

Reclaiming Glory
Revitalizing Dying Churches
Mark Clifton

Chapter 1: new life for dying churches

It is tragic that so many churches do just the opposite of what they are eternally designed to do. As a living organism, the body of Christ the church is to grow reproducing frequently and generously.

When churches start to plateau or decline rather than seeking a kingdom legacy defined in Matthew 28 they turn inward focusing on saving themselves rather than advancing the kingdom of God. 70 to 80% of our churches are in the state of plateau or decline.

- **Revelation 2:5** reminds us that we should repeat the earlier things.
- We need to refocus on the kingdom. No cold cup of water offered humbly in Jesus name is without eternal impact.
- *We need to focus on multiplication. We never bear fruit by trying to “save ourselves” but by “losing ourselves” for the sake of Christ and his church*

Southern Baptist churches are losing more than 900 churches every year. 90% of those churches are in our cities. **Seven out of 10 churches are either plateaued or declining.** Revitalization must be our focus!

The following are important as a church moves in the direction of revitalization:

1. repent of past mistakes
2. pray with a passion focus
3. embrace meaningful and biblical change
4. *become externally focused*
5. become relevant to the local community

According to life we research statistics, only about 15% of Southern Baptist churches are healthy, growing, and multiplying.

- Stagnant or fruitless churches have the following characteristics:
 - new disciples are not being made as demanded in Matthew 28
 - Neighboring communities are not being transformed by the power of the gospel.
 - **A church that is not producing fruit does not accurately and biblically reflect God’s glory.**

Question – we must identify what it means for a church to bear fruit.

- What constitutes biblical success in the life of the church?
- ***In Matthew 28 as Jesus was about ready to depart from this earth, he didn’t ask his disciples to***
 - ***gather larger crowds or***
 - ***to raise large sums of money***
 - ***or to construct great buildings***
- Jesus commanded us to make disciples! **Matthew 28:19 – 20 states “go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.**
 - Revitalization success is therefore characterized by a pattern of making disciples who make disciples which results in a community being noticeably better.
 - In reality, declining churches don’t have an attendance problem, a giving problem, or a baptism problem. They have a discipleship problem.

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- In **1 Thessalonians 2:8** the Bible states, “we cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives because you had become year to us”
- In **Luke 13** Jesus tells the story about a man who had a fig tree in his vineyard that had not produced fruit in three years. The vineyard owner solution was to lower the expectation of the tree. He didn't urge the vine dresser to ignore the problem and hope it would just go away. He didn't offer excuses for the unfruitful less, such as predators or unfavorable weather. His command was short and clear cut it down.
 - We can have a similar expectation when it comes to declining churches.

Church planters clearly indicate that it is easier to start a new church than to resurrect a dying one.

- The question we must ask is what's right and what's expedient in God's economy?
- Struggling churches should haunt every pastor and every Christian.
- When was the last time a local suburban community experienced a healthy local neighborhood church that was involved in the community?
 - People within our communities often see church as *an irrelevant place where people whose lives are nothing like mine do things that have no connection to how I live my life.*
- **What about a dying church brings glory to God? Answer – nothing.**
- *Pastors often risk their reputations, their livelihoods, and their emotional health when they get involved with plateaued struggling churches*
- **A dying church robs God of his glory. Nothing matters more than God receiving glory.**

In Ezekiel 37 we have the prophetic vision of dry bone's. God had given Ezekiel the on inevitable task of preaching to spiritually dried up people who were obviously well beyond their heyday.

Christian churches die for one reason and one reason only: **they stop loving what they once loved and stopped doing what they once did.**

- The church in Ephesus in **Revelation chapter 2** was admonished to “remember how far you have fallen; repent, and do the work she did first”.
- The pathway therefore for stagnant or declining churches is:
 - repent
 - remember
 -

God's people are not to live selfishly but for the glory of God. Note **Ephesians 3:20 – 21.**

Is the ever present physical church building that we see a constant reminder of who God really is?

Within the book “Let the nations be glad”, John Piper cites Psalm 92:1 and Psalm 67:3 – four as he writes “missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When the siege is over, and the countless millions of redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is temporarily necessary. But worship abides forever. Worship therefore, is the fuel and goal of missions. Is the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory. The goal of missions is the gladness of the People's and the greatness of God.”

In Matthew 5:16 Jesus gives us a primary motivation for revitalizing dying churches. “In the same way, let your light shine before men so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven”

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When the church begins to revitalize people begin to see a living picture of what the gospel looks like, what was once dead is now very much alive.

Survival and nostalgia along with warm memories are no reason for a church to stay open. Ed Stetzer has stated, “nostalgia is a cul-de-sac. It leads to nowhere.

Question – what will keep a pastor and his church excited, focused, and sacrificially committed to the goal of making disciples over the long haul?

As a pastor if you are looking for a low stress easy way to spend the next 5 to 10 years of your life do not attempt to replant or revitalize a dying church. Replanting and revitalization are literally fighting for the glory of God.

Chapter 2 – Diagnosing a Dying church

Characteristics of a dying church:

1. They value the process of decision more than the outcome of the decision.
 - a. They don't know how to make real and significant change but they still meet and go through the motions that they have done for decades.
 - b. Their well-known processes of comfort bring security to their church life experience.
 - c. It seems that as long as they continue the process they are keeping the church alive. How foolish.
2. They value their own preferences over the needs of the unreached.
 - a. Most members of the congregation focus on their own desires instead of what would meet the needs the people who do not know Jesus.
 - i. A church with the heart of Christ and the salvation of souls will thoughtfully and sacrificially consider the interests of others more valuable than their own.
3. They have the inability to pass leadership to the next generation.
 - a. Although they may want young people do they have a strategic plan in place and meaningful leadership to provide ministry to young families and youth?
 - b. If you don't provide young leaders the opportunity to lead in your church, they will eventually go somewhere else where they can lead.
4. They cease common often gradually, to be part of the fabric of their community.
 - a. Members of declining churches rarely live within walking distance of the church. They have long ago moved to other parts of town. *What was a community church has now become a commuter church.*
 - i. *It matters little to most members that the church is even in that neighborhood.*
 - ii. The church often pays little attention to the needs of the community and the community knows little about the church.
5. They grow dependent upon programs or personalities for growth or stability.
 - a. Programs and personalities do not turn churches around. It is the power of the Holy Spirit through prayer through embracing the changes needed, and through becoming healthy again that will turn the church around.
 - b. There is no silver bullet program for fixing the problem
 - c. churches are often trying to use attraction on methods in a community that no longer response to those methods.
6. There is a tendency to blame the community for a lack of response and in time they grow resentful of the community for not responding as it once did.

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- a. Declining churches are slow to believe that the problem actually lies within. In Revelation 2 and three Jesus calls these churches to repent and remember.
 - b. Declining churches often mistakenly assume the community is there for them. The opposite is true.
7. **They in this to size the pain of death with an overabundance of activity and maintaining less fruitful governance structure.**
- a. It's not enough to simply get busy doing "church stuff".
 - b. We must not have a full slate of church activities for activity's sake.
 - c. We must realize that being busy is not a form of obedience
 - i. Being busy can become a source of pride which is sin.
8. **They confuse caring for the building with caring for the church and the community.**
- a. Unfortunately the primary motivation of remaining members is often to "keep the church doors open"
 - b. The church must be maintained, however when there is more focus on maintaining the building then reaching the lost in the community the church is headed for an eventual death.
 - c. We must pass the question, "can this stagnant declining church be saved".
 - d. ***God will only resurrect dry bones if the people are willing to seek him his glory and his plan above all else.***

Some churches cannot and will not be saved. Jesus has promised that his church will never die and it will not, but local expressions of the church have come and gone since the days of the New Testament writers. None of the seven churches in Revelation 1 – 3 are in existence today.

The question should never be, "can we save this church", but "how can God get the most glory from this congregation?"

1. Is the church in a location where there is a need for a new church?
 - a. If the church exist to serve a local community but there is no longer a local community is there reason to exist?
 - b. Is the neighborhood already saturated with gospel preaching theologically solid churches? We should always ask the question: is there a need?
2. Has the community changed and can the facility be used as an incubator for multiethnic church plants?
 - a. If the sanctuary is too large a problem is presented. If it seats 300 and you only have 75 guests who attend do not recognize the 75 present but the 225 empty seats. Reclaim every inch of that building for the kingdom and find ways to use it.
 - b. ***Your building communicates a message to your neighborhood. Declining churches often tell the neighborhood that the gospel is irrelevant and unimportant.***
 - i. The facility should look alive, filled with ministry and activity, and be well-maintained.
 - c. Remember that the glory of God in the neighborhood where the facility exists is at stake.