

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

Church Life Cycle

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Abstract

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With thousands of American churches permanently closing their doors each year, it is important to take a closer look at the churches that are in desperate need for renewal. The Body of Christ is eternal, but each church will individually display the life cycle that is observed in the human body. With so many churches in desperate need, all attempts must be made to provide suggestions that may result in their ability to continue on with the mission of Christ. The purpose of this research study is to examine the body of Christ as to its scriptural background, compare the current state of the church, and then contrast with the contemporary models to provide assistance for renewal.

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Introduction

Almost every single church in the history of Christianity has had a history of birth, growth, and eventually death. For the vast majority of churches, this seems to be an almost inevitable end. There are many ways to define this, such as the death of a church or the failure of a church. A local church is usually defined as a community of believers. In America, the churches are stereotypically seen as an institution with a physical building with a particular set of traditions. The permanent closing of a local church's doors could be seen as the death of that church. In all of this, the analogy of the body of Christ can be applied in various aspects. One local church is not the entire body of Christian believers. Therefore, the permanent closure of one local church does not equate to the entire body of Christ dying. The purpose of this research study is to examine the body of Christ as to its scriptural background, compare the current state of the church, and then contrast with the contemporary models to provide assistance for renewal.

Statement of the problem

Churches in America are closing their doors at a rate that is significantly higher than new churches are opening.¹ Even more concerning, the number of churches that are in various stages of the end of the life cycle represent the vast majority of churches in America.² Significant amount of study is going into revitalizing these churches that are near death, but is this always

¹ Scott Thumma, "A Health Checkup of U.S. Churches" (October 22, 2012), http://hartfordinstitute.org/church_checkup.html.

² Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can, Too* (Nashville, Tenn: B&H Books, 2007).

the best course of action?³⁴⁵⁶⁷⁸⁹¹⁰ The problem is that the body of Christ is uncertain in how to handle these types of dying organizations both in terms of what to do with them and how to react to their demise.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this paper will be to thoroughly examine the current literature for what is currently being done about the problems, and producing a wide spectrum of Biblically based options to address the problems.

Statement of Importance of the Problem

The body of Christ is supposed to be a unified presence of God in this world to all the nations. A church that is near the end of its existence is not able to fulfill its mission to be a light

³ Eddie Gibbs, *The Rebirth of the Church: Applying Paul's Vision for Ministry in Our Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013).

⁴ Jim Tomberlin, Warren Bird, and Craig Groeschel, *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work*, 1 edition (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012).

⁵ Elmer L. Towns and Warren Bird, *Into the Future: Turning Today's Church Trends into Tomorrow's Opportunities* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Fleming H Revell Co, 2000).

⁶ Todd Grant Yonkman Ph D., *Reconstructing Church: Tools for Turning Your Congregation Around* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014).

⁷ Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*.

⁸ Thom Schultz and Joani Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore: And How 4 Acts of Love Will Make Your Church Irresistible*, First edition (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2013).

⁹ John S. Dickerson, *The Great Evangelical Recession: 6 Factors That Will Crash the American Church...and How to Prepare*, 37302nd edition (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2013).

¹⁰ Elmer Towns, Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church: How Today's Leaders Can Learn, Discern and Move into the Future* (Ventura, Calif: Regal, 2007).

unto the world, or to make new disciples. Addressing a church that is no longer able to do this has a two-fold purpose. First, this work will help in possibly bringing a church back to a level where they are once again able to function as a proper member of the body of Christ or to enable them to no longer be a drain on the resources used to further enable those who are doing the mission of Christ. As a secondary purpose, addressing the churches that are no longer in healthy working order will help to address the increasingly negative public opinion about the Church in America. It is clear from the continuing trend of church decline over the last few decades that efforts thus far are either inadequate or no longer sufficiently relevant.

Statement of Position on the Problem

From the evidence that has been review this far, there seems to be a clear sign that a significant amount of effort is going into keeping church buildings open for business regardless of any other factors. It seems to be the opinion of the American church as a whole that no church should ever close down. Because of this, allowing for a unique church entity to no longer exist as it had previously is inexcusable. This opinion is Biblically unfounded. It is the belief of this author that the American concept of church is fundamentally flawed. However, even under the assumption of the American concept of the church, there are methods to ensuring the continued fulfillment of the church's objective that require for the unique church entity to change in some significant manner.

Limitations/Delimitations

There are two primary parameters placed upon this thesis to ensure its accuracy. These parameters are that the churches in focus will be American and protestant. As culture and

theology intimately tie into ecclesiology, it is important to keep these variables within an appropriate range. A major limitation will be the primary reliance upon other sources for the majority of statistical information. Massive organizations like the North American Mission Board are some of the only organizations that have the resources to be able to even attempt and relatively sound scientific study of trends in church populations. As for solutions to the problem this thesis will address, very little information is available. Most information that is available is on a case by case basis. This makes comparing various solutions, or even the effectiveness of a single solution significantly more difficult.

Method

Research Methods

The method for this study will begin with an analysis of the current literature. This will be fundamentally based off of statistical research by a number of organizations that produce large scale statistical analysis. Through this, definitions will be able to be rendered for the purposes of this paper. The definitions will reflect both what is used for the purposes of the statistics as well as what is prevalent in the literature to reference American culture. This stage of research will also include considering the possibility of smaller scale original research into various churches for their historical data. This data can be used to observe specific patterns. Literature will also include research and analysis done based upon these statistics. This will look at everything from what is the current state of the church, to what does the current research suggest are the problems. Additionally, another aspect to consider will be what are some of the things being done to combat these problems.

Data Collection

The two primary statistical databases that contribute to this topic are from the North American Mission Board and the PEW research center. The author will personally begin to collect data from individual churches whenever churches with this information are found. The search will begin within the confines of Virginia and North Carolina, and slowly expand outward as time allows. More time will be put into finding already established research and documentation on what has been done with this research.

Data Analysis

The first step in utilizing any of the data will be to try to determine a unified definition for various terms that the majority of the papers use. From there, re-evaluation of data can be done from past research with the new definitions providing the lens through which to be able to uniformly determine results for a given study and compare it to others of a similar nature.

Chapter 1 – Defining Terms

The purpose of this chapter will be put research on level terms before diving in too far with them. Additionally, this section helps set up a unified understanding for the rest of the paper. Finally, this section allows for a contrast from the final chapter that will come back around to these definitions to make a re-evaluated suggestion for the church.

Christian

Defining a Christian is typically one of the most complicated issues that the church has faced throughout history. Biblical evidence of what defines a Christian is relatively clear. The problem lies in that a saving relationship with Jesus Christ is a relationship between an individual and God. Therefore, the rest of humanity cannot know if a person truly has a relationship with God or is being deceitful. There have traditionally been an outstanding number of methods people have utilized in order to try to determine the spiritual relationship of a person. There will always be tenuous ground when trying to define a Christian as providing a definition will automatically limit some from the label of Christian who might believe themselves to be Christian. This issue is most prominent when numbers such as over 70% of Americans claim to be Christian.¹¹

The Biblical basis for what defines a Christian are typically refined down to a few key verses. Romans 10:9 makes it seem like a fairly simple requirement when it says, “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Many other verses mirror this sentiment such as, but not limited to, the

¹¹ “Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics | Pew Research Center,” May 11, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

following: Matthew 10:32, Luke 12:8, Acts 16:31, Romans 2:24, Romans 10:10, 1 Peter 1:21, 1 John 4:15.

If that's all there was to the issue, it wouldn't be an issue. It is clearly relevant that any person who is a Christian will have the Holy Spirit in them. A number of verses attest to this as well, such as 1 Corinthians 6:19, 2 Corinthians 6:16, 2 Timothy 1:14, Romans 8:9, Romans 8:11, John 16:13, Galatians 4:6, 1 John 2:27.

Following this, if the Holy Spirit dwells within a person, there will be spiritual fruit produced. John 15:8 is the most outright statement of this train of thought by stating, "This is my Father's Glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." The fruit of the spirit is most plainly stated in Galatians 5:22-23 when it states, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law."

It is from all this that most groups conclude that a true Christian will produce spiritual fruits. The difficulty part comes from attempting to judge if the actions of an individual are in fact Spiritual fruit, or if the actions of the individual are by some level of conscious or unconscious deception.

Some institutions take a liberal stance that if a person has publicly claimed to be a follower of Christ, then they are so. Most official research on any large scale must utilize some form of polling or other self-answered questionnaire. Without a thorough analysis of each individual, there is too little to ascertain the true status of an individual. Furthermore, history has long taught the church that identifying with absolute certainty who has the Holy Spirit is not within the realm of power of humans. Finally, the Parable of the Weeds and Tares in Matthew 13 is explained in verses 37-42 where it states,

“He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.” This passage indicates that determining who is truly Christian and who is not will not be effectively handled except by the supernatural power wielded by at least angels. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, Christian will simply refer to any individual who self identifies as Christian.

Church

For the purpose of this paper, there will be only one use of the word church. While Scripture is particularly clear as to its definition of the church, many parts of the world have developed their own definition for the church. The church will be solely referenced by the phrase the Body of Christ. The church will refer to the institution in America that is recognized as a church. The IRS attributes a number of qualities that help to define a church and are as follows: “Distinct legal existence, Recognized creed and form of worship, Definite and distinct ecclesiastical government, Formal code of doctrine and discipline, Distinct religious history, Membership not associated with any other church or denomination, Organization of ordained

ministers, Established places of worship, Regular congregations, Regular religious services”.¹² An example of such an entity would be Lakewood church in Houston, Texas. It is a recognized entity by the United States government. It has a physical building with a distinct ecclesiastical government and form of worship.

Body of Christ

The Body of Christ is a metaphor used for the church throughout the new testament. The cumulative, worldwide church is categorized by this group. This will include all followers of Christ. The following section will contain various verses and passages that discuss the Body of Christ in order to lay the foundation for what the Body of Christ should look like and how it should function. Some verses may not directly use the phrase Body of Christ, but still contribute to the theology.

The greatest contribution to this metaphor is usually attributed to 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. The passage states,

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an

¹² “Churches Defined | Internal Revenue Service,” accessed September 19, 2018, <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/churches-religious-organizations/churches-defined>.

eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

This passage is the most in depth description of the Body of Christ. The next passage, Ephesians 4:11-16 mirrors much of what is stated in 1 Corinthians. It states,

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every

wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

From this point, the rest of the verses do not directly label the Body of Christ but do make some reference to it. The focus of these verses is about the function and position that the church has.

Ephesians 1:22-23 states, “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

Romans 8:9 states, “You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ.

Colossians 2:9-12 states, “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Colossians 2:19 states, “They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.”

Romans 8:14-17 states, “For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you

received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba*, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”

Romans 12:4-8 states, “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.”

Colossians 1:24 states, “Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.”

Ephesians 5:23 states, “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.”

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 states, “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.”

Colossians 3:15 states, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.”

Churched/Unchurched

For the purpose of this paper, the unchurched or unreached will refer to people that have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel message. Although the definition for gospel message may change from church to church, each will have their own definition of what it means to share the gospel message. Therefore, any person who has claimed to have heard the gospel message and accepted it will be considered churched. Please note that there is an option in this cycle that is to have heard the gospel message and to decline it. While some may argue that a stipulation of the idea of irresistible grace means that this option is impossible, many others will argue for an individual's ability or opportunity to turn down the gift of the Lord.

Life Cycle of the Church

A well-observed cycle has been noted by many authors.¹³ This cycle is broken down into three primary stages that are the growth, stagnation, and decline of the church.

Growth

The growth stage is started through the process of church planting. A significant body of work has been written on the topic of church planting in America. The general basis includes a single individual or small group of individuals that desire to create a church. The motivations for starting churches is incredibly varied. The first reason is to reach a group of people that are unchurched. As technology increases to aid in the ease of communications, the number of people

¹³ Gary L. McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (Grand Rapids, UNITED STATES: Baker Books, 2009), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=714473>.

that are able to be reached has dramatically increased. Each new community that is reached leaves one less completely unreached population. In terms of blatant sharing of the core Bible message, this means that over time there are significantly less populations in the world that have never had an opportunity to hear the Bible. In order to get around this, some churches will state that a population has not been reached because the population has never heard their version of the gospel message.

This moves us into the next reason for church planting. A particular denomination may state that a group of people or area is unchurched because they have never had the opportunity to hear the only true gospel message which is the one that they are offering. As a cure to the plague that they see as the false doctrine of other denominations, they encourage church planting in areas covered by other denominations.

Once the church has been initially granted in concept, it will usually go about the process laying the foundation. Laying the foundation includes such things as determining a location for meeting, what sort of clergy will be involved in the process, form of worship, formal code of doctrine, affiliation with any other churches/organizations.

From there, the church will usually begin to exist as a formal entity as recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. With this formal beginning, a history has been established. The church can then go through the process growing its membership base.

Stagnation

The Bible does not directly address the concept of the life cycle of the church. However, in Revelations, the seven churches are addressed in chapter two and three. Revelations was most likely written near the end of the 1st century. This would be somewhere around 30-50 years after

Paul founded the churches, depending on which scholar is questioned. The churches of this age would be prime suspects to be into the stagnation era of the life cycle.¹⁴ Christ goes into some basic criticisms of five of the seven churches. Revelation 2:4 addresses the church at Ephesus, and He says, “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.” Revelation 2:14 states this against the church in Pergamum, “Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.” The church in Thyatira is addressed in verse 20 when he states, “Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.” The church in Sardis is addressed in Revelation 3:1b, “I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” The final church to be addressed for failure was Laodicea. Verses 15-16 states, “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” Christ did not criticize the other two churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia, but He provided them warnings and encouragement in the hopes that they would continue to stay healthy.¹⁵

Decline

At some point, the church will begin to lose numbers on average. Some churches will lose people steadily, but slowly over time. Other churches will lose them quickly. The core cause

¹⁴ McIntosh.

¹⁵ McIntosh.

of decline is over the loss of vision or mission. Both newcomers and regular attendees alike will have only a vague understanding of a mission or vision at best. The primary focus for the church at this point is keeping the current ministries going.¹⁶

Healthy churches

It was stated earlier that defining a Christian is a difficult task to do without enraging many people. In a similar manner, defining a church can be a difficult task. Even further, defining what makes a healthy church is a task that will garner much resentment from various people. A healthy church is even more difficult to define because of the nature of Christians. The simplest terms would be to say that a healthy church is one that is both increasing in the number of devoted Christ followers as well as one that is moving people into a deeper walk with the Lord. Both aspects are nearly impossible to realistically test. Many attempts have been made to do just this. One of the most fundamental ways that this has been attempted is to simply count the number of regular attendees for a given church's Sunday service. Mark Clifton describes his concept of a healthy church. He calls to mind the great commission and follows up with this concept as the pattern. What this looks like is a pattern of making disciples that make more disciples.¹⁷

¹⁶ McIntosh, 47.

¹⁷ Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: Creating a Gospel Legacy throughout North America*. (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2016), 7.

Chapter 2 – State of the Church

The purpose of this chapter will be to summarize the status of the church. This will review documentation on historical data pertaining to the number of congregations and adherents in relation to the growth of American population to show trends of the church in America.

Determining the exact status of the church in America is a particularly difficult thing to accomplish. There are few people who have done studies on this topic providing legitimate numbers. The biggest downside is that any possible reports are difficult to get a hold of because of how separate denominations are. However, there are a few resources that can be utilized. Before getting started on churches, the population growth of America will be established to present a baseline for what one would hope to see from the church. US census data is easily attainable from the United States Census Bureau. Their data follows:

Year	Population
1950	159,000,000
1960	179,000,000
1970	203,000,000
1980	226,000,000
1990	248,000,000
2000	281,000,000
2010	308,000,000
2018	328,000,000

The next step to take is to establish a base line. Seeing as many different data sets will present different findings, an average will be taken to express the best estimate possible.

Year	Congregations in thousands
1952	182 ¹⁸
1988	350 ¹⁹

¹⁸ Cliff Grammich, "U.S. Religion Census 2010: Summary Findings," n.d., 16.

¹⁹ Win Arn and Charles Arn, *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples* (Baker Books, 1998).

1994	350 ²⁰
1997	353 ²¹
1998	331 ²²
2000	334 ²³
2002	314 ²⁴
2010	337 ²⁵

There is a significant amount of conflicting data, and the ranges are substantial. Despite this, there seems to be a general consensus that the number of churches has leveled out over the past 30 years.

The second statistic to look at would be church attendance. Church attendance will be one sign of a healthy or unhealthy church. As many data points will be examined as possible, with the understanding that numerous studies together will still leave gaps. These are the numbers from various small scale, self-reporting polls.

Year	Church attendance in Millions
1950	62.01 ²⁶

²⁰ J. Gordon Melton, *National Directory of Churches, Synagogues, and Other Houses of Worship: Midwestern States* (Gale Research International, Limited, 1993).

²¹ Arthur D. Kirsch, Michael T. McCormack, and Susan K. E. Saxon-Harrold, “Evaluation of Differences in Giving and Volunteering Data Collected by In-Home and Telephone Interviewing,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (September 1, 2001): 495–504, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764001303007>.

²² Mark A. Chaves, “National Congregations Study - 1998, 2006, and 2012 [Cumulative File]” (ICPSR - Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR03471.v3>.

²³ Grammich.

²⁴ “Business and Consumer Mailing Lists,” *InfoUSA* (blog), accessed October 31, 2018, <https://www.infousa.com/lists/mailling-lists/>.

²⁵ Grammich, “U.S. Religion Census 2010: Summary Findings”; Hadaway and Marler, “How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week?”

²⁶ Gallup Inc, “Five Key Findings on Religion in the U.S.,” Gallup.com, accessed October 31, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/200186/five-key-findings-religion.aspx>.

1952	74.13 ²⁷
1955	77.91
1960	82.34
1968	85.26
1978	85.8
1980	92.66
1985	94.8
1990	99.2
1995	100.51
2000	129.79
2004	129.58
2010	132.32
2016	109.97

According to these sources, the percentage of Americans that attend church has only fallen slightly in the last few years. Before then, they had steadily increased with population size. The percentage of Americans reported by these polls was nearly the same percentage for 60 years. Despite these studies, some have come to hotly debate the numbers. David Olson did a study of over 200,000 churches and found that between 1990 and 2006, the attendance went from 51.8 million to 51.7 million. Another study suggests that the polling that is all self-reported by Americans is so overreported that a better estimate is almost half of the results of the poll. The estimated number was 22% of the American population which comes out to be around 64.8 million people.²⁸ The Barna group reported 31% of America as their estimated percentage that attends church for a total of 101.68. These sources are significantly more credible and scientifically rigorous than the polls.

When accounting for poor methodology, many of the numbers that would represent a significant growth for the church or its congregations can be disregarded. The summary is the

²⁷ Grammich, "U.S. Religion Census 2010: Summary Findings."

²⁸ Hadaway and Marler, "How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week?"

American population has more than doubled in population. In that time, the best estimates show the population of the church has kept up with population growth of the country. The better statistics put the population of the congregations at just barely 1.5 times the 1950 numbers. All of this leads to the conclusion that the church is not even keeping up with population growth.

Further, we have multiple reports that anywhere between 65-85 percent of all churches are in stagnation or in decline.²⁹ A massive number of churches are struggling with attendance and staying in business. Because the trend of the American population does not follow with Christianity, it is clear that American church is in trouble.

²⁹ “Dispelling the 80 Percent Myth of Declining Churches,” ThomRainer.com, June 28, 2017, <https://thomrainer.com/2017/06/dispelling-80-percent-myth-declining-churches/>; Arn and Arn, *The Master’s Plan for Making Disciples*.

Chapter 3 – Church Planting and Growth

This chapter will begin the conversation on the current research of the beginning phase of the church in its life cycle. This section will focus on many of the things that the church does, especially those churches that are extremely successful. This will assist in creating a greater contrast for the following sections.

The creation of a church allows for the imprinting of DNA into the culture of the soon to be church. Everything from leadership style, to worship style, to the nature of how the church operates can be determined. Every church is going to be attempting to model itself after aspects that the individuals latch onto from various parts of the Bible. Optimally, the church structure will incorporate the instructions from every section, but reality proves that this is a monumental task.³⁰ The intensely varying degree of differences between denominations signifies just how complex ecclesiology is. How the church brings in new members and holds onto them is one of the largest defining aspects of a church. To this extent, each church can be distilled into one of four primary types of churches. These four models would be traditional, attractional, hybrid, and organic.

Traditional

The traditional church is a model that is well known across America. The majority of Americans have set foot inside a church at one point in their lives. The traditional church model can be found as most magnitudes of attendance but is most commonly on the small size in America. It will normally be led by a senior pastor that is responsible for the all the ministries

³⁰ Gibbs, *The Rebirth of the Church*, 89.

and programs of the church.³¹ The power structure is not going to be complex. There will usually be a direct hierarchy beneath the senior pastor, but the senior pastor assumes the majority of the responsibility for the church. The pastor is seen as the professional. His responsibility is to meet the needs of teaching the congregation. The majority of the donations for the church go to pay the salaries of the pastor and staff, as well as funding the various ministries that the pastor is responsible for running.

Attractional

The attractional model was developed out of a genuine desire. With evangelism taking root in Christian Protestantism, the attractional model set out to utilize evangelism as its primary source of power as well as its focus for training. “The attractional church makes its primary aim in worship to get as many people through the doors of the church as possible so that they may hear what it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ.”³² The development of the attractional style of church has been strongly due to the type of individual that these churches are seeking to bring in. In 1995, Sally Morgenthaler published a book titled *Worship Evangelism*, where she detailed a model of church that would appeal to the type of individual that was seeking a church experience.³³ The premise was that worship was designed by God to witness to people. For the evangelical, there is no greater focus than to witness to people. Therefore, it is only logical that to focus on the worship experience would be to focus on witnessing to people.

³¹ Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is . . . : How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Academic, 2013), 210.

³² Jared C Wilson, *The Prodigal Church: A Gentle Manifesto against the Status Quo*, 2015, 25–26.

³³ Wilson, 31.

In premise, this is theologically sound. Worship of God shows a lost world who God is and what He does. This function should work so as to allow a greater impact of evangelical efforts.

While there is nothing fundamentally wrong with setting out to expose as many people to God's Word as possible, there are a number of problems that occur because of the focus on this style of worship. The first of these is that if the church is utilizing worship to evangelize to lost people, is the worship service for God or for the lost? The attractional church would state that the answer to this question is a resounding, both. For many people outside of these attractional churches, the worship service seems significantly less about God.

Another issue is that worship evangelism is supposed to, by its premise, be about evangelizing the unsaved. This works under to concept that at least some percentage of the church is unsaved or unchurched. Morgenthaler goes back on her initial discussions on what makes an attractional church by stating "In 2001, a worship-driven congregation in my area finally did a survey as to who they were really reaching, and they were shocked. They'd thought their congregation was at least 50 percent unchurched. The real number was 3 percent."³⁴ This dramatic disconnect from perception and reality indicate a primary problem. Although growth may be exponential at first, the model is not sustainable over the long term. The majority of the numbers in growth will come from other churches and people who have previously been churched.

Attractional churches are also the masters of projects and programs. Each church will vie to pour funds into a program or project that caters to a particular demographic. These programs continually evolve to take advantage of newer technology and research, but they are always focused on a particular subsection. The problem comes in when an individual who was in that

³⁴ Morgenthaler, "worship as Evangelism," 49-50,
http://nancybeach.typepad.com/nancy_beach/files/morgenthaler_article.pdf.

demographic leaves the demographic. This is mostly applicable to age related demographics, which make up a large majority of the programs in attractional churches.

The attractional church also works on the premise that every Christian is a working member of the Body of Christ. Fundamentally, this is true once a Christian has gotten past the babes in Christ phase as described in 1 Corinthians 1:3 when it states, Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly--mere infants in Christ." 1 John 2:12-14 describes the stages a little more clearly by stating, "I am writing to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of His name. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, dear children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one." Multiple stages of the Christian development have different expectations and roles to play. So then if Christians who are past the babes in Christ stage are expected to work for the Lord, why would there be any issue in the attractional church? The problem comes by means of how the people are utilized. The attractional church revolves around the Sunday service, and so do the vast majority of the jobs. For an individual who wishes to serve the Lord, they are told that they must serve the vital role of setting up chairs or welcoming people into the church. While these are valuable services to the church, they can be interchanged with another person relatively easily. These people end up just being cogs in a giant wheel. This becomes even more pronounced by the nature of the attractional church. Because the entire premise revolves around evangelism, these people are not taken care of spiritually. The process is relatively simple. The church attracts a family to begin attending. Through providing programs

that cater to their demographic and provide features such as childcare or a contemporary music selection, they create an atmosphere that seems to satisfy all the needs of the seekers. These individuals are then encouraged to volunteer in the church to contribute their gifts towards the Body of Christ. There is a small training period where each individual is given a particular task. Those people then continue in a role similar to this for a period of time where they believe they are contributing towards the body of Christ. Eventually, however, they begin to feel dissatisfied as their primary connection to the church is through their volunteer work. Their work feels less and less as a contribution to the Body of Christ and more of a contribution to the show.

The attractional church's solution to this problem is through depicting a process of self-feeding. Self-feeding is the concept that a church teaches a person how to read the Bible and they are then able to provide themselves all the Spiritual nourishment they need on their own. In principle, this should not only be a viable option, but a highly sought-after goal. The unfortunate reality is that many people are not prepared properly to be able to self-feed. In addition to this problem, self-feeding as the only source of spiritual growth should only be a last-ditch option. It should always be the goal of the church to provide an environment where strong spiritual growth is done hand in hand with other believers.

Hybrid

The Hybrid church attempts to combine the best elements of the attractional church and the organic church. It is both a place where people are encouraged to come and experience being a part of the church. At the same time, they are then encourage to go and be Christ in the community. Rod Dempsey summarizes this as, “the hybrid model has taken a small-group

system and laid that system on top of an existing traditional/attractational model.”³⁵ This system provides for an extremely level of complexity that can easily lead to misunderstanding and confusion of what the church is doing or how it is doing it. However, to some people, this model of church is seen as a compromise to entertain the fundamental premise that only an organic church can be successful in truly developing disciples, but the American culture will not normally accept an organic church in its original form.

Organic

The organic model is defined around the usage of small groups. Principally, the concept is born from passages such as Matthew 18:20 that state, “For where two or more are gathered in my name, there I am with them.” Starting small, the community of believers is first and foremost a family. Intimate bonds with other individuals are the core tenant of this community. These people are supposed to be closer than even blood relatives. This is only possible through the intimate sharing of one’s life that is accomplished through the regular meeting of a small group of people. This essential concept forms the basis of the organic church. Although some organic churches will grow past the single small group, the fundamental concept of the small group is maintained as the focus of the church.

Organic churches also trace their origins through three key parables in the Gospel of Mark. Neil Cole describes the first of these as the parable of the sower and the seed that we see Matthew 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20, and Luke 8:4-15. The fact that this appears in three of the four gospels indicates that its significance to the Christian walk is most likely one of the more important aspects. The first part of this would be literally Mark 4:14 that states, “the farmer sows

³⁵ Earley and Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is . . .*, 213.

the word.” The Word of God being the most important first part of the process. However, there is a dilemma in that most churches will adamantly state that they only preach the Word of God. Cole addresses this when he states, “Many would come on Sundays to hear me preach God’s word, but they didn’t receive the seed; they received a message about the seed—a seed substitute.” The second part of this parable is about the soil itself. The soils represent the different types of people that the truth is planted in. The good soil represents people in whom God’s word takes hold and grows. Its growth is displayed by the tremendous fruit it bears. The organic church takes the principle of this parable to heart in that it incorporates the seed and forces a focus on the soil that the seed is planted in. Though seed may get spread to soil that is hard and unreceptive, it can be assured that the seed will not grow there. The farmer is not going to continue to be concerned with this seed that was spread here. His concern is for the seed that is growing well in the good soil. So too does the organic church keep its focus on those that bear much fruit.

Another core principle that makes the organic church is their idealistic view of the body of Christ. These types of churches rely heavily on the idea that an individual will want as many cells in their own body to be as healthy as possible. If 20% of a person’s cells were unhealthy, they would be in a particularly bad spot. A common saying in churches is that 20% of the church does 80% of the work. If a body had 80% of their cells not working, that individual would most likely die. The organic church takes this principle to heart. The nature of the organic church is that every cell needs to be healthy and contributing towards the well-being of the body of Christ. Many non-organic churches will diligently claim that they focus on having each individual healthy in their church. However, when member engagement is measured in most of these churches, there is a level of non-engagement that is considered acceptable. The best engaged

churches are seen at 60-70% engagement. In contrast, a small group of an organic church would not function if only 60-70% of the group was engaged. In this way, it is essential that each person in an organic church are workers engaged in the mission of the church.³⁶

Cole describes another critical element of what makes an organic church unique when he states, “Leadership in an organic church multiplication movement never *prescribes* the work but instead *describes* it, allowing great diversity and multitudes of expression, all containing and contained by the original DNA.³⁷ This is a reverse of the type of leadership that is seen in the other three styles of churches. Instead of a top-down leadership style that allows for micromanagement and control, this style allows for order while still allowing for a unique distribution of authority. The authority in a church normally extends in an understood progression from God, to the head pastor, to the people beneath in each subsequent layer. In the organic church, authority comes from God, but is instead given to each individual person in order for them to accomplish their given role in the church.

³⁶ Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens*, 1 edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 149.

³⁷ Cole, 134.

Chapter 4 – Stagnancy

The focus of this chapter will be on defining what is meant by a stagnant church, as well as possible stages of a stagnant church. Additionally, literature will be utilized to compare and contrast the methods of running a church with what was covered in the previous chapter.

Definition

Stagnancy as it relates to the life cycle of the church will be defined as a plateau in growth of the church population. This paper has already covered why determining the health of a church by its population is problematic, but it is still the easiest mass measure for health. In this section, evidence will be presented that will explain possible reasons why a church goes from growing to stagnant. Furthermore, evidence will be presented to show some common occurrences in a stagnant church so that a church may be able to identify if their church falls into this category.

Change in Function

There are a wide variety of books and articles that discuss the mission of the church. Google Scholar has well over 2 million entries that discuss this topic. To this extent, it is easy to state that there are a wide variety of opinions on what exactly is the mission of the Christian church. The labeling of the mission of the church creates quite a separation even among the protestant churches in America. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) defines a

church as a place where the word is proclaimed and the sacraments properly administered.³⁸ The Southern Baptist Convention defines a church as, “an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.”³⁹ With many other denominations, the range of separation can be extended even further. There is little limit to that which a church may declare as their function. However, there is an extent to which there should be a differentiation between what is the church and what its purpose is. American culture has defined a church similarly to how this paper has. The Biblical definition of a church is significantly closer to the body of Christ. It is the case that the Biblical separation between what is the church and what is the mission of the church is quite clear. The American definition is significantly more muddled because the individual churches must also involve a mission in their identity.

Although Americans have an idea of what the church should look like and what it’s function should be, a thorough analysis of scripture must be included in order to help determine what the true function of the church should be.

Mission

The church that is mission focused will be God centered. It will also be supernaturally empowered. This is most evident through the great commission in Matthew 28:18-20 when Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make

³⁸ <https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Worship>

³⁹ <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/basicbeliefs.asp>

disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

The Biblically minded mission statement of the church is to make disciples that obey everything that Jesus has commanded of his followers. Most churches are going to want to break this down into steps that are more easily specified and established. One example of this sort of process was written by Rick Warren, of Saddleback Church. His five purposes are as follows: “Membership: “Baptizing them” (incorporating into fellowship), Maturity: “Teaching them to obey” (Discipleship), Ministry: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (service), Mission: “Go and make disciples” (evangelism), Magnification: “Love the Lord with all your heart” (Worship).⁴⁰ The purpose of the church is then to act in a way that utilizes what the Lord provides whenever there is an opportunity. Ed Stetzer clarifies this by stating, “One distinction of the missional church is that it gives focus to meeting needs inside and outside the church. It takes care of its own, but it also reaches out for the sake of the gospel.”⁴¹

The good shepherd is one of the most famous analogies that Jesus utilizes for himself. The theme of good shepherd runs through most of the New Testament books. The analogy is supposed to apply to the leaders in the church, who are supposed to be mirroring Jesus as a good shepherd. Many pastors will refer to their church congregation as their flock. Matthew 18:12-13 states, “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he

⁴⁰ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*

⁴¹ Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 5.

finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.” Jesus passionately sought after the lost sheep. As shepherds over a flock of Jesus’ sheep, pastors are responsible for chasing after those that stray from the path.⁴²

Non-Missional

One of the core concepts of what makes a non-missional church is a shift in focus. One such focus would be away from the supernatural empowerment of the church. Jamie Dunlop makes the argument that what is lost is essentially the power behind what makes evangelism and discipleship truly effective.⁴³ Without the supernatural empowerment, these two aspects have effectively been compromised to the ways of the world. Dunlop describes how John 13:34-35 is utilized to show the empowerment of Jesus in His believers when it says, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” It is then clear that the power of what makes Evangelism truly effective is the supernatural power of Jesus empowering those that are going in His name. When evangelism is attempted without the power of Jesus, then the love that is established is not the same love that is described in John 13.

Dunlop describes the second thing that is lost is the effectiveness of discipleship.⁴⁴ Going back to the great commission, Matthew 28:20a focuses the argument by stating, “and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Because of this, the discussion is directed to

⁴² Julia Duin and Julia Duin, *Quitting Church: Why the Faithful Are Fleeing* (Grand Rapids, UNITED STATES: Bondfire Books, 2013), 83, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=3031783>.

⁴³ Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community: Where God’s Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 37.

⁴⁴ Dever and Dunlop, 39.

doctrine. If Christians are to teach the new Christians everything that Jesus has commanded them, then some take this to mean that theology and doctrine are quintessential to the argument of properly disciplined. Dunlop utilizes the verse in Ephesians 12:4 to help make his argument. It states, “then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.” The supernatural aspect of discipleship is in effect the relationship with Jesus that begins and feeds the process that is the believers change into the image of God. Without Jesus in the process of discipleship, the individual may still be able to assimilate some of the outward signs of what a conformed Christian may look like.

There are a few questions that can help identify a church that is focused on the individual over God. “Does the worship service feel exciting and relevant to you? Do you enjoy the music? Is the message inspiring? Are you made to feel special when you’re there? Do your kids have a good time in the children’s ministry?”⁴⁵ These sorts of questions don’t particularly apply to anything spiritual. They look more like a customer satisfaction survey.

Causes of Stagnancy

Church Conflict

The definition for what makes conflict in the church can be difficult to describe. Bill Henard describes it as, “a situation in which two or more members or factions struggle aggressively over what is, or appears to be, mutually exclusive beliefs, values, assumed powers

⁴⁵ Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 158.

or goals.”⁴⁶ A number of issues can contribute to conflict in the church. The first and most obvious of these is spiritual warfare. In Ephesians 6:10-13, Christians are instructed to take up the armor of God and prepare to resist the evil every day. As the Body of Christ is the primary threat for Satan, the church will be one of the core targets in spiritual battles. It can be difficult for some people to come to grips with the spiritual warfare that will occur within the walls of the church. 2 Corinthians 2:11 indicates that there is a possibility that Christians will be outwitted by Satan. It is not that they are no longer Christian, but that they have fallen into a sin. These people will be utilized by Satan to attack the church from within. These people are usually influenced and intermix with the wolves in sheep clothing. Paul goes into detail about these types of people later in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 when he states, “For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.”

The second issue that will show up is power issues. Spiritual warfare will often manifest itself through power issues. Henard describes five separate groupings of people in the church that are all categorized by the amount of time they have spent in the church. The amount of time spent in the church determines the amount of investment in time, service, and money that an individual has put into the church. Conflict often arises from people who are under-appreciated or have things that they value threatened. Clifton describes how this is one of the greatest road blocks in getting rid of programs and features in the church that are no longer of value.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Bill Henard, *ReClaimed Church: How Churches Grow, Decline, and Experience Revitalization* (S.I.: B&H Books, 2018), 91.

⁴⁷ Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 158.

The third issue that creates power issues are various changes in the church. Changes are attempted most readily when a new pastor comes in. Because of the differences in upbringing and experience, any new pastor is going to bring a lot of new ideas and concepts into a congregation. Even more than this, an outside perspective is always going to bring problematic areas to light more readily. The new pastor will want to implement changes that address these problems so that it can begin to grow in both numbers and spiritually.

Another issue that Henard defines is cultural differences. Christianity is a religion that has been commanded to be spread across the world. As such, it will often cross cultural boundaries. While the crossing of cultural boundaries is regularly considered to be an activity taken by missionary efforts, many churches will find themselves among a population that has a number of cultural influences on it or its congregation. Henard states that culture within a church will usually apply to polity, preferences, or personalities.⁴⁸ Polity references the particular procedures and traditions that a given church will create as a cultural norm for themselves. In comparison, preferences are the aspect of the church that are most noticeable, and the most common source of differences. The style of doing various activities such as worship, teaching, preaching, and even decorating can all be serious areas of conflict. Finally, personalities will always clash, regardless of the situation. In the church, where passion is encouraged, negative traits of personalities will come to combat each other even more strongly.

People Think Differently

Culture is radically changing in America. In the past seventy years, the face of America and the minds of its citizens look nothing alike. Yet, with more than one-half of America's

⁴⁸ Henard, *ReClaimed Church*, 93.

congregations having been created before World War II, many churches are struggling to keep up with this massive culture shift.⁴⁹ Society used to be in a modernist view of science and education. Post-Modernism has since taken its place. Some scholars even argue that American society has moved past post-modernism to a sort of post-post-modernism. Regardless of how one wants to label what place society is currently, the end result is that many churches are providing answers for questions that few are asking anymore. Worse than that, many churches are still trying to reach out to people to come to the church on the church's terms. The American people are resoundingly responding with a no.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Aubrey Malphurs, *A New Kind of Church: Understanding Models of Ministry for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, UNITED STATES: Baker Books, 2007), 24, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=570239>.

⁵⁰ Malphurs, 23.

Chapter 5 – Decline

This chapter will present the different factors which are usual signs of a church declining or are bound to correlation with a church that is declining.

Process vs Decision

Some churches will diligently engage in the process of making decisions over the actual outcome of a decision.⁵¹ This is a tendency to hold to the love of meetings. There are a myriad of things to be done at the meetings. Everything from discussing, debating, defining, to describing the issues at hand are the focus of these meetings. The outcome becomes significantly less important than the process of reaching the outcome. Eventually, a point is reached whereby the process overwhelms the ability to reach a point where an outcome can become a reality. At this point, few decisions will be made that are relevant to the continued success of the church.

Own preferences over needs of unreached

Many churches can become lost in the minutia of preferences over issues that assist with reaching out to people or even encouraging spiritual growth in their own walls. Clifton describes how members, "...may passionately deny that they value their preferences over the needs of the lost..."⁵² Yet, in those same churches, there will be heated discussion over the type of music that will be hosted. Discussion over the types of pews that include individual seating for personal space verse pews where people may have to crawl over an individual that sat on the isle is just an

⁵¹ Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 22.

⁵² Clifton, 23.

example of the types of arguments that can show a church's focus personal preferences over discussion that would be beneficial to the welcoming of new members.

Cannot Pass Leadership to the Next Generation

Some churches will diligently discuss their desire to have young people in the church. However, these pleadings are pointless when the church has no plan to identify and utilize young leaders. Some churches will place a young person in a leadership position, but then micromanage and criticize the individual until they leave. Even further, most churches have no program for discipleship for young leaders. When churches lose a pastor, most will resort to creating a search committee in order to find a new pastor to replace the old one. Few churches plan for the eventual loss of leaders by training and guiding younger people to be able to eventually take over. Some people will make the argument that only a special breed of people are qualified to be pastors, or senior pastors. Some arguments include the following: that a pastor must be called, must have received formal training, must have experience leading a church or team, must have experience budgeting, must have experience doing fundraising campaigns. All of these are just the tip of the iceberg in what some people classify as a necessity to be able to lead a church. While many of these qualifications are strong positives for running a traditional church, they are by no means Biblically based.

This dilemma can sometimes be accredited to pride. As a person grows and matures, looking back at people in the same situation as there were in years before makes them seem smaller, immature, and less capable. Sometimes, thoughts will move towards how these

individuals are lesser than the older person was during that same stage.⁵³ This prideful thought then leads to consequences that equate to the next generation not provided with an opportunity to become involved or learn.

Another critical aspect is that many pastors want to run a one man show. Stetzer describes the situation that many churches put themselves in when he states, “Our professional Superman pastor will be trained in exclusive places called seminaries to gain experience in business, family therapy, communication, marketing, leadership, and theology. The pastor will be taught how to lead local teams to spectacular church growth.”⁵⁴ These sorts of leaders don’t want to pass on leadership to other people, and especially not to the next generation.

Cease to be a Part of Their Community

Many churches in America have become commuter churches. There is a discussion of the reach of the church which is the amount of people that a church should expect within a given driving range. There is a distinct lack of vitality in the church in its efforts to be a part of the community. Clifton made the striking statement, “If the church closed tomorrow, it is likely that no one in the neighborhood would fear losing their quality of life or that the neighborhood would be negatively affected.”⁵⁵ Although some churches may choose to express the wonderful things they are doing in their town, their local neighborhood is minimally impacted by the church. To some, this would be a best-case scenario over the churches that have zero impact in their local

⁵³ Larry Osborne, *Sticky Teams: Keeping Your Leadership Team and Staff on the Same Page* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2010), 116.

⁵⁴ Ed Stetzer and Thom S Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Pub., 2010), 78.

⁵⁵ Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 25.

neighborhood or in the larger town as a whole.⁵⁶ Churches can easily end up living in a community, while not being a part of that community. However, “The Christian life, like the church, is lived in the real world.”⁵⁷ The choice to be a part of the real world is not a question or a request made by the Lord. Instead, it is a statement of reality and a command.⁵⁸ The Lord states in Matthew 5:13a, “You are the salt of the earth.” There is no question, or discussion. Later in the verse, he goes on to state that salt that has lost its saltiness is, “no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”

Another way that churches cease to be a part of their community is through their focus on their own members. Multiple programs begin to grow in the church such as church sports leagues or concerts. Various events and programs turn out to be simply a Christian variation of a particular activity. There is nothing wrong with Christians doing these things together, but the problem arises when the Church is doing these activities. Instead of the church being a part of the community, they are trying to become the community itself.⁵⁹

Dependent upon Programs or Personalities for Growth/Stability

For some churches, programs and personalities provide the core aspect of their growth. These churches are the attractional churches. While these types of churches worked in the past,

⁵⁶ Linda Bergquist and Allan Karr, *Church Turned Inside Out: A Guide for Designers, Refiners, and Re-Aligners* (Hoboken, UNITED STATES: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2009), 34, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=468953>.

⁵⁷ Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor, *Bonhoeffer on the Christian Life: From the Cross, for the World* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2013), 69.

⁵⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, unknown edition (Minneapolis, Minn: FORTRESS PRESS, 2003), 113.

⁵⁹ Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 158.

they may not work quite as well anymore. Although there are clearly some mega churches such as Lakewood Church by Joel Osteen and Elevation Church by Steven Furtick that have seen success in the current age through an attractional model, other churches may see a hastening of their demise by attempting to latch onto these methods.⁶⁰

The premise behind programs for growth and stability is particularly logical and Biblical. Every individual in the church has a gift or talent in conjunction with a mixture of passions and specialties. Put all of these together and an individual has the potential to be an excellent leader for a particular ministry. This would be full utilization of that individual and the benefits that they bring to the Body of Christ. There is nothing inherently wrong with this choice of action and is actually Biblically founded. The problem that is encountered is that many of the programs that are allowed to begin are focused around the one or few passionate and talented individuals.⁶¹ If the program does not have a method for replacing those few important people, then the program is bound for failure as soon as the person is no longer able to run it. There are additional potential problems such as the long-term viability of these programs. Even if the critical staff are still able to run it, does the program still serve its vital role in the church? If the answer to that last question is no, then the program will begin to be a drain upon the church in which it exists.⁶² Even worse is that attempting to discontinue these programs can be particularly difficult. Because the nature of these programs involves utilizing people of passion to develop and run them, they will intrinsically be held very dear to certain members of the congregation. No matter

⁶⁰ Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 25.

⁶¹ Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 123.

⁶² Jason E. Vickers, *Minding the Good Ground: A Theology for Church Renewal* (Waco, UNITED STATES: Baylor University Press, 2011), 49, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=1036995>.

how ineffective or draining they are, they now hold a sentimental aspect for some people in the church.

Some scholars believe that some organizations determination to offer as many things is a strong detriment to their success.⁶³⁶⁴ This is an aspect of focusing on breadth instead of depth of programs. This is referred to as the criterion of simplicity.⁶⁵ In this method, an organization is attempting to make sure that every member is addressed on at least a minor level. However, more programs mean less opportunity to do one or two things with excellence. Along those same lines, by having so many programs, people are apt to become confused about the focus of the church. If a person has a particular passion for a church, the church needs to make sure that it is not taking on more than can be safely and efficiently handled by staff.⁶⁶

Confusing the Building for the Church

Care for the church building and property is an essential part of owning a property. There will always be air conditioning units that need to be repaired, walls that need to be rebuilt, and lawn that needs to be mowed. However, a problem arises when the primary focus of meetings and committees is consumed with these sorts of details. Instead of discussing how teams will be reaching out and impacting their community, effort is spent on ensuring upkeep is done well. The church begins to enter a state where it exists almost exclusively to keep the church doors open.

⁶³ Andy Stanley, Lane Jones, and Reggie Joiner, *Seven Practices of Effective Ministry* (Sisters, Or: Multnomah, 2004), 101.

⁶⁴ Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 124.

⁶⁵ Vickers, *Minding the Good Ground*, 48.

⁶⁶ Stanley, Jones, and Joiner, *Seven Practices of Effective Ministry*, 105.

This problem can be seen exhibited in other ways. Jim Putman describes events he encountered such as people complaining about smokers standing near the church, or people wearing hats during the service. He always responds that the building is just a building. The Christians themselves are the church. Secondly, Jesus' regularly associated with the undesirables in the community. If those people are unwelcome in what is supposed to be God's house, then the church is probably not on mission.⁶⁷

Pastor/Staff Does all the Work

The American church has a major problem with being consumers. A pithy saying that is passed around is that the congregation is taught to pay, pray, and get out of the way.⁶⁸ This is about the clergy and laity divide. For many years, the protestant church has been developing a more decisive line between the clergy and laity. The divide began to take root with the development of seminaries. With an education system revolving around training individuals in theology, these individuals soon became the professionals. Although continuing advancement in technology and world development has made the advent of human specialization more developed, the reformation really drove the increasing specialization of clergy. The process moves the work of ministry to the pastor alone. Instead of being a Body of Christ that does the mission of Christ, it becomes a group of people supporting an individual to do the work. Sometimes, a pastor wishes to delegate, but is unable to do so. The inability can be caused by a number of factors. The greatest of these is the inability to understand and appreciate the gifts of

⁶⁷ Jim Putman, *Church Is a Team Sport: A Championship Strategy for Doing Ministry Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 81.

⁶⁸ Ed Stetzer, "Killing the Clergy-Laity Caste System," n.d., 1.

the people and personalities.⁶⁹ Even if delegation does happen, it will frequently occur in a process that forces people who do not fit into the roles to attempt the job. This can cause minor inconveniences like dissatisfaction, to major problems like complete failure of a ministry. Sometimes delegation is given in only halfway steps. Giving the responsibilities over to a person, without giving them the power or authority necessary to either make it theirs or to truly make it flourish. This sort of hold back can be seen as selfish or a lack of confidence on the part of the leader. This halfway act will promote dissatisfaction. Furthermore, Christians are responsible for being good stewards of the resources God has provided. The human resources are one of the single most valuable things that God provides any ministry. Failure to utilize this properly is a significant failure.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence For Every Believer*, New edition (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007), 137.

⁷⁰ Sanders, 139.

Chapter 6 – Proposals

This is where examination of cutting edge literature can be utilized to present the reality of the solutions to churches that do not wish to look at what may happen to them. Finally, suggestions will be synthesized from what has been discussed in previous chapters to make logical next steps for a variety of congregational settings.

Renewal

Church renewal is one of the largest areas of writing in Christian literature in the past 20 years. With the decline in so many churches across America, many churches are looking to make some sort of a comeback. These revitalization and renewal ideas stand as many leaders' last ditch efforts to save their church from being forced to close their doors. There are a wide variety of ideas and methods that are advertised for leaders to utilize.⁷¹ Three major categories reveal themselves among all of the data. The first is the attempt to refocus the church onto a particular idea or concept. The second is an attempt to leave behind past traditions or methods so as to drop the dead weight behind. The final method is a historical perspective to move the church back to what worked in previous times. Between these methods the end result would be a continuation of the church in a way that allows it to remain as close to the original as possible.

Church Refocusing/Specializing

One way of looking at the church refocusing would be to think of church planting from within. This is most easily done when the senior pastor leads. In this situation, the lead pastor

⁷¹ Reggie McNeal, *Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (Hoboken, UNITED STATES: Wiley, 2009), 7, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=427795>.

would look at the situation like a church plant. An entirely new set of standards needs to be made such as the church structure, culture, and decision making process. If the church is the same as it was before, then the results will be the same as the old church.

With the massive spread of programs and features available in churches, a number of leaders suggest that churches would be more effective by learning how to specialize.⁷² This is not to say that any particular type of program is inherently bad, or that there is a definitive limit on what makes too many programs. All of that aside, a church reaches a point where too many programs create chaos in the focus of individuals in the church. By significantly reducing the number of programs that are hosted by the church, focus can be given on incorporating greater numbers of people into the efforts of particular ministries.⁷³ By utilizing more and varied people into each program, there will be a greater opportunity for that particular ministry to be excellent. Instead of catering to a person that is simply wishing to partake in what the church has to offer, the program will focus on the primary mission of the church.

Previously discussed was the problematic issue of churches not understanding how to raise up the next generation. It is important to talk about the inverse aspect of how to properly raise up the next generation through making effective leaders. While this aspect was originally categorized as full generational difference in a church, it is important to recognize that a new generation of leaders in a church can and should include the next group of people to be incorporated into being leaders in the church. Elmer towns quotes Pastor Ted Haggard in his statement, “The pastoral team, the staff of the church, is to serve the people of the church in their

⁷² Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 126.

⁷³ Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning: A 21st-Century Model for Church and Ministry Leaders*, 3 edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2013), 201.

ministry—to empower *them*, to equip *them*, to give *them* tracks to run on for ministry.”⁷⁴ This brings us immediately back to Ephesians 4:12-13. The churches purpose is to prepare God’s people for works of service.

Information and Teaching

In the modern age, information reigns supreme. There is so much information that even specializing in a particularly narrow field can provide a lifetime of learning. As seminaries show, there is a more than a couple of lifetimes worth of information a person could learn about the Bible. However, for people in the church, most of this information is not particularly useful. The historical context of Paul’s hometown has little impact on a person’s difficulty with a narcissistic co-worker. A particularly insightful quote on this subject is, “Most people don’t learn just so they can know more; they learn when they need to know something.”⁷⁵ Identification needs to be made of what people need to learn. This applies to both the staff and the congregation, and it applies differently for each group.

There are plenty of examples of things that can be taught to congregations. The number of suggestions for what a Christian should be taught is seemingly endless. A pastor named Peter Lord was particularly famous for exponential growth in a relatively small populated area. He developed a program called the 2959 plan. This was a workbook that takes new Christians through the process of learning how to pray and helping to ensure that they actively work on it.⁷⁶ It’s not about getting people to read some new book or learn a new fact. Christians should be

⁷⁴ Elmer towns, *into the future*, 163.

⁷⁵ Stanley, Jones, and Joiner, *Seven Practices of Effective Ministry*, 121.

⁷⁶ Peter M. Lord, *The 2959 Plan: A Guide to Communion with God*, 1st edition (Agape Ministries, 1976).

focused on what they need in order to reach maturity. Learning how to pray is a non-negotiable beginning step. What leaderships can focus on is to provide the laity with the tools to be able to teach themselves.⁷⁷ This does require a dedication by the leadership in order to teach the laity how to utilize those tools as well as the constant support that these individuals will need to continue to utilize these tools even without the presence of the leadership guiding the use of these tools.⁷⁸

Seeker-focused vs Seeker-mindful

When discussing the attractional model, the idea of the church being focused on people who are seeking something was heavily pressed. The problems of this model have already been established. The proposition is for churches to be mindful of seekers in their church, instead of having the primary focus being on the seekers.⁷⁹ Because many churches see so few people attending their services that are unchurched, it makes little sense to continue to focus on the seeker as the first priority.⁸⁰ 1 Corinthians 14:22-24 uses the word outsider or unbeliever four times, and these verses incorporate if statements. These verses make it clear that Paul does not consider that unbelievers or outsiders will be an event that will happen every meeting. Quite the contrary, he makes it seem as if their appearance is the anomaly. While he makes it very clear

⁷⁷ Max Anders, *Brave New Discipleship: Cultivating Scripture-Driven Christians in a Culture-Driven World* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 57.

⁷⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, Reprint edition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1999), 18.

⁷⁹ Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 64.

⁸⁰ Ed Stetzer and Dr Daniel L. Akin, *The Mission of Today's Church: Baptist Leaders Look at Modern Faith Issues*, ed. R. Stanton Norman (Nashville, Tenn: B&H Academic, 2007), 18.

that the church should accommodate the unbeliever should they appear, their primary focus is not on these individuals.

Within this same model is the premise that the way you win people to the church is what you win them to. The attractional church is winning people through providing a service for the seekers that is an experience on Sunday. Wilson presents this plainly when he states, “If we attract a crowd by appealing to their preferences, they are going to expect that we will continue to do so, and they will in fact eventually feel cheated or betrayed when we try to switch gears on them.”⁸¹

Being seeker focused will mean that growth of the church is going to be the focus of the church. Rick Warren is head pastor of one of the largest attractional churches in America with a weekly attendance of 22,000. Even he states that, “Focusing on growth alone misses the point. When congregations are healthy, they grow the way God intends.”⁸² However, he also goes further to say that he believes a church must offer the people something that they are unable to get anywhere else. This is the epitome of the seeker model, and what it means to be an attractional church. They are attracting people by providing something they cannot get anywhere else. No matter if this is a “spiritual” experience in the worship service or services like top class child care, they are all attracting people through providing them with something that they desire. The consumerism in this seeker driven model goes so far that people will drive past dozens of churches to go to the one individual church that best fits their desires.⁸³

⁸¹ Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 67.

⁸² Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church*, Unabridged edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 17.

⁸³ Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart*, 2013, 27.

With so many churches being concerned about the number of disciples they bring in, they become completely lost in the depth of the spiritual connection they make.⁸⁴ In essence, this is a discussion of quality vs quantity. Rick Warren states that he believes it is a myth that you must choose between quality or quantity of disciples in a church.⁸⁵ It is not surprising that one of the largest attractional churches in America would state this. If both quality and quantity could be accomplished, then the church would be a leading example of the power of God. A problematic statement from Warren is that he states that quantity is, “how many people are being brought to Christ, developed to maturity, and mobilized for ministry and missions”.⁸⁶ He states this without stating what it means to be developed to maturity. Developing to maturity is the most important aspect to the Christian walk, but few people are willing to define what a mature Christian is. Warren does make a solidly Biblical point that if quality disciples are made, quantity will follow. If people connect on a deep, spiritual level, then the church will see growth as more and more people buy into the mission and vision of the church.⁸⁷

Factors that impact the effectiveness of lay leadership

Spiritual giftedness is an aspect of Christian leadership that has received growing popularity in America.⁸⁸ Romans 12:6-8 describes many of the spiritual gifts that a Christian

⁸⁴ McNeal, *Present Future*, 24.

⁸⁵ Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church*, 51.

⁸⁶ Warren, 51.

⁸⁷ Michael Jenkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context* (New York: Oxford Univ Pr, 1999), 13.

⁸⁸ Towns and Bird, *Into the Future*, 171.

could have. Christians are commanded to make use of these gifts for the benefit of the body of Christ.

Effective leaders

The number of pastors that exist in America are not keeping up with the growing population. Furthermore, there is a startling lack of training for these pastors. Malphurs and Penfold make the observation about what the majority of seminaries teach when they state, “there much on church history, the original languages (Hebrew and Greek), Bible knowledge, preaching, Christian education, and so on, and these are important to the curriculum.”⁸⁹ However, the core aspect that is not being taught is leadership. Without a strong leader, a given church will languish in what it will do. Even in an organic church, some level of strong leader needs to lay down the foundation that is the focus on training every individual into a leader. This will usually happen as a more natural process of the organic church. However, for all the other churches, the head pastor is where the strong leadership must come from. But what makes for an effective leader?

Vision for Leaders

Vision is one of the most important aspects an effective leader will need. Proverbs 29:18 is a famously quoted passage, because it states, “Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained, but happy is he who keeps the law.” For the leader of the church, vision should be paramount. In the business world, vision is a core aspect of what a business is expected to have before it ever opens. When a business is losing profit, they will usually look to the leader for a

⁸⁹ Aubrey Malphurs, *Re: Vision: The Key to Transforming Your Church*, 2014, 30.

vision for the company.⁹⁰ In much the same manner, churches who are declining will look for a visionary leader. However, pastors that are found usually do not have any sort of vision when it comes to training other leaders.⁹¹ For those pastors that have a vision for the church outside of this, their effectiveness may be lackluster.

Producing the desired results can seem like an insurmountable task, but there are a few steps that an individual can take in how to create a compelling vision. Malphurs describes this in a six-step process.⁹²

1. Pray

This is not a unique step to Malphurs. Although some authors will assume that prayer is a given necessity, leaving this step out of a list can be a flaw.

2. Think big

This step is important because many visions end up being particularly small in order to accommodate a person's expectations that God will have a limited influence on the outcome.

3. Connect emotionally with the vision

Does the vision work to enable individuals to be able to picture the visions mentally? If so, then then the vision can begin to connect to the individual emotionally so that they are more likely to take that vision on as their own. There are a few steps for an emotional connection with the vision. First, the people need to be able to see the vision. Then, they need to think that it's an achievable vision. A vision that is viewed as unreachable or unrealistic will discourage the

⁹⁰ J. Richard Hackman, *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances*, 1 edition (Boston, Mass: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), 215.

⁹¹ Malphurs, *Re*, 29.

⁹² Malphurs, *157*.

emotional connection. Finally, the people need to want it with a sense of urgency. Their motivation for achieving the results will be fueled by their desire to see the vision complete in a meaningful amount of time.⁹³

4. Decide on the vision's contents

The statement of the vision needs to be particularly short. Barna describes the max length for a vision statement should be no more than a paragraph with the best visions being shorter than that.⁹⁴ Some may argue that two to three sentences are insufficient to be able to describe the vision as God has provided to them. This usually reveals an insufficient clarification of the vision in the mind of the leader. While there is plenty of time to be able to expand on the vision and go into much greater detail, a one to two sentence length should be looked at as a well captured idea.⁹⁵

5. Determine the vision's length

The length of the vision statement is often particularly long. Organizations will go to great lengths to cover every aspect of what they want their vision to look like. This will often limit effectiveness. A long vision statement will hamper the ability for people to easily communicate it as well as to easily remember it. Instead, a short and pithy saying will be much more effective to communicate, often for both the leaders and the followers of the church.

6. Answer the vision question

⁹³ Pat MacMillan, *The Performance Factor: Unlocking the Secrets of Teamwork* (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 49–50.

⁹⁴ George Barna, *The Power of Vision: Discover and Apply God's Plan for Your Life and Ministry*, Revised, Updated edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan.: Baker Books, 2009), 129.

⁹⁵ Barna, 130.

“Will you be a church simply with a vision statement or a truly visionary church?”⁹⁶ This is the part where implementation of the vision becomes important. In order to develop a compelling vision, one must ensure that the church will embrace the vision and run with it. However, no matter what vision is developed or who develops it, there will be consequences. The biggest of these is that some people will leave the church because of the vision. There is no way to satisfy everyone and attempting to do so will result in an organization that is void of direction and effectiveness.

Biblically speaking, a leader is servant. The concept of servant leadership is a topic that is thoroughly discussed in Christian literature as well as in the academic setting. There are many verses that can act as a basis for servant leadership. One of the more prominent verses is Mark 10:45 where he states, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In this regard, Jesus came and turned the concept of leadership on its head. Jesus doesn’t make the concept of servant leadership a question.⁹⁷ Verses 42-44 make this abundantly clear by stating, “Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”

The purpose of a Biblical leader

⁹⁶ Malphurs, *Re*, 160.

⁹⁷ Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus*, 1 edition (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 12.

Biblical leadership should be on the basis of raising up leaders. Ephesians 4:12 makes it clear that the church leadership is intended to train the saints to do the work of ministry. In Hebrews 10:24, we see an expectation for Christians, and especially of the leadership when it is stated, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds...”.

How Leaders are Made

Many people will offer evidence that the only true leaders are born. The abilities that make for a truly gifted leader are ones that are inherent and cannot be taught in any sort of environment. This is the classical nature verses nurture argument. Can leaders be made, or are they born? Many teachings from Jesus seem to indicate that leaders absolutely can be made. His disciples are one of the best examples of men who were particularly unremarkable in their lives before Jesus came across them.⁹⁸

A good beginning place for making leaders is by creating a leadership environment. Aspects like valuing a team approach to ministry is essential in this regard.⁹⁹ Instead of putting value on the professional clergy, an effective leadership environment puts emphasis on the lay person as the driving force and primary worker of ministry. Stetzer makes an incredible observation when he discusses the work of Satan by saying, “Among his numerous strategies, one of his favorites is to keep Christians convinced that ministry must be left to professionals.”¹⁰⁰ More than just utilizing the lay person, a leadership environment will emphasize a narrower mission focus. It is essential that as many individuals as possible are on the same mission focus

⁹⁸ Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, 33.

⁹⁹ Stetzer and Rainer, *Transformational Church*, 93.

¹⁰⁰ Stetzer and Rainer, 93.

as the leader.¹⁰¹ Without this, various people will be trying to push the church in a different direction than the pastor.

Osborne suggests, for senior pastors, a three step method to making leaders of people who are already into the process of being a leader.¹⁰² The first step is to empower and platform individuals. Empower means to provide them with the resources and support to be able to get the job done. The platform is the type of social status that an individual has. An example of this would be the understood difference of power between a senior pastor and an associate pastor. By providing an individual with a title of appropriate status, that individual now has the authority of a title to help assist while the authority gained by reputation is being built. This is the difference between legitimate power and expert power. Legitimate power is the power of a position of authority. Expert power is a process that is slower to build up, and relies upon reputation.¹⁰³ The process of creating a role to provide authority is a part of what it means to create a supportive context.¹⁰⁴ The second step is to include the new people in the meetings and keep them in the loop. Allowing people to be in the same room as important decisions are being made means that they feel they are a part of the team. This is important even if the understood role is that their input is not counted for the final decisions. The third step is about who gets to take over holes in the ministry. Many churches will employ a method where a void in the church staff will be filled by the first available warm body. The method moves even further by enabling a queue to be formed that is dictated by tenure. If the only method for upward movement is by the death of a

¹⁰¹ MacMillan, *The Performance Factor*, 46.

¹⁰² Osborne, *Sticky Teams*, 116.

¹⁰³ Rodney Napier and Matti Gershenfeld, *Groups: Theory and Experience* (Houghton Mifflin College Div, 1992), 232.

¹⁰⁴ Hackman, *Leading Teams*, 142.

senior staff member, then leaders are going to be turned away from the church. Instead, each position needs to be filled by the most qualified individual possible.

How do Leaders Utilize the Lay-Person?

Many times leaders in church will try to utilize people by generically telling them that the leadership needs them to do something. This is a generic form of requesting utilization. What normally happens in this sort of situation is that a positive response may be given by the requestee, but that little or no action will occur because of the circumstances. Instead, a more direct and hands on approach needs to be taken. Ed Stetzer describes a case which he used in his own church when he states, “Jerry, we want you to do this, but we want to train you for this. We have a course we want you to go through, a series of three courses. Would you go through this one with us?”¹⁰⁵ Some may see this as too in depth or hands on. What this really does is allows the individual to get over the initial excuses of not knowing what they are doing or not being trained properly to be able to do whatever activity is desired of them. While there may be significant resistance to this sort of program at first, it will have the opportunity to greatly increase the results of a particular ministry activity. The church leadership is fulfilling its’ duty in training the lay individual.

Ed Stetzer suggests four critical aspects to what it takes to utilize the lay-person. The first of these is creating effective communication. Pastors in particular have the single most effective place to utilize effective communication if they so choose. The pulpit is America’s greatest strength in this regard. No other method is going to address the larger church body at one time. Utilizing the time available at the pulpit to push the vision of the church body learning

¹⁰⁵ Stetzer, “Killing the Clergy-Laity Caste System,” 2.

about their gifts and using them is going to be one of the first places to go. There are many other effective methods for communicating such as bulletins, emails, and small groups. Major encouragement needs to go further so that each individual that is already engaged in the church will address people that are not engaged in one-on-one conversations.¹⁰⁶

Stetzer's second suggestion is that of empowered leaders and unafraid pastors. Pastors that are unafraid of the unknown that is allowing other people to do what they are currently doing. Particularly small churches see a big problem when they attempt to move from a solitary pastor doing everything, to having other people help out in various ways. Areas that are as simple as taking care of the children or being in charge of outreach can be a formidable thing for pastors to allow other people to intrude upon and take over. As the church grows, the pastor will be forced to think more about being a leader of leaders.

The third suggestion is affirmation. People need encouragement to continue working diligently and passionately. Every volunteer that works in the church deserves recognition at some point. Making thanks and gratitude a part of the church culture will help to keep the focus on the efforts of those that sacrifice for the church. While this does marginally play into feeding the ego of individuals, many churches will go far to the opposite side of the spectrum to never give thanks to these individuals. Fundamentally, people desire to be appreciated. Further from that, they desire to feel like they are making a difference. The majority of people that want to volunteer at a church are doing so because they are passionate about giving their efforts and talents to the Lord. It can be difficult for these individuals to see what they have done and see the difference it makes. If the person who folds the bulletins every week does show up, someone else will take over. As mentioned earlier, individuals can start feeling like cogs in a wheel. Each cog

¹⁰⁶ Stetzer, 5.

being completely interchangeable. A culture of affirmation and recognition of work will help to fight against the anonymity that people can feel in these positions.

The final suggestion by Stetzer is about assessing the individuals in the church.¹⁰⁷ This is an important step for not just the laity, but also for the clergy. Hopefully, the clergy will have already completed this step, but confirmation is beneficial. Spiritual gifts are one of the most important tools that a Christian has. Peter addresses spiritual gifts in 1 Peter 4:10 when he states, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.” As a power that is bestowed by the Holy Spirit, Spiritual gifts manifest themselves in numerous ways. Many churches do not utilize spiritual gifts in any meaningful way. It is impossible to utilize spiritual gifts if the majority of attendees at a church do not even know what their own spiritual gift is. In 2009, Barna did a study that indicated that 68% of all people who say they are Christian in America noted they have heard of spiritual gifts.¹⁰⁸ Just because a person has heard of spiritual gifts, does not mean that they know what spiritual gifts are. Barna stated that 15% of Christians in their study did not know what their gift was. Another 21% of all respondents stated that they had gifts that do not fit any the lists of gifts found in the Bible. Another 28% of the people claimed that they did not have a Spiritual gift. A grand total of 64% of their participants were unable to even attempt a solid guess as to what their spiritual gift might be.¹⁰⁹ For an individual to understand what their spiritual gift is only the beginning of the process but will significantly help them to begin to understand their personal

¹⁰⁷ Stetzer and Rainer, *Transformational Church*, 86.

¹⁰⁸ “Survey Describes the Spiritual Gifts That Christians Say They Have,” Barna Group, accessed October 23, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/survey-describes-the-spiritual-gifts-that-christians-say-they-have/>.

¹⁰⁹ “Survey Describes the Spiritual Gifts That Christians Say They Have.”

responsibility in the Body of Christ. Stetzer summarizes this issue in a profound statement. He says, “They need to be aware that the power of effective ministry comes from the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. The need to know of their gifts (knowledge) but must walk in the power of the one who gifts (empowerment).¹¹⁰

Breaking Traditions

Breaking traditions can be a lot of things for churches. The bottom line for this is envisioning a change of some type and motivating the church to allow this sort of change to take place. The most important first step is having a leader with a vision. Since what it means to have a visionary leader has already been covered, it is prudent to move onto the next step that is to have a culture of change.¹¹¹ The first step to creating a culture of change is to align the church’s population with a uniform vocabulary. Many of the disagreements between churches are the result of utilizing the same words with different understood definitions. Even inside an individual church, this same problem frequently occurs and causes problems. The beginning steps are to allow an open forum for discussion where the discussion can revolve around the collective movement of the church. If the church can agree that working as a singular unit is a desired effect, then utilizing the same terminology to decrease conflict will be a natural step that the people will be significantly more willing to take on.

Terminology is not the only particularly difficult area. That is a topic that is only within the same language. Many churches face the problem that they are in area that hosts more than one language as a part of the cultural makeup of the community. If the church only speaks

¹¹⁰ Stetzer, “Killing the Clergy-Laity Caste System,” 10.

¹¹¹ Malphurs, *Re*, 166.

English in a community that primarily speaks Chinese, they will not be effective. There must be an adjustment to the culture that the church has found itself in. This concept moves even further in that the culture that a church finds itself in will necessitate a change in how the church operates.

One definition of culture is, “a church’s congregational culture is its unique expression of the interaction of its shared beliefs and values, which explain its behavior in general and display its unique expression of its shared values and beliefs.”¹¹²

The culture of the church can be defined in three levels. The first level is the church’s outward behavior to the community. Everything about this would be the things you physically see and experience about the church. This involves a lot of things, such as the church’s actions in the community, its buildings, and its rituals. Many other things can be hosted in that list, but the fundamental aspect is that these are the things that a person experiences about the church that make it unique. Even if two churches utilize the exact same layout for the building, their physical grounds will probably be different. This creates a unique difference for the churches.

The second level is the core values. The values are the fundamental basis for the behaviors that observed. A church that only utilizes traditional music and services does not value the contemporary practices. A church that has people continually sharing their beliefs with others is most likely to have a high value on evangelism.

The third level is the core beliefs. Beliefs are not simply the theological or doctrinal beliefs. Beliefs that are also relevant can include things like the usage of technology, communications, and social media.

¹¹² Malphurs, 172.

Before attempting to change the culture, the current culture that exists in the church must be prepared for change. A church that is well set in its culture is existing in a *status quo* world. One idea for preparing this change is to cause pain. Humans are naturally going to want to move away from pain. In this case, pain is caused through presenting the current situation the church is in as problematic. A poignant method for doing this is to directly ask some hard questions. A church that is in decline will have specific numbers on attendance and giving. Asking them to estimate when they will be forced to close their doors at the current rate will force them to acknowledge the state they are in.

Going Back to What Worked

Many churches who face struggling times can be heard reminiscing about the past. If only the church goes back to good preaching or focusing on the word, then it would be fine. One of the greatest arguments for returning to what worked includes the focus on solid theology. A foundation of solid theology is absolutely necessary for a healthy church. However, there is a question as to what counts as a solid foundation or theology. For example, a theology of worship will involve a focus on God and shun away worshiping worship or the people.¹¹³

There can be issues with focusing on what used to work, though. Paul states this clearly when he writes in Philippians 3:13-14, “Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Many churches are living in history. They are constantly gazing back to their glory

¹¹³ Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 97.

days, wishing to revive them. Despite this, most historians will utter something along the same message as George Santayana uttered in saying, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”¹¹⁴ There is much to be learned from the previous generations in terms of their ecclesiology. Giving up solid and Biblical preaching is not necessarily the answer. Some people adamantly fight for retaking the best principles of what makes preaching necessary for the current church, despite the best protests from some modern churches.¹¹⁵ D. L. Moody recognized the need for Biblical preaching when he stated, “I believe the reason people won’t come more than they do into our churches is because we don’t feed them enough on the Word of God. They have been fed on sawdust long enough... give people the Word of God and they will know the difference.”¹¹⁶

Death and Re-utilization of Assets

When it comes to actually accepting the death of a church, hard truths are faced. Many Christians talk about the tough love required when rebuking a fellow Christian who has strayed from the path. However, this tough love is decidedly unpracticed when it comes to rebuking a church that has strayed from the path. Even if the church has not strayed from the path, it’s nearness to closure indicates a necessity to face some tough realities. Mark Clifton makes a stark statement to this effect by recounting the parable of Jesus and the fig tree.¹¹⁷ The Luke 13

¹¹⁴ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, New edition edition (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1998).

¹¹⁵ Jim Belcher and Richard J. Mouw, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Westmont, UNITED STATES: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 144, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=2009923>.

¹¹⁶ Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, 113–14.

¹¹⁷ Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 8.

passage describes a fig tree that was not bearing fruit. The parable goes to tell of how the vineyard owner did not make excuses but cut down the entire tree. Clifton applies the parable to the church. If year after year, a church does not bear fruit, then the solution is to cut down the tree. Surely the wood can be utilized for a fire, and the land can be tilled so that it can be utilized again. In much the same way, the church can be broken up. It's various assets such as the land, building, and equipment can be utilized by other churches. The members that are left in the congregation can join another congregation that is in a healthy state.

There are some considerations to include with the reutilization of assets. The first of these is the value of assets. For example, an evaluation of the building should be done. Many churches place a strong importance on their physical building. This importance runs so strongly for these members that they will desire to keep the building even in the case that it would cost less to destroy the entire building and build a bigger or more up to date building. This is an example of allowing the emotional connection to an item, such as a building, to effect a churches ability to impact the world for the Kingdom of Heaven.¹¹⁸

If the building is in good status, there are a multitude of ways that it can be re-utilized. There are few suggested ways that a building could be introduced back into being utilized for ministry. The first would be to give the building to a church plant. In principle, the church would simply hand over the keys to the new church and allow their operation to take over the use of the building. Of course, this is going to be extremely difficult for a church to accept, because of the aforementioned emotional connection that most churches in America have with their building. Another, less strenuous option would be to share the building with a new church plant. Because of the cost and difficulties in finding a meeting space, providing an operational space for a new

¹¹⁸ Clifton, 32.

church will allow them to get past the toughest aspects of planting a church. This option could also provide benefits for the existing church through means of providing insight into ways to address the changing community population. A third option would be for a church to merge with a church plant. This is going to be a much more difficult process. Instead of simply accepting that the old church is done and a new church is in its place, this option prolongs the church entity. However, the difficulty that is faced is that the declining church will have to give up many of its dearly held preferences in how things are operationally run. Many people will find this abandonment of long held principles to be unacceptable. They will leave.

Another option that a number of churches have taken over the years is to merge two churches together to attempt to create a stronger church. There are three basic types of church mergers. An adoption type merger is where a stable church takes on a struggling church. A desperation type merger is where two churches that are both willing to admit they are failing and attempt to combine together in an attempt to survive. The final type of merger is the rarest. It is called many things, but marriage merger is a term commonly seen.¹¹⁹ This is where two strong and healthy churches merge together to create a more powerful entity. Both churches would have to re-align their vision to create a unified vision and make a new leadership structure. A successful church will almost never consider this a valid option. A powerful quote by Tomberlin about the situation of mergers is, “the decision to merge usually does not happen until church leaders conclude that the pain of not changing is greater than the pain of changing.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Tomberlin, Bird, and Groeschel, *Better Together*, 22.

¹²⁰ Tomberlin, Bird, and Groeschel, 24.

Conclusion

The Body of Christ is the unified assembly of all Christians. In American culture, the Body of Christ is a concept that is mostly forgotten or ignored because of the divisive state of denominations. If approached as a whole, the church in America is expected to act dramatically different from what has been historically seen.

The state of the church in America is one that has been previously ignored. Conflicting statements by some authors make it seem as if the Church is doing perfectly fine in terms of keeping its growth in line with the growth of population in America. However, growth equal to the increase in population is not the level of growth that should be seen if the church in America was healthy as a whole. Despite all of this, more reliable data indicates that the situation is much more desperate than the best-case situation would lead people to believe. This tremendous decline needs to be a wake-up call for American Churches.

By analyzing the three stages that make up the life cycle of the Church, it is easy to see how the birth and growth follows the Biblical description made in the Body of Christ. However, with a distraction from the mission that the church should be following, the churches eventually fall into what seems like an irrecoverable position. Although many churches are never able to recover, there are a number of options that a church in decline can take to help recover from this state. These options range from changing the core DNA of what makes up the church, to recovering their mission, to allowing the assets God has given them to be used by other people.

The number of proposed suggestions to assist in renewal is an extraordinary list. However, a good number of suggestions continually come up time and again. Refocusing and returning to what previously worked is one of the preferred first efforts because it limits the amount of change required. Other suggestions such as working on developing and utilizing a

new vision can require significant change. Some suggestions work against the entire culture of the church. The development of pastors that are true leaders, lay-leaders, and the redistribution of power that is associated with these tasks will create entire shifts in how a church operates.

Other suggestions proposed are to break traditions or change how information and learning are utilized. The final suggestion was to determine how a church may dissolve its formal structure and allow its assets to be better utilized by other congregations. While this not a comprehensive list of all the possible solutions to the decline of the church, it will provide a starting place for churches seeking to stem the tide of failures.

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