

Injecting New Life Into Your Congregation



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Growing in a No-Growth Town

Realistic help for churches facing seemingly impossible odds.

by Charles Yarborough

Growth in this little church seemed impossible. First Christian Church in Albany, Kentucky, was started by sixteen people in 1834. The original church building was destroyed by fire on March 20, 1926. The congregation, broke and in despair, made its own bricks, built a new church, and moved into it November 6, 1927. It is still in that building today.

The church suffered a split in the late 1950s. By the late 1980s, attendance had dropped to an average of twenty. Sunday school attendance was in the low teens. The youth program had two members: a 12-year-old girl and a 5-week-old boy. Most members were retired.

This small church is in Albany (pop.: 2,500), a non-growth town in south central Kentucky. While the scenery is breathtakingly beautiful, the county has little industry. Unemployment is high. The nearest medium-size city is fifty-five miles away. Almost all young people leave town after they graduate from Clinton County High School.

I asked church members how long it had been since the last family moved into the area. No one could remember. This church was only two or three funerals away from closing.

My assessment of this church's potential needed to factor in the power of the Spirit of God. That power touched the small group of mostly senior citizens in the Albany church. They decided to grow.

In our first four years of effort, we added fifty-seven members. We keep struggling to maintain our growth, hoping and praying for just one more new member. They keep coming. It's not a mad rush, but growth is steady. Sunday worship attendance is now in the fifties rather than at twenty. There are twenty young people active today, rather than two. The congregation purchased a new Allen organ and new choir robes. An old garage next to the church will be renovated and connected to the church building.

Ours is not a rags-to-riches story of church growth. It is a story of a small church that struggled to stay alive under the leadership of a new but aged pastor who should have been thinking about retiring instead of leading a small church in a no-growth town. For what it's worth, I'd like to pass along some ideas that put our church into action and broke the bonds that held us back.





Draw on History

Three weeks after I arrived, I was looking through some old church files when I found some old record books. I read that “Raccoon” John Smith, one of the founding fathers of our denomination, had preached in this church. He and fifteen others founded the church. His grandson helped make the Communion table and pulpit, which are still used every Sunday.

I could not believe that this great church, a community landmark since 1834, was so close to closing its doors. I wasn’t sure I had the energy to lead the people in a church growth program. Yet I couldn’t stop thinking: *It just doesn’t seem right that this church should close its doors. If it is closed, who will have the dubious honor? Me? One of the relatives of the founders?*

Through an afternoon of tears and prayer, I came up with the sermon I needed. That Sunday I preached on, “Who’s going to turn off the lights in First Christian Church?”

During the sermon, I read this statement from the display case downstairs: “From the beginning it was a church of vision, a church that tried and succeeded in living out the gospel as Jesus set forth. They lived through some of the toughest times in American history. They survived. Their flames may have flickered as the winds of the Civil War blew around them, but the light remained bright, and has continued to burn.”

Then I said, “We will not say to our children, ‘The last one out, blow out the lamp and sell the building. It’s all over.’ Let us never let that happen. Instead, let us say to them, ‘Take this lamp and handle it well, because it will light your way as it has for those before you.’ Let history record these words, ‘In 1989, a small group of servants known as First Christian Church in Albany, Kentucky, fought back. Because of them, the flame of the lamp glows brighter than ever!’”

When we sang the hymn of commitment, “O Jesus, I Have Promised to Serve Thee to the End,” nine people came forward, saying, “We will never close this church.” The first to come forward were the descendants of our founders. We found hope for the future in the church’s history.

Most small congregations feel threatened by growth. They fear they may lose their identity if they get bigger. They ask, “Do we want these new people coming in here and taking over?” Or, “If we grow, I may have to give more money and do more work.” Some people are just opposed to change. We did what we could not to hurt people who resisted change, but we also insisted that we had to build Christ’s church. I tried to help people see what will happen if they didn’t grow. “Church growth is a lot more fun than turning off the lights in your church,” I said.





Build Friendliness

I did a modern adaptation of Luke 5:17-20 to encourage people to be like the four friends who brought their neighbor on a stretcher to the feet of Jesus. I tried to help people see the positive motivation for church growth—to bring others into an encounter with Christ. That has become our theme.

Before your church can grow, you must have prospects, and you cannot get prospects if you don't have a friendly church. Visitors who come to a cold, unfriendly church are not likely to return.

Most small churches are quick to tell you, "Why, we're the friendliest little church in town." Most are friendly to their own members, but in truth, they often ignore the lonely visitor. They're so busy being neighborly to their neighbor that they pay no attention to others. For some reason, many small church members are afraid they are going to bother the guests.

To break the ice, we asked people to greet others during worship. Following the opening hymn, I said, "Would you please remain standing and greet those around you, especially our guests?" The first Sunday I tried this, people just looked at one another. No one moved. So I stepped down from the pulpit and greeted two people in the second row (my mother-in-law and father-in-law, who were visiting with us).

The next Sunday I again asked people to greet each other. My wife, Linda, greeted someone, then two choir members and members of the congregation joined in. We were off and running. Now people look forward to this time of greeting.

I've learned that if you don't have a record of your visitors, you can't follow up on your best church-growth possibility. Many small churches use a guest register, which is a great idea for funerals and weddings but a total failure in churches. I know how beautiful the gold-lettered guest book is (and it was given in memory of Aunt Ada), but many guests walk past the register and never see it. Those who do sign it usually list just their name and city.

So we asked deacons and ushers to pass out visitor cards and pencils during the time of welcome. The cards ask for a guest's full address, ages of children, and more. We follow up on visitors with what we call "pie evangelism"—taking them a pie, cake, cookies, or home-baked bread. We don't let the person who baked the pie take it to the visitor, however. Instead, specially trained delivery people do that.

The delivery people say, "Hi, we're John and Kathy from First Christian Church. We just wanted to stop by and tell you how happy we are to have you visit our church. We keep saying we're the friendliest church in the world, and to prove it, we brought you a delicious apple pie." People say thank you, which gives our delivery people their opening. "I'm just the delivery person," one will say. "Mrs. So-and-so baked this pie for you. I'll be





happy to point her out to you next Sunday.” That way, the prospect meets two church members rather than one.

That approach has helped us reach prospects who visit our church more than once. It has also helped us to build friendliness, which is the foundation for growth.

Hold Special Events

Anytime you have a crowd in a small-town church, it’s a big deal. It gives you a positive appearance in the community.

One event that helped us was Friend Day. We used the program from Church Growth Institute (800-553-GROW). At first, I had my doubts about the program, but that one day (and the follow up) did more for our growth than any single event.

A committee of our best workers met every Monday night for eight weeks, prior to the target day of April 1. After the first meeting, I announced to the congregation that we were going to have a Friend Day on April 1. They all smiled; they had heard this kind of thing before. The next week, I said that our goal for Friend Day was ninety people. One lady said, “You’ll never get ninety people in here.” I agreed with her that we should change the goal. We upped it to 110.

Every Sunday I began to read letters from the town’s VIPs—the mayor, county judge, school principal, and bank vice-president—who were accepting invitations to Friend Day. The program began to gain credibility. On Friend Day Sunday, our attendance, which had been twenty-nine people for nine months, shot up to 151. We followed up Friend Day by making seven contacts with each prospect within seven days.

Challenge Members to Reach Neighbors

Most people don’t feel comfortable evangelizing their neighbors. I’m often told, “Pastor, he’s my neighbor, and he’s definitely not interested in being a member of our church.” We have tried to relieve that pressure by teaching people how to bring their neighbor to an encounter with Christ. We say to them: “Just bring people you know. You will be most effective in reaching your mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, cousin, co-worker, or friend. No one in the world can reach this group as well as you.”

The process takes time. We have found that it takes an average of thirteen months for a visitor to unite with our church. Foothills people are slow about making commitments.

We also teach people to ask a simple but specific question: “Do you attend any particular church on a regular basis?” The last four words are key. We don’t ask, “Do you belong to a church?” or “Do you go to church anywhere?” Most people belong to some church, even if they haven’t attended it in the past forty years. When a person responds,





“On a regular basis? No, we don’t attend church very much,” you can talk about your church.

Pay Attention to Young People

On my first Sunday evening service at First Christian Church, I asked our congregation, “What changes do you want to see in this church?”

The majority said, “We want more young people.”

I then asked, “Who will work with them?”

Their excitement crashed. No one, including the preacher, wanted to take on the role of youth leader. I had served a large church as minister of music and youth, but that was twenty-two years ago. I then realized, *Our problem is not a lack of leadership. Our real problem is finding young people.*

There is one sure way to get young people: take them on a trip. Albany is about five hours from the beautiful Smoky Mountains, so we decided to hold a youth retreat in the Smokies. I’m still not sure where they came from, but six teenagers came to our retreat. Following the retreat, all six were baptized and received into the church.

In addition, we added a children’s sermon to the worship service. We’ve found that parents go to a church where their children are happiest.

Reaching young people has been our most difficult task. But over time, things have happened. We now have youth activities, three children’s Sunday school classes, and a nursery.

Improve the Music

A well-prepared organist truly lifts the spirit of worship. Yet so often, we try to get by with a person who can’t play. The music program is stuck until he or she is replaced.

We also continue to use incompetent musicians because of relationships. “Aunt Ada has played organ for us for sixty-five years. She was good enough for us in the past when nobody else would help us, so why not now? She would never think of charging us to play. Now you want to spend all this money by paying an outsider when we could continue using Aunt Ada for free?”

We need people like Aunt Ada. We should never make a dedicated servant like her feel unwanted. Still, sometimes a pianist or organist is simply not musically or physically able to continue. Hiring a pianist could solve the problem. Use organ and piano together. Select choral music that will challenge an older musician to work harder.

One of two things will happen. The extra practicing will make Aunt Ada a better musician, or she will decide it’s time to retire. If she makes that decision, host a church-





wide retirement dinner in her honor. Award her with a certificate of appreciation and a nice gift. If she has played free for many years, the church owes her a great debt of gratitude.

Here are some ways to make a small choir sound great:

- Start singing simple unison music, if need be.
- Hold a music school to teach people who can't read music. This could be held immediately following choir rehearsal for about six weeks.
- When the music calls for a soprano solo, and you don't have a soloist, use all the sopranos, or all the women, to sing it.
- Select music that encourages a big sound. It's easier to sing out on "Onward Christian Soldiers" than on "Nearer My God to Thee."

Motivation for Growth

The growth committees in our church include people in their eighties, in their fifties, and a few younger. But all are dedicated to the goal of bringing others to have an encounter with Christ. Although some people in our church are opposed to change, almost everyone has enjoyed seeing our congregation come alive and grow—even those who were originally opposed to it. People from other churches are enthusiastic about our growth, too. The talk around Albany is, "First Christian is really on the move." That has given our people a lift. It's pretty encouraging for a small church in a no-growth town.

*—Charles L. Yarborough recently retired as minister
of First Christian Church in Albany, Kentucky.
Adapted by permission from *Jump Starting the Small Church* by
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Overcoming Our Inferiority Complex

How one congregation found new confidence.

by Peter Youmans

People in Hazard, Kentucky, already struggle with a poor self-image, and comparisons with “The Dukes of Hazzard” TV show don’t help. For the record, the “Dukes” were caricatures from fictitious Hazzard County, Georgia.

Here in the town of Hazard, I’ve never seen Boss Hogg, our police officer isn’t named Enis, and Uncle Jesse’s boys don’t drive wildly around “these here parts” in an orange Dodge Charger named “General Lee.” But in Appalachia, we still combat stereotypes, and because of them, we suffer from inferiority complexes. Even the church I pastor has a problem with self-image.

When I came to Davidson Baptist Church in Hazard, its members were defeated and divided. They couldn’t agree on much, and they had little hope for reaching the community. Even though its average attendance of 130 was large for the area, the church was not sure it could afford a full-time pastor. Every aspect of life reflected the mindset: “we’re just a poor little church.”

I’ve discovered that my situation is no different from that of many pastors. Whether it is a rural church with limited growth potential, a downtown church whose neighborhood has changed, or a congregation struggling in the shadow of a megachurch, the problems are often the same. These churches are unable to see themselves as a ministry of importance. They have low spiritual esteem.

Why They Feel That Way

There are several contributing factors to a church-wide inferiority complex. Sometimes a church puts up a false front to hide its insecurities, much like the blustering bully does on the playground. One member told an interested visitor we were “too big” and were no longer taking new members. This bully front was a defense against the instability newcomers might bring to the church.

A second source of inferiority comes from the culture. Because of past experiences with outsiders—government and media, for example—anyone moving into our area is viewed with suspicion. You have to work hard to earn the locals’ trust.

Families and communities are so closely knit that they resist any change that might affect those bonds. Some families even discourage their children from traveling to attend college in order to keep the close community together.





Economic factors also play a part. Much of eastern Kentucky is cut off from urban areas because of an inadequate highway system. Until recently the only real industry in the area was coal mining, which has never been consistent. And without new businesses, the population has declined rapidly. Schools face falling enrollments, and jobs are hard to find. Many young couples must either live off welfare or leave the area, further discouraging the people who've stayed behind.

An area's theological heritage also affects a church's self-image. Circuit-riding ministry was common in this area well into the 1960s. Consequently, many people around here perceive bi-vocational preaching as a sign of deep spirituality. More than once I've heard, "I wouldn't go to a church that pays a preacher."

Because of the area's history of poverty, many view with suspicion any type of church offering. A man complained to me about a friend who sat next to him each week in church. "He has a good job and he never puts anything in the offering plate. I always put my dollar in!"

I thought he was joking. He wasn't.

With Hazard's residents holding such deeply ingrained attitudes, I knew there would be no overnight solution. After several years of struggling against these forces, I had almost given up. We had lost a few key people, the economy had grown worse, and the church bills were barely being paid. I, too, was beginning to feel like a failure. I shared this with a man who had been there for years.

"But, Pete," he replied, "you don't see where we've come from; I do."

While the area's population had declined, our membership had actually increased, he said. Our offerings were up. More important, we had put into practice 2 Corinthians 10:5: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

Unintentionally we had begun to address the causes of our ecclesiastical inferiority complex. Now, I would work on that more intentionally—and with vigor.

Growing Godly Confidence

Our people needed a fresh perspective. Here are the ways we developed godly confidence:

1. I began preaching about underdog churches. When I preached on the churches in Acts, we found that the poor, young congregation of Philippi was a constant blessing to Paul and the church of Jerusalem. Likewise, in Hazard, we learned that a church's social standing has nothing to do with its spiritual position.





2. A new strategy for decision-making made everyone important. A small but significant change in how the church is governed altered our approach to big decisions. For years, leaders had maneuvered the church's by-laws to support their opinions. Politicking and procuring of votes often prevented the church from moving ahead.

We ended majority rule. Instead, we agreed to seek consensus on a vote before moving forward. Now we depend on the Spirit of God, rather than machinations and manipulation, to bring about decisions. If some people struggle with an idea, we table it and allow the Spirit to work in the hearts of our leaders. Not only has this stopped the stumping for votes, but it has also focused our leaders on seeking God instead of seeking to have their way. It is amazing how often our leaders change their opinions, now that God's will, not their way, is at stake.

3. We got a second opinion and a new outlook. The myopia that low self-esteem produces had kept our church from seeing its potential. Years ago, for example, our leadership suggested that we pave our parking lot. It was a simple change that we had hoped would increase the attractiveness of the church to visitors.

The congregation quickly stifled the idea. "Convenience is not enough reason to spend that kind of money," people said. Even though I tried to present a greater vision, as long as that vision was mine alone, the church fought it.

We began bringing in leaders of other churches who had accomplished great things with the Lord. As the speakers shared their stories, some people in our church began thinking, *If God could do that with their church, then he can use us here.*

4. We took field trips. We began visiting other churches and attending outside conferences. Our members saw firsthand what others were doing and began catching a vision larger than Hazard's.

Our young people went on a short-term mission trip to the inner city. They were stretched, and they loved it. One of the young men decided that God wanted to use him in full-time ministry. This fall he became the first teen from our youth group to study for the ministry.

Several churches in our area forbid using musical instruments in worship. When I took some of our men to a Bible conference, they got to hear different worship styles. When the men returned, they helped us to introduce new types of music (even a video projector!) to the congregation. Today, teens use guitars in our evening service. That has invigorated our church's worship.

Recently, our leaders revisited the idea of paving the parking lot. As the church has grown, parking has become a bigger problem. Numerous visitors have mentioned passing us by because they did not see a space. This time the leaders recognized paving





the lot, not as a matter of convenience, but as an issue of evangelism. The paving proposal passed without argument.

Conquering Our Final Fear

After sixteen years as pastor in Hazard, I thought we had overcome our inferiority complex—until a recent board meeting. As we discussed amending the membership requirements for missionaries, one man offered a familiar refrain: “If we do this, the church will be taken over.”

Apparently he and others were so concerned about the changes that outsiders might introduce that they wanted to prohibit even our missionaries from having any say in the church.

After a lengthy discussion, the issue was dropped. But at the next board meeting, this same man raised the issue again. To my surprise he said, “I have been thinking about how I would feel if I attended a church that I could have no real part in. I think we need to change our constitution.” He became the point man for some major changes that followed.

For years, people in Hazard had been suspicious of strangers, wondering, *Why would anyone want anything to do with us?* Today people know that God has a great plan for us, and we all have a part in it. There’s nothing inferior about that.

—Peter Youmans is pastor of Davidson Baptist Church near Hazard, Kentucky.

“My Church’s Inferiority Complex,” LEADERSHIP, Fall 2003, Vol. XXIV, No. 4, Page 78





Myths About Church Growth

Busting common misconceptions about expansion and change.

by Lyle E. Schaller

The typical congregational planning process is overloaded with wishes, dreams, and myths that undermine effective decision-making. Nine common examples illustrate this syndrome:

Myth 1: If we build it, they will come.

“We now average about four hundred at worship, and we have designed a comprehensive strategy to double our membership over the next six years. The recent and projected population growth in this community suggests that is a realistic goal. Therefore we have launched a capital fund campaign to double the size of our physical facilities. We’re convinced that if we build it, they will come.”

Reality: That slogan was a great story line for a wonderful baseball movie, but for churches, it overlooks two crucial variables. First, the initial focus on responding to rapid population growth should be on expanding the ministry and raising the quality of what is offered. Adding program staff should come before constructing additional facilities.

A second issue is the assimilation of newcomers. Unless the process for the assimilation of new people is improved and expanded, a 50 percent increase in membership may produce only a 10 percent increase in worship attendance.

Myth 2: Don’t make changes in the first year.

“When I came to this congregation, three veteran pastors advised me to spend the first year identifying the lay of the land and getting acquainted with the people. They warned me to minimize the number of changes I should introduce in the first year.”

Reality: That may be wise advice for congregations whose leader left under a cloud and for whom the number-one priority is reestablishing trust in the office of pastor. In most churches, however, the new pastor would be wise to take advantage of the honeymoon period to (a) earn trust, (b) build alliances with future-oriented leaders, and (c) initiate overdue changes.

Myth 3: Friendliness makes visitors return.

“We’re a friendly church. We make it a point to welcome every first-time visitor. Less than a fourth of our first-time visitors, however, return a second time, and fewer than half of those join our church. How can we be more effective in persuading visitors we want them to return?”



Reality: While some church shoppers, especially those who live alone and those who were born before 1935, place friendliness at the top of their list in evaluating churches, the vast majority have another criterion: Will this congregation appear to be relevant and responsive to my religious needs?

Myth 4: Money precedes ministry.

“If we could solve our financial problems, we could concentrate on evangelism, missions, and improving our ministry. Our people, however, are not generous contributors. Every year we have a deficit in our operating budget. What can we do to improve our financial base?”

Reality: In one of five congregations, this is a genuine problem. But in most churches, a financial squeeze is symptomatic of a larger issue. The three most common causes of a low level of financial support by the people are (a) a low level of commitment resulting from low expectations, (b) no compelling and unifying vision of what God is calling this congregation to be about, and (c) inadequate internal communication of financial needs. When these conditions prevail, a low level of financial support is inevitable.

Myth 5: Effective leaders are facilitators.

“I was taught in seminary that a pastor should be an enabler or facilitator.”

Reality: The enabler style of pastoral leadership is appropriate in perhaps 75,000 Protestant churches in the United States. These congregations average forty or fewer at worship. Most of them want a loving shepherd, not an initiating leader. That may explain why they remain small.

Another 75,000 Protestant congregations average 125 or more at worship. In these, the guiding principle is that the larger the size of the congregation, the more important it is for the pastor to accept and fill the role of initiating leader.

Myth 6: Community growth means church growth.

“The planners tell us the population of this community will double during the next decade. We must plan to accommodate the influx of newcomers. If the population doubles, our church should at least double in size.”

Reality: The number-one consequence of rapid population growth for long-established congregations is usually not an increase in attendance. A more common result is a sharp rise in the level of competition among churches. New congregations are founded. Several existing congregations upgrade their physical plants or relocate to a larger site and construct new facilities. Staffs are expanded, ministries are enriched, and new programs are designed to reach the newcomers.

A second result is a rising demand for quality. The long-established congregation that earned a grade of B on the quality, relevance, and scope of its ministry ten years earlier



waits patiently for newcomers to come knocking on the door. The church shoppers, after comparing this congregation with the competition, will likely give it a grade of C or D. Rapid population growth means the bar for a grade of above average has been raised a couple of notches.

Myth 7: Economy of scale applies to church.

“Our basic overhead will remain the same whether we average 300 or 500 at worship. The cost of our insurance, utilities, staff, and the amount we allocate to missions will rise only slightly if we grow, but a 50 percent increase in size should reduce our per unit costs by at least a fourth.”

In the business world, we call that economy of scale.

Reality: Unlike the assembly of automobiles or the manufacture of legal drugs, the economy of scale rarely applies to churches. As a general rule, the congregation averaging 150 at worship will need about \$29 per worshiper per weekend to pay all operational expenses, including missions. For the congregation averaging 500 at worship, that figure is more likely to be \$30 or more, and for the congregation averaging 800 at worship, it often is closer to \$50 than to \$20.

The explanation is in the size. Attracting 500 to 800 worshipers usually requires a higher quality ministry than is needed to attract 150. Very large congregations usually offer higher quality programs and more choices. In addition, they tend to be more sensitive and responsive to the needs of younger generations. That requires more money.

Myth 8: Accommodate everyone in one service.

“We’re so crowded for space we’ve had to go to four worship services every weekend, one on Saturday evening and three on Sunday morning. Our dream is to build a new worship center in which we can accommodate everyone at one service on Sunday morning. That should reinforce our sense of community.”

Reality: That may be the dumbest myth on this list. Cutting back to one worship service on Sunday would mean that most, if not all, of the people would have to change their schedule. That would probably reduce worship attendance by at least 15 percent.

A wiser alternative would be to answer two questions: First, how can we sharpen the differences among the four services so that each serves a clearly defined constituency? Second, when should we add a fifth service to the schedule and what people should it reach?

Myth 9: Sermons should be shorter.

“I’ve been told that sermons are getting shorter. In the 1950s the typical sermon was thirty minutes. In the 1970s it was twenty-two minutes, and now I’m told I should plan on sermons lasting no more than fifteen to eighteen minutes. Television and the faster pace of life have shortened people’s attention span. I noticed at the Republican



Convention in San Diego last August that most of the platform speeches were ten minutes or less.”

Reality: Those are two irrelevant reference points. The number-one context for the length of sermons is the size of the crowd. Three basic generalizations apply.

First, the larger the number of people in the room, and the greater the degree of anonymity among the people, and the larger the proportion who have been worshipping there for less than two years, the more time is required for music and intercessory prayer to transform that collection of individuals into a worshipping community. Small congregations take five to fifteen minutes. Very large congregations take twenty-five to thirty-five minutes.

Second, the larger the crowd and the greater the emphasis on teaching, the longer the sermon should be. That also applies to the need for humor, change of pace, revealing personal anecdotes, and redundancy.

Third, unless it includes a highly liturgical format built around the Lord’s Supper, the larger the crowd, the longer the service. Forty to fifty minutes may be appropriate when attendance is less than a hundred, but if it exceeds five hundred, the worship experience should be in the sixty-five to ninety-minute range.

—Lyle E. Schaller, parish consultant for the Yokefellow Institute, lives in Naperville, Illinois. He is a contributing editor for Leadership.

“You Can’t Believe Everything You Hear about Church Growth,”
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Helping a Settled Congregation Move Ahead

Seven steps to the future.

by John Beukema

A pilot and his mechanic were driving each other crazy. One day the pilot turned his plane into the shop with a complaint, “Unfamiliar noise in engine.” The next day the plane was back in service. The pilot checked the logbook to see what problem had been found.

The entry read, “Ran engine continuously for four hours. Noise now familiar.”

One of the greatest barriers to change in the church is that a congregation becomes so familiar with a problem it no longer recognizes it as trouble. The pastor is often more sensitive to the need for change. How can a pastor help a church recognize a problem and respond to it?

I have observed seven steps.

Step 1: Commit to the knowledge process

In my first pastorate in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, I was visiting a woman who was a long-time member. I had been pastor at the church for almost a year and was beginning to feel at home. The homey feeling evaporated when the woman fixed a steely cold New England gaze on me and said, “Young man, you are not a Cape Codder, and you *never will be* a Cape Codder!”

I believed her. Rather than committing myself to know Cape Codders, I withdrew. I did what I was gifted at and most comfortable doing: preaching and leading. But I soon discovered that my gifts lacked full potency because they were cut off from people. The intervening dozen years have underscored the value of committing my time and energy to knowing people.

When I came to my current pastorate, I publicly promised to spend time with as many people as possible, as quickly as possible. This helped build trust in my leadership. The more people feel they know me and the more I make an effort to know them, the more they will be receptive to change.

I also read every document I could find on our eighty-five-year history. I questioned everyone from past church members to the village barber. I am surprising long-time members with information about the church they didn’t know.

The time spent in knowing people and the history of a church tackles two major obstacles to change. It calms people’s fear that I will negate their past. And it calms people’s fear that I will push the church into something that doesn’t fit who they are.



Step 2: Cultivate a perception of crisis

Our first elders' retreat since I became pastor prompted a lot of prayer, asking for God's wisdom for dealing with our declining membership, our landlocked facility in Toronto, and the future of our ministry.

We came to quick consensus that God wanted us to stay in our community. At that point the chairman produced a letter from a neighboring church. "Since we've decided not to relocate," he said, "perhaps this offer is something the Lord wants us to consider." The letter asked if we were open to a merger. The other church was affiliated with a different denomination than ours but was in a similarly state of decline. The thirty-year-old daughter church of that church was included in the proposal, creating the potential of a three-way merger.

We began an intense process of prayer, discovery, and organization. After a year, the result was an overwhelming "no" from all three churches, but I couldn't have known the good that would come out of the process. For years there had been attempts at significant change in our church. When I candidated at the church, the elders told me that if significant changes weren't made soon, the church would die within five years. This dire pronouncement was even made to the congregation. Yet it wasn't until we invested a year in serious merger talks that the congregation finally believed it was in crisis.

Within four years we had a new building and a new organizational structure. Today the church ministers to four times as many people as it did ten years ago. I didn't plan that merger crisis, but I did learn how important it is for a congregation to perceive crisis if change is to occur. Crisis may be the only way a congregation will hear troubling noise in its engine. I'm not advocating that pastors invent crises; just make use of the ones that arise.

Step 3: Craft a consensus

When our elders began initiating change, we soon were spinning our wheels. "Let's have lunch with Ralph," a long-time elder said. Ralph was the last guy I wanted to bring into the situation. He was self-important, loquacious, lacking in spiritual depth, and, for all his years at the church, had never held an official leadership position. I knew Ralph had the ear of a certain group, but I didn't think it was significant. The elder convinced me to lunch with Ralph anyway.

That lunch was the first of several. Along the way, Ralph proposed ideas I had recommended and contributed several I hadn't thought of. Most important, Ralph helped us out of our rut by opening us up to other influencers. For example, Ralph would say, "We're going to need money for this. Don't worry about it. There's more money in this church than anyone knows. Leave that to me." I did.

I learned that winning key people is half the battle in bringing about change. I didn't see Ralph personally mature in the process, but the Lord used Ralph to bring changes that resulted in the salvation and spiritual growth of many others.



In *The Leadership Challenge*, James Kouzes and Barry Posner write, “Leaders involve, in some way, all those who must live with the results.” Through important periods of change, I have used several methods to involve those who must live with the results.

- Gathering focus groups from within the church to help test and sharpen the issues.
- Involving key influencers early in the process. This helps win them over, gives them opportunity to broaden the base of support, and adds depth to my ideas.
- Presenting written proposals to key people and groups as drafts and starting points for discussion rather than completed documents. Resistance to allowing anyone to tamper with my perfect plan is poison.
- Delegating parts of the research process to as many other people or ad hoc groups as possible.
- Holding question-and-answer sessions. The earlier in the process and the more inviting of ideas, the better.
- Taking every opportunity *not* to take the credit.

Step 4: Conceptualize the promised land

Unless the pastor can picture the promised land, he may lose the participation of two key groups of people: the “Marthas” and “Marys,” patterned after Jesus’ friends from Bethany.

The Marthas are people who have taught three- and four-year-olds, ushered, served in the nursery, cleaned up after church dinners, written to missionaries, or worked with landscaping. Unless I conceptualize the promised land for Martha, she will grow weary. She has to see the priceless value of her labor as it relates to the larger ministry of the church.

In a recent talk to a group of ushers and nursery workers, I said, “On Sunday morning, you have the two most important jobs in this church. To visitors, how they are greeted and how their children are cared for will be more important than what I preach. Without your ministry, these visitors will probably not come back again.”

One long-time usher replied, “It’s about time somebody realized that.”

The Marys in a church are people who will not involve themselves without a vision of the promised land. Years ago an extremely talented family left our church. We had a plan for change that would enable us to grow and expand. Yet this family kept asking annoying questions: “Why are we doing this? How will these changes help us to accomplish what God wants for us, beyond physical growth? What will our church look like when all this is over?”



It was demoralizing to lose this family, yet now I realize the validity of their questions and the missing part of our plan for change. Our vision was not significant enough. It did not include a picture of the promised land. When we do picture the promised land for people, they find motivation.

Once, right before presenting some major change proposals, I preached a sermon on Joshua 14: “Caleb offered no excuses that the city walls were too big, his enemy too strong, his people too impossible. ... He left a legacy of wholeheartedness. ... The question is, What will we leave for the next generation? What great challenge has God called us to meet? What kind of ministry will reach our children with the gospel?”

One result was that an 80-year-old woman caught the vision. “I’ve been thinking about craft classes as a way of ministering to our community,” she said to me. “Would it be all right if I tried to organize something like that?”

A “female Caleb,” she envisioned craft classes complete with childcare, refreshments, and a simple gospel message. She saw it as an entry point for retired couples, stay-at-home moms, and shift workers. This woman not only understood the ministry picture we had drawn for our church, she also saw how she fit into that picture.

Step 5: Communicate redundantly

As part of a major shift in direction, the elders and board spent the better part of a year drafting changes to the church’s constitution. I preached a series of four sermons communicating its underlying biblical principles. We published a paper that explained what we had done, and why, and mailed one copy to each member. Later we put another copy in every church mailbox. Finally, we scheduled two open sessions for the congregation. The first meeting gave information, restating what was published. The second meeting was to answer questions.

At the second meeting one man stood and said, “I don’t know why you’re trying to shove this new constitution down our throats. We haven’t even had a chance to talk this through.” After an uncomfortable silence, numerous people responded without being recognized by the moderator: “You should have come to the question-and-answer meetings.” “Didn’t you read the information paper? It was all in there.”

Sheepishly, the dissenter relinquished the floor. The new constitution passed unanimously.

You can’t overdo communication. Lyle Schaller says, “All important messages should be sent out on at least five different channels of communication.”

Step 6: Clarify criticism

Two of our key young leaders were presenting ideas for a major addition to our building. They had done their homework and provided charts, conceptual drawings, anecdotes from our history, and energetic enthusiasm. The two had anticipated every question.



Then, right near the end of the presentation, Sam, a well-respected, fifty-something member, made a speech. In two minutes Sam seemed to undo what had been done the previous two hours. “We can’t afford this,” he carped. “Look at how few of us there are. Out of all the people here, look at how many are retired or will retire soon. I suggest we forget this grandiose idea and hold on to what we’ve got before we lose that.”

My mouth hung open. I didn’t expect this from Sam, a former board chair. Single-handedly he had delayed further discussion.

Two months later my wife and I received an invitation to attend a party for Sam’s early retirement. Later, after Sam and his wife moved to Florida, I put the two incidents together: his stonewalling and his retirement. I concluded Sam had felt that he needed to protect the congregation from the removal of his spiritual and monetary contributions. I still felt he was wrong, but the incident encouraged me to try to understand why someone opposes a change.

Now, when I encounter opposition to an innovation, I ask the person to help me understand what they object to and why. For example, several people objected when we turned the sanctuary into a multi-purpose room, although pure necessity had led us in that direction. I discovered a variety of reasons for the opposition. “What about the flags?” asked one veteran of World War II. “We can’t have a bunch of basketballs knocking them off the wall.”

We found a way to protect this display rather than remove it completely (which I had initially assumed we would do). The other objections were handled, except one, which included translation of a passage from Scripture: “God says my house shall be called a house of prayer, and you have turned it into a gymnasium.” We used the objection to highlight the truth that there is no longer any earthly structure that is God’s house; the people of God are his building.

This discussion was helpful to everyone except the critic, but we had taken time to answer his criticism. When we voted, he happened to be out of the country, and the proposal passed unanimously.

When criticism of a proposed change comes, I ask: Did I fail to communicate redundantly, to build consensus, or to commit enough time to the knowledge process? This keeps me from being too hasty to blame critics. If we have tried to understand the criticism and answer the questions and we are still confident that this is God’s direction, it is vital to continue on.

Step 7: Complete all you can while you can

I looked around the table at our focus group, which had gathered in my home, since the church had no facility. The church was preparing to move into a new building, with a new constitution and philosophy of ministry.



Our purpose was to use this group as a sounding board. I excitedly showed them new logos, structural diagrams, and vision statements. When I got into the specifics of schedule changes and program ideas, I hit the saturation point.

“Wait a minute, John,” said a young professional woman. “Some of this is just going to have to wait. We can’t handle any more change right now. We need time to enjoy our new building and get used to the new structure.”

Outwardly I remained calm (I think). Inwardly I contemplated whether we would have to be satisfied with fewer changes than I had envisioned. The window of opportunity would close for a time.

No matter how glorious and spiritually productive the changes may be, a time will come when the congregation cannot take even one more change. Even the most minor adjustments then will be too upsetting. So I intentionally planned not to introduce change once we moved into the new building, at least for a while.

The important point is: Do all you can while the window is open.

*—John Beukema is pastor of The Village Church
in Western Springs, Illinois.*

“Helping a Settled Congregation Move Ahead,” LEADERSHIP, Winter 1997, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, Page 61



The Team Approach to Church Vision

Finding your church's calling with the people you already have.

by Paul R. Ford

Kent is no Moses, and he knows it. Gifted as a pastor and teacher, Kent arrived at his mid-sized midwestern church believing that God had called him to shepherd this congregation. The people were generally supportive. But Kent soon began staggering under “vision block.” The elders were pushing him to “be more of a leader.” “Give us a vision,” they told Kent. “Take charge of it.”

Kent had a hard time generating visionary ideas. However, he had little difficulty discerning whether other people’s visionary ideas were from God. He listened well to the leaders around him—particularly elders and staff—and was able to synthesize pieces of God’s vision for the church as shared by key players. He then put the pieces together and clearly communicated, biblically and sensitively, what God was doing in the congregation.

“Couldn’t God speak through the body?” Kent asked his elders. But that wasn’t the leadership model the elders assumed every church needed. And they told him so.

If Only I were Moses

Most of today’s leadership literature focuses on the “visionary leader,” who determines his church’s calling and then communicates that vision to the church. The model is Moses’ receiving the Ten Commandments. Moses went up the mountain, heard from God, and came back down the mountain to communicate the vision and to challenge his people to follow. It’s the “Moses as CEO” model.

Americans value the Moses-style leader. This approach is rooted in the rugged individualism that is so much a part of our culture. The frontier spirit has surely spurred growth and creativity, but often at the expense of community. Throughout American history—whether homesteaders who left the cities for a new life in the wilderness, or the Internet culture that asks “Where do you want to go today?”—“we” thinking is usually trumped by “I” motivations.

While Generation X supposedly lauds community, marketers persist in promoting self-centeredness, entitlement, and dissatisfaction, emphasizing “my needs” rather than “what’s important for us.” Personal freedom still overshadows group values. It’s easier for individuals to relate to a single leader than to support a process-oriented leadership team.

I needed extensive training in four cultures besides my own to bring home this reality. After eight years of work with more than 500 teams from 35 denominations and 20 mission agencies in North America, I have found that less than 5 percent have healthy



leadership teams. Only now are Americans beginning to realize the limitations of “the Moses model” regarding vision.

Moses’ descent from Mt. Sinai with God’s plan in hand is a great model for about 30 percent of the 2,000 pastors with whom I have worked. These gifted leaders have a clear sense of vision from the Lord and can mobilize the congregation to fulfill that vision. The other 70 percent struggle to discover their unique vision. When these pastors go up the mountain, the only tablets they come back with are aspirin!

Because so many stumble trying single-handedly to discover God’s intent for their congregation, does this mean God made a mistake in gifting less than one-third of church leaders with visionary leadership?

No.

Moses Isn’t the Only Model

Through a pastors’ group, Kent realized that he could never be the kind of leader his elders expected. He wept over that. But Kent believed God had designed him to lead his church just as he is.

Kent, like so many not-Moses pastors, is an equipper, a role that receives considerable treatment in the New Testament. In fact, I find little emphasis there on the strong visionary leader concept. There is more emphasis on those who are fully prepared by God to train the saints for the work of ministry.

In Acts 6, when the church faced a defining moment, the apostles asked that leaders be prayerfully chosen to serve. No one leader stated God’s vision, and no one leader made those selections. Leadership was a shared function through which the Spirit worked.

In its explanation of various leadership gifts, Ephesians 4:11–16 focuses on the unity and maturity of a group rather than on the individual. The only mention of the individual is that “each plays his part” (4:16). Maybe there’s a reason. Perhaps God intends that churches discover their calling through the body rather than an individual. Over the long haul, a leader’s ability to effectively equip and release a team may be the more significant ministry.

How can visioning be a group experience?

After his tearful reckoning with the way God had constructed him, Kent went to his board. “I cannot be the visionary leader you want me to be,” he told them. “If who I am is not sufficient for your purposes, then I will resign today. But if you believe that God has called me to be your pastor, then we need to make some changes around here.”

The elders unanimously affirmed Kent as their leader. Together rewrote a job description for Kent that freed him to use his primary gifts of pastoring, teaching, and discernment. The new job description suggesting using gifted leaders to help with specific leadership functions, such as visioning.



The church has more than doubled in attendance since that time. The growth can be tracked back to the change of heart in Kent and the elders. Kent no longer tries to fulfill all the functions of a visionary leader, and the elders no longer expect him to. While Kent's pastoral authority has not changed, he shares key leadership functions with others. He also continues to discern vision in other leaders on the team.

This is "body-life vision." It has liberated hundreds of pastors I've seen who suddenly realized they didn't have to be the sole originator of church vision.

Esteem the Team

If God has brought "the right people to the right place at the right time for the right reasons," as Bruce Bugbee has suggested, then understanding who we are is key to discovering God's vision for our ministry.

Start by forming a leadership team that together will seek vision for your church. In some churches, this team will include the pastor and staff. In others, the team will include the pastor, deacons, and elders or trustees. It may include program directors. However you define your team, it must include those who set the course for ministry, who share the vision, and who will play key roles in fulfilling that vision in various areas of ministry.

Before discussing how to set a vision, I introduce the "body-life design team" concept. For a leadership team to discover the purposes God has called them to, three building blocks must be firmly in place:

1. *Body life.* As members of the body of Christ, each member of the team is vitally important. Jesus' death on the cross has settled every issue of significance. Once team members understand that their individual significance has been settled at the cross, they can begin finding their function alongside others on the team. If they don't settle their issues of significance in Christ, they'll seek significance in their position, their influence, or in other unhealthy ways. The team will become the battleground on which they seek individual significance.
2. *Design.* God has designed each member of the team. In Christ, each of us is truly unique. Each of us has a spiritual blueprint that determines how we function powerfully in ministry. Most people don't know what that design is. So work at clarifying who each player is in Christ. Assessment tools are helpful for this. I developed one called *Discovering Your Ministry Identity*. Use these tools to identify each person's spiritual gifts, ministry burden or passion, team style, personal values, and "principle priorities" (which key leadership functions are strongest in you). That will help your team with both team building and visioning.

The team must also re-learn that "who I am affects who we are." This re-learning is a process, not an event. Team building is the foundation of setting a new vision.

In the mid-1990s, I trained ministry teams to go into the former Soviet Union. Their task was to prepare Russian schoolteachers to teach Christian ethics in Russian public schools. One of our team leaders, who had been to Russia, reported



the comment of a newly converted Russian Christian who had observed Americans on an earlier trip: “Why doesn’t your team go home until they like each other, then come back and share the gospel?”

Ouch! That was not an uncommon observation. Russians in nearly every city were stunned by the relational struggles they say on American teams.

3. *Team.* Each player on the team actively works for unity. Unity not accidental; it happens through choice and a process. It happens when people esteem “we” (the church) above “I” (the individual believer). Without this kind of community, vision is nearly impossible. With it, nothing is impossible.

Seeing with New Ears

How do you discover the vision that God has planted in the hearts of your key players? Ask them!

The problem is that we seldom ask. A top-down leadership model assumes that a leader shares the vision and everyone else figures out how they fit into it. There is no opportunity for others to share how God is nudging them. I have discovered that most Christians, whether in leadership or not, have something or someone for which they will invest their very lives. Rarely do we ask what that is.

In determining God’s vision for a congregation, consider the order of sharing. Usually leaders talk first in a group. The result is that others feel obligated to relate to what the leader has shared. Yet the real value of sharing is to hear the thoughts of people who are not leaders, because God may speak clearly about the church’s overall vision through these unprompted heart callings. After each player shares his or her ministry burden or passion, then the leader shares.

God does give some vision to pastors, but he also communicates vision through the hearts of other leaders. Seldom does one person have all the details worked out. If a leader listens well, he or she will discover strategic pieces of the big picture that haven’t previously been considered. Are you listening?

I will never forget the Sunday evening we did some vision sharing at a church in the Southwest. After talking about Paul’s burden for the Gentiles in Romans 15, I asked people to talk about what was on their hearts. With no preparation time, each of the 42 people present talked. As each person spoke, excitement rose. Even quiet people were contributing. And they weren’t talking about things “the church ought to do.” They were describing people and activities in which they wanted to invest their lives.

The pastor was last to speak. Though I had asked him in advance to prepare something about his vision for the church, he decided not to. With tears in his eyes in response to what other people had shared, the pastor said, “I have nothing to share. You all have just shared every significant piece of the burden God has put on my heart!”



What if you treated your leadership team as players prepared by God to lead your church? Wouldn't you look for opportunities to listen? God will speak through this "body of Christ." You can trust a leadership team, even with something as important as vision.

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At a Glance: Visioning as a Group

Vision can be a group process, especially for those who value team ministry. Here's a quick overview of the steps.

- 1. Build your vision team.** The team will include official leaders, but it should also include other key people, even if they don't hold an office or head a ministry. In a society that assumes everyone is an individual, people need lessons on how to function as a team. Sign a pact, if necessary, to work for team unity. Agree to agree.
- 2. Discover who you are.** The body functions well when each part knows its function and does it. Help team members discover their uniqueness in Christ.
- 3. Build on weaknesses and needs.** Real unity comes when leaders share weaknesses as well as strengths. A team becomes vital in ministering to a person's admitted neediness.
- 4. Discover who WE are.** God has brought your team together for a purpose. Discover their God-given ambitions, and you'll discover your calling in what God is already doing.

Teambuilding Questions

As your team develops, ask three key questions.

- 1. Where is God powerful in you?** Spiritual gifts reveal more than what we are "good at"—they identify where God is powerful in us. While in Kazakhstan last year, I discovered the Kazaks have 20 words for sheep but no comparable words for "spiritual gift." So I told the Kazaks that spiritual gifts are where God's power is revealed in our lives. Kazak or American, explore where God has shown his power in you.
- 2. Where are you weak?** When deep, confidential sharing of weaknesses takes place, unity can begin. Without it, your team is unlikely to move beyond functional relationships that merely complete tasks. Real Christian community surfaces at the point of shared vulnerability, usually modeled first by the leader.

When Bill, a senior pastor I met with, freely admitted his weaknesses to his team of 12, team members stopped hiding behind their strengths and honestly admitted their neediness. Community happened that day for that powerful team who never before had felt free to acknowledge how they needed each other. They were hired for their ministry expertise and had learned to impress each other. When the walls came down, real unity occurred.

Confidentiality is essential here. No one wants his confessions discussed around the coffee machine. Honoring each other in our weakness means protecting one another.

- 3. Who do you need?** We tend to ask, "What am I good at? Where am I weak, and to which seminar can I go to improve in my weak areas?" As individuals we tend to think about fixing our own weaknesses. We seldom think about how God designed us to need others. Team members need each other. As we identify ways in which we need others, the team grows stronger.



Questions to Build a Healthy Church

These diagnostic tools will boost your church's vitality.

by Roger Jenks

The conference speaker was clear. “There are five essential questions of congregational life that must be asked and answered sequentially,” said Rev. Lloyd John Ogilvie. “If you skip any of them, the best that your church will ever do is limp.”

With that opening line, I began to take notes. When I returned from that conference, however, I kept those questions to myself. They guided me personally, but not the church as a whole.

Twenty years after speaking at that conference, Lloyd John Ogilvie was the chaplain of the U.S. Senate, and I was in my fourth church. Yet when I came to my current pastorate, I decided our whole congregation needed the reprioritizing influence of those five, fundamental questions. I didn't realize how dramatically these questions would transform us.

Many churches try hard to “do church” the best they know how. Yet those churches are often directionless (like we were), relying more on doing what's familiar than on what would help them grow. Ogilvie said the reason for that is that “95 percent of churches never ask themselves the first question.”

Start at the End

Two years ago, at our annual all-church retreat, I told the entire church to stand in a circle. I took one little girl into the middle of the circle, handed her a rubber ball, and told her, “Throw this ball as hard as you can at the target.” Then I stepped out of the circle.

The girl stood there, confused. She turned and looked, but there was no target, no place to throw that ball “as hard as you can.”

I explained to the church, “This girl is us. We don't have a defined place to pour our efforts. We have no target.” This set the church up for the first key question: ***What kind of people does God want us to produce in this body of believers?*** The biblical answer to that question is “Go and make disciples.” But what does a disciple look like? What target are we aiming for?

To answer that question, we began with a Bible study on the mandate to make disciples. This is the job of every church and every believer. Then I instructed everyone to go silently alone, pray, and write down what traits of a disciple God reveals.



Prayer and study becomes crucial at this point, as the question asks, “What kind of disciples does God want?” Not “What do I think makes a good disciple?”

Then we wrote the answers on a board for all to see. The people were amazed to see the diversity of the answers. Being a disciple affects many areas of life!

In my church and in others I have consulted, I have watched congregations become electrified as they define these traits and then begin to own responsibility for imparting them. To have these traits identified as the target gives meaning, energy, and clarity of vision—in short, purpose—to the church’s efforts.

We then grouped the fifty-five or so traits we came up with into ten categories and distributed the list to leaders in the church with the following instruction: “Everything you do has to aim to produce these kinds of people.” We also made bookmarks out of the list and distributed them to the congregation.

I asked each of our leadership teams, “Which of these traits and categories you are responsible for?” Each team identified certain areas that they and their ministries were uniquely positioned to address. They began to take responsibility for producing a specific fruit within the congregation.

Answering this one question was the turning point in our church. It gave us a clearly defined value system—*this* is what we’re doing here.

Creating Key Experiences

The second question addresses the practical level of programming: ***What kinds of experiences do people need to become those kinds of people?***

Too often we start with this step, without asking the first question. When we do, programming is usually a matter of what we did last year, what we did at our last church, an idea that sounds nice, what we can afford, or the pastor’s newest whim. For example, before the all-church retreat, our Christian education ministries determined their curriculum by the popularity test—in other words, “What would you all like to study next?”

After we identified the specific kinds of people God wanted us to produce, our education ministry had a specific target to aim for. So the Christian education team partnered with the youth and children’s ministries to develop a core curriculum that would introduce and help people move toward our identified traits of disciples. Today, nearly half the adults in the church have completed the core curriculum, and we use the traits of a disciple in our introduction-to-the-church groups.

Planning our programming around the traits God wants us to produce in believers lends purpose and urgency to our ministries. It also provides a bonus; we now have a reason to say no to things that don’t fit.



Our fellowship team, which oversees church trips and get-togethers, used to plan elaborate, often expensive events. But after we identified “evangelistic character” as one of our key traits of a disciple, the fellowship team rethought the outings. Were the expensive events helping our people become more evangelistic, or were they primarily events for insiders, excluding people by costing so much?

The fellowship team reworked the event schedule, planning more potlucks, picnics, and pizza parties. They also planned Christmas ornament and cookie exchanges—all events that cost a participant less than ten dollars. They wanted to free people from the expense to begin inviting others, and thus grow in evangelistic character.

Our ministries began to reflect our purpose, but one more question was needed to ignite our purpose with passion.

Boosting More Leaders

The third question asks: ***What kinds of leaders are needed to provide those kinds of experiences?*** Making disciples in the many areas that Christianity affects our lives is too big a job for one leader alone. When they answer this question, churches realize they need several passionate, gifted, and trained leaders to provide “those kinds of experiences.”

Our Christian education board recognized that in order to provide life-changing instruction, we needed trained and knowledgeable teachers. So they partnered with the children’s and youth ministry to put together a series of training classes for teachers. Then, we asked every teacher in our Sunday school, children’s, and youth ministries to take the classes. Our goal was to train leaders to provide the experiences our people needed to grow as disciples.

One summer, we got substitutes for all the teachers to allow our teachers to take the classes to meet our new requirement. We had two responses to the new requirement. Some of our teachers were volunteers who were simply filling holes. In the goodness of their hearts, they were working in ministries they weren’t particularly passionate about but where a need was apparent. Many of these volunteers didn’t take the classes, and, to be honest, we had a slump in teachers for three to six months. We had to scramble to keep some classes going.

But when we made the new requirement, we clearly explained why we did it. It wasn’t a legalistic new “rule,” but an earnest effort to improve the quality and effectiveness of the education ministry.

That led to the second response. New teachers, people who were passionate about children and Christian education but who previously weren’t certain of the church’s commitment, began to step up. “I want to take this class,” one of them said, “because now I realize how important this is.”

We now have people lining up to take the required classes. We’re not short of teachers any more. More important, the people who are becoming teachers are no longer



stop-gap volunteers; they are people who are passionate and gifted in Christian education.

Different Kinds of Captains

The pastor's role in the church must be examined if the church is going to work together to accomplish its purpose. And so the fourth question is: ***What kind of pastor is needed to train those kinds of leaders?***

This question is particularly helpful when a church is searching for a new pastor. Recently another church in that situation asked me to consult with them during their search. The church was hurting, despondent, and desperate. They hadn't had a pastor for a long time, and they were unsure of what kind of pastor they should be looking for.

I led their leadership in a full-day workshop on these five questions. Before we began, I said, "Let's look at your ministerial profile. What kind of pastor are you looking for?"

As we reviewed their expectations, I realized they were looking for a cross between Jesus and James Bond. But after leading them through the first three questions and establishing what God was doing in their church, they realized that they didn't need James Bond as their pastor. They needed someone who was skilled in rallying people to a common vision and training them to accomplish it. As we discussed the questions, they told me, "We need a coach."

One church may need a coach, another may need a shepherd, and another may need an executive. By asking question three, then question four, a church can learn to rightly divide the duties of pastors and lay leaders.

When a resident pastor asks what kind of pastor is needed to train his church's leaders, question four invites him to analyze his or her gifting, time allocation, skill development, and continuing education opportunities. But that leads me to the fifth question, which happens to be most pastors' favorite of the five.

The Power to Say "No"

The fifth question is: ***What kinds of experiences does the pastor need to be that kind of pastor?*** Practically, this means churches begin to ask themselves, "What can we do to help our pastor become who God wants him or her to be?"

At my current church we've established a committee to handle pastor-parish relations. The committee's job is to field the concerns, wants, compliments, and complaints of the congregation, and to mediate between pastor and parish. At the same time, committee members listen to my concerns and try to help me be a healthy leader.

In first meetings, we generally say to each other, "Okay, give me your bad news and your gripes, then I'll give you mine."



After asking this fifth question, however, the committee began asking me, “Are you actually taking your time off? Is the church giving you adequate time to study? Pray?”

What a difference!

One meeting illustrated clearly the change questions four and five have brought to our church. The committee brought to me a concern of some people regarding visitation: “We think you ought to visit every newcomer to our church.”

Oh, boy, here we go, I thought. “Let me forecast what that’s going to mean long term,” I said. “If we continue growing the way we have, that may mean five or more visitors every week. Now most of those folks work during the day, so I’ll need to visit with them at night. Then there are the meetings I have with the board, with this committee, and others, most of which also occur at night. Now, what will that mean for me personally?”

“There won’t be any time for your family,” one member said.

“Bingo.”

The first four questions helped us define what kind of pastor our church needed; the fifth helped us realize what that pastor needed to do and not do.

The committee realized I could not be the kind of pastor God had in mind for them while meeting that expectation. Their pastor needed a healthy family life, sufficient time off, study, prayer, training, and so on. So instead of burdening me with that expectation, the committee helped me communicate the need for our congregation to start a newcomer orientation program.

Finally, this fifth question helped me determine my own priorities. If given a choice between seminars on coaching or on making pastoral calls, I choose the former, because that’s the kind of pastor this church needs.

For the last twenty years, these questions have advised me. Now they’re helping my church define its purpose. They’re diagnostic when things begin to feel flat. They function like a plumb line when there are too many good ideas under consideration. And they’re helping us keep the role of pastor and laity in proper perspective while giving me the space and accountability I need to grow.

Focusing on questions isn’t a novel idea. Some of the most dynamic moments in Jesus’ ministry were precipitated by the right questions.

“Who do people say that I am?”

“Whose inscription do you see?”

“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I say?”

In each case, a question prompted a moment of transformation—the kind of transformation we like to see in our churches.



We've become a church with a shared and driving vision of discipleship. We're developing new, passionate leaders, while our veterans refine and reinvent our ministries to better accomplish common goals. We have a solid vision of who we are and what we want to do. All that began by asking five simple questions, just like Lloyd Ogilvie said.

— *Roger Jenks is pastor of Fox Valley Area
Christian Church in Aurora, Illinois.*

"The Health Sequence," LEADERSHIP, Winter 2003, Vol. XXV, No. 1, Page 81

The Five Essential Questions

Answering these, in order, is the first step toward congregational wellness.

1. What kind of people does God want us to produce in this body of believers?
2. What kinds of experiences do we need to become those kinds of people?
3. What leaders are needed to provide those kinds of experiences?
4. What kind of pastor is needed to train those kinds of leaders?
5. What kinds of experiences does the pastor need to be that kind of pastor?

—*Roger Jenks*



Winning Through Resistance

When your vision meets obstruction, which way do you go?

by Wayne Schmidt

Everyone on staff agreed: blended worship would increase the impact of our choir in Sunday morning worship. The choir would be more involved as worship leaders. They would lead congregational singing as well as sing anthems.

To accomplish this, we started doing things we had never done. We required auditions to discern the spirit and talent of choir members. Rehearsals were extended to include time for worship and small group prayer. The workload increased.

The vision was great, but as we made changes, resistance grew. Several long-term choir members dropped out. Others pointed fingers at staff members, accusing them of exerting excessive power. Some argued: “We’re becoming just like the Saturday night service.” It was painful to hear people react to our attempts for greater depth in worship by saying of the choir: “They’re just doing ‘doo-wops’ for the worship team.”

I was getting another lesson in reading the resistance.

Sometimes It’s a Phase

Change is the price of vision, and with change comes resistance. The greater the change, the greater the resistance. In the words of my mentor Dick Zalack, “People prefer the painful known to the uncertain better.” Casting a vision involves that “uncertain better” that stretches faith and invites resistance.

There are four stages to most transitions:

1. Denial, or holding on to the illusion that nothing will change and the pressure to do so will go away.
2. Resistance. Resistance interrupts sleep, makes us angry, and tempts us to withdraw back into denial. Many churches and leaders bounce back and forth between resistance and denial.
3. Exploration of options for our future.
4. Commitment to pursue that future.

Interestingly, we tend to justify our own resistance while judging the resistance of others. I’ve even found myself impatient with others in the very area where I was initially resistant. Once we overcome our internal resistance, we expect others to do the same but in much less time.



I saw this recently while attempting to implement changes with our staff. For years I had viewed staff meetings as a waste of time. However, doing without them left us operating as loosely affiliated entrepreneurs rather than as a team. Once I recognized the value of meetings in creating a sense of team, I was impatient with others who resisted the meetings. I was frustrated by the very resistance I had created by reinstating meetings.

If resistance is simply a stage of transition, give people time and encouragement. The resistance will subside if it's just a phase. But it may be more than that.

Sometimes It's Spiritual

Understanding why everyone is anxious and nobody is doing what you had hoped takes discernment. With time and prayer, trace the resistance to its source.

1. Resistance may signal redirection from God. As a river's flow changes because of an obstacle, so a God-placed obstacle may cause our energy to flow in another direction.

When our church moved to its present site, we anticipated moving from a multi-purpose space to a new worship center within a few years. Initial plans for funding the worship center produced resistance because the need for adding children's ministry space was more pressing. We delayed construction of the worship center, added more worship services to the schedule, and paid cash for the new children's wing. Then we revisited our plan to build the worship center.

When circumstances beyond a leader's control force change, ask if God is at work. A good indicator is when the congregation sees an alternative direction and most everyone agrees. If that is the case, pray about it and prepare to change direction.

2. Resistance can be a call to humility. This source of resistance merits special attention, mainly because it is so prevalent. God resists the proud (James 4:6), but pride may be subtly disguised as feeling unappreciated or left out. Those with the greatest investment in the old way of doing things are often the most resistant to a new way of doing things.

I like to view myself as a flexible person. However, when our competent lay ministry team recommended that we change our spiritual gifts training materials, I balked. I had created those lessons. I didn't see the need for change. Besides, I said to myself, they didn't fully appreciate the strengths of my approach.

Eventually the lay leaders' tactful persistence won me over to the conclusion others had reached long before. If pride is the root, humble yourself before God humbles you!

3. Resistance may mean altering something within us. Recently we made some changes in our staff structure. Some of the resistance was my own, since the plan uncovered changes I needed to make in my life. Some of our staff difficulty was due to deficits in my leadership skill. So realigning our staff led to a list of skill-development areas for myself.



If you are resisting change because it requires changing yourself, consider this. Resistance is strongest in my life when external uncertainty confronts internal insecurity.

3. Resistance can be a sign of spiritual warfare. Some people view all resistance to their ideas as an attack of the enemy. Others downplay the reality that a God-given vision will result in spiritual opposition. The truth lies between.

We recently broke ground on a new student center. While the congregation strongly supported the vision for reaching middle schoolers and high schoolers, there was dissension regarding our approach to raising the necessary dollars. Many of us came to believe this disunity was part of Satan's strategy to derail this ministry initiative. Knowing unity was the desire of Christ for His followers, we prayed and discussed the matter until we reached a spirit of unity. We agreed on the vision, although we did not have complete unanimity on the details.

If spiritual warfare is suspected, this calls for prayer. Persistent prayer will dispel the fears and amplify the faith of the congregation.

5. Resistance may indicate a need for balance. One part of the vision may be well developed while another is underdeveloped. Or a vision's impact on one segment of the congregation may be clear while its impact on another is unclear. Balance issues may be about age, interests, taste, or tenure. But legitimate balance issues are about ministry.

One source of resistance is related to spiritual gifts. Our church board consists of people with various gifts. The gift of leadership is most predominant, however, and a direction rising from this gift sets our course. Sometimes a few on our board resist, usually people who have the gift of mercy.

We're learning the best response isn't "Well, they don't have the leadership gift; no wonder they don't get it." It's better to ask "What can we learn from their gift of mercy that will make the vision clearer or the process kinder?"

If ministry balance is an issue, test whether the opposition arises from people who have a common spiritual gift. You may find that the change was prompted by leaders with a different (even opposite) gift.

Benefits of Resistance

When working out at my athletic club, I overhear trainers telling their clients that resistance builds strength. They offer promises of greater muscle definition and strength as they pile on the weights. The ability to handle additional resistance indicates progress.

For the church leader, progress requires honestly assessing the resistance to change.

With the issue of our choir, I searched my own heart and prayerfully determined that my motive—the deepening of our corporate worship—was right. The leaders of the change consistently humbled themselves before God and, from what I could see, were



overcoming the pull of pride. Nor was it a balance issue, because other priorities were not suffering. In the end we decided that two causes were at work, as is often the case.

Resistance to changing the choir was, in part, a phase. We had raised our expectations several notches at one time. In doing so, we upset everybody's routine. There was also spiritual warfare involved, because deepening worship invites the presence of God and the interference of Satan. The resistance was not God's call for redirection, for the evidences of his blessing were clear even in the midst of the resistance.

The choir's new role has now taken hold and is gaining momentum, and I've had another first-hand lesson in reading resistance.

When committed church leaders prayerfully seek God's direction for the future, resistance often signals the need for perseverance. Its weight contributes to greater definition of the vision and greater determination among those who champion it. It's a blessing in disguise.

*—Wayne Schmidt is pastor of Kentwood Community Church,
1200 60th Street, Kentwood MI*

"Reading the Resistance," LEADERSHIP, Summer 2000, Vol. XXI, No. 3, Page 43



Growing the Old-Fashioned Way

Ignoring youth-fixated culture, this church found its future in seniors.

by Kevin Powell

At the time, it seemed like my worst nightmare. I was newly ordained, called to a rural parish where the average age of the congregation was age sixty-five or older. Cows and cornfields dotted the countryside and fueled the local economy. The same names kept appearing on mailboxes along our narrow highway. Everyone was related in some way.

Families had toiled side-by-side for generations, working the land, creating a community. But it was a way of life that was slowly dying, and with it my parish. This congregation was in decline longer than I had been alive. I was called to palliative care, and that seemed to be a waste of my gifts and energy. *I should be a church planter*, I thought. *I shouldn't be stuck way out here in the boondocks*. I was probably going to be this church's last pastor. I would be remembered as the kid who closed one of the oldest congregations in our denomination.

I put on a brave face. "Wherever God calls me to serve, I'll serve with joy," I told my bishop, half-believing the words myself.

Like most mainline churches, this one struggled with the question, "How do we get the young people involved?" The church had called a young pastor (I was twenty-nine at the time), not only because that was what they could afford, but also because they wanted to reach out to the younger generations. So I settled into my first call, the lone shaved head lost in a sea of white hair.

My congregation envied the nearby Christian Reformed church for its new building, large attendance figures, and well-populated youth group. "What are they doing that we aren't?" we asked ourselves. "Maybe we can duplicate their program."

I met the Christian Reformed pastor at the coffee shop to pick his brain. "How do you draw so many people?" I asked him.

"Easy," he replied, "We're Dutch. Ours is the only ethnic congregation in the area. People drive an hour and a half to come to church. And they have big families with lots of kids to help out on the farm. Lots of large families equal a large church. But don't be fooled. We have numbers, but this church is more proud of being Dutch than being Christian. Be careful not to equate numbers with faithfulness."

Wise counsel. Abraham and Sarah notwithstanding, our congregation was too chronologically challenged to engage in reproduction evangelism.

Back to square one.



The congregation president called a special meeting to devise a strategy to bring young people to faith and become members of the church. We began by asking, “Where are all the youth in our community?” Given that the village numbered only 350, we could quickly name all the people in the township, along with church affiliation and family history, back to the time the area was settled.

We had an epiphany and a problem.

The epiphany was that all the young people were spoken for. Between the three churches in our little village, all the young people were members of one congregation or another.

The problem was a dwindling population. The connection between the depressed economy and the drop in young people became obvious. When the youth went away to university, they didn’t come back because there were no jobs for them in the village. Their parents sold their farms to the big dairy producers and retired in Florida. The decline in population matched the drop in church attendance. Go figure.

The Christian Reformed church grew because more Dutch people remained in the village than non-Dutch farmers. The Dutch didn’t sell their farms to the big dairy producers.

What were we to do? Buy back the farms? Coax the younger generations who moved away to greener economic pastures to re-embrace an agricultural vocation?

The answers were obvious. There was no going back. Our meeting ended.

Two Important Questions

We began to pray for God’s guidance and began looking at other options. We asked ourselves a few more questions. “Who actually lives in the village?”

“What about that new retirement villa that opened a couple years back—many older folks there may need a church home,” said George.

“That doesn’t solve our problem with the youth,” Mary pointed out. “If we reach out to the seniors, how will we replace them when they are gone? We need young blood.”

“Do we?” George asked with a twinkle in his eye. “The retirement villa has a waiting list a mile long. When our beloved members pass on to be with the Lord, there are always people to replace them. This village is a wonderful place to retire. It’s quiet. It’s clean. And there are many people their own age.”

If seniors are a renewable resource, we reasoned, they could be the future for our church. The council hammered out a strategy to reach the seniors in our community. “How can they best hear the gospel?” we asked.

We dusted off the hymnbooks and changed the worship style from contemporary to traditional. No newfangled postmodern worship here. We pulled out standard hymns



and mixed in old-time gospel favorites. We began with *A Mighty Fortress* and closed with *The Old Rugged Cross*. The old folks loved it!

Traditional does not have to mean boring. The older crowd, rocking the sanctuary with a good old-fashioned hymn, could rival any youth rally. Word got out about this congregation that worshiped “old-school.”

Interestingly enough, we began to attract baby boomers who wanted to “come home” to traditional worship. Some families started driving an hour and a half to worship with us. Within a year, our thirty-year decline was reversed, and we had grown by 18 percent.

More important, the Spirit began to move among the people. Churchgoers became disciples. Attendance became worship. Cliques were transformed into a community. We saw lives changed by the power of the gospel because it was expressed in ways that meant something to the older generation. A historic church on the verge of closing became an energetic mission center.

Being innovative does not necessarily mean using the newest technology or songs. When we asked “Who’s available?” and “How do they best hear the gospel?” we found that innovation for us meant bringing back the expressions of faith that nurtured and sustained the older generations.

The church of the future, I concluded, is best secured by reaching the people of the present.

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“Reaching the Edges: The Importance of Reaching Ernest,” *LEADERSHIP*, Summer 2001, Vol. 23, No. 3, Page 58



How the Family Church Grows

Honest talk about leading change in the smaller congregation.

A Leadership Forum

“Churches are getting smaller and larger”—that’s the analysis of some who read church demographics. As the culture shifts, the survivor churches seem to be large, full-service churches, and small, intimate-family churches.

Many books and seminars trumpet large churches. Fewer provide help for growing small churches.

LEADERSHIP asked three veterans of small churches to give honest and practical answers to questions such as “What does growth mean when it may cause a church to lose what is most precious to it—its family feeling?”

The candid discussion came from:

- **Kathy Callahan-Howell**, who planted and has ministered for twelve years in a small, urban church: Winton Community Free Methodist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio.
- **Gary Farley**, a former bi-vocational pastor, who served in the Town and Country department of the Home Mission Board (Southern Baptist) for thirteen years. He is director of the Center for Rural Church Leadership.
- **Martin Giese**, pastor of Faith Baptist Church in Park Rapids, Minnesota, and co-director of the Country Shepherds workshop, a training seminar for pastors of rural churches.

How do you define “small church”?

Gary: The small church sees itself as a family. People are connected through ethnicity, vocation, or place. Often there are several generations. People in small churches interact with each other outside of church—at the post office, at the Lions Club, at the turkey shoot, at the Friday-night football game. They drink coffee at the cafe in the morning before they go to work.

Martin: That creates a climate of intimacy and a strong level of accountability that can be uncomfortable. It also makes evangelism difficult. How do you evangelize someone who has watched you go through your teen years—or watched your dad go through *his* teen years?

Kathy: In my denomination, a church of two hundred is considered big. There’s a denominational factor in defining “small.” I pastor in an urban neighborhood and, in one sense my people have lots of interaction with each other outside of church. But in



contrast to Martin's rural setting, people in small urban churches have huge networks, so evangelism isn't as hard.

Martin: Many people in a rural setting see themselves as a CEO; they are management, and the pastor is labor.

Gary: Most older churches have developed bell cows—matriarchs and patriarchs who have carried them through difficult times. Then young pastors arrive with a kind of military mindset: "I'm ordained, I'm going to lead, and this old guy needs to get out of my way."

It's overwhelming for a smaller church when it suddenly becomes the "in" church; people feel invaded.

—Kathy Callahan-Howell

In a small church, different people can lead parades around different things. Good leaders have the sense to know when they need to be out front and when they need to be in the back. Over time, as people see you're not there for your aggrandizement, they trust you more.

How do you reconcile your call to lead with the reality that you need to be given permission to lead?

Martin: I knew a pastor in a rural church in western Minnesota. He was delighted when, in the early part of his ministry, all his initiatives were passed in business meetings with no discussion. He was puzzled later when none of the decisions was implemented. He discovered that the real business meeting began after the official meeting adjourned. People would get cups of coffee, meet in the aisles of the church, review all the meeting decisions, and either ratify or nullify them.

What was key here was "consensus." The small church gravitates toward consensus and feels anxious if there isn't at least a perception of consensus.

What does growth mean for a church with a family identity?

Kathy: The family image still works. In a family there are children. Those children eventually get married and have children. That's how a family grows.

Gary: Sometimes, though, when small churches grow, they get to a certain size and then fragment.

Martin: The key word is *slowly*. There's a limit to how large a group can get and still preserve the family feel. That may be one reason small churches fight so fiercely not to grow. Our church is situated in a rural area, but we use the term *rurban*, because the area draws a lot of retirees from urban communities. Its membership is half rural and half urban. That tension affects nearly every decision we make, from whether to leave the lights on to how we develop ministry.

Kathy: It's overwhelming for a smaller church when it suddenly becomes the "in" church—the sermons are good, the music is good, so it's the happening place to be. People feel invaded. Growth can have a negative effect if the church suddenly receives an



influx of people disgruntled from a church split or frustrated with their former church. In our case, we're seeing slow growth, almost all of it from conversions. With that kind of growth, it's much easier to envelop new people.

Martin: When a congregation I served grew from around fifty to seventy on a Sunday morning, an elderly lady said, "I don't know anyone around here anymore." What she meant was "I no longer can catch up with everyone's life on a Sunday morning."

Small-church pastors don't take one another seriously.

—Martin Giese

How do you respond to that concern?

Martin: I sat down with many of the older people and said, "A lot of things have happened here through the years, but we're outgrowing this building. Moving won't be easy. But you know what? The Lord is answering your prayers by helping this church grow. Isn't it odd that an answer to prayer would bring some pain, some adjustment?"

Kathy: I accept that some churches need to be small—as long as people are coming to the kingdom, and as long as there is spiritual regeneration. What isn't healthy is for a church to say, "It's okay to just be us and never reach out."

Gary: I used to think that every small church ought to change and become a big suburban church. I don't believe that anymore. I think some people fit best in a small church.

Sometimes those who fit best are eccentric people who wouldn't feel accepted in a larger church. Do you ever worry that new people might be turned off by quirky members?

Martin: Sometimes you wonder whether you have enough functional people to do outreach. But I believe that God will bring enough people to accomplish what he wants to do.

The elderly woman I mentioned, who said she didn't know anyone anymore, had a nervous tic and was flighty. I found out that she had one son who had served in Korea and had never come home. For two years she didn't know where he was. Somehow, in the providence of God, a guy found her and told her he had seen her son starve to death in a Korean prisoner-of-war camp.

Yet she wasn't bitter at God; she loved Jesus.

Kathy: People who have a problem with diversity don't belong in my church. We have a multiracial church, which we set out to create. I want people to attend our church because they can accept all kinds of people.

Our church has a gentleman who functions at a low level. One Sunday he couldn't find the hymn in the hymnal, so a woman, Sharon, walked up and stood beside him



through the entire song, holding the hymnal so he could sing with her. Then she went back to her seat.

I was so proud. Those are the people I want in my church.

What other things can a smaller church do well?

Gary: Endure. The life expectancy of a metropolitan church is about fifty years. Contrast that with a rural church whose life expectancy may be centuries.

Recently I looked at a list of Southern Baptist churches that were in Kansas City in 1928. Practically none of those churches exist today. Those that have survived do so in name only, usually in a different location.

Kathy: Smaller churches can get a higher percentage of people involved in ministry. I love all the hoopla about finding your gifts, and certainly it's easier to be energized when you're working out of your giftedness, but the reality of a small church is that some people are going to have to do stuff they're not gifted to do.

Pastoring a small church in an age that glorifies bigness can make a minister feel small. What contributes to that feeling?

Martin: A pastor feels small when he feels that his peers in larger churches don't take him seriously. But even we small-church pastors embrace that ethic. We don't take one another seriously.

Another factor is constant negative self-assessment by our people. They say, "Well, Pastor, we're not much of a church, and you're just the pastor for us." People don't mean to denigrate their shepherd, but the effect is to shift your focus from what God has called you to do to the struggle of the church.

Gary: Pastors are generalists rather than specialists, and our society pays specialists better. That puts a lot of pressure on a person to know about everything and be good at all things. In addition, I see more and more churches being pastored by bi-vocational leaders. A person in that position can think, *If I were really accomplishing something, my church would be able to support me full-time.* Changing economics only exacerbates this problem.

How can a pastor help raise a church's self-esteem?

Gary: One way is for the church to do something well and then celebrate it. It may not be great by the standards of First Church, but it's good for your church. So celebrate a successful vacation Bible school. Build on that sense of accomplishment.

Kathy: A small church has to focus on doing one or two things well. If it tries to spread itself too thin, it won't do anything well.

The attitude of the pastor makes a huge difference. The word that comes to mind is *vision*. People will catch it. When we started our Free Methodist church, we inherited a



few saints from what used to be a United Methodist congregation. That church had died, and several women who joined our church caught the vision for our church plant. Today, they get so excited: “Oh, look at all these new people.”

It’s not that they’ll never feel discomfort, but they were able to get on board.

Martin: You celebrate survival. Many pastors with ambition come to a place and say, “What have you people been doing here for forty years?” That’s a mistake. The reality is that, in some settings, survival is an achievement.

When we were going through our transition to a new building, I interviewed our custodian on the platform. He was in his eighties. He had hand-dug the basement of the old church with a shovel. When the young people, who were excited about leaving the old building, heard this guy talk about digging the old church basement, they suddenly understood what it was costing him to leave. The newcomers had a new respect for the contributions of the old-timers, and the old-timers felt affirmed and ready to move on.

What does a smaller-church pastor have to change internally, for the church to be able to grow?

Martin: We do ourselves and the kingdom a disservice when we conclude that we’re the leaders when, in actuality, every church has people who are already leaders. Our credibility goes up as we recognize those leaders God has placed in that church. As time passes, those leaders grant us more and more leadership opportunities.

Kathy: As a church planter, I had to change from planter mode to pastor mode. While planting the church, nobody else was making decisions because there wasn’t anybody else. My husband and I made all the decisions. Figuring out when it was time to shift into using other people was hard.

Kathy, what has motivated you to stay at your church for twelve years?

Kathy: Three reasons: One is my family; my husband feels he’s where God wants him to be. Another is a commitment to long-term ministry. We’re just beginning to reap fruit from seeds we’ve been sowing for years. The third is I have outside interests such as writing that help me feel that I’m part of a larger picture.

Martin: During at least three periods when I was at one church, I left claw marks on my walls. Were it not for a sense of call and commitment, I would have cut and run. During those times, I started to learn about my motives for ministry.

“Just be faithful” is the philosophy of many smaller churches. How does a church measure its faithfulness?

Martin: A church needs to be more than “just faithful.” The question is, “Faithful to what?” Churches struggle and die when they persist in being faithful to the wrong things, such as to the program that worked in the late forties.



Being faithful isn't a matter of large or small. We need biblically effective churches in every size range. In the kingdom of God, small and insignificant are two different things. There's no such thing as an insignificant ministry in the kingdom of God.

"How the Family Church Grows," LEADERSHIP, Spring 1998, Vol. XIX, No. 2, Page 111