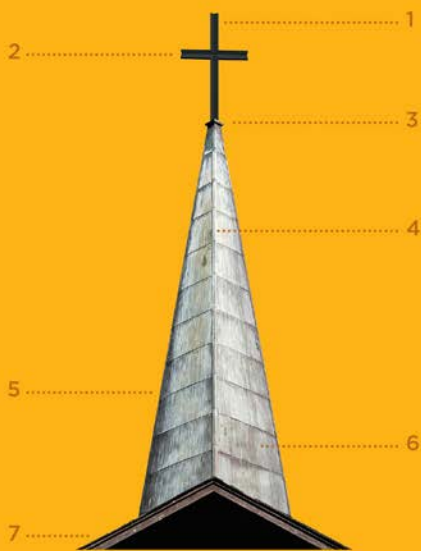


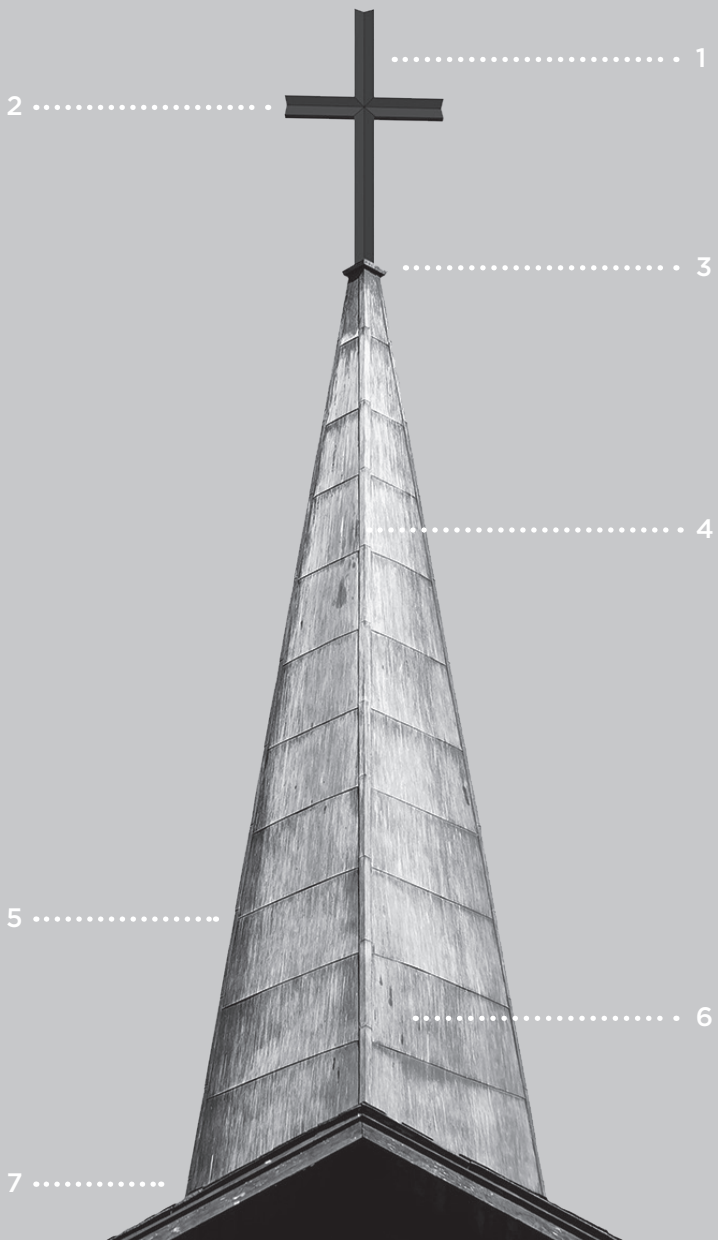
ANATOMY OF A REVIVED CHURCH

Seven Findings about How Congregations Avoided Death



THOM S. RAINER

Anatomy of a Revived Church



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INTRODUCTION

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BEFORE THE AUTOPSY

“You were too late.”

It was an unusual statement from a man I had never met. Indeed, I had to pause for clarification. “Excuse me?” I asked.

“You were too late.”

There were those words again. I had not misheard them. The expression on his face clearly told me he was not joking. He was serious. Dead serious.

Though I was tempted to begin a conversation with others at the conference who wanted to speak with me, I could not leave this man with the stern expression without an explanation.

“So, where was I too late?” I asked him.

“It was your book,” he said. “*Autopsy of a Deceased Church*. I read the book in one sitting. But it was too late.”

I waited.

“My church had already died. We closed the doors just a few months before I read your book,” he said quietly. “Why

didn't you write something sooner? Why couldn't we have made some changes before we had no choice but to die? I just don't understand."

And then I saw tears. At first I thought his eyes were just irritated. But those were real tears.

He was not angry; he was hurting. Deeply hurting. His church had closed. I would eventually learn it was the same church where he was married and his two daughters were married. It was the church he had attended faithfully. It was the church he had loved deeply.

Now it was closed. But he chose the word *died* first—the man was deeply grieving a death.

I asked him to stick around. I wanted to hear his story and his church's story, but I could not be rude to the others who were waiting. I was grateful he waited on me. We talked for almost an hour after the conference ended.

I heard his story.

CHURCHES THAT CHOOSE TO DIE

In May 2005, *Fast Company* published a cover story by Alan Deutschman. The article was simply but profoundly titled "Change or Die." The responses were so voluminous that Deutschman expanded his work into a full book by the same title. It was released in early 2007.

There were two major reasons the article and the book

had such eager audiences. First, the research for his topic was meticulous and thorough. Second, the results were breathtaking. His central thesis was both profound and disturbing. If given a choice between life and death, most people and leaders choose death if life requires substantive changes.

Reflect on that previous sentence a moment.

Most people choose death rather than change.

Even if they have the path to live, the resources to live, and the choice to live, they choose death rather than making the necessary changes.

Deutschman pointed to some disturbing realities that confirmed such an astounding claim. For example, among more than 1.5 million patients who undergo heart bypass surgery each year, a significant number of them can be restored to full health with lifestyle changes in their eating and exercise habits. But 90 percent do not make any changes.¹ They are choosing to die.

Such choices of death, Deutschman tells us, are not limited to personal health. He points to many leaders of organizations who know what changes are needed for the organization to live or even thrive. Yet they do not make those changes, and the organization dies.

Here is the disturbing reality in all these examples: Individuals and organizations do not lack the resources, knowledge, and information to survive; they simply do not choose to make the changes that are clear and available.

When confronted with the choice to change or die, they choose to die.

No one knows for certain how many churches close their doors in the United States each year, but it's probably safe to say the number is at least seven thousand, and that number is growing. Twenty churches are closing their doors every single day.² Most of them did not have to die. Most of them chose to die.

I know—my words sound harsh. But reality can be a tough taskmaster. As I will explain in greater detail in the next chapter, we cannot begin to change until we accept reality.

Here is another bit of sobering reality: More churches are marching toward the precipitous path of death every year. Ten years ago, about 10 percent of all churches were declining so rapidly that we deemed them terminal or near terminal. Today, 19 percent of all churches in America are in that category.

Stated another way, the number of churches near death has grown from thirty-five thousand to sixty-six thousand in ten years.³

Change or die.

A few years ago, I saw this reality up close. A church near death asked me to speak to their remnant of members. As I entered the deteriorating facility, I saw that the church sign was covered by weeds—you couldn't see the name of the church from the road.

The signs of death were everywhere. I decided not to take a restroom break when I opened the door to the men's room. It was filthy beyond words.

In one of the rooms off the sanctuary was an old upright piano that a member had donated to get a tax write-off. But no one had ever played it; the church was just a better dumping ground than the landfill.

But more concerning than the facilities were the faces of the members. They were defeated. A couple of them were angry. They had given up hope, or at least they saw me as their last hope.

I vaguely remember saying a few words about change when I was interrupted by a lady almost all the way in the back. There were fewer than a dozen people left in the church, but she chose to sit in the last pew.

"What about the screens?" she asked.

"The screens?" I replied with bewilderment.

"Yeah," she said with growing indignation. "Will we have words on the screen instead of using our hymnals if we make these changes? You're not supposed to have screens in a church!" The other heads nodded in affirmation.

I wrapped up my presentation quickly. The church members thought it was more important to have dusty hymnals than to be a gospel presence in their community. They had already made their decision. There was no need for me to waste my breath further. They had chosen to die rather than change.

Change or die.

There are thousands of these churches. In fact, if you include all the declining churches in America, three out of four are change-or-die churches.⁴ Some are declining rapidly toward death. Others are declining slowly but must decide to change before their condition worsens.

Change-or-die churches. Robert's church was one of them. They chose to die.

THE SAD BUT COMMON STORY

Robert was the name of the man at the conference. His church is the one that died. By the time we met after the conference, he had regained his composure. He wanted to talk. And though I am an introvert by nature, I wanted to hear his story. So I mostly listened.

"Our church was founded in 1961," he began. "I took a job in the community when I was in my twenties. I joined the church right away and stayed with it until it died."

Robert paused for a moment. I could tell his articulation of those last three words took him by surprise: *until it died*. It still seemed surreal to him that his church no longer existed.

"I was already engaged when I moved to town, so I wanted to make sure my wife was okay with the church. She loved it. In fact, she loved it so much that she made the decision to have our wedding there. The people were so

loving. We just wanted to build our lives around the church in our neighborhood.”

That was the first time I'd heard the church was located in a specific neighborhood. I asked Robert if he lived near the church.

“Oh yeah. We bought a house only two blocks away,” he responded. “We would walk to church unless the weather was bad.”

I then asked him if he still had a home in that same neighborhood. I could have predicted his response.

“No, we moved out of the neighborhood after living there for almost twenty-five years,” he told me.

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, the homes in the neighborhood began to decline in value. There were some other changes as well. We just didn't feel good about staying there,” he said with a bit of hesitation.

I could tell he was uncomfortable with my question, so I decided to approach it differently later in the conversation. I moved to a happier discussion.

“Tell me about your daughters,” I said. For the first time in the few minutes I had known Robert, I saw a smile on his face.

“My girls are incredible,” he exclaimed. “God blessed us with Sarah and Michelle. We raised them in the church. Sarah married a guy from the church, and Michelle married

a guy she met at college. They are such a joy! Even more, the two girls have given us five grandchildren.”

Now, I really understood that joy!

I thought I knew where Robert would take the conversation. At least on this one occasion, I was on target.

“I guess the saddest thing about the church was when two of the families left the church,” he began. “They didn’t leave at one time, but it was pretty close together. They bought homes in different parts of town. To be fair, a lot of the young families left in just a short period. We had gotten to the point where we didn’t really have anything for the young families. We called different youth ministers to solve the problem, but that didn’t change things much. And we finally called a young pastor with three kids, but he didn’t stay long either. It was like every time we thought we had a solution, it didn’t work.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell Robert I had seen the “silver bullet” solution fail time and time again. Instead, I tried to ease back into the conversation about the changing community around the church

“So, did a lot of the members still live in the neighborhood right before the church closed?” I asked.

“No, not really,” he responded. “In fact, only one person, one of our widows, lived in the neighborhood for the last five years the church was open. You’ve got to understand, the community was changing fast. The people moving in really

weren't like us. Our members weren't racists or anything. But most of the people we know, most of our families, moved out. You understand?"

Yes. Unfortunately, I did understand.

THE PRE-AUTOPSY

Robert changed the conversation quickly. He wanted to get back to talking about the book I wrote several years ago, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*. I wrote the book after talking to a number of people like Robert. In every case, I got to hear stories about churches that died. I got to hear the common themes about these deceased churches. Thus in some ways, I got to perform an autopsy of deceased churches.

My initial understanding of Robert's claim that I was too late was not exactly clear. He was not saying he wished he had read the book earlier; instead, he was saying I needed to write a book addressing the needs before a church dies, before an autopsy is performed.

I found humor in his suggestion that I write a prequel called *The Pre-autopsy*. I understood what he meant, though. He wanted a resource on death prevention. In essence, he wanted a book on church revitalization. I initially dismissed the idea since there were already a wealth of books and resources on the topic.

But the more I spoke with Robert, the more I realized he

was probably pointing me in a different direction. He understood we have an abundance of material, resources, consultants, and coaches to provide solutions for revitalization. That is not the key issue.

Instead, *the key issue is why church members and leaders choose not to change even when the solutions seem to be staring them in their collective faces.* In fact, Robert could articulate well the wrong choices his church made. What he could not explain is why the church continued down the path of wrong choices.

They chose tradition over change. They chose comfort over change. They chose preferences over change.

Ultimately, they chose death over change.

A NECESSARY CAVEAT

I do not want to assume you know my assumptions. Instead, I want you to hear clearly that the necessary change of which I speak is not change related to God's foundational, unchangeable truths as recorded in the Bible:

- The Bible is the Word of God.
- Jesus died for sinners.
- Jesus defeated death with his resurrection from the grave.
- Christ is the only way of salvation.

- God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
- Eternity is a reality.

There are many other unchangeable truths, but I want you to understand that this book about change is not about compromising biblical truth. To be clear, any human-centered change is headed for failure. True change in our congregations must be rooted in the truths of the Bible, saturated in prayer, and empowered by God alone.

Yet there is so much we can change. Let me state it more emphatically: There is so much we *must* change.

TO THE ROBERTS IN OUR CHURCHES

With a few exceptions, I write for church leaders, particularly pastors. They are my primary audience, but this book is also for the Roberts in our churches. Robert told me to get a message to you.

“Would you consider writing something to us church members before there is a need for an autopsy?” he asked. “Don’t just tell us *what* needs to change. Don’t just tell us *how* to change. Tell us *why* we need to change. Yeah, give us the tough news; we need to hear it. But also give us hope. Point us to a better future where our churches will *want* to go. Don’t drag us there. Lead us there.”

I could see it happening again: Robert was thinking about

his deceased church. Even more, he was grieving about his church.

“I’m trying to find another church home, but after nearly thirty years at one church, it’s tough. I’ve gone through the stages of grief, and I’m not done grieving yet. But I’ll tell you one thing: Wherever God leads me to find a church home, I won’t make the same mistakes. Perhaps God will use the death of my church to be the catalyst for other churches to live.”

He already has, Robert. He already has.

Would you, church member, approach this book with prayer and discernment? Would you ask God how he might speak to you through the words you are about to read? Would you be willing to put aside personal preferences and desires so that your church may not just survive but thrive? Would you take a moment to absorb some of the tough news and realities so you can see the hope of which I write?

The hope comes in the form of an anatomy. We have figuratively dissected hundreds of churches that have been on the path toward death, but they turned around. They revived. They did so in the face of facts and naysayers who told them it could not be done.

In its simplest form, these churches chose to live. I can anticipate what you’re thinking: *What church wouldn’t choose to live?* But remember the story of Robert’s church—it chose to die.

Get ready to walk with us through the anatomy of

BEFORE THE AUTOPSY

churches that were revived because they chose to live. Get ready for the prequel to *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, a prequel called *Anatomy of a Revived Church*.

These churches chose to live. The choice is as simple as it is profound.

Change or die.

And now, in God's power, the choice is yours.

QUESTIONS FOR PRAYERFUL CONSIDERATION

1. How would you evaluate your church right now: Healthy? Not so healthy? Very sick? Dying? Why did you make that particular choice?
2. Why do you think about three out of four churches are declining today, and about one in five are dying?
3. Do you know of a church that has closed its doors? Why do you think these kinds of churches die?
4. As we look at “change or die” realities, name some areas we cannot consider changing.
5. What are the similarities between a person refusing to change health and lifestyle habits and a church refusing to change methods and programs?

CHAPTER 1

.....

ANATOMY FINDING #1: ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY

“I learned it in anatomy.”

Our family heard that sentence untold times from my oldest son, Sam, when he was in high school. He took a course in anatomy and was enthralled by it. Again and again, he would remind us of all the things he was learning in that course. It became such a redundant sentence that every time Sam said something, his two brothers would ask him, “Did you learn that in anatomy?”

At times those three brothers could be a little tough on one another. I may or may not have contributed to the anatomy sarcasm.

But I got why Sam was fascinated by the course. It dealt in detail with the bodily structure and organisms of humans

and animals. He learned so much about the amazing makeup of God's creatures, understanding how the component parts explained the whole.

Anatomy is also a good term for explaining what we see when we analyze and dissect other things. Indeed, it is specifically helpful in understanding congregational life and the life cycle of churches.

I have analyzed a lot of churches since I began this type of research back in the mid-1980s. I estimate I have examined the data, at least on the surface, of more than one hundred thousand churches. These congregations taught me a lot, both good and bad.

By far, my most enjoyable research over the years has been analyzing churches that are alive and well after going down a path that seemed destined for death. A few descriptive names I have given them include "breakout churches," "turnaround churches," "revitalized churches," and "revived churches."

But I have also been inspired by people like Robert, whom you met in the previous chapter. While he appreciated my book on church autopsies, he wanted to know how churches could avoid death. At least, that is what he wished had been available for his church before it was too late.

As I considered similar requests and questions, I knew the task before me. I had to get into the world of the anatomy of churches, specifically those churches that were once headed

toward death and now are alive and well. Such is the purpose of this book. In each chapter, I look from an anatomical perspective at what these revived churches did. I examine the components that made up the whole of a revived congregation.

The first component boils down to the choice of blame and denial versus acceptance and responsibility. I have seen it hundreds, if not thousands, of times. Dying churches blame others. Revived churches accept responsibility. So who and what do dying churches blame? Here are a few of the culprits.

“IT’S THE OTHER CHURCH’S FAULT”

Their expressions were somber, their body language tense. I don’t think they wanted to meet with me. A mutual friend had arranged the meeting, telling the three church members at the table that I could help their church.

After five minutes, I doubted I could.

“So tell me about your church,” I began. I was not expecting a joyful response.

“We’ve got a problem,” one lady replied. *Good*, I thought. *At least they recognize there is a problem.*

“It’s the megachurch in our town,” she continued.

Delete any positive thoughts I had up to this point.

“Yeah,” a man next to her spoke up. “It’s sucking the life

out of our church. We can't compete with their children's ministry and the smoke and loud noise of their worship services."

I was tempted to ask, "Smoke is the problem?" But I refrained.

For nearly thirty minutes, I listened to them complain and criticize another church. I heard nothing about their church investing in the community. I heard nothing about their responsibility to evangelize and to minister to others.

It was the other church's fault. That summed it all up.

I came prepared. I showed them a demographic map. There were more than seventeen thousand people within three miles of the church. The number of unchurched was estimated to be 78 percent.

"Look, there are over thirteen thousand people within three miles of your church who don't go to church!" I exclaimed.

I waited for their response.

I wish I could say I was waiting with joyful expectation. I wasn't.

"Yeah," the other woman responded. "Probably the only place they will go is that megachurch that's stealing our members."

Sigh.

I left our meeting as soon I could get away.

“IT’S THE WORSHIP STYLE’S FAULT”

I wish I had a dime for every time a member of a declining church concluded that worship style is the reason for their congregation’s decline. Typically the declining church is more traditional in worship style, and their examples of growing churches are typically more contemporary in worship style.

The members and leaders of the declining churches usually conclude they are being faithful by sticking to their traditional worship style, while the contemporary churches are headed down the path to perdition.

“We aren’t going to compromise by doing away with our hymnals in exchange for loud music and smoke,” a Baptist deacon declared to me.

There’s that smoke thing again.

It remains a secret to most church members, but contemporary music is not the silver bullet for a turnaround. A healthy contemporary church has a desire to understand, reach, and minister to their communities. It’s called contextualization.

Some healthy churches are contemporary. Some are traditional. Some are liturgical.

Some unhealthy churches are contemporary. Or traditional. Or liturgical.

Worship style is neither a silver bullet nor an excuse.

If you’re ready for your church to revive, dump the excuse of worship style.

“IT’S THE PASTOR’S FAULT”

I got fired as a church consultant.

Okay, that’s a bit of hyperbole. The clearer way for me to say it is I never was retained as the consultant for this church.

It began as an initial conversation between seven leaders from the church and me. We were sitting around a large table. It was an ordinary request—the church was in a twelve-year decline and, almost in desperation, decided to seek outside help. I was the consultant they called.

“What do you see as the primary reason for the decline?” I asked after a few conversational formalities.

It took a few moments, but the oldest person at the table spoke. “Well,” he began cautiously, “I don’t like to throw anyone under the bus, but it basically comes down to our pastor.”

I asked him to elaborate.

He responded, “The pastor came in and wanted to change a bunch of stuff, like the worship style. He didn’t visit our members enough. And he sometimes preached too long.”

Others nodded in affirmation.

After an extended discussion of the pastor problem, I opened my chart for them to see.

“Here are the names of the pastors for the past fifteen years,” I began. “There are five in all. I’ve learned that all five were either fired or pressured to leave. That’s an average of one pastor termination every three years for fifteen years.

You have a reputation in the community of being a ‘preacher eater’ church. With all respect, I don’t think you have a pastor problem; I think you have a people problem.”

I didn’t get the consultation.

“IT’S THE DENOMINATION’S FAULT”

While denominational loyalty is waning, the real growth is in denominational blaming.

Of course, thousands of churches do not belong to a denomination, so they can’t add this one to their lists. But many *are* denominational. And many would place the responsibility at the feet of the organizations, leaders, and workers in their respective denomination:

“The denomination’s resources are inadequate.”

“We can’t get a denominational worker to assist our church.”

“The denomination does not care about us little churches.”

“The denomination doesn’t have all the free events they used to have.”

You get the picture.

Many denominations began as an organization of churches that held similar doctrinal beliefs and heritage.

They often were a conduit to fund mission work around the nation and the world. They may have supported some seminaries or colleges.

But somewhere along the way, many church leaders saw denominations as their personal resource assistants. And many denominations did just that for a season. Then denominational loyalties started waning, and the funds for these endeavors were cut significantly.

For many, it's now the denomination's fault.

“IT’S THE COMMUNITY’S FAULT”

This one used to surprise me. No more. I hear it with too much frequency.

Here is a conversation I heard a few months ago. I quote the pastor's words to the best of my recollection: “This community is not like it was twelve years ago when I first came here,” he began. “Our church was like a magnet to the people around us with our programs and ministries. We could announce something, and people would flood into our church.”

The obvious question from me: “What happened?”

“Well, the community started changing,” the pastor explained. “A lot of our members moved out, even though most of them kept coming to our church. But the people who moved in those houses were not like our church members.

They weren't at all interested in our church. I don't understand it. We would welcome them if they came. And they must know we are here—you can't miss the big white columns out front."

"Perhaps your church might go out into the community instead of expecting them to come to you," I said with trepidation.

"Nah," he said with a hint of indignation. "They're not interested in us. If this church dies, it will be because of the community."

Yep. It's the community's fault.

"IT'S THE DEMOGRAPHIC'S FAULT"

This path of blame can go in several directions. One is to blame the perceived scarcity of unchurched people. I have heard countless times how there are so many churches in a community and how everyone who wants a church home has already found one. The tone is futility: "We can never reach anyone because there is no one left to reach."

I've been working with churches for more than three decades. I have *never* been in a community that has no one to reach. Never ever.

A corollary of this blame game is simply to say the population base is too small. There are just not that many people in the area.

To be fair, I have been in rural communities with a small population. I get that. Churches in those communities will likely never be large. Still, there are always people to be reached.

One of the most rewarding conversations I had recently was with a pastor whose church was in an area with a population of four hundred within a five-mile radius. That's sparse! The fatalists in the church warned him he would do well if he could lead the church to hold its attendance average of forty-five.

The pastor was not deterred. He led the church to minister to the population in many creative ways. The rural community got the message: The church cares. The members care. Five years later, church attendance averages ninety-five. Almost one out of every four people living in that rural community attend that church on a given Sunday.

It's not the demographic's fault.

ANATOMY OF ACCEPTED RESPONSIBILITY

Change or die.

Church leaders and members who refuse to accept their God-given responsibility to reach and minister both inside and outside the walls of the church buildings are on a clear path to decline and likely death.

But church leaders and members who embrace the reality of the Great Commission and Great Commandment for

their lives will be a part of churches that don't just survive and live but also thrive and grow.

When Church Answers did our anatomical study of the churches that moved from a path of decline and death to one of life and growth, we saw a commonality early in the turnaround, indeed before the turnaround became visible: Usually a few leaders determined through God's power that they would stop blaming others and other situations. They would take responsibility for their own obedience and lack of obedience. The blame game, they discovered, does nothing but increase frustration.

A pastor in New Jersey decided to set aside five hours a week to connect with people in the community who were not a part of the church. Soon one other person joined him; then eight more followed. Those ten people became an outward focus and evangelistic force that invaded their community with gospel conversations and ministry.

Three women at a nondenominational church in northern California stopped blaming the pastor, staff, and lazy church members for the decline of their church. Instead, they began to pray fervently for God's power in their congregation. They met twice a month and used an app to remind them to pray together every day of the week at a specific time. That church, four years later, is beginning to show signs of reviving. It has been slow and arduous, but it sure beats blaming others.

Members of a church in Florida watched helplessly as their church declined for eleven consecutive years. The path toward death seemed inevitable. Pastors who were supposed to be the silver bullet came and left after one to three years. Frustrations were high, and the blame game was pervasive.

Five of the members, all senior adults, became weary of the decline and blame syndrome, and they began to pray for God to direct them in a positive way. They began to find places in the community where they could care for and love people they had never known. They became the hands, feet, and mouth of Jesus.

Three years later, the church began to turn in a positive direction. No, there has not been dramatic growth, but the signs of life are evident. Hope has replaced fear. Obedience has replaced blame.

One member summed it up well: “If you had told me three years ago we would begin to have hope in this church, I would have said either you were crazy or a miracle had taken place. I believe a miracle has really happened.”

You see, it’s not others’ fault. It’s not the fault of the situation in which your church finds itself. In our anatomy of revived churches, we saw blame transform to words of hope, encouragement, ministry, and possibility.

Anatomy Finding #1 is clear: Church leaders and

ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY

members accepted responsibility. In God's power they moved forward.

The blaming of others came to an abrupt and glorious halt.

QUESTIONS FOR PRAYERFUL CONSIDERATION

1. Read Acts 6:1-7. How did the church in Jerusalem move from blame to obedience?
2. Again, look at Acts 6:1-7, particularly verse 7. What were the immediate results of their obedience?
3. What are some common ways you have seen blame expressed in churches?
4. What does it mean that church members and leaders "accepted responsibility"?
5. Why do you think this finding in the anatomy of a revived church is mentioned first among the others?