

Leading a Turnaround Church: Critical Considerations By Dr. Donald E. Ross

What is a Turnaround Church? Turnaround Churches experience a decline nearly impossible to reverse, but somehow they do. Most churches in similar situations simply go out of business. What are the critical aspects of a church and pastor that see terminal decline turned into growth?

Let's begin by defining a turnaround church. A turnaround church has recognized that, due to consistent decline, within a generation it will be out of business. This church has courageously decided to face the truth and make a series of extremely difficult and painful decisions to reverse that trend.

Mission: I'd like to say that "Everything rises or falls on mission" but I think someone has already captured that sentiment. Regardless, mission is critical. Understanding that both the leader and the church are part of the mission of Christ gives the needed elements to embrace a turnaround.

Mission says, "This is not about me, it's about Jesus". When we understand that nearly 4000 churches a year go out of business, and we are not planting nearly enough to replace them, we can understand that turning around declining churches as well as planting new ones is very much a part of Christ's mission.

In many ways, the challenge of a turnaround church was written for us 2000 years ago in Revelation, 3:1-3. The letter to the church of Sardis says,

"To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ²Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. ³Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

In a very real sense, a declining church may have had a reputation of being alive, but it is not alive now. It's on life support and needs help.

Both the pastor and church leaders need to work together to "Strengthen what remains and is about to die." This is hard work, but possible and needed, if the leaders and church are willing to pay the price to not only survive, but also learn to thrive.

Vision: This turnaround is usually lead by a visionary leader, often brought in from the outside the church current culture. The value of bringing in a new leader is that they are not stuck in the current thinking trends or bogged down by the church's history.

The challenge of a new visionary leader is that they must earn the right to lead a group of people, almost all of whom are stuck in current thinking trends and severely bogged by down the church's history.

Leadership: This pastor/leader must be able to paint a constant verbal picture of a church's preferred future based in reality. He must also realize, regardless of what those around him say, he is probably the only one who sees it, and often it will be foggy to him. Nevertheless, there is a God-given picture, and he must hold on to it relentlessly.

Max De Pree says, "*The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant.*" The pastor of a turnaround church must develop the skill set necessary to tell the truth without discouraging their flock beyond recovery. His ability to encourage, recognize the smallest progress and chart a manageable course is critical.

Pain: Another element needed is the ability to endure pain. This is mostly the emotional pain of rejection, but financial pain and even physical pain may be a part of the process. The old saying, "No pain, no gain" could not be more applicable.

Let's be painfully honest here. If the current way of doing things at this church were working, it wouldn't need to turnaround. People own

and do these “things”, so in order to change the way things are done, the people must change. Either they change internally or they are changed and new people are doing new things. This is incredibly painful for both pastor and people.

Imagine telling someone who is very faithful, they can need to change their way of leading a class or ministry after they have done it this way for decades. They can feel driven away by the pastor, if he has not successfully communicated the mission clearly, and even then, emotions usually overrule sense.

Urgency: Urgency is the adrenaline of a turnaround church. Without it change cannot be made. Too much of this ecclesiastical chemical and the church will become discouraged and give up. Too little and no change will happen. The pastor needs to become a skilled ecclesiastical anesthesiologist.

John Kotter said, “Instilling urgency ... is critical to getting organizations to switch directions; arguing the ... case using facts alone won’t create that urgency.”

Endurance: Although things must change, it will take time. Researcher Gary McIntosh states that a turnaround can take from five to twelve years, depending on the setting. Rural churches and churches in dire circumstances can take longer. Ours was a “dire circumstance church” and we took a bit longer. The more desperate the situation, the more endurance is needed on the part of the leader.

Money: Here’s the deal... money will be tight. Period. Who wants to give to a dying cause? It takes a while to see a new vision surface, which draws in resources. That’s the downside.

The upside is that often declining churches have untapped resources in facilities and property. These can be tapped to pick up the needed capitol to make needed changes and simply stay alive. We tapped our equity several times to make changes and to move us ahead.

The pastor should be prepared to resource himself during a turnaround recovery. By this I mean, he may have to work a second job or set funds aside to “float” his finances until he gets paid.

Facilities: These are important but not necessarily first in your thinking and planning. Usually an established congregation is deeply rooted to facilities, having sacrificed to build and maintain them.

Any changes you make should be done carefully and part of an overall plan. Getting key lay leaders on board is critical. It may be that you need to renovate, upgrade and even sell your facilities for the sake of the church.

Remember, buildings are not the church; they are a tool. Sometimes you need to sharpen or replace tools to accomplish a worthy project. We did. As a part of our turnaround we ended up relocating and selling our old campus.

Tenure: Researcher George Barna says that most turnaround pastors will only lead one turnaround church in their career. I think that is true, not only because of the stress and energy it takes, but also the amount of time it takes.

If you are unwilling to give five years to see a declining church turnaround, don't get involved. The whole project will take more time than five years, but you will see progress by then.

Trust is the most crucial, intangible quality a pastor needs to turn a declining church and it just takes a while to gain that trust. You will quite literally be asked to lay down your life for this church, one day at a time.

Peer Support: Lone rangers make poor turnaround church leaders. It is just too challenging to do this project alone. You will need to build around you a group of other leaders, outside your church, who believe in you and what you, are doing and that you can trust.

This leaders will listen to you as your process your plans, reflect back to you pressure points and talk you through the minefield you are working in. You need them and God will give them to you. Don't do this alone.

Word: You must have a high view of scripture to be an effective turnaround leader. Being able to regularly “download” encouragement from God’s Word is an important skill. Remember, Jesus is the one who said, “Strengthen what remains” which is exactly what you are attempting to do. Letting Him encourage you through His Word and give you direction is very important.

Reading the Biblical accounts of other turnaround leaders like Nehemiah, Joshua and Moses is not only inspiring, its life to you as a leader. You need a high view of scripture.

Spirit: Finally, there must be a sense in you, your family, and your leadership core that you are being lead by God’s Holy Spirit in this endeavor.

Jesus called the Holy Spirit, “the Advocate” (John 16:7) and anyone leading a turnaround church needs an advocate to guide them. The Holy Spirit will be your “life coach”, guiding you through tense meetings, difficult financial decisions and helping to develop a critical strategy to save this church.

Being a turnaround leader is rewarding, but much like a parent who waits years before being appreciated by their children, you will need to be willing to wait and endure to see the results you are working towards. There is no “quick fix” to seeing a declining church reverse direction, but it can happen, and it needs to happen.

Are you up for it? If you are, there are thousands of opportunities, as America is filled with declining churches. Which one will stay alive because you said yes to Jesus?

Check out the Turnaround Church Coaching Network at
www.turnaroundchurch.org