

TRANSFORMING THE FORMERLY PRESTIGIOUS CHURCH

By Tom Bandy



Perhaps one of the greatest challenges in North American ministry today is redeeming the formerly prestigious, now declining, downtown church. Many a successful pastor has been driven to nervous breakdown trying to transform these sleeping giants. Recently the board of such a church voted not to participate in a transformational process to go deeper into the mystery of Christ and further in the mission of Christ, even though the coaching process had worked to change other churches in the judicatory. Each board member had an interesting reason:

- “We tried that before and it failed.”
- “It will be a sidetrack from current church work.”
- “Let’s wait for another John Calvin or Martin Luther.”
- “The youth are the future of the church ... not us.”
- “Let’s wait for a younger pastor.”
- “People are too busy.”
- “It is unreasonable to expect church leaders to pray and read the Bible daily.”

Two more board members said they just didn’t want to do it without giving any reason. The last board member voted against it because everyone else did. Nobody had an alternative plan. Three people left the church (all under forty-five), but that was preferable to alienating the older members, and they didn’t give much to the budget anyway.

The list of challenges that confront the formerly prestigious, now declining downtown church is admittedly long. For one thing, these churches are inordinately expensive. Huge old buildings, with beautiful heritage artifacts, consume most of the budget. Even if the church has endowments, legal constraints limit their use. For another thing, these churches lost the battle for political influence long ago. Neighborhoods have changed, parking has been reduced, and violent crime and homeless-

ness have increased. People are more interested in warmth and security than pews and pipe

organs. Social service without overhead is preferable to sermons and capital fund raising. It’s enough to scare any young Christian away who did not actually grow up in that church.

Given such a daunting list of obstacles, where do you begin?

Let’s imagine that you are the pastor. You have been faithful enough (or perhaps crazy enough) to accept the appointment or call. You have been willing to relocate your family downtown, with all the attendant risks. Perhaps you are blessed with a large endowed salary, but primarily you are blessed with a huge heart for outreach and extraordinary courage to reshape your lifestyle in order to bless strangers. The adrenaline rush of being the pastor of a historically prestigious church faded after about four weeks, and it really begins to sink in that you have become the pastor of this “great church” about forty years too late.

Out of all the possibilities for change, the place to start is leadership. If your board is anything remotely like the one described above, they must be replaced. You cannot wait for them to die, or even wait for their term to expire. They must be replaced as soon as possible. Now that you think about it, you should have made your acceptance of the call conditional on this in the first place. You should

Continued on next page

have insisted that you would have the power to appoint or nominate an entirely new board by the end of your first year as pastor. Unfortunately, you didn't think of that, or, if you did, the denomination or congregation wouldn't agree to it, and you were either moved by the Holy Spirit or just too naïve, and you came anyway. Now what?

First, you announce publicly that you will begin immediately holding the board accountable to the spiritual

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disciplines of leadership prescribed in your own denominational polity, scripture, and the tacit expectations of

board members from the congregational heyday forty years ago. These expectations have always been there, in plain sight, but have been ignored for decades. Now you hold them accountable for them ... and declare that any board member who cannot or will not do them will be dismissed regardless of term of office.

These expectations for spiritual leadership always include daily prayer and Bible reading; weekly participation in intentional Christian education or small group, and weekly Sunday worship attendance unless sick. They also include modeling the core values expressed in Galatians 5 and Romans 12, and essential agreement with the faith convictions of the Apostles' Creed (or denominational statement of faith). Finally, they include a readiness to make personal taste secondary to the mission of the church and take personal time to mentor new leaders. It is important to communicate with the church that these are not innovations. They are traditions. These are the true traditions that made the congregation prestigious in the first place.

There may be a few resignations over this renewal of tradition. However, your attitude does not have to be con-

Continued on next page



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frontational. It just has to be sincere. You lead the way with your own demonstration of such discipline, and your own readiness for the board to hold you accountable as well. If you approach it with a humble heart, rather than an angry demeanor, it is more likely that leaders will confess themselves inadequate rather than unwilling. Your main task, then, is to mentor them yourself.

Help each current board member design their own continuing education path and spiritual discipline. Meet with them regularly. Alternate a monthly business meeting with a monthly spiritual growth session. Invest time in one-to-one counseling for prayer, Biblical insight, reflection on the creed, and experience of Christ. Go looking for new board members who are willing and

eager for spiritual growth and healthy accountability. This is time well spent. It is better to reduce visitation, curtail administrative meetings, and let some programs coast ... for the sake of growing a core spiritual leadership. That is more important.

Think of it as a kind of diet plan for unfit executives. What good is it to maintain property while your key leaders are having the equivalent of a spiritual heart attack? The best fitness programs take time but require urgency. You don't have to get it all done tomorrow, but you have to keep increasing the pace. Here is your plan:

Year 1: Move the board from ...

- Sporadic worship to regular worship, with no "vacations" except illness;

Continued on next page

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- No Christian education to regular small group participation, for peer spiritual growth;
- Limited personal spiritual discipline to daily Bible reading, intercessory prayer, and journaling;
- Awareness of spiritual gifts, doing activities from passion and joy;
- Unknown financial contributions to giving that is at last 3 percent above the average membership giving.

Year 2: Then move the board to ...

- Intentional worship leadership as liturgist, witness, sacramental assistant, and preacher;
- Small group leadership for an accountable spiritual growth group;
- Triad accountability with a peer group of Christians within or beyond the church;
- Discernment of personal call, sacrificial ownership of personal mission in life;
- Sacrificial financial giving, at least 5 percent of gross personal income.

Eventually you can lead them to articulate faith sharing, social service leadership, and tithing. The real goal, however, is not that your board members fit some statistical template or dogmatic position, but that they acquire a desire to go deeper into the mystery of Christ and further with Christ in mission. Just keep growing. Set the pace for the rest of the church.

The former “prestige” of a church can work against you ... or it can work for you. It works against you in that prestige thickens the walls of the box that constrains creativity. Church people are so worried about damaging the reputation of the church, that they cannot bring themselves to entertain the smallest risk. Church leaders are so anxious about looking foolish in the eyes of the denomination, that they cannot endure the thought of failure. Only by raising the bar of spiritual life will leaders have confidence to be “fools for Christ.”

The former prestige of a church can work for you, but only if you establish a renewed expectation of the board as visionaries. That is really how the reputation was earned in the first place. The church did not gain prestige in the past because leaders were good managers. They were visionaries. They made bold moves which at the time were considered foolish by their colleagues. They established great adult Sunday schools at a time when depression and war had generated an atmosphere

of fear. They launched global missions at a time when the economies of their own hometowns were in shambles. They marched for civil rights even though the top givers withdrew their offerings. They introduced new technologies for broadcast radio, new instrumentations for contemporary music, new theological dialogue with feared religious competitors, and new social services that drew weird people (i.e., people unlike us) into the sanctuary. The denomination gasped and the community scoffed, but they were visionary spiritual leaders capable of failing, looking foolish, and trying again.



Often the former prestige is so oppressive that it is difficult to get any traction at all. What do you do when an entire board reacts negatively as in the example above? It all starts with just one person, one mentoring relationship, and one transformed life. The pastor finds the most restless leader (who may not be very restless!) and focuses on them. Little by little, their heart is softened, their mind is opened, and a life is transformed. Now don't make the mistake of deploying this transformed leader simply to “do stuff”! They are a precious commodity, so don't burn them out! Instead, deploy that person to mentor another restless leader ... perhaps even a friend or family member ... to go deeper into spiritual life. Bit by bit, leader to leader, remove the pebbles and the stone that has been gathering moss for decades suddenly rolls over.

There is urgency about this transformational process. Therefore, set the standard of spiritual leadership ... but don't waste time persuading them that a standard ought to be set. The criteria are already clear in scripture, denominational roots, and even the local history of that congregation. Don't waste time debating it. Clarify it. Give reasonable time to commit to it. Dismiss those who won't do it, and coach those who will do it. Stop trying to preserve a reputation, and start trying to live up to it instead. 