the endings. Warren Bridges proposed an agenda for how to get people to let go:

1. Identify who's losing what.
2. Accept the reality and importance of the subjective losses.
3. Don't be surprised at overreaction.
4. Acknowledge the losses openly and sympathetically.
5. Expect and accept the signs of grieving.
6. Compensate for the losses.
7. Get people information, and do it again and again.
8. Define what's over and what isn't.

⁴¹Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 40.

⁴²Stetzer and Dodson, 32.

⁴³Southerland, 110-128.

9. Mark the endings.
10. Treat the past with respect.
11. Let people take a piece of the old way with them.
12. Show how endings ensure the continuity of what really matters.⁴⁴

“The single biggest reason organizational changes fail is that no one has thought about endings or planned to manage their impact on people.”⁴⁵

One final insight on balancing logic and leverage involves treating each new initiative as an experiment. The concept of an experiment or pilot project can prove less resistant than a permanent change. Herrington, Bonem, and Furr contend that the way a change is presented determines its success or failure. “An experiment signals that the leaders do not claim to have all the answers. Experiments give people more room to innovate, learn, and improve with less risk of repercussion.”⁴⁶

RAISING MINISTRY EXCELLENCE

Change does not need to be radical and drastic. Change can be as simple as an “all-out commitment to quality – doing it right the first time.”⁴⁷ Southerland’s third principle of change process – building on strengths instead of maximizing weakness – is often overlooked in church revitalization. Most churches are doing some things well –

⁴⁴Warren Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2003), 23-36.

⁴⁵Ibid, 37.

⁴⁶Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, 82.

⁴⁷Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, *Leading the Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 175.

the secret is to move from good to better to best. The old adage “Good, Better, Best, never let it rest, until the good gets better and the better gets best” could be the impetus for raising ministry excellence.

One of the common denominators in Rainer’s Breakout Churches was defined as a “culture of excellence,” a passion for ministry excellence in all they attempted.⁴⁸ Chuck Lawless compared churches that struggle with attenders who never join and uncommitted members with churches where people join and become active participants. Churches who have uncommitted members and inactive attenders often accept mediocrity, while churches where people join and become active participants demand excellence!⁴⁹

Raising ministry excellence involves several components. These are not in order of importance, for all of these may and often should occur simultaneously. First is getting the right people on board who can join the pastor and staff in leading the transformation of the church from an environment of mediocrity to an environment of excellence. “The right people create the environment, which attracts more of the right people, which creates an even more excellent culture, and so on.”⁵⁰ A second component of raising ministry excellence is creating an atmosphere of equipping and empowerment. Equipping people for ministry skills is an often assumed and forgotten discipline in the church. What good is it to reach new people if they are not infused into ministry through matching spiritual gifts with ministry opportunities and providing ministry skills training? In his book *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can*

⁴⁸Rainer, 144.

⁴⁹Chuck Lawless, *Membership Matters: Insights from Effective Churches on New Member Classes and Assimilation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 107.

⁵⁰Rainer, 142.

Revitalize Your Church, Harry Reeder magnified the importance of equipping people for ministry which results in ministry multiplication:

“If you and I die, or move on from our present ministry, and we do not have other leaders trained and ready to take our place, then we have not been good leaders. Period. The truest test of a leader is not simply the success of his mission, or the number of his followers, but the number of others whom he attracts, develops, empowers, and enables to be leaders. Great leaders develop more leaders; they multiply themselves continually and intentionally. And one of the primary ways they do so is through *delegation*.”⁵¹

Equipping must transition to empowerment and enabling. Stetzer and Dodson identified the process of empowerment to include effective communication through preaching, teaching, and training; providing authority along with responsibility; and offering constant affirmation and appreciation.⁵²

A third component of raising ministry excellence inserts the issue of elimination. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins introduced the idea of a “stop doing” list. He asserted that the leaders of good-to-great companies “made as much use of ‘stop doing’ lists as ‘to do’ lists. They displayed a remarkable discipline to unplug all sorts of extraneous junk.”⁵³ Building on Collins’ principle, Rainer’s Breakout Churches adopted “not-to-do” lists – choosing what not to do and then making the very difficult decisions of eliminating that which could not be done with excellence. “A culture of excellence will never become a reality until a church takes the often painful step of “not doing.”⁵⁴

⁵¹Harry L. Reeder III and David Swavely, *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), 158-59.

⁵²Stetzer and Dodson, 142-44.

⁵³Collins, *Good to Great*, 139.

⁵⁴Rainer, 143.

In the Simple Church model, Rainer and Geiger discovered that “ministry schizophrenia” is plaguing the local church. Ministry schizophrenia occurs when churches either attempt to blend multiple church models into one or allow programs and ministries to move in a multiplicity of directions. The cure for ministry schizophrenia is to focus on essential ministries and say no to almost everything else. It is the principle of “less is more.”⁵⁵

From personal experience, the author would offer one additional component – raising the level of ministry excellence one ministry at a time one year at a time. While elimination is certainly a needed and viable option in church revitalization, focusing on raising the level of ministry excellence in one ministry in a given year can produce momentum-building results. For example, if in one twelve-month period, attention was focused on the evangelism/outreach ministry of the church, by providing additional financial resources, adding options, creating special events, and offering skills training, not only would the evangelism/outreach ministry area be raised to a new level of excellence, but the results would also impact other ministry areas of the church. If that principle were applied every year in an additional ministry area, then in a ten-year period, ten ministry areas could receive new levels of excellence.⁵⁶ It can be discouraging how little can be accomplished in one year, but it is astounding how much can be accomplished in ten years. The secret of ten is the secret of one at a time.

⁵⁵Rainer and Geiger, 197-226. See also H. Dale Burke, *Less Is More Leadership* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2004).

⁵⁶Stetzer and Dodson identified ten ministry change areas of Comeback Churches (Chapter 11). These could form the stimulus for raising the level of ministry excellence one ministry at a time one year at a time. They also confirmed that 61.5 percent of Comeback Churches remodeled, renovated, and upgraded their existing facilities. Just the excitement of new paint, furnishings, parking, landscaping, etc. can produce a sense of revitalization. While upgrading facilities can be costly, they can also be accomplished in a short period of time without the pain of change.

REINTRODUCING STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

“The typical church in North America is like a sailboat without a rudder, drifting aimlessly in the ocean....the rudder that the church is missing is a good strategic planning process.”⁵⁷ With that statement, Aubrey Malphurs introduced his monumental strategic planning process for churches and ministry leaders in 1999. Malphurs affirmed that the conventional or traditional methods of long-range planning in churches and organizations have become obsolete and irrelevant. The problem is not with strategy, but with strategy that is a pedantic, incremental planning event which assumes that tomorrow is just an extension of today while ignoring the profound, cataclysmic changes of the community context. Malphurs’ gives eight reasons for reintroducing the process of strategy planning into the church context:

- 1) The church decides on and envisions its God-determined future and how best, through specific strategies, to accomplish that future.
- 2) The process prompts the church to be proactive not reactive – to be aggressive not passive.
- 3) It forces churches to think about and focus on such deep biblical-theological issues as core purpose, mission, values, vision, and strategy – a hermeneutic for “doing” church.
- 4) A good strategic model helps the ministry discover its strengths as well as its weaknesses, its opportunities as well as its threats.
- 5) Strategic thinking helps churches face the reality of chaotic change and make the tough decisions.
- 6) A good strategic planning model will help the church be positive, not negative, in its approach to ministry – to envision what it can do.

⁵⁷Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning: A New Model for Church and Ministry Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 9.

- 7) It invites the church to discover the trends driving both the secular world and the church and their positive or negative effect on the ministry.
- 8) The planning model gets everyone on the same page so that the entire church team has a common context for decision making and problem solving.⁵⁸

Strategy defines a military term for “what generals do.” Effective strategy in its simplest form produces strategic advantage, a leading toward forward direction and movement, rather than simply managing the status quo. Strategic development is an essential process of maximizing resources to achieve maximum results. Effective strategy development addresses change issues, sets direction, establishes priorities, mobilizes resources, enhances results, and determines needed structure.⁵⁹

Lyle Schaller echoes Malphurs by applying Sir Isaac Newton’s first law of motion that a body in motion will continue in motion in the same direction unless acted on by outside forces. He believes that the way to reverse decline is to introduce a counterforce – a turnaround strategy – that is customized to fit the polity, culture, and resources of the organization. The support for the implementation of the customized turnaround strategy must exceed the combined support for all of the forces and factors producing the decline.⁶⁰

The strength of a strategy planning process is that it ultimately leads to setting priorities, goals, and action steps. Determining priorities allows the church to focus all of its resources – people, energy, finances, creativity, etc. – on what needs to be done now. To fail to set priorities means that everything becomes a priority, and when

⁵⁸Ibid, 10-11.

⁵⁹Hugh Townsend, *Set the Journey: A Strategy Development Process for Associations* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board, 2001), 3-13.

⁶⁰Schaller, *A Mainline Turnaround*, 4.

everything is a priority, nothing ultimately is.⁶¹ Goals are statements of intent, expressing an end result. Goals should be SMART – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timed.⁶² Action steps are the tactics to accomplish the goals, including projects, activities, and events, each with a deadline attached and the specific person or persons responsible for the action.⁶³

Church revitalization in the 21st century will demand more than ministry skill development, program maintenance, and even strategic thinking. Ministry leaders must learn strategy development skills and lead church in a turnaround, revitalization process. Strategy planning takes time – it is a process that cannot be rushed. However, the benefits of implementing a good strategy far exceed the time and energy expended in developing a good strategy.

REDEFINING PURPOSE WITHIN COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Much has been written and developed in recent years concerning the church's mission and purpose. Mission statements and purpose statements provide the direction and focus for the organization. Rick Warren is the founding pastor of Saddleback Community Church, one of the largest churches in America. He planted and developed the church on a purpose-driven model. Warren believes that nothing precedes purpose. The starting point for every church should be the question, "Why do we exist?" Without a clear purpose, a church has no foundation, no motivation, and no direction for ministry. Listen to his heart:

⁶¹Malphurs, 179.

⁶²Townsend, 43.

⁶³Malphurs, 267.

“If you are helping a new church get started, your first task is to define your purpose. It’s far easier to set the right foundation at the start of a new church than it is to reset it after a church has existed for years. However, if you serve in an existing church that has plateaued, is declining, or is simply discouraged, your most important task is to redefine your purpose. Forget everything else until you have established it in the minds of your members. Recapture a clear vision of what God wants to do in and through your church family. Absolutely nothing will revitalize a discouraged church faster than rediscovering its purpose.”⁶⁴

TACRP indicates that established church attendance is presently declining by between one and two percent per year. By 2020, that will produce a decline of more than 20 percent in the attendance of established churches. Reversing that decline will demand addressing certain prevailing assumptions among churches and denominations, the first one being to courageously and aggressively strive toward both church health and church growth. Olsen is convinced that clarifying the message and mission of the church will establish the first pathway to church health and church growth.⁶⁵

All congregations exist within a particular historical, community context. Identifying the demographic, cultural, and organizational levels of community context are important factors in revitalizing any church. It is amazing and astounding that churches can exist in community context and yet have “tunnel-vision” and “far-sightedness” with regard to their purpose. Analyzing community context enables the church to face reality and offers opportunity to refocus the church’s purpose within that context. Nancy Ammerman’s *Congregation and Community* traces a number of

⁶⁴Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 81.

⁶⁵Olsen, 180.

congregations that are facing change in their communities.⁶⁶ Her findings indicate that churches respond to changing community context in four ways: they resist or ignore the changes, they relocate to another community, they refocus and become a “niche” congregation, or they regenerate and adopt an entirely new identity. Ammerman’s conclusions affirm that the only congregations avoiding conflict were those that refused to change, a refusal ultimately producing demise. “The only sure way for a congregation to die is for it to close itself off from its context.”⁶⁷

Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro have developed an exciting process of transforming a church’s culture from the inside out. However, they caution against changing programs and structures without examining purpose and value:

“In Greek mythology, the god Prometheus was a troublemaker. He could change his identity into a tree, a horse, or anything else in order to trick his friends. He turned into so many shapes that one day he couldn’t find his way back to who he was. He had forgotten. Some churches are like that. Having chased so many dreams of others, they lost their true sense of self. We want to make sure we’re not Promethean ministries who change, change, and change until we don’t remember what our defining purpose is.”⁶⁸

The two most important questions any church can ask and answer are “Who are we?” and “Why are we here?” The first defines identity and the second directs purpose. Mentioned earlier, the author was privileged to spend fourteen years in one pastorate. The church was only twenty-five years old, but I was the ninth pastor. You

⁶⁶Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

⁶⁷Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, editors, *Studying Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 76.

⁶⁸Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro, *Culture Shift: Transforming Your Church From the Inside Out* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 18.
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do the math. The church experienced vibrant growth in its first eight years of existence, but had plateaued and declined slowly from years eight through twenty-five. The first five years of my pastoral tenure, I basically sought to understand the church in its community context. That process was delayed because of a significant economic downturn which drastically affected the community. When the downturn was reversed, the next five years involved renovating existing facilities and building new facilities to maximize growth. In year ten of my pastoral tenure, a crisis surfaced in that church growth leveled again toward plateau, in spite of the population growth in our community context. A long process of personal and organization analysis reflected stagnation in two areas: we had lost our sense of purpose and our church structure hindered ministry creativity and innovation. As pastor, I led the church in a two-year process of redefining and refocusing our purpose within our community context and restructuring the church to create maximum ministry innovation. It was a long, but rewarding journey, because the outcome and outgrowth of the process produced long-term church revitalization.

IMPLICATIONS

The intent of this paper is not to sound the alarm – the alarm has already been sounded. Churches and denominations must revitalize or face demise and death. Every airplane pilot knows that when a plane takes a dive, there is a point in which the pilot can pull out of the dive and resume the flight. But in every dive, there is a point of no return, when a crash is inevitable and the only option apart from disintegration is bailing out of the plane.

Jesus promised to build His church and to protect it from being overcome and overpowered by even the gates of hell.⁶⁹ The Great Commission to go into the world

⁶⁹Matthew 16:18

and make disciples was both personal and corporate.⁷⁰ In *The Acts of the Apostles*, the early church was birthed and in a less than a century turned its world upside down.⁷¹ The Epistles of Paul and Peter imply vibrant, growing congregations.⁷² *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* concludes the New Testament with a message of encouragement and victory for the church!⁷³ From a biblical vantage point, church plateau and decline are unacceptable!

General Implications

This paper has identified five critical issues in church revitalization. The thesis of the paper proposes that the Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) degree impacts each of these critical issues. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has established degree standards for all D.Min. degrees. These standards are usually reflected the D.Min. Handbooks and Procedures Manuals of individual seminaries and theological schools. The following general and specific implications will utilize and reference the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary's D.Min. Handbook and degree components as example only. General application to all D.Min. degree programs is the author's intent.

The D.Min. degree is designed to provide qualified students the opportunity to achieve a high level of excellence in the practice of ministry. The degree is built on the

⁷⁰Matthew 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8.

⁷¹Acts 17:6

⁷²The *Epistles of Ephesians, Philippians, Thessalonians* and *Colossians* specifically engage vibrant congregations. The *Epistles of Timothy* and *Titus* magnify effective pastoral leadership. The *Epistle of First Corinthians* confronts a dysfunctional church and invokes resolving church conflict. The *Epistles of Peter* encourage congregational health in the midst of community struggle and suffering.

⁷³Revelation 1:19-20.

prerequisite of the Master of Divinity or equivalent theological preparation and at least three years of substantial professional experience in ministry between completion of the Master of Divinity degree and admission into the D.Min. program. The average length of completion of the program is three to five years. Components of the program are a combination of workshops, seminars, and a ministry project designed to address a specific need in the student's ministry context.⁷⁴

The NOBTS D.Min. Handbook lists specific goals of the D.Min. degree. Each goal directly impacts the critical issues of church revitalization.

- 1). To assist the minister in practical ministry through **resources** afforded by additional study in the classical areas.
- 2). To stimulate the minister's total growth toward **personal maturity** and to assist in developing goals and methods to achieve **maximum excellence**.
- 3). To encourage and develop **critical thinking** and wise and intelligent **decision-making** capabilities.
- 4). To strengthen basic knowledge and **professional skills** essential to effective ministry.
- 5). To teach those skills and instill those attitudes which will develop greater **competence in ministry**: preaching, teaching, counseling, administration, etc.

⁷⁴The NOBTS D.Min. degree components currently include 15 different specializations delivered through a combination of approximately 100 different workshops and seminars. For a listing of D.Min. Specializations, see <http://www.nobts.edu/cme/DMin/Specializations.html>. For a listing of Course Descriptions, see <http://www.nobts.edu/resources/pdf/ProDoc/StudentMaterials/ProDoc%20Course%20Descriptions.pdf>.

- 6). To inspire ministers to **move beyond** the routinely accepted methods of ministry toward **innovative** methods, procedures, and outreach.
- 7). To develop the student's capacity to **analyze** the needs within a community and to lead a church in developing a program to meet those needs.
- 8). To **motivate** ministers to develop a unified ministry philosophy which involves the staff and laity in a worldwide ministry through churches.⁷⁵

The highlighted words in each goal directly impact all five of the critical issues in church revitalization. In Goal #1, **resource development** provides the tools for effective ministry skill enhancement in all five critical issues areas equally. In Goal #2, **personal maturity** can be the difference-maker in all five critical issues areas, especially in effective pastoral leadership and longevity. In Goal #3, **critical thinking** and **wise decision-making** are essential factors in all five critical issues areas equally. In Goal #4, all five critical issues areas require enhanced **professional skills**. In Goal #5, **ministry competence** cannot be overemphasized as crucial in all five critical issues areas. In Goal #6, **moving beyond** the status quo and "business-as-usual" is the stimulus for all five critical issues, especially in the areas of change process and ministry excellence. In Goal #7, the capacity to **analyze needs** is pertinent in the areas of ministry excellence, strategy development, and community needs assessments. In Goal #8, **motivation toward a unified ministry philosophy** impacts all critical issues areas equally.

Specific Implications

Curriculum Design and Program Components

⁷⁵<http://www.nobts.edu/resources/pdf/ProDoc/StudentMaterials/DMin%20Handbook%20Rev%20Nov%202007.pdf>, accessed March 9, 2008.

D.Min. programs can specifically impact all five critical issues in church revitalization through designing course curriculum and program components. Workshops and seminars can address specific areas of ministry specializations providing resources and tools for effective ministry performance. D.Min. programs should customize their curriculum and program components to provide a variety of options for ministry skills enhancement and ministry specialization. Course flexibility and multiple delivery systems can also improve both the quality and quantity of the specific D.Min. program.⁷⁶

Vocational Assessment

Many D.Min. students are already “seasoned ministry veterans.” The D.Min. degree provides the environment for vocational ministry assessments and evaluations, which in turn can impact pastoral leadership effectiveness, tenure, change process, ministry excellence, and community context. Healthy leaders lead healthy churches. Rick Warren is credited with saying that if you want to diagnose the health of an organization, put a thermometer in the mouth of the leader.⁷⁷

Peer Involvement and Faculty Experience

⁷⁶ The NOBTS D.Min. program currently consists of fifteen different specializations: Christian Education, Christian Theological Heritage, Church Health, Church Planting/Missions, Collegiate Ministry, Denominational Leadership, Evangelistic Church Growth, Expository Preaching, Leadership & Administration, Pastoral Counseling, Pastoral Work, Singles Ministry, Spiritual Formation, Student Ministry, and Worship Studies. The two most popular areas of specialization are Leadership & Administration and Pastoral Work.

⁷⁷The NOBTS D.Min. program measures vocational assessment for all students in a Mid Career Assessment Workshop. The workshop components include leadership audits, ministry gifts evaluations, and measuring spiritual, physical, emotional, and social wellness. Annual student evaluations indicate this workshop to be the most helpful and life-changing of all of the NOBTS D.Min. program components.

The structure of the D.Min. degree is built around small group dialogues facilitated by experienced Faculty. Unlike seminary education at the undergraduate and graduate levels, D.Min. workshops and seminars foster small group learning in an intense and compact setting. Instead of courses spread over a semester time period, D.Min. education offers shorter, intense time frames. The Faculty is assigned teaching venues according to experience and expertise in specific ministry disciplines. Peer involvement and Faculty experience can enhance reciprocal learning in all critical areas of church revitalization, as both students and professors interact and interface in the sharing and exchange of ministry ideas and experiences, successes and failures.⁷⁸

Project in Ministry

Before beginning the Project in Ministry phase of the D.Min. program, a student must have been in his or her current ministry position at least one year and the student must remain in that position throughout the duration of the project. Since most D.Min. students have already been involved in practical ministry for at least three years beyond their Master of Divinity degrees, and since the D.Min. degree takes an average of three to five years to complete, it is highly conceivable that a D.Min. student could remain in the same ministry position for at least eight years, which is twice the average pastoral tenure of American pastors.

The goal of the Project in Ministry is to provide a contextualized ministry program which responds creatively to an acknowledged need. The Project addresses the student's own ministry skills by contributing to his or her understanding and

⁷⁸The NOBTS D.Min. program offers workshops and seminars in a trimester format, involving combinations of two to four day course combinations. The seat time varies according to the hour count of the specific workshop or seminar. Faculty are often paired in team teaching roles to enhance the learning environment.

development of those skills. Depending on the specific area of focus, a good Project in Ministry can have direct impact on all five of the critical issues in church revitalization.⁷⁹

CHALLENGES

The state of the twenty-first century American church definitely calls for “Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times.” While large segments of the church are in a period of decline or stagnation, there is hope for struggling and declining congregations. Churches can be restored, renewed, refocused, and revitalized.

Frank Page recently raised the question: “Who can save the incredible shrinking church?”⁸⁰ No one answer exists. No easy answers exist. Church revitalization is both complex and challenging. Gary McIntosh is right – “one size doesn’t fit all.”⁸¹ Beyond the uniqueness of individual congregations, denominational issues provide added challenges.

The Doctor of Ministry degree program offered by seminaries and theological schools can have profound impact on church revitalization. Because the D.Min. is a degree involving the “practice of ministry,” as pastors, church staff, and denominational leaders raise their ministry to a new level of excellence, they directly

⁷⁹The NOBTS D.Min. identifies five ministry models to be utilized in the Project in Ministry: Equipping Program Model, Ministry Skill Enhancement Model, Strategy Planning Model, Community Assessment Model, and Ministry Research Model. All five of these Project in Ministry models can be customized for maximum impact in any or all five of the critical issues in church revitalization.

⁸⁰Frank Page, *The Incredible Shrinking Church* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2008)

⁸¹Gary L. McIntosh, *One Size Doesn't Fit All* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1999)

infuse that excellence into the life of church. This Associate Dean and Seminary Professor is convinced that the D.Min. is the most significant degree being offered in theological education.

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