



The Essential Library

I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church

Paul Nixon. Pilgrim Press, 122 pp., \$16.00

True or False: Any church can blossom and grow anywhere if it will become healthy enough spiritually and pay attention to the needs, experiences, and sensibilities of those it seeks to serve.

That's the assertion Paul Nixon makes in *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church*; a bold assertion for such a short book. And yet, his thesis is intriguing. Imagine what it might mean to all those plateaued and declining churches if what he posits is anywhere near reality. One might be tempted to toss this book aside as just another smoke-and-mirrors happy book with the promise of yet another magic potion that will cure all our ills. But you'll be sorry if you do.

One of the delights of *I Refuse ...* is that although there are indeed specific tried-and-true steps that must be taken to effect a church turnaround, Nixon doesn't belabor them. Indeed, he smoothly weaves them into his exposition well enough that they're hardly noticeable. What is noticeable, however, is that his six-part manifesto for the mainline not only speaks a new language, it reframes what is already known about turnarounds with a startling freshness.

If there's a single theme throughout the book, it is captured in the word **Bold**. Although there are six parts to Nixon's manifesto (Choosing life over death; Choosing community over isolation; Choosing fun over drudgery; Choosing bold over mild; Choosing frontier over fortress; and Choosing now rather than later), choosing boldness appears to be job one starting with the first page. What might happen if a pastor decided to devote the lion's share of his or her time to encouraging, nurturing, and equipping the few in the congregation with bright eyes for ministry and mission? What might happen if a church leader, clergy or lay, decided to spend time outside of the church fortress? What might happen if it was more fun inside the church than out? These are bold steps for any church leader to take, and there's no

doubt that any one of them could create a stir and a not-so-pleasant backlash from the oft-entrenched powers that be. However, Nixon is convinced (and he's convincing) that a church leader committed to such boldness will help the church rediscover and re-experience life over death.

It would be difficult to choose a favorite chapter. Each is filled with personal anecdotes and packed with a plethora of ideas and suggestions. Some of these ideas are as old as the church, but many are ideas that can't be found on other printed pages. Finding ministry partnerships while prayer walking. Recasting small group meetings as parties. And the inventory on how to tell if your church is an imposing fortress—even if your building isn't—is probably worth the price of the book.

Nixon is hardly a novice at turnarounds, though his commitment and passion hinge on new church ministry. His first turnaround attempt began when he was yet a teenager in an Eastern Washington church and he's been working in and with the church ever since. Until recently, he served as the Director of Congregational Development with the Alabama-West Florida Conference of the United Methodist church where he helped church leaders put parts of this manifesto to work. Nixon is beginning a new season in his life as he engages in a church start in and around the Washington, DC area.

Unbinding the Gospel: Real Live Evangelism

Martha Gay Reese. Chalice Press, 160pp., \$19.99

If you're looking for a book with the newest and slickest evangelism and marketing tips, this is *not* the book for you.

On the other hand, if you're perplexed why Mainliners have such a strong aversion to evangelism ... and want to do something about it ... this is the book for you.

In 2004, Reese set out with a Lily Endowment grant to study the state of evangelism in the Mainline. Her team interviewed over 1,000 pastors, lay people, professors, seminarians, denominational officials, and kids in youth

groups. They spoke to long-time church members and brand-new Christians and studied 150 churches in seven different Mainline denominations that are doing the best job of reaching people with no church background. Her findings and her conclusions are startling, heart-wrenching, and heart-warming. It turns out that there are some reasons to hope that the Mainline *could* have a future.

One of the real gems in this book is the opportunity it affords for conversations about why Mainliners might consider sharing their faith. First, there's the decades old de-emphasis on eternal security, getting "saved," escaping the fires of hell, etc. Add to that the privatization of our faith and evangelism takes it on the chin. Reese devotes a chapter on the topic. And though there aren't any surprises why Mainliners *don't* do evangelism, it was eye-opening why those in the churches reaching the unreached *do* evangelism. This chapter alone is worth the price of admission.

If there's a single recurrent theme throughout this study, it is the necessity of prayer. Not bookend prayers at the beginning and the end of the evangelism committee meeting, but prayer that sounds more like work than many may be comfortable with. And yet, church leaders of all stripes confessed that prayer was the foundation on which they built their growth.

This book could be one of the most important books you read this year, especially if you choose to read it along with a small group of leaders and the culturally influential in your church. So, it's a particularly good thing that *Unbinding the Gospel* includes a study guide.

Marketing Your Church to the Community

Peter Metz. Abingdon Press, 63 pp., \$8.00

Marketing Your Church ... is the newest Abingdon release in The Church of the Resurrection Ministry Guides. As such, it joins the recent rash of books written by staff members of Mega Churches. The book is a quick read ... really, I read it in less than forty-five minutes ... and lasers in on the topic of advertising.

Metz begins with the metaphor of choosing a restaurant. When we decide we're going out to eat, we choose a destination based on what we know about the place. Kid friendly? Romantic? Ethnic? When it comes to dining out, he asserts, we seldom if ever walk into a generic restaurant that we know absolutely nothing about. And yet, without being intentional about marketing to the community, that's exactly what we seem to expect of those

who wake up on a Sunday morning and decide to go to church.

Chapter one begins with "Getting Your Message Right." Metz rightly insists that each church needs a mission statement. Armed with mission in hand, he touches on how to define your church's "message" (selling proposition) and develop a "message strategy" to deliver that message to the church's "target" in the community. The gem from this section is Metz's insistence that the church's message must communicate only *one* main idea. Only one.

Chapter two, "Selecting Options ..." discusses the alternatives churches have for communicating their message. Newspaper? Television? Radio? Yellow Pages? Website? Fliers? Metz touches on all but personal invitation, which he covers in Chapter four.

Chapter three, "What to Say and How to Say It" is arguably the best chapter of the book, but only if you've read the first two chapters. It's one thing to say the goal is to communicate only one main idea, it's quite another thing to figure out how to do that for Christmas, Easter, and even in the Yellow Pages. Metz provides us with photographs of actual ads The Church of the Resurrection has run that illustrate the principle better than all the words one could fit on a page.

Then there's Chapter four, "Empowering Your Members." First, Metz admits that over 90 percent of The Church of the Resurrection's new members came because of a personal invitation. His numbers aren't skewed. Ninety percent or more is pretty typical for new members, so it's a bit surprising that Chapter four is by far the shortest chapter in the book—only four-and-a-half pages long.

Overall, *Marketing Your Church ...* is a fine overview of a church's advertising and marketing. On the other hand, this is not a book chock full of tips on how to market on a shoestring, even though Metz does give a brief nod toward a few of the less expensive marketing methods.

Something's gained and something's lost with a book this short. Larger churches will likely find the information too basic to be much help in making marketing decisions. Smaller churches may be frustrated that the book's brevity offers only broad strokes. Still, that's sort of the point of an overview, and Metz does a good job at introducing and whetting the appetite for more.