

Factors that Threaten Church Life and Health

By Bob Young

As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, an increasing number of US churches are plateaued or declining. An alarming number are dying. Across the spectrum of Christian churches, 50-60 congregations dissolve every week; 3500-4000 churches die every year. Of the 3000-4000 churches at severe risk in a given year, no more than 300-400 are able to redefine themselves and survive. It is estimated that 100,000 churches will close their doors in the U.S. in coming years (out of about 350,000 churches). Some churches in decline are in denial, not realizing that “swelling” through member transfers is only postponing the inevitable—unless the challenges are addressed. New churches are not being planted rapidly enough to maintain the historic Christian influence in the US.

The typical death process is that churches decline and then stay there for an extended time, even with flat vital signs. A church with few members, little or no ministry, and few expenses can exist almost interminably. The only life support system necessary is continuing funding. Often the members of such churches are able to fund the minimal activities considered necessary in such a church.

Given the studies concerning church life cycles and the need to dream a new dream in order to survive, it appears that many of the generation of churches planted just after World War 2 are in the final stages of their institutional life. Why are these churches in danger of dying?

1. lack of financial support, not enough money to do what needs to be done, which often includes building mortgages and deferred maintenance issues,
2. lack of sufficient volunteer human resources to provide the necessary structural and ministry support within the congregation,
3. failure or inability of churches in high-density urban areas to provide the variety of choices necessary to meet the typical demands of members and prospective members,
4. inability to break the 200 barrier (70% of the churches in the US), which is the general size necessary to provide a minimum level of expected services,
5. Inability or lack of willingness to provide an adequate number of groups with group ratios that provide open groups capable of incorporating new members,
6. inability or lack of willingness to provide adequate staffing and ratios,
7. lack of vision in the pulpit,
8. lack of vision and/or necessary skills in the church leadership,
9. lack of direction which has a negative impact on those in the pew,
10. development of a defensive mentality which identifies “turf issues”, with the result that the “enemy” is often other church members,
11. a maintenance mentality which focuses inward rather than outward,
12. lack of evangelism, accompanied by natural or normal decreases in attendance.

The current cultural reality and the list above provide a helpful set of questions. Take an honest look at the congregation where you attend. What do you see? Which of the items in the list

above apply? Does the church have a clear vision and purpose that is bigger than it is and centered outside itself? Is the church growing? Is the church healthy? Are people being brought to Christ? Does the church reflect the demographics of the community where it exists? These and similar questions will help us understand the difficult situations in which many of our congregations find themselves—if we are willing to look and listen. These questions will help us escape the difficult situations in which many congregations find themselves—if we are willing to change.