

CHURCH TURN-AROUNDS: A RESEARCH REVIEW

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Background

Little research exists on church turn-arounds. This is perhaps understandable, since to study how struggling churches turn around, one has to study what is making them fail, and now one likes failure. (As the old aphorism goes: “Success has a hundred parents, but failure is an orphan.”) Yet such knowledge is critical if we hope to have a chance at turning around struggling parishes. There are two studies on this subject that are worthy of note. They can be found in the following books or articles:

- *Turn-Around Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring New Life to an Established Church*, by George Barna of the Barna Research Group.¹
- *When to Close a Church*, by Gary L. McIntosh, Director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Talbot School of Theology at Biola University.²

Survey Results

The results of these studies are both encouraging and sobering. On the encouraging side, they go along way toward establishing benchmarks for what constitutes a health church, as well as early warning signs of impending decline. On the sobering side, they make clear that once successful doesn't mean always successful, that even large churches can decline rapidly, and that the majority of churches which enter decline either close or stabilize at much lower numbers, never to grow again. Yet some churches do break the cycle of decline and the study of these churches can provide insights for others.

Both studies also indicate that it should not be surprising to us that churches fail. After all, while they are in many way different than business (as one would hope), they are human organizations, and as such they are not immune from the “organizational cycle” that effects all human organizations. For example, one of the largest categories of churches that close is New Church Plants. But this should come as no surprise, since in the business world nine out of ten start-up businesses fail, and start-up churches have a much better success record than that. Yet the same volatility enables them to grow faster than any other category as well. And churches that make it past their third year of existence are likely to last at least 60 more years.

What Churches Close?

While Barna and McIntosh both indicate that a list of such factors is potentially endless, there are several categories to watch:

¹ Barna, George (1993). Turn-Around Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring New Life to an Established Church. Ventura, CA: Regal.

² McIntosh, Gary L. (December, 1990). When to Close a Church, in The McIntosh Church Growth Network Newsletter (2:12).

1. **New Church Plants.** New churches are often at great risk. The first few years are the most crucial. As a rule of thumb if a new church makes it past the third year of existence it is likely to last at least 60 more years. This has implications for diocesan planning, resource-development, and funding for new church-plants: at commitment to least five-years of funding is essential.
2. **Churches that Fail to Adapt to Demographic Shifts.** In most communities 20% of the population moves each year. In addition, half of the new population growth is from immigration. Congregations that fail to adapt to these changes are likely to enter stagnation, then death.
3. **Churches That Lose Their Vision or Their Visionary Leadership.** The energy that drives a church into the future is a vision of what God has called the church to be and do. Churches that lose their sense of mission and purpose will struggle to justify their existence. The lack of visionary leadership has a similar effect. Both result in a lack of passion for ministry, which can be deadly.
4. **Churches with Weak Management.** While leadership provides the ideas, strategy and motivation, managers organize the structures and tactics to bring them to fruition. Churches with visionary leaders but poor management end up as clergy-dominated churches with ideas that never get off the ground (on the other hand, management without leadership produces ministry that is mechanical and joyless). Such churches are more prone to failure.
5. **Churches with "Old Blood."** Churches that are adult-heavy are prone to failure.
6. **Churches with an Ingrown Family Focus.** Declining churches tend to focus inward, committing all their resources to internal service or church plant maintenance, and slowly become unknown in the community around them.
7. **Churches with Congregations Resistant to Change.** This is related to the "vision-thing." Churches without a vision can see no reason to change and cannot summon the courage to do the new and risky but necessary things necessary to survive.
8. **Churches with Serious Attendance Loss.** A major loss of three-fourths or more of worship attendance is critical. When this factor is accompanied by other losses of vision, finances and effectiveness, a church has a very dim future.
9. **Churches That Become Ineffective In Evangelism and Newcomer Incorporation.** A basic generalization suggested by Lyle Schaller is that "the leading cause of death among churches is a deterioration of the capability to reach and to assimilate new members."
10. **Churches with Building Campaigns.** The graveyard of churches is filled churches which had building campaigns. This is not to say that buildings are unnecessary or that building campaigns always start a downward spiral. However, building campaigns started for the wrong reasons, or lacking a clear relationship to the vision of the church, or managed poorly can lead to a decline.

Elements Critical for a Turn-Around. This list can be endless, too, since each situation is to some degree unique. What binds them all together is the presence of the Holy Spirit and an openness of the people to the working of God's Spirit. Here are some common elements:

1. **Pastoral Love of People.** The role of the turnaround pastor is to be so committed to the people that they recognize his or her unconventional determination to be one of them, not simply a rescue expert. For a church to turn around the must not be allowed to develop a pastor-of-the-week syndrome. The

pastor must be able to make an honest and convincing commitment to see the congregation through to the end, whether in success or failure.

2. **Select a New Pastor.** In the vast majority of cases, the old pastor is too associated with and injured by the decline to be able to reverse it. A new pastor is usually necessary to create the climate and the plans for a successful resurrection of the congregation.
3. **Release the Past.** It almost goes without saying that to survive and thrive, a congregation must focus on the future rather than relive the past. But this is easier said than done. It requires a new or renewed vision. Another reason why a new pastor is often necessary.
4. **Define Outreach.** To reverse a decline caused in part by an inward focus of ministry, congregations must intentionally define what outreach the church will emphasize.
5. **Equip the Congregation.** Intentional outreach will fail to revive a congregation if done only by the clergy. Therefore, the laity must be trained for effective, targeted ministry.
6. **Select a Strong Leader.** Declining congregations that hired caretakers, healers, managers, administrators, healers or consensus builders failed to gain ground. The most critical skill of the leader is to help the congregation establish a new vision to which all can commit.
7. **Hard Work.** The pastor and everyone else in the congregation must commit to working hard. This is not to say that Spirit has no role, but that much effort is required to overcome the downward inertia.
8. **Widespread and Heartfelt Prayer.** If people don't commit themselves to prayer, they will not catch the vision.
9. **Quality Sermons.** Sermons need not be excellent, but they need to be more relevant and inspired than what they are likely to have been hearing during the later part of their decline.
10. **An Outside Perspective.** Access to objective, outside opinion is critical.
11. **Support Staff.** Support staff is exceptionally helpful, even for a transition period.
12. **A Committed Core Group.** As well as a pastor willing to stay no matter what, there must be a core group of lay people with the same commitment.

Key Indicators for Church Closure. A decision to close a church should never be made on the basis of any single indicator below, but taken as a whole they can provide church leaders with helpful insights as to the future potential of a church.

1. **Public Worship Attendance.** A church needs at least 50 adults to have a public worship service that is celebrative and attractive to new people. 20 to 40 adults at worship puts a church in an unhealthy situation. Less than 20 adults is a strong indication the church should be closed.
2. **Total Giving Units.** It usually takes a minimum of 10 - 12 faithful giving units to provide for a full time pastor. It takes another 10 - 12 units to provide for the ministry of a church in terms of supplies, advertising, etc. Thus, a church reaches a danger point when it has 25 or less giving units.

3. **Lay Leadership Pool.** As a rule of thumb, a church needs one leader for every 10 adult members (junior high and up), 1 leader for every 6 elementary children and 1 leader for every 2 children below school age. Less leadership than this will make it difficult to provide for the needs of a growth ministry.
4. **An Effective Ministry.** A church needs at least one ministry for which it is known in the community. For example, some churches may be known as the church with the great Sunday school, others for their children's program. Still others may be known for their ministry to senior citizens.
5. **Past Growth Rate.** A growth rate that has been declining for 5 to 10 years should serve as a warning signal. If a church is only about one-fourth or less of its original size it is likely to be facing hard times which may result in eventual closure.
6. **Congregation's Spiritual Health.** A church's spiritual climate is another factor to be considered. Is a church characterized as one of peace, happiness, and love? Or, is it found to be one of anger, bitterness and discouragement?
7. **Average Membership Tenure.** How long have people been attending church? If the average tenure is longer than 20 years, it is a sign that a church is having difficulty reaching and assimilating new people.
8. **Focus of Church Goals.** Is the focus of a church on itself or outward to new people? Do leaders talk about ministry, mission and purpose? Or, do they talk about paying the bills, hanging on, real estate, the past and membership care?
9. **Budget Expenditures.** Where is the money spent? Is it spent on outreach, advertising and ministry? Or, are these areas the first to be cut when the budget gets tight?
10. **Church Rumors.** Is there positive talk about God and His work in the church? Are there people who believe God can renew the church in the days ahead? Or, do people talk about the past, respond pessimistically to visionary statements and fail to recognize that God is at work in their church?