
GROWTH POINTS

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Turning a Church Around: An Ignored Aspect

Everyone knows local churches are struggling. Worship attendance is down, volunteers are difficult to find, and leaders are worn out.

It's clear! Revitalization, even resurrection, is needed. Turnaround is a watchword for today.

Scripture doesn't use the word "turnaround." Biblical writers speak of repentance rather than turnaround.

The Hebrew word for repentance (*shub*) means "To turn or return." It is used in one of the best known passages of Scripture — 2 Chronicles 7:14:

"If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn (*shub*) from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

While we tend to quote this passage when talking about the necessity of a nation turning back to God, there is an

application to local churches that is often missed or ignored.

Hebrew scholar, Walter C Kaiser, says, "The Hebrew word 'to turn or repent' is pronounced *shuv*. And in every one of the 118 instances where the word occurs with a religious significance, God was trying to give His people a *shove* in the right direction" (*Quest for Renewal*, page 103).

In "Clean Out the Sludge: A Theology of Turnaround," Gordon MacDonald writes, "Maybe this is where real turnarounds have to start: with leaders and people bowed low, in silence, listening to Jesus" (*Leadership*, Fall 2005).

It's a sobering thought to think of a church needing to repent. Churches do good, right? Churches assist the poor, right? Churches help society, right?

I'm certain many (perhaps most) church leaders shudder to consider the church they lead has corporately sinned. But, it's a necessary place to start when seeking to turn a church around.

Serious Questions

Consider the following questions that might point to a need for repentance by your church.

1. Has the church lived a selfish existence focused primarily on itself with no outreach to the lost in the community around it?
2. Does the church have an unteachable and unresponsive attitude to missional ministry?
3. Has the church experienced one or more splits in the past that are unreconciled?
4. Did the church fire a pastor (or pastors) without cause in the past?
5. Does the church have a spirit of bitterness, anger, or resentment?

Of course, there are other signs that point to a need for turnaround in a local church. These, however, are typical ones found in numerous declining or plateaued churches.

If you answered yes to any of these questions, your church needs a turnaround.

Try These Ideas

First, gather your church board or leaders together for a day or weekend of prayer.

Second, ask each person to spend thirty minutes reflecting on their own walk with Christ, admitting and confessing any known sin in their own life (1 John 1:9).

Third, ask the leaders to name any spiritual barriers that might be holding your church back from being all that God wants it to be. Write their ideas on a board so all can see them.

Fourth, take the items you list and pray for them one at a time, confessing the church's complicity, and asking God's forgiveness (Nehemiah 1:4-10).

Fifth, make amends or reconciliation with others as possible.

These steps will help you "clean out the sludge," as Macdonald suggests. And, it will get you on the path to turning around your church.



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