

A Place that Offers Life

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"Finances are tight, and our numbers are dwindling. The congregation is looking to me to turn things around. So is my denomination—that's exactly what I was told when I was appointed here. And, frankly, that's my expectation too. Isn't that my job?" says a pastor of a congregation that has been experiencing decline for many years, voicing the belief of many congregations, denominations, and pastors that when a congregation is declining, it is the pastor's job to fix it.

Here's the hard truth. If you're a layperson in a congregation that's experiencing decline, whether the congregation thrives is ultimately up to you and the other members. Your pastor can teach, guide, lead, support, inspire, even cajole. But in the end, congregational health is a function of how people in the congregation relate to one another, to God, and to their community. A congregation is a microcosm of the greater church, a local embodiment of the body of Christ. In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). We believe this is one of the primary messages that a healthy congregation embodies for its members and its surrounding community.

A congregation that is truly being *church* brings people into a loving, life-giving relationship with God and others that is transformational. This is the nature of the *kin*-dom of God, where covenant relationships model the best aspects of family. People find hope. They experience belonging; they extend and receive forgiveness. They discover a sense of purpose and direction. They learn to live with appreciation and joy no matter what the circumstances. Although a pastor can preach and teach this message, the message has power only to the extent that the people in the congregation live it and practice it with one another. Practicing loving, life-giving relationships transforms congregation members. Witnessing such benefits draws others who want something similar for themselves and their families.

Businesses are based on the premise of offering something of value—goods or services—to a customer in exchange for money. Successful businesses "give value for money." Gimmicks and fancy features may bring people through the door, but people won't buy unless they believe they'll receive something of worth. And they'll return and recommend the business to others only if they receive something of value. Congregations are not businesses, yet they can fall into a similar trap of thinking that it's the features and the gimmicks that people want. A congregation's greatest asset, the unique gift it offers, is the people who make up the congregation and the possibilities for transformation they embody.

When we talk about congregational renewal, we mean a renewal of the people's ability to notice and experience God in their midst, a renewal of the congregation's desire to partner with God in achieving God's aims for the world. The term renewal implies that the congregation knew how to do this at one time and that the work is a reclaiming of a lost skill. We find that's not always the case. Some congregations we've worked with have no memory of ever having been a church that talked openly about God and matters of faith. The people have no memory of the congregation's ever having had an evangelistic bent. However, we have yet to encounter a congregation that, when asked to recall moments when its church was really "being church," couldn't name sacred moments when God seemed present and people found healing and hope.

The church-growth movement is often blamed for leading congregations down the path of thinking that bigger is better and that increased numbers equal health and growth. That movement did, however, help raise the question of how to measure congregational health. If the measure is not dollars in the bank or people in the pews, what is it? We hear congregations and pastors wrestling with questions that weren't on the table twenty years ago. "What's the fundamental purpose of church? What difference is a congregation supposed to make in the lives of its members and in its surrounding community? What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? What does it mean to be spiritual? What difference do spiritual practices make?"

These challenging questions are the foundation of renewal, the building blocks of a new future. They are not, however, the point at which most congregations start. Fear of having to close the church or to reduce the services offered to members typically prompts a congregation's desire for renewal: "We need to do something now, if we're going to still be open a decade from now." This desire to avoid death drives many renewal efforts, and it certainly provides energy. But if the congregation itself doesn't ultimately trade its fear of death for a longing for life, the efforts will end as soon as the danger has passed.

The aim of renewal is not a bigger building or high-tech worship or a slew of professional programs but a new way of looking at church, the work of a congregation, and what it has to offer the world. Congregational renewal is a renewal of the people's understanding of their relationship with God, their relationship with their community, and their calling. In the most fundamental sense, congregational renewal happens through "people renewal." What's renewed in congregational renewal is the people's understanding of their relationship with God, their relationship with their community, and their sense of calling.

No pastor, no program, no resource can make renewal happen. On the other hand, almost any pastor, program, or resource can help renewal unfold when the people of a congregation deeply desire a new and better life and are willing to do what it takes to get there. The hard part can be developing that desire. As long as life together is satisfactory, there is little impetus for change.

Over and over we hear congregations wishing that the people in the community would become active in their church. What drives that desire is revealed in their response to the question "Why?" Any time a significant number of people answer, "To keep our programs running and our doors open," we know that the congregation is in trouble. It has moved to the point at which the people beyond its doors are valued primarily for what they can bring to the church. People in the community are seen as the congregation's salvation, rather than the other way around.

Attempting to lure the new population group, the congregational leaders add programs and make changes they imagine will appeal to the people. Surprised and frustrated when their changes show little result, they redouble their efforts to find the right program. This work is misdirected. The congregation is not declining because the community around it has changed, or even primarily because the church's form of ministry and worship feels foreign to those in the neighborhood. The real and deeper issue is that the congregation has lost connection with a Christian church's basic mission: helping people experience God and connect with the gospel message of life and hope.

Declining congregations have lost connection with the Christian church's basic mission of helping people experience God and live the gospel message of life and hope.

Without this sense of mission to keep the congregation focused beyond the doors of the church, the congregation turns inward and loses connection with its community. Before others

will turn to a congregation as a life-giving resource in their lives, the congregation has to be **a place that offers life**. When traveling by plane, passengers are reminded that in the event of an emergency they should put on their own oxygen masks before helping others. In congregational renewal, a congregation reminds itself of and intentionally engages in the basic practices of Christianity. It realigns itself with the basic outward-focused mission of church.

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