



THE

# Church Revitalization Checklist

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A Hopeful and Practical Guide  
for Leading Your Congregation  
to a Brighter Tomorrow

**Sam Rainer**  
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*The Church Revitalization Checklist: A Hopeful and Practical Guide for Leading Your Congregation to a Brighter Tomorrow*

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*Dedicated to the memory of Ambrose Gilbert Sapp, a local church pastor who toiled in obscurity among the rolling fields of Kentucky, shepherding God's people in poverty without any glory or recognition. He faithfully preached the gospel until he died. May God grant us more like him.*



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## INTRODUCTION

# Leading Your Church into an Era of Renewed Optimism

IF GOD CAN SAVE any *person*, he can save any *church*. The gospel embodies a movement—bringing people out of spiritual darkness and into eternal light. The gospel not only initiates a new life in us, it also sustains us throughout our earthly lives. Jesus saves each one of us in a moment of time. But he also supports us in every moment that follows.

What Jesus does for individuals, he also does for the church, the assembly of saved individuals. The Good News is both personal and corporate. If we believe any person is worth saving, we must also believe any church is worth saving.

Some local churches will die. But no church *should* die. Every congregation of God's people is worth the effort to revitalize.

Landon pastors a church in rural Iowa. When I asked him how God had called him to his congregation, he responded, "I was the only one who applied."

He knew that pastoring a small church out in the cornfields would be difficult. His friends all told him not to go. But God had a different plan, and Landon followed in obedience.

"I was twenty-seven years old, young and dumb. So I said, 'I'll take it.'"

Right from the start, he encountered turmoil and a lot of heartache. Between the time he was called and his first day on the job, about a dozen people left the church. Another dozen left after the first couple of Sundays. In a church of maybe six dozen total, losing a third of the congregation was a big blow. Forget the typical ministry honeymoon; that didn't happen. To Landon, it was obvious the church needed a culture shift and a quick change of direction.

Having grown up in the area, Landon grasped intuitively what he had to do. He went back to basics with a twofold strategy: building relationships and teaching biblical truth.

As he focused on preaching through entire books of the Bible and spent a lot of time in people's homes, this combination of truth and love started to turn the tide. But at the six-month mark, another round of church squabbles caused him to question the viability of his leadership.

“I was so discouraged, I wasn’t sure I would make it.”

But Landon stuck it out, and personal evangelism became the catalyst for change.

“I started working one-on-one, bringing people into the church myself.”

The personal revival in his own soul gradually spread to the congregation. It took almost five years, but noticeable changes began to occur. Average attendance moved above one hundred for the first time in decades. They renovated the church campus and added an associate pastor. The children’s ministry and student ministry began to thrive. As average Sunday attendance grew to more than 125, they added a second service. Most of the newcomers had no idea that this had been a struggling church of only a few dozen people not that long ago.

What made the difference?

“The pastors who stay are the ones who make a difference,” Landon is quick to point out. “It’s easy to say and hard to do. But every time I wanted to leave, there were no opportunities available. And every time an opportunity came my way, I realized I was in a place I didn’t want to leave.”

Landon doesn’t consider himself thick-skinned or courageous. He believes that God gives strength through our willingness to persevere.

“It’s not about how tough or brave you are. It’s about endurance. You take your licks and keep going. And one other thing: Don’t make major decisions when you’re hurting.”

The ups and downs of ministry are real. There’s no way

to gloss them over or soften the blows. Landon has felt them all. But through his endurance, he saw God take a church from falling apart to falling in love.

“I love the people of this church deeply,” Landon said. “They are my family.”

In the end, the only pastor who applied for the position was exactly the one God wanted there.

### **Optimism Always Bends toward Hope**

Though it may not *feel* like it from one day to the next, God has sovereignly placed you exactly where he wants you to be. Maybe you’ve been longing for a transition in your circumstances. Maybe you’re ready to quit. Maybe you just got fired. Maybe your church has been in the doldrums for years, and you’re losing hope that it could ever be any different.

Regardless of your circumstances, there are many things you can’t control. But what you can always control is your attitude—your posture. As you persevere, I encourage you to bend toward hope. Most pastors have a sore back because they carry a heavy load. It hurts to bend toward optimism. When you lean into a better place, it won’t be without pain. God will stretch you. But he also promises to fill you with hope, peace, and joy.

I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

To hear people talk, the church in North America is deteriorating.<sup>2</sup> Reading the reports of decline can be exhausting and discouraging. Some overstate how hard the church is falling, but few would deny that many local churches are not doing well. Perhaps *your* church is one of them. Maybe you're tired or disheartened. Maybe you're hurting. Don't give up. Your congregation is worth revitalizing.

Some churches reek of selfishness, but even the self-righteous and self-absorbed are worth redeeming. They just need help refocusing on serving others. God may be calling you to exhort a few saints. Be strong. Don't give up. Your church is worth revitalizing.

Some churches fight. A lot. Certain members, it seems, put on their cockfighting spurs for business meetings and dare the chickens to challenge them. Hostile churches need someone to set a good example—to show them how to fight *for* the church, not *with* the church. Be brave. Don't give up. Your church is worth revitalizing.

Some churches don't seem to have a clue when it comes to ministry, and people scoff at them. But Jesus never has—and never will—ridicule a church. The church is his bride. Every congregation deserves leaders who will lovingly shepherd them toward a greater purpose. Be resilient. Don't give up. Your church is worth revitalizing.

Some churches are immature—like a gangly middle schooler trying to impress the girls at skate night. The people seem more concerned about how they appear than who they are. Energy is poured into all the wrong things. If this is your

church, you'll need to be the grown-up in the room. Middle schoolers don't mature well without guidance. Churches don't grow in discipleship without a mature shepherd. Be determined. Don't give up. Your church is worth revitalizing.

Revitalizing a church can be a lonely calling. It's hard work, but it's worth it. Your fellow pastors may wonder why you stick around. Your church may not understand at first what you're trying to do. But you're not alone. The Bridegroom is with you—always. He is committed to his bride. He has promised to build his church to overcome the gates of hell. Don't give up. Your church is worth revitalizing.

Psalms 22, one of King David's great prophetic psalms, contains a movement—from disorientation to orientation; from the anguish of feeling forsaken to a crescendo of praise and optimism. Confusion becomes clarity. Uncertainty transitions into certainty.

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

Why are you so far away when I groan for help?

Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not  
answer.

Every night I lift my voice, but I find no relief. . . .

Yet you brought me safely from my mother's womb  
and led me to trust you at my mother's breast.

I was thrust into your arms at my birth.

You have been my God from the moment I was  
born. . . .

I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters.

I will praise you among your assembled people.

Praise the LORD, all you who fear him! . . .

I will praise you in the great assembly.

I will fulfill my vows in the presence of those who  
worship you.<sup>3</sup>

How does David get to a better place? Through praise. He praises God not only in times of blessing, but through the valleys as well. David's lament in Psalm 22 points to something greater. There is *purpose* to his disorientation, just as there was purpose in Christ's suffering on the cross.

In Psalm 22, Jesus is portrayed as a sacrificial lamb. But by Psalm 23, he has become the Good Shepherd. The green meadows he promises in Psalm 23 are possible because of his suffering in Psalm 22. The dust of death in Psalm 22 precedes the peaceful streams of Psalm 23.

Your disorientation has a purpose, so praise God through it. A people yet to be born need to hear a message of hope. Your praise today—even as you struggle—may be just the spark that ignites a gospel movement. Give God glory in the fog, through the disappointment, through the pain, through the valley of the shadow of death. There is a better place ahead.

Psalm 22 begins with God's silence, but silence does not mean absence. God is ever present, even when you don't perceive him. God will never neglect you or forsake you. He has you in his sights even when you feel completely lost.

David's psalm of disorientation is not about deliverance *from* death, but rather a deliverance *through* death. Jesus died so you can live. Jesus died so his *church* can live.

The movement of the gospel takes people to a better place. Bad news becomes good news. Death becomes life. This applies to you personally, and it applies to the church corporately. If God can save any person, he can save any church. Any church can live. Any church can *thrive*. Persevere. Lead your congregation to a better place.

The hinge of true hope is resurrection. Jesus defeated death. Through his resurrection, you can be optimistic about the future. Through his resurrection, you can have complete assurance in the present.

Resurrection hope conquers defeatism. You don't have to resign. You don't have to give up. With Jesus, your struggle is purposeful and powerful.

Resurrection hope conquers anxiety. Your concerns have answers.

Resurrection hope conquers fear. You can be calm in the storm.

Resurrection hope conquers doubt. God provides assurance even when you're not certain.

Resurrection hope conquers death. Your church isn't dead yet. Your church doesn't have to die.

### **Let's Do This!**

In my congregation's tradition, we baptize by immersion. Some baptisms are more memorable than others. I'll never

forget the young man who shouted, “Let’s do this!” right before he was immersed. He was completely submitted to Christ, optimistic about God’s mission, and ready to share the gospel. He came up out of the water to roaring applause. His optimism was contagious. The church shared his hope.

I don’t wake up every morning saying, “Let’s do this!” But I probably should. Every believer should. Biblical optimism is neither capricious nor superficial. It is a joy deeply rooted in hope. Biblical optimism is complete confidence that God has a plan and his plan will prevail.

Optimism always bends toward hope. Everyone hopes for something. In a general sense, hope is the feeling we get when we *think* that something we want is within our reach. This type of hope is not a certainty. It’s just a feeling.

Hope rises. Hope falls. But what if we could hope for something that was truly within our reach? What if our collective hope led to collective praise? What if our hope led to something—or Someone—certain?

The Gospel of Luke records such a hope—a greater hope not determined in the finite realm of circumstances.

Some have called Luke’s thesis “the Great Reversal.” The last become first. The least become the greatest. The least of all sit at the table with the King. This is the hope suggested in the Old Testament book of Job, of all places: “At last the poor have hope, and the snapping jaws of the wicked are shut.”<sup>4</sup>

*Hope* is a term often used in a context of doubt. When we say, “I hope my team wins,” there is a hint of disbelief.

When we say, “I hope my church grows,” you know it’s not guaranteed. When I peer into the freezer and say, “I hope there is ice cream,” the grim knowledge of my kids’ appetites adds an element of doubt.

Biblical hope, on the other hand, conveys confidence and security. When the Bible uses the word *hope*, there is no inclination to doubt.

There’s only one place to find certain hope. As the old hymn has it, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”<sup>5</sup> This hope is certain. It’s not just a feeling. This hope is collective. It’s available to all. This hope is infinite and eternal. It never dies.

Cultural Christianity might be dead or dying. Maybe that’s embarrassing for some. But I’m not embarrassed. We need more faith contenders and fewer church pretenders anyway. The Christianity I see in the New Testament is lean and determined. We’re called to work out our faith while running a race. We’re called to gird our loins with truth.

Church, let’s do this! We can stand strong. We can exude joy. We can encourage hope. I’m optimistic about God’s work. I’m hopeful about Christ’s church in North America. You should be too.

### **The Other Side of Tomorrow**

This book is more about what *should* happen than what *will* happen. The following chapters are more prescription than prediction. However, the book wasn’t written in a sociological vacuum. The ideas here come from hundreds of personal

interviews with pastors over the last six years through Church Answers and more than twenty years of research on the church.<sup>6</sup>

The primary method of exploration is qualitative, rather than quantitative. Qualitative research offers a richness and depth often missing in quantitative research. Qualitative methods account for complex social interactions in naturalistic settings.<sup>7</sup> The church as an institution will likely never be accused of oversimplicity. But at times, raw statistical data on the church, even if accurate, is too reductionistic. For instance, few doubt the decline of the church in terms of average weekly attendance. Six out of ten churches have either plateaued or declined in weekly attendance.<sup>8</sup> Many good researchers have acted as prophetic voices over the past several decades. The overarching narrative is true. The church, in general, is not well.

My desire is to focus more on the story than on the stats, though the quantitative facts are woven into the backdrop and cannot be ignored. At times, I'll bring them to the forefront. But when we dig into the particulars of individual stories, hope emerges. Just beneath the surface flows a spring of life. There are signs that a movement of God is afoot. The decline does not have to continue. Things on the other side of tomorrow might be better than we anticipate.

Almost all the research in this book occurred through interviews with pastors in smaller churches—or what pastor Mark Clifton points out are “normative size” churches.<sup>9</sup> The median church size in the United States is seventy-five

people.<sup>10</sup> If you're under one hundred in average weekly attendance, your church is normal.

I realize that numbers do matter. Human curiosity always gravitates toward things that grow quickly. This attention can sometimes be negative, but it's not always wrong. At many large churches where Christ is proclaimed, God is saving scores of people.

The first megachurch in the US, the Moody Church in Chicago, helped make pastor D. L. Moody famous in the late nineteenth century. In the 1880s, the growth of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London to more than five thousand in attendance drew some of the world's most powerful leaders to pastor Charles Spurgeon.<sup>11</sup> Big churches are still popular, and worship attendance growth remains a viable measure of success. And just as Moody and Spurgeon are heroes, not villains, we should not assume that today's megachurch pastors are antagonists in the continuing story of the church.

However, a subtle shift in the storyline has begun to develop. After five decades of exponential growth, the number of megachurches in the United States has remained relatively stable over the past ten years—somewhere around 1,600, or less than one percent of the estimated 350,000 churches in the United States.<sup>12</sup> More people attend these megachurches than ten years ago, mainly because of the multisite movement, but the total number of megachurches has remained surprisingly static. After a decade of this sideways trend, is it safe to claim that the megachurch movement is beginning to wane?

The next few years are crucial for the health of the North American church. Megachurches won't just disappear. People won't flock back into smaller churches just for a change of scenery. Though the megachurch movement has been more of a positive force for the gospel than a negative one, if the overall health of the church is to improve, I believe that a movement of non-megachurches must gain momentum.

I'm optimistic about tomorrow, but smaller and medium-size churches will have to move into a mode of exploration to take advantage of the opportunity. Adventurers do not embark with a spirit of pessimism. Sailors move into uncharted waters when they believe something better is just over the horizon.

I believe a blue ocean lies before us. This book is an attempt to chart at least one course into the unknown waters. It's exciting but also risky. My hope is to help pastors and church leaders see that the risk is worth the reward.

But even though I'm hopeful, I'm not a Pollyanna. A firm grip on reality is every bit as important to leadership as optimism and a can-do spirit. The trick is to get the right mix. We're not going to get it all right. Hope must be willing to sacrifice perfection for progress. Hope must also be willing to get up and move, even if we're unsure exactly where to go. Where *are* we going? Forward! Where is that? Right in front of us.

The primary focus of this book is on the near-term. We must start exploring *now*. Set your sights for five years from today, but hold the specifics loosely. If we've learned

anything from the coronavirus pandemic, it's that the future can change on a dime. But God is unchanging. His faithfulness endures forever.<sup>13</sup>

Uncertainty forces us to abandon our self-reliance and surrender to the power of God. When we do, God is able to stretch our hope and build our faith. It's a hard lesson. It's a necessary lesson.

When faced with a *crux* moment, the temptation is to hit the pause button. But as we'll see in chapter 1, we should hit the reset button instead. We must come to grips with the reality that things will not be the same. And that's okay! A blue ocean awaits.<sup>14</sup> Something greater lies on the other side of tomorrow.

### **Leading Churches into a New Era of Optimism**

Not all optimists are leaders, but every leader must be an optimist. As a leader in your church, you have a responsibility to convey a hopeful message to your congregation. Leaders take people to a better place. Pastors shepherd their congregations to a better place. Pessimism has no place in leadership—not even if you try to rebrand it as *realism*—and it will not move people to a healthier place. Pessimists are not leaders. Pessimists always see the worst case. Pessimists assume that evil will prevail over good. Pessimists—by God's design—cannot be effective pastors or church leaders, because the gospel by its very nature is optimistic.<sup>15</sup>

I've written this book primarily for church leaders. As a lead pastor who coaches other pastors, I view the church

through the lens of leadership. My doctorate is in the field of leadership studies, and most of my writing and research is on church leadership.

I titled this introduction “Leading Your Church into an Era of Renewed Optimism” to draw a clear distinction between my outlook on the future of the church and the more somber tone of other recent books on the subject. *Pessimistic* may be too strong a word to describe those other works, but cheerful and optimistic do not immediately come to mind when you consider titles that include the words *autopsy*, *recession*, and *crisis*, for example.<sup>16</sup> My concern is that too much negativity might become a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially at the local church level.

Just because national trends point to a decline in the North American church does not mean *your* church must decline. Leaders cannot resign themselves to negative influences and outcomes. Your role as a leader is to translate the message of hope in your own context.

Don’t deny the facts—of course not. Problem identification is central to any good revitalization plan, and it’s important to recognize the current state of your church. But you and your congregation are not destined to continue on a path of negativity. In fact, your job as a leader is to compel people toward a new hope, a renewed optimism.

What if every church adopted the mindset of new hope? What if every church stood up and said, “We can do this!” What if we all encouraged each other with the truth that the gospel conquers evil and Jesus wins in the end?

The Kingdom of God knows nothing of pessimism. Pessimism in leadership leads ultimately to tyranny. I also believe that so-called *realism* on its own is too rigid. Realism detached from optimism can only describe a situation without prescribing a solution. Describing reality is the job of historians and journalists, not leaders. Historians look backward. Journalists report what's happening today. Leaders move people to the other side of tomorrow. And that requires optimism.<sup>17</sup> Optimism at its most basic simply means seeing that something *better* is *possible*. Optimism assures us that we don't have to stay stuck where we are. We can move, we can hope, we can take action.

My thesis is really quite simple: Moving your church toward the hope of tomorrow requires optimism. *The Church Revitalization Checklist* provides a way to implement this hope. Without a guide, it's easy to get lost. The checklist will keep you focused. God has sovereignly placed your church in a specific location for a reason. A better day is just on the other side of tomorrow. Optimism and hope will lead your church there.

All together now: *Let's do this!*

# 1

## Hit the Reset Button, Not Pause

FAR TOO MANY CHURCHES hit the pause button when what they really need is a full reset. Depending on who's counting, somewhere between 65 and 90 percent of churches need some form of revitalization.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, there are times to pause, take a breath, and reevaluate, but some churches have been idling on the sidelines for decades. A lot of churches are still driving around in a 1982 Ford Escort—the bestselling car of the year with its 1.6-liter single-cam engine pulling a full 68 horsepower—and yelling “It still runs!” out the manually rolled-down window. Hitting the forty-year pause button is nothing to brag about. Just because it was popular way back when doesn't mean it should be driving your church today.

Here's a more compelling—and biblical—vision to drive today's church: "Anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father."<sup>2</sup>

Right now, your church has the opportunity of a lifetime. Sounds cliché, right? Except it's *true*. The promise Jesus made in John 14 should definitely get your attention.

The work Jesus did transformed people's lives. He taught. He healed. He saved. He fed. But that was only the beginning. Read that promise again, with some emphasis added: "Anyone who believes in me *will do the same works* I have done, *and even greater works*, because I am going to be with the Father."

We will do *even greater works*. Do you believe this promise? It's a hard one for me to grasp. Once you've resurrected someone from the dead, what "greater works" are even possible? I barely have the power to landscape a flower bed.

But what does Jesus mean by "greater"? Obviously, we don't have more power than the Son of God does. So how can our works be greater than his? I believe the word *greater* refers to geographical reach, not potency of power.

During his time on earth, Jesus was limited to three years of ministry in a small region of the world. After he ascended, and left the church to complete the mission, the amount of geography in play soon expanded to include North Africa, Asia Minor, and the southern reaches of Europe. And eventually the entire globe.

Notice the purpose of this expansion, in John 14:13: God's glory. Don't miss this: God promises us greater things through

the church if we pursue his glory. The promise is that God will use us for greater things.

Ephesians 3:10 reveals the means of this promise:

God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

How will Christ be made known to the world? Through the local church. Through the extended geographic mission of the bride of Christ.

God will use you individually, and he will use the church corporately. The promise of John 14 is that he will use both in greater ways! You give God glory by believing in his promise that your church can change the community around you. Pessimism is anathema to God's calling for every local church. Optimism is required to lead a church forward in the work of the gospel.

Now is the time for a reset. If the COVID-19 lockdown taught us anything, it's that the church can adapt quickly to changing circumstances. When we were forced to shut the doors of our facilities, we had to completely rethink our approach. Churches everywhere made the move online, added outdoor services where possible, and looked for creative new ways to fulfill their mission. Physical distance became the norm for ministry, but churches found new ways to promote and preserve community.

Drive-in church became a thing again. What launched

Robert Schuller and the Crystal Cathedral in the 1950s was suddenly back in vogue.<sup>3</sup> Old-fashioned solutions paralleled new tech-based experiments. The team at my church covered the full spectrum, writing snail mail letters and making phone calls while also pushing the limits of the available technology to produce our weekly services. Some ideas worked better than others, but our church and others soon found their groove and started reshaping their methods of ministry.

The marriage of old and new technologies created a fresh new balance. Hitting the reset button doesn't mean we scrap everything we've been doing, but it does mean we're willing to try something new and experiment to see what works best.

The best art is often produced at a point of tension, such as when a crisis prompts an artist to think in new ways. The beauty that emerges from darkness and despair carries a particular power. Now is the time to experiment with new ideas. Recognize that the people of your church may be more willing than ever to accept creative new ideas. Not only have people become more accepting of innovation, but they are also more forgiving of fits and starts. Everything is different now, right? Or is it? Perhaps these kinds of opportunities have always been available. We just missed them as we puttered along with our church-as-usual programs.

### **Everything Is Different Now, Just like Always**

The reset button is not a novel invention suddenly available to today's leaders. Over the past hundred years alone, dozens of *This changes everything!* moments have occurred.

For example, in 1966, Robert W. Taylor had an idea to create a nationwide computer network. Two years later, he wrote a white paper called “The Computer as a Communications Device,” which became one of the founding documents of the internet.<sup>4</sup> Taylor was the director of the Pentagon’s Advanced Research Projects Agency Information Processing Techniques Office—a long title later shortened to ARPAnet. What began with three terminals between the System Development Corporation in Santa Monica, UC Berkeley, and MIT would grow to dozens of networked sites by the early 1980s.

At first, the computer geeks did not want to share computing power across terminals. Why give up a share of your ability to process information? But when they came to realize the power of a dynamic medium over a static station, the entire world opened up. When my dad was in college in the 1970s, computer science was still dependent on physical punch cards. By the time I was in high school in the mid-1990s, my computer class was programming the school’s first website.

To gauge the accelerated pace of change brought about by technological innovation, consider this: It took broadcast radio thirty-eight years to reach fifty million users. Television reached fifty million within thirteen years. The internet reached fifty million in four years—and changed everything.<sup>5</sup> But it wasn’t the first time a pivotal event had changed the world.

The trenches of World War I obliterated the prevailing optimism of modernity—changing the face of warfare

and international relations. With World War II, everything changed again. The Great Depression in the 1930s changed everything—as did the Great Recession in 2008 and 2009. The Long March and the ascendance of communism under Mao Zedong changed everything. So did the fall of the Berlin Wall. The mass production of penicillin in the 1940s changed everything. So did Rosa Parks and the civil rights movement. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 changed everything. So did the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Albert Einstein, quantum physics, and the development of nuclear energy changed everything. So did space exploration, satellite technology, and mobile phones. Walt Disney changed everything. So did Nelson Mandela. The proliferation of credit cards changed everything. So did the housing crash and the bursting of the dot-com bubble. The emergence of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s changed everything. So did the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. “Everything is different now” has always been the case.

Every church has a reset button. Every pastor has an opportunity to press it. Don’t wait for the world to change. The church is supposed to change the world. Stop lamenting our increasingly godless age. Let’s build God’s Kingdom.

### **Optimistic Responses to the Winds of Change**

Here’s a truth you can take to the bank: Change will be constant until Christ returns. Tomorrow will be different from today. Will tomorrow’s differences be subtle or culture-shifting? It is impossible to predict.

During the coronavirus pandemic, many people learned

more than they wanted to know about logarithmic curves and regression analysis. Facebook became a statistics tutor as friends and neighbors began making predictions. But even the experts struggled with predicting what would happen next. We were living the truth of the old statistics adage: “All models are wrong, but some are useful.”<sup>6</sup>

This chapter is less about getting an exact prediction right and more about getting the posture of leadership right. Get ready and start believing that God will do a great work. Bob Dylan’s famous line “The answer is blowin’ in the wind” is both truth and poetry.<sup>7</sup> We feel the wind, but we can’t see it. We know it’s there, but we can’t grab it. The winds of change are all around us. No one can predict exactly what will happen on the other side of tomorrow. But we can prepare ourselves for an optimistic response. With 65 to 90 percent of churches needing some form of revitalization, something must be done. How did we get here? What answers might be blowin’ in the wind? How can we respond optimistically?<sup>8</sup>

### *The Erosion of Evangelism*

The first wind of change is a slowing conversion rate due to a decline of evangelism. Don’t get me wrong: Some churches are growing. In fact, before the pandemic, about 30 percent were on a trajectory of increasing attendance and income.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, evangelism is not the driving force behind growth in many churches. Growth is more likely to come from *transfer growth* and *biological growth* than from evangelism or growth from conversions.<sup>10</sup>

Over the last few decades, a simple societal shift has occurred in the church. People moved from liberal churches to conservative churches and had more babies. The growth of conservative churches over liberal churches was first identified in the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> Liberal churches declined as congregants shifted toward more conservative churches. Additionally, conservatives have significantly more children than liberals—by a factor of 41 percent.<sup>12</sup> I am not making a qualitative judgment about theology or family size, but the facts are important to know. Facts are our friends.

Some churches are growing, but too few are doing the work of evangelism. The conversion rates of growing churches are almost the same as for any other church.<sup>13</sup> Evangelism programs were popular from the 1970s through the 1990s, but then churches began to cancel their evangelism programs and did not replace them with anything else. Though the efficacy of those programs was rightly questioned, the tragedy is that, rather than trying to develop more effective methods, churches just stopped trying to do evangelism training.

If you're a Christian, someone must have shared Jesus with you. Who invited you into the faith? Now it's your turn—and your responsibility—to share the good news of Jesus with others.

Most people don't share their faith for two reasons: *fear of failure* and *fear of rejection*. What if I don't share the gospel correctly? What if the person rejects the message? Or worse, rejects *me*! The problem with most evangelism efforts is that

we plan more for failure than for success. But evangelism is one area where we should be the *most* optimistic.

God is not looking for the strongest, best looking, most eloquent, or most popular witnesses. He is looking for the most devoted.

You can hit the reset button on evangelism. Quite simply, it begins with you.

A few years ago, I sat with a group of eight elders who had hired me as a consultant because their church had noticed a decline in attendance. I asked for their annual figures. As I dove into forty years of data, a trend emerged. They had lost, on average, about eight people a year over a forty-year period. What was once a church of five hundred was now under two hundred.

“What do you think caused this decline?” I asked.

“Many of our members believe the new pastor is to blame.”

“Really? He’s in his twenties. Your problem began about fifteen years before he was born!”

“Your numbers must be wrong.”

“These are the numbers you gave me!”

They wanted to make the problem more complicated than it was. When problems are complex, it’s much easier to avoid responsibility and assign blame. But the problem here was obvious. They had stopped doing the work of evangelism.

So I said to them, “We have eight elders at the table here, and your church has averaged a loss of eight people per year. If you elders had simply done the work of evangelism

yourselves, each of you winning one person to Christ per year, then your church would not have declined.”

Optimism can be blunt. But the truth can also be liberating.

The return to an evangelistic outlook begins with leadership. Evangelistic churches have evangelistic pastors. Your church will respond if you *show* them evangelism in action rather than simply talking about it on Sunday morning. Set a personal goal of reaching one person for Christ every six months. Expand your outreach to include your staff and key leaders.

If you're hesitant, I understand. Salvation is God's work, not ours. At the same time, we cannot *fail* if we are *obedient*. What if the one thing holding back a large-scale revival is your disobedience? Be optimistic about evangelism—not for the sake of increasing your attendance numbers, but for the sake of changing your church's culture and promoting the growth of God's Kingdom. The healthiest churches inwardly are the ones most focused outwardly. If Jesus is the gravitational center of your life, you will naturally pull others toward him and into his body, the church.

### *A Larger Generation Gap*

The second wind of change is a widening generation gap. Two major reasons exist for this widening gap: *technology* and *life expectancy*. Technological advances are increasing rapidly at the same time life expectancy is also increasing rapidly. Both are great trends. Both give us reasons to be optimistic.

People are living longer. People are advancing further. There are more years to enjoy and more things to do in those years. But with more years and more gadgets comes more tension.

“Open your Bibles. Turn on your Bibles. Roll out your scrolls.”

That’s the kind of language I now use when directing my congregation to God’s Word. *Turn on your Bible?* That concept was completely unknown until recently.

The distribution of the Bible has always been aided by technological innovation. Papyrus sheets replaced leather scrolls. Parchment ultimately replaced papyrus. For a long time, only certain church leaders owned a Bible. In the 1300s, John Wycliffe—a revolutionary for his time—believed all Christians should read the entire Bible for themselves. He led a movement that translated the Bible into the language of the people. But until the mechanical, movable-type printing press was invented in the mid-1400s, few commoners had access to a Bible. Johannes Gutenberg’s technological innovation enabled mass production of Bibles. Eventually, every family had a Bible. At some point, preachers started saying, “Turn to page 432.” Now we open our Bible apps. Technology gives everyone access to every type of Bible translation for free.

I don’t want to overlay the generational tensions with technology. There are Luddites of every age. However, many of our older brothers and sisters are witnessing rapid change in a way unimaginable during their youth. For my young children, rapid change is normal.

In 1900, only 25 percent of the US population had running water and less than 10 percent had a telephone. In 1900, no one had a refrigerator, radio, or washer and dryer. By 1965, Gordon Moore, the cofounder of Intel, predicted the doubling of electronic device capabilities every two years.<sup>14</sup> Today, some dystopian thinkers believe we will reach a technological singularity around 2050, in which machines become smarter than humans and take over the world. If Arnold Schwarzenegger is still alive then, we should all be afraid.

Not only are the rates of technological advances increasing, but people are also living longer, much longer than at any point in history. In 1900, a male infant was expected to live to forty-six, a female to forty-eight. By 2000, life expectancy of a male infant was seventy-four, and eighty for a female infant.<sup>15</sup>

What does this age trend mean for the church? Quite simply, the generation gap *feels* larger now because it *is*. People living longer means more generations than ever in the church. In 1900, most people died before the age of fifty. Therefore, church congregations spanned just two generations, with a smattering of older grandparents. Today, it's not uncommon to see four generations in a congregation. Today, large numbers of elderly congregants worship side by side with their great-grandchildren.

Church leaders now face the difficult challenge of unifying four—and sometimes five—generations. The preaching audience is as broad as it's ever been. Though I'm generalizing,

most in the older generations expect lower use of technology in the church while those of the younger generations expect more technology. Just a few years ago, having your phone out in church was rude. Today it's encouraged—for giving, Scripture reading, and taking notes.

Church leaders deal with a greater variety of expectations from members as well, and those expectations change over time. For many in the older generations, the church is the one place where they can hang on to what's familiar. Technology introduces the unfamiliar. That feeling is not necessarily negative; it's simply a reality. The best church leaders will find ways to leverage technology in a way that is least disruptive for the older people while at the same time engaging for the younger people.

The tension inherent in a widening generation gap is both reality and an opportunity. As people live longer and technology continues to advance, generation gaps will continue to expand in our congregations. Just as we must embrace the increasing ethnic diversity in the United States, we must also embrace—not fear or try to ignore—the increasing generational diversity. In fact, the reset button exists because the older generations created it. After all, who invented all this new technology? The foundations for today's advances were laid decades ago.

I've been in pastoral ministry for more than fifteen years. I'm right at that age where the younger generations think I'm old but the older generations still think I'm young. This generational no-man's-land has taught me something. Many times,

it's better to *show* people your vision rather than try to *explain* your vision. I've spent countless hours writing summaries for committees, creating spreadsheets for teams, and documenting history for business meetings only to meet a brick wall because people could not *visualize* the vision. One of the best ways to hit the reset button for all generations is simply to show them, rather than try to explain everything.

William is an example. He's a fortysomething worship pastor attempting to unify a multigenerational church. For years, he tried to explain to the younger generation why hymns are important. He spent countless hours trying to convince the older generation why a modern worship experience was necessary for the future health of the church. The people of the church were kind to William, but they didn't want to budge. Everyone feared the unknown.

Then one day he just did it. He *showed* them the new worship experience. The church loved it. In fact, people from both generations came up to him after a few weeks and said, "See, I told you so. We've been talking about this for years. I'm glad you finally started listening to us."<sup>16</sup>

If you're younger, please don't ignore the older generation. And if you're older, please don't fear the younger generation. The inevitable friction between generations can create beautiful congregations. But it will take all ages submitting to the Master, allowing him to mold and shape us together. Be optimistic. All creatures of our God and King can be a merry bunch of misfits. Safe churches don't change the world. You become an Acts 17:6 church by first being an

Acts 4:20 church. You will turn the world upside down when you can't stop speaking about Jesus.

### *Diversity Is Expected*

What was once merely an ideal is now an expectation. Our churches must become more diverse. Hitting the reset button includes leveraging our ability to become more diverse.<sup>17</sup>

But is the United States *really* becoming more diverse? Many well-meaning people have asked me this question. If you live in an area that is still largely homogeneous, you may not see much ethnic diversity in your circles—at least not *yet*. But it's coming. The demographic landscape in the United States is reaching a tipping point and the Caucasian majority will soon become a minority.

My grandparents came of age when the US population was almost 90 percent white. My grandchildren will grow up in a nation that is majority nonwhite.<sup>18</sup> This shift can already be seen in preschools.<sup>19</sup> Ethnic diversity was once limited to large urban centers such as New York, San Francisco, Houston, and Miami. But diversity is now spreading everywhere—primarily among the younger generations.

In 1967, the US Supreme Court ruled that interracial marriage is legal. Since that ruling, in *Loving v. Virginia*, marriages between different races or ethnicities has increased more than fivefold.<sup>20</sup>

The issue of diversity is not only a demographic reality, it's a gospel reality. What humanity segregates, God brings back together. Racial segregation is a vile idea from the pit of hell.

If we genuinely believe the bride of Christ contains every tongue, tribe, and nation, then we shouldn't have a problem with marriages between tongues, tribes, and nations.

More importantly, our churches should reflect this demographic change. Indeed, the church should lead on the issue of diversity. Public schools will become ethnically diverse simply by who moves into the neighborhood. Why shouldn't our churches see similar patterns? As tribes and nations move in together, the church should reach out to enfold them. Ethnically diverse neighborhoods are not pre-Jonah Nineveh. They are a taste of heaven.

About fifty years ago, leaders in the church-growth movement started using the "homogeneous unit principle" to justify racial segregation. A homogeneous unit "is simply a section of society in which all the members have some characteristic in common."<sup>21</sup> It is based on the underlying assumption that "people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."<sup>22</sup> Even as they warned against ethnocentrism and racism, many of the movement's leaders favored a more segregated church.

The homogeneous unit principle evolved to become a rationale for churches not assimilating people across ethnicities. For example, proposals on how to deal with African Americans moving into white neighborhoods called for white churches to move out to the suburbs rather than work to become heterogeneous in the city. Calls to break the comfort of tradition in the church did not seem to extend to becoming *uncomfortable* by reaching people of different backgrounds.

Now that our nation is reaching a demographic tipping point, these rationalizations from a prior generation are diminishing—as they should. The church must do the hard work of assimilating people of different ethnicities, generations, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The more diverse a church, the more it reflects the true gospel. An ethnically diverse church makes a loud statement for the transformational power of King Jesus.

We're getting better about embracing diversity, but we've still got a long way to go. The binary divide of white and black reached its apex in the 1960s. The nation has healed somewhat since then, but tensions still exist. In 2020, protests erupted following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, at the hands of a white police officer. His last words, "I can't breathe," became a rallying cry for many who desired to see a greater focus on racial justice for the black community.

Studies have shown that most pastors believe in racial diversity, but it's still "more dream than reality."<sup>23</sup> About 85 percent of pastors believe in striving for diversity, but the vast majority do not shepherd heterogeneous congregations. Americans in general believe in diverse churches—about 78 percent believe churches should strive for diversity. However, only about half of Americans would be most comfortable in a multiethnic church.<sup>24</sup> Weekend worship services are still among the most segregated places in the United States. What can be done?

Though specific churches have sought to lead the way on diversity, a movement of hundreds or thousands of churches

does not exist. Perhaps we're in the beginning stages of such a movement. I certainly hope so. I have a personal stake in this issue, as three of my children are white and one is black. But for a movement to pick up steam, a few things will likely need to occur:

1. Churches must pursue diversity on their staff. In most cases, churches will not become more diverse until leadership becomes more diverse. This diversity is especially important with the visible staff positions, such as pastors and worship leaders.
2. Heterogeneous mergers must become more common. Church mergers are becoming more prevalent. These mergers come in many shapes and sizes. However, we need to see more mergers between two (or more) congregations with different ethnicities. Most church mergers are homogeneous—two churches with a similar makeup of people. Stories such as the merger between Jacksonville, Florida's Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church (African American) and Ridgewood Baptist Church (white) are far too rare.<sup>25</sup>
3. Preschool and children's ministry must become more of a priority. Even if a church might resist a merger, or resist the idea of becoming multiethnic, the children of the church will never know the difference. If a church has a diverse preschool and children's ministry, it's more likely to become a multiethnic church within a generation.

Not only should churches pursue diversity organizationally, but every church leader can do something individually as well. In fact, it will take pastors and church leaders making the first strides to achieve cultural and racial diversity in our churches.

Start by developing individual relationships. You should intentionally develop a relationship with another church leader in your community who is not of your ethnic background. When you build bridges to other leaders in this way, you also tear down walls between congregations.

You can also begin new organizational relationships. You should get involved in an organization or event that is not part of your demographic group. Traveling to a different context—whether across the globe or in your own backyard—will broaden your worldview and enhance your understanding of cultural issues.

All pastors and church leaders should read more diversely. Read books, blogs, and publications that have a different ethnic audience than your own. Diving into the ideas of others strengthens your appreciation for their struggles and victories.

Listen to people of color. Perhaps the easiest way to grow as a multiethnic leader is to engage with and listen to other ethnic leaders. Simply pay attention to their social media feeds. Go to a meeting with them and observe. Attend their church and worship as they do. I bet you'll learn something.

The move toward racial and cultural diversity in our churches probably doesn't *feel* like a pressing need. The

tyranny of the urgent seems to get our immediate attention. The need to grow in racial and ethnic diversity shows up more as a gnawing reminder that there is more to do. But this growth is important. In fact, the health of the church twenty years from now depends on our steps in this direction today. Be optimistic and take action. The gospel demands that we move in this direction.

### *Declining Attendance Frequency*

Another wind of change affecting churches in the United States is a decline in attendance frequency. This applies to most churches, regardless of size or denominational affiliation.

It used to be that an active member was someone who came to church two or three times a week. Today, someone who comes to church twice a *month* is considered an active member.

Many reasons exist for this decline—from travel sports to the demise of cultural Christianity. Not every reason is bad. Some folks may be inching their way into church for the first time. Others may be returning to church after years of being gone. In most cases, however, people just fade away and don't attend as often.

On the surface, it may not seem so bad that a person misses one or two weeks out of four. But when a sizable portion of a congregation does not attend as frequently as they once did, it has a much more significant collective impact.

A simple exercise bears this out.

Church A has four hundred people who attend four out

of four Sundays. (Every pastor's dream, right?) Thus the church has four hundred members and averages four hundred in attendance.

Church B has four hundred people who attend three out of four Sundays. (Still not too bad.) But this attendance frequency means that the church averages three hundred in attendance each week.

Church C has four hundred people who attend, on average, two out of four weeks. (This pattern is probably more realistic in most churches today). Thus they average two hundred in attendance.

I'm sure you see where this is going. Each church has four hundred people who are part of the flock, but the average attendance at Church C is half that of Church A. Even without "losing" anyone, Church C is, for all practical purposes, half the size of Church A.

Here's the kicker: The true size of your church could be double the average weekly attendance, if not higher. As attendance frequency declines, the congregation will *feel* smaller even if it's actually getting larger. Many will wonder *Where is everyone?* on a Sunday morning, but the pastors and church leaders will *feel* the full ministry load. The people who attend less frequently still email, call, and set up counseling appointments. They still ask the pastors to do funerals and weddings and come to the hospital.

As people attend church less frequently, other symptoms begin to appear as well. For one, spiritual disciplines become weaker. As one discipline (attendance) goes by the boards, so

do others. People who attend church less often are also likely to read their Bibles less, pray less, and share their faith less.

Communication becomes harder even as methods of communication improve. In a past era, the church used the Sunday morning gathering to communicate important information. Then bulletins became popular. Then churches started to utilize newsletters mailed to homes. Then they began using slides on a screen. Then email newsletters became prevalent. Now we have social media and texting services. At our church, we use no fewer than twenty pathways of communication. In an era of decreased attendance frequency, overcommunication becomes the norm to make sure we're reaching everyone.

As attendance frequency declines, so does congregational loyalty, and church hopping becomes even more common. Giving also becomes less consistent, though online giving and automatic deductions have helped to mitigate this problem. But the underlying reality remains: People who attend church sporadically tend to give sporadically.

As attendance frequency drops, swings in attendance patterns become greater as well. Three-day weekends can create greater dips. Holiday services can create greater peaks.

There is, however, an upside to the problem of declining attendance frequency. Since most churches are already experiencing the problem, solutions are likely to bring rapid gains. For example, if your church members attend, on average, two out of four weeks, and you are able to increase this pattern to three out of four weeks, your average attendance will increase by fifty percent. One of the biggest reasons for

a church to decline is a drop in attendance frequency. And improving attendance frequency can be one of the biggest reasons why churches grow!

### *The Slow Fade of Denominations*

In the past when a church wanted help, few lifelines were available. Denominations were the institutional foundation. Associations and districts provided a local support system.

Denominations, associations, districts, and networks still assist churches, especially smaller churches, but their ability to do so on a large scale is hampered by declining loyalty.<sup>26</sup> If denominations and local associations still had the ability to help in grand ways, many established churches would not be in decline. The lifelines still exist, but they are weaker today than in the past.

I worked with one church that sought help from their association, only to find that the resources were limited to a few workshops. Their denomination did not return phone calls because they were inundated with requests from struggling churches. When this congregation reached out to larger churches in the area for help, they found themselves in conversations about merging. They soon realized they would have to make their own way through a revitalization process.

The remnant of people in this church remembered the good old days of denominational and associational strength. They had supported each one faithfully for decades, only to find a crumbling shell when they themselves needed help.

The leaders of this church were shocked by how weak their association and denomination had become. They had been blind to the decline not only in their own church, but also in their denomination.

The old lifelines are long frayed and not likely to hold much longer. Most denominations are losing members and churches at a rapid rate. I believe denominations will continue to exist for the next few decades, but they will not be able to assist member churches the way they did in the past.

Some of the decline is due to the demise of cultural Christianity. Many people who once were nominally connected to a particular denomination are now completely detached—not only from the denomination but also from the local church. But the decline cannot be attributed solely to the exodus of nominally connected congregants. Even among those who are active in the faith, denominational loyalty is declining, especially among the younger generations. When a denomination is no longer in a growth mode, it eventually goes into survival mode. We should not celebrate this decline. The denomination as a Kingdom institution was a huge benefit to the mission of God.

Unfortunately, many of these institutions no longer provide the resources and financial backing needed to help revitalize struggling churches within their tribe. As denominations decline, funding goes down and the ability to promote collective interests begins to fade.<sup>27</sup> Denominations do not have the energy or funds to revitalize churches, mainly because the churches supporting the denominations are the ones in

need of revitalization. It's a vicious cycle. The denomination can't help the churches because the churches can't fund the denomination.

There will always be individual cases of revitalization through denominational work, but a movement of revitalized churches is not likely to come from denominations. Revitalized churches will chart their own course, which is why I've written this book. I assume most churches will not receive large amounts of funding or resources from their denominations. The next chapter introduces the concept of a checklist, something that can be done by any church. The checklist includes seven points of emphasis that are essential to any revitalization process.

Maybe you feel like a lone voice crying in the wilderness. But like John the Baptist before Jesus, it may simply be that you are preparing the way. Keep moving forward. God just may send people into your wilderness who are ready for revitalization.

### **The Optimism of a Reset**

When I hit the reset button on my Atari game system as a kid, it was often in a moment of frustration. I didn't like the outcome of a game, so I started over. Frustration may not be the best motive, but it can be channeled into a desire to do better. The church needs a reboot of evangelism. The church needs to address the widening generation gap. The church needs to meet the diversity challenge. And people need a reason to start attending church more often.

The reset button is a symbol for a new mindset—one that uses optimism to pursue revitalization in the church. As we will see in the next chapter, a strong comeback is possible.