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## Upcycling Church: New Hope for Transforming Declining and Plateaued Churches

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162

**UPCYCLING CHURCH: NEW HOPE FOR TRANSFORMING  
DECLINING AND PLATEAUED CHURCHES**

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Richard J. Frazer

**abstract**

This article introduces new language and an alternative paradigm to the topic of revitalizing declining churches, which presents a transforming process for pastors, church leaders, denominational executives, and consultants to implement when coaching revitalizing churches. The biblical foundation for this writing is Jesus' letter to the church of Sardis, recorded in Revelation 3:1–6. Five principles for upcycling a declining church are presented: embrace the crisis, answer the wakeup call, strengthen what remains, strengthen who remains, and return to spiritual roots.

This paper is an expansion of a twenty-minute lecture given at the Great Commission Research Network and The Society for Church Consulting's Turnaround 20/20 Conference in Nashville in October 2012.

**introduction**

On Thursday, November 12, 2009, the amphibious transport dock ship, *USS New York*, steamed onto the Hudson River in New York en route to fulfill its mission of supporting special military operations designed to intercept and destroy enemies

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 2 [2014], Art. 2  
of the United States of America and her allies. What distinguishes this ship from all others in the Navy flotilla is this: cast into the bow section of the ship's hull is seven and a half tons of steel salvaged from the World Trade Center destroyed by Al Qaeda terrorists on September 11, 2001. Emblazoned on the hull is the motto of the ship, "Strength Forged Through Sacrifice—Never Forget," as a reminder that power often arises from humble and humbling circumstances.

The World Trade Center had been a symbol of American ingenuity and worldwide commerce for more than 30 years. It housed more than 430 companies from 28 countries. These companies engaged in a wide variety of commercial enterprises, including import and export, transportation, insurance, banking and finance, and diplomatic engagements of foreign governments. It is estimated that 50,000 people worked there, and another 140,000 visited the complex daily.

Images of bent and broken beams that once supported the Twin Towers are etched in the memory of everyone who was exposed to the media coverage of the WTC's destruction. The devastation sent shock waves around the world as many languished in disbelief and wondered what the future would hold.

The steel that supported the Twin Towers that lay in a heap seemed useless. No one could bend it back into its previous shape and put back into its original location. To be reclaimed, it had to go through the process of cleaning, shredding, melting, and reforming. Approximately 15,000 pounds of steel came out the other end of this procedure, recast into the forward section of a warship equipped and staffed to do battle with the very enemy that brought it down. The crooked, cracked, and fallen was eventually redeemed and reshaped into a powerful symbol of regeneration and transformation.

It is quite remarkable that the twisted framework of this monumental symbol of strength, commerce, and community could be recycled into such a mighty warship. To gain a better understanding of the intended outcomes of the recycling process, one has to realize the two directions recycled products take.

### **the recycling process**

The recycling industry has become a worldwide multi-billion dollar industry, as the "Reuse, Repurpose, and Recycle" mantra demands the preservation and conservation of existing resources. The purpose of the recycling process is to harvest and make useful materials that have lost their value in their present or previous form, in part so that fewer raw materials will be required to keep up with the demand for more products.

## Frazer: Upcycling Church: New Hope for Transforming Declining and Plateau

The recycling process has two major outcomes: downcycling and upcycling.

Downcycling is the process of converting redeemable materials into new products of lesser quality and reduced functionality. Most recycling fits into this category. A clear example is plastic recycling, which turns the material into lower-grade plastics in lower-valued products.

On the other hand, upcycling is the practice of taking material of low or diminishing worth and transforming it into something of greater value. A clear illustration of this is the steel of the World Trade Center. Another example is the transformation of an empty plastic liquid container being upcycled into fleece for a jacket, stuffing for a sleeping bag, tread material for a house deck, or material for backpacks and clothing.

One should recognize the recyclers are not changing the essential DNA of the material. They are merely reducing it into its basic element(s) so that the material can be recast into forms that are valuable and usable.

164

The upcycling principle can be applied to the revitalization of many empty or emptying churches. Foundational ministries of many declining churches can be redeemed and reshaped into significant offensive weapons for the kingdom of God. An upcycled church will be a powerful testimony to Jesus' restorative and redemptive power and a prevailing weapon against those who work toward the destruction of the church.

### **the upcycling process**

The process of upcycling areas of a church's ministry parallels what takes place in upcycling of material products. The following process is reduced here for space and for a practical discussion of how upcycling might be employed in a ministry context.

The first step in the upcycling process is identifying the product that is to be released from its form (soda can, milk jug, or engine block) and returning to its most basic element (plastic, kind and grade of metal, paper, etc.). The next step is to determine if the form in which to shape the material is suited for the material and will add to its value. The final step is forming the material into a more usable and valuable form.

In the church context, the first task is to identify the element worth redeeming and deconstruct it to its basic element and essential functions. Leadership, for example, is a highly valued dimension of a church's ministry. In its basic function, it provides vision (what the ministry is going to look like), goals (what our vision looks like in measureable terms), strategies (how the ministry is going to achieve

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 2 [2014], Art. 2.  
the goals and fulfill the vision), and evaluation and adjustments (how the ministry will determine if it is fulfilling its goals and vision). A ministry that is declining or has plateaued will often have an outdated, unmatched, and/or weak approach to leadership.

Implementing an upcycling process to the leadership function of a ministry will open a wide spectrum of acceptable forms in which activities of leadership will take place. For example, if a ministry had a lone visionary dictating all the dreams of the ministry, a new iteration of visionary leadership may be that vision will arise from a team of leaders or from a primary visionary with strategic cohorts functioning as consultants for and refiners of the vision. Goal setting, strategies, and evaluation may arise from those who are on the frontlines of a particular ministry, instead of elders and pastors who are removed from sustaining the ministry. A chart in the appendix provides more examples of the leadership shifts that can emerge following an upcycling process.

The upcycling process attempts to redeem vital functions that have become less effective or non-effective due in part to the forms in which they exist. A declining ministry that performs upcycling operations on their essential ministries has a great potential for adding value to that ministry area while discovering and implementing more effective means for fulfilling their purpose.

165

## **terminology**

The terminology used to describe this transformation process is “upcycling church.” “Upcycling” instead of “upcycled” is used, as the latter implies the process may end, while the former implies a perpetual status of transforming. The term “church” identifies the body of Christ, primarily in its local identities rather than its regional, denominational, or global expression.

## **the upcycling process in churches**

Many authors have written excellent books to stem the tide of church decline. They refer to comebacks, turnarounds, and breakouts.<sup>1</sup> This paper offers a different model: the upcycling church.

Upcycling is a fitting metaphor to describe the potential existing in many diminishing churches. Vast residual human, physical, and supernatural resources in declining assemblies can be employed for fruitful endeavor, if these congregations

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<sup>1</sup> Randy Frazee, *The Comeback Congregation* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1995), George Barna, *Turnaround Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993), Thom Rainer, *Breakout Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

Frazer: Upcycling Church: New Hope for Transforming Declining and Plateau  
were to surrender to becoming intentionally and miraculously transformed into  
churches that focus on what they can become rather than what they are or were.

### **the scriptural foundation**

The church of Sardis was in a crisis—and may not have known it. It was enjoying a good reputation in its community, and its commendable works were well known. However, in the eyes of the Head of the church, it was on the eve of destruction.

Revelation 3:1–6

*“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:*

*He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: ‘I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. 3 So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore, if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. 4 But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”*

166

What would an upcycling process look like for a declining church, and what could consultants suggest and leaders of churches, movements, and denominations do to introduce and produce revitalization in dying churches? Five key strategies that are derived from the letter of the Head of the church to the church of Sardis found in Revelation 3:1–6 will be proposed for this process.

#### **1. embrace the crisis**

Most upcycling efforts begin with a serious and shocking awareness of a current or impending crisis. Like the images of the rubble of the World Trade Center imprinted a sense of devastation, ruination, and defeat, so the symbols of decline and impending death should amplify church leaders’ shock and sense of urgency.

Imagine how the members of the church of Sardis would have responded to Jesus’ words as, perhaps, one of the deacons read the letter to the followers of the Way:

*“I have some good news and I have some bad news from Jesus. Here it is.”*

*“Jesus writes, ‘I know the things you do, and that you have a reputation that you are alive . . .’”*

One might envision the people at this point in the reading, high-fiving each other over the Head of the church's glowing assessment of the fruit of their efforts. They must have felt smug and content in their good works and respectable status in the community. Perhaps they were already considering renaming the church Abundant Life Fellowship, New Life Revival Center, or New Beginnings Community Church.

The people are now waiting for the rest of the story.

*"OK. What's the bad news?"*

*"Jesus continues, 'But you are DEAD!'"*

Now visualize the dropped jaws and looks of disbelief that appeared on the faces of the faithful few. Hear the gasps of unbelief that sucked the air out of the room. The shock felt must have been much like the collective responses of the world to the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center.

Jesus did not soft sell their condition by employing euphemism. He talked straight and was characteristically blunt. He knew that an accurate diagnosis is the beginning of the cure, and He was quite willing to shock them into an awareness of their imminent demise.

167

### **assessing the crisis**

A declining church that has any potential for transformation must have leaders who see things as they are. They must be mature enough to define reality and to confront themselves and their congregations with it.

Objective leaders need to be like the man who responded to his wife's comments made while she examined herself in a full-length mirror. The wife said to her husband, "You know, dear, I look in the mirror, and I see an old woman. My face is all wrinkled; everything else I see is either sagging or bloated. I see fat legs, and I see flabby arms."

She turns to her husband and says, "Tell me something positive to make me feel better about myself."

Her husband studies her for a moment, thinking about what she has said and what she is requesting. He then says in a soft, thoughtful voice, "Well, there's nothing wrong with your eyesight."

People in declining churches may not like what they see when they look in the statistical mirror. However, facts do not lie, and neither does Jesus!

An accurate assessment is more helpful than a polite one. A statement of current circumstances, regardless of how bleak, provides leaders of declining churches the untainted picture of the way things are. It also gives leaders a starting point from which to make wise decisions.

Like the church of Sardis, many declining churches manage to sustain a moderate to good name based on past victories, present facilities, and some marginally effective ministries. One must recognize, however, that a good reputation (name) can often be purchased with attractive signage, slick marketing, and an attractive staff. Projecting an image does not necessarily equate with a congregation's spiritual vitality and will certainly not produce it.

Further, good works will not keep terminal churches alive. Jesus *commended* the Sardisians for their good works, but their deeds were not keeping them afloat. Indeed, He even said their good works were not complete (v. 2). Not all activity bears fruit. Not all movement is forward.

Many churches that have lost their spiritual vitality think they will regain it by doing improved activities. Some have replaced Spirit-driven good deeds with fruitless busywork. It is possible to remain spiritually and practically unhealthy even while active.

To be fair, activity and marketing that is more accurate can be a strong enhancement for a revitalizing church when performed by faith-driven advocates for the people Jesus loves and wants us to serve. However, the example of the church of Sardis is a reminder that a projected image and good deeds, by themselves, will not generate vital ministry.

### **crisis point**

Hearing one's obituary read during the worship service should provide sufficient motivation for change! Many church leaders, though well aware of the diminishing condition of the flock, remain in denial. This writer's research revealed 63% of the congregations surveyed had an acute or moderate awareness of the severity of the crisis they were in but did nothing constructive to revitalize the congregational status for an average of three years. One pastor admitted the church he had recently been called to lead had been limp and lifeless for 25 years!<sup>2</sup>

A church in decline has to get a firm grasp on objective evidence of its decline. Through congregational surveys, attendance patterns, financial giving trends, community demographical studies, and leadership and vision evaluations, a leadership team will be able to examine and analyze the ministry's vital signs to make an accurate assessment of the ministry's present viability.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Frazer, "Principles and Processes of Revitalized Churches of the Western and Central California Districts of the Evangelical Free Churches of America," (D.Min. Diss. Phoenix Seminary, 2002), 61.



A trained and wise consultant's objective assistance could be a vital asset at this pivotal juncture. An experienced and compassionate professional's support and recommendations will provide the congregation the facts needed to properly appraise its current reality, clarify its options, and set it on a path to recovery.

## **2. answer the wakeup call**

Jesus was not yet ready to bury the church of Sardis, however. In fact, the most hopeful comment in this entire letter was His urgent directive. Just before one would expect the Great Physician to “pronounce” and offer last rites, He broadcasted this surprising and powerful invitation: *Wake up!*

Three men were asked the question what they wanted people to say as they looked at their bodies in the casket at their funeral service. One man said he wanted people to say that he was a man who loved his family and friends and who influenced their lives for the good.

The second man said he wanted people to say he used his skills as a medical doctor to help people live and enjoy healthy lives.

The third man thought for a minute and then said, “What do I want people to say about me at my funeral? Hey! Look! He's moving!”

This may be what the Sardinian believers were hoping. “Jesus pronounced us dead—but it looks like we're still moving!”

Indeed, they were. It is clear that Jesus did not want the church to remain dead. He wanted it to resurrect! Nevertheless, that was dependent upon the church coming to its senses.

169

## **the sooner the better**

The call Jesus gave to the believers was to hope and to change. In fact, their only hope WAS to change.

The awareness of imminent mortality should create an overwhelming sense of urgency. This should have been the case with the church of Sardis. The Head of the church himself impresses upon them that they needed immediate, intentional, and intense intervention, or they were going to die.

To illustrate this, one is reminded of a doctor looking over the recent blood work of a very sick and out of shape patient who was with him in the examination room. The doctor began his assessment with, “You are extremely sick. If you don't change your behaviors and habits, you're likely to die in ten . . .”

At that point, the patient nervously interrupted the doctor and asked, “Ten what? Ten years? Ten months? Ten weeks?”

Change does not become easier the more it is prolonged—it just gets later. In fact, the longer church leaders wait to deal with the church’s declining state, the more difficult it will likely become to jumpstart ministry momentum. A longer disobedience in the wrong direction typically requires a more prolonged period to recover.

While the church stalls, people they should be reaching remain unreached. People who should be experiencing the love and ministry of Christ through the church remain like sheep without a shepherd. Those who might otherwise be seeing the body of Christ at work in relationships, homes, and communities have few if any visible witnesses to the present ministry of Christ through His church. The sooner churches hear and accept their wakeup call and recognize their loss of momentum and vitality, the better for all involved.

170 One of the central issues related to answering the wakeup call is obedience. Jesus’ admonition for the church of Sardis to wake up is in the imperative mood. This was a command, not a suggestion. The church’s faith-driven obedience to Jesus’ authority would be the determining factor in its recovery.

### **hope and change**

An old joke asks, “How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Answer? One. But the light bulb has to want to change.”

So how many consultants, pastors, and ministry leaders does it take to revitalize a church? Answer? It does not matter, if the church does not want to change.

For revitalization to happen in their ministry context, those who are the decision-makers and ministry leaders have to be willing to change what they are currently thinking and doing. They have to want the vitality back in their church ministry more than they want to preserve tradition, retain ineffective staff people, and prolong outdated ministry approaches.

It is well known in church and corporate culture that change, even when essential for survival, is difficult to initiate and lead. Change is also very challenging to those forced into it. Most often, change is met with resistance and rebellion. However, in some conditions, people welcome change. Someone has wisely stated that people change when:

- They hurt enough that they have to change.
- They hope enough that they want to change.
- They learn enough that they are able to change.

Two of the elders who experienced and helped lead the revitalization in the church this writer was privileged to lead were asked, “To what do you attribute the turnaround of the church?” In virtual unison they answered, “We were ready for change.” They had hurt, hoped, and learned enough and were ready to accept and fulfill significant leadership responsibilities that lead to change. Embracing the crisis and waking up to the potential of revitalization paved the way for the significant transformation that several ministries of the congregation experienced.

Pastors, networking pastors, and middle judicatory leaders could head off a steep decline in a church’s fruitfulness and/or greatly shorten the length of time that the church declines by recognizing declining vital signs and intervening by offering consultation and resources.

Churches lose momentum and decline for many reasons. Studies are available on growth cycles, symptoms of decline, and reasons for decline in an increasing number of published books and articles that specifically refer to revitalizing strategies. Only reasons for decline will be addressed here.

171

### **reasons for decline**

Evaluation is difficult in that it is the first thing to do but is often the most difficult thing to do. A review of decadal growth/decline patterns will give a clear statistical picture of the church’s health. Highlighting significant events in and stories of the ministry’s history will add more color to the assessment and provide historical insights into the reasons for the difficulties on the chart.

It is imperative for a church to honestly face the reasons for decline and to confront what has been holding it back. Though ministries decline for numerous reasons, the following are the ones most recognized by church revitalization specialists and consultants. Ministry leaders that are evaluating the vitality of their churches would be wise to deliberate on the following causes of congregational decline.

- *Lack of Visionary and Purposeful Pastoral Leadership.* The primary reason churches decline and lose their sense of hope and passion is the lack of visionary leadership. Pastors and significant lay leaders without vision, purpose, and an effective strategy create a leadership vacuum and a misalignment of resources that rob churches of fruitful outcomes for effort and resources invested.
- *Lack of Purpose.* Every ministry leader needs to know what to achieve in the ministry he is leading. Having purpose gives meaning to every activity and aligns ministry leaders to accomplish agreed-upon tasks through

Frazer: **Upcycling Church: New Hope for Transforming Declining and Plateau** agreed-upon strategies. If the purpose is unclear, unstated, or under communicated, the ministry will lack focused energy and achievement.

- *Lack of Evangelism and Discipleship.* Many churches have forgotten the Great Commission and, thereby, become disobedient to the Master's marching orders. This deficiency is deepened by a lack of concern for people's spiritual status as well as complacency regarding their own growth as disciples.
- *Undefined and/or Unbiblical Leadership Roles.* It is imperative that those in the various categories of leadership know their roles and responsibilities. Undefined roles and responsibilities lead to power struggles, unmet needs, and division. Defining the responsibilities of key leaders (elders, deacons, staff, and lead pastor) contributes to shared responsibility and defines accountability systems.
- *Cumbersome Decision-Making Processes.* To get approval for implementing new ministries or changing outdated and unfruitful ones is often a long and laborious process that can be rife with political and historical motivations. Motivated people who want to serve become discouraged when their plans for improving or implementing ministries are deferred because of slow approval procedures overseen by authoritarian leaders.
- *Underutilization of Personnel Resources.* Many believers are underemployed and sidelined by overzealous ministry staff persons who are convinced they should perform all functions of ministry. Congregational members' responsibilities are reduced to showing up, paying up, and shutting up.
- *Fear of Change.* A church's ability and eagerness to implement needed changes to maximize its ministries and resources is at the core of congregational transformation. Growth requires change. Change requires risk. Risk quite often invokes fear. Resistance to change is historical, emotional, and personal, not usually spiritual nor practical.
- *Lack of Biblical Foundations.* When a church loses its biblical anchors, it sets itself adrift with no tangible authority for direction and the utilization of personnel and material resources. More of this topic will be addressed in section five of this paper.
- *Demographic Shifts.* Quite often, a church's ministry is targeting a diminishing demographic. This happens especially in churches either where existing attendees move to a different section of town or when the neighborhood in which the church meets becomes inhabited by a socio-economic or racial stratum unlike the existing leadership and/or congregation.

172

- *Ingrown Congregations*. Many congregations that are in decline are apathetic about outsiders joining their church. Their primary concern is for their own people, property, and traditions.
- *Congregational Discouragement*. When people are unenthusiastic about their church's ministries, they will not invite others to participate. This leads to further decline and increased discouragement.

These represent a solid spectrum of maladies that leaders of waning churches may identify when assessing their own ministries. Many helpful assessment tools can be accessed and employed to improve ministry leaders' eyesight, expose blind spots, and provide a realistic diagnosis of their declining status.<sup>3</sup>

The immediacy of death is considerably motivating. The prospects of hope and change after such a devastating evaluation can be, at the other end of the spectrum, quite inspiring.

Fortunately, Jesus is much more interested in resurrecting this church than burying it. In fact, He has a flawless record of accomplishment of giving new life and purpose to people and movements that wake up, repent, remember, and return to Him in a timely manner.

173

### 3. strengthen what remains

Jesus then tells the church to "strengthen the things that remains which were about to die." The proposition for the Sardisians was to stabilize and fortify what was left of their ministries. Jesus was calling for a recovery of the church's signature strengths that would have served as pillars to keep the church from losing more ground and that established a baseline for expansion and transformation.

Every church has something going for it. Every congregation has resources that can serve as rallying points for revitalization. Every ministry in the predicament under study could ask, "What do we have left, and what can we do with it?"

One of the difficult judgments for leaders of an upcycling church is determining which of their core ministries should be strengthened, rescued, repurposed, and/or shelved. It takes the wisdom of Solomon to delineate between these strategies for existing programs and ministries. The reality is, however, that a church in distress is unable to focus in the number of areas it did when it was thriving.

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<sup>3</sup> Consider the following tools: *Church Health Assessment Tool* by Dr. Stephen Macchia, *Transformational Church Assessment Tool* by LifeWay Christian Resources, *The Church Health Survey* by Church Central, and *Natural Church Development* by Christian Schwartz.

## Frazer: Upcycling Church: New Hope for Transforming Declining and Plateau

Essentially, ministry leaders will be asking questions to clarify what should receive their primary attention and resources. To assist in the assessment process, note the following questions to ask each ministry:

*Is this ministry being done well?*

It is interesting that Jesus did not ask the Sardisians to resurrect what they had lost. He instructed them to strengthen what survived.

Churches often possess a few areas of ministry that are in full stride with the purposes of the church and that are still seen in a relatively positive light. Leaders should capitalize on these fruitful areas of ministry by highlighting and further resourcing them.

*What should be improved first?*

It is generally considered wise, depending on the personnel available, to improve one or two ministries at a time. As people recognize the increased quality of a few ministries, they will gain more confidence in the church's leadership and believe more strongly in the church's future. This will typically attract more qualified people who will offer their expertise to the areas of ministries in which they are gifted and interested. The areas of greatest improvements are generally the areas of a ministry's greatest strengths. Likely, some ministries will still be going strong, because they are deeply imbedded in the values of the church body.

While pastoring an upcycling church, this writer's leadership team decided to focus on upgrading the Sunday morning worship service. As the quality of the worship environment improved, more and better leaders joined the church. As leaders emerged and signed on to serve, more ministries were improved and added.

*What needs to be refocused?*

Some meetings or ministry gatherings may have an outdated purpose. Though they were meaningful for a season, they have lost their original aim and need to be infused with new purpose and vision.

*What needs to be eliminated?*

This is perhaps the toughest question to answer, as these decisions impact the people who initiated them, who feel called to staff them, and whose livelihood may depend upon them. As has been stated, however, a church in crisis cannot effectively sustain the amount of effort it had been exerting.

In the same church this writer helped revitalize, the leadership team whittled down the number of ministries to the few that could be executed with a high degree of excellence. The leadership team often referred to the church as a delicatessen that served only smoked turkey on wheat bread. The staff's vision, however, was

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 2 [2014], Art. 2  
that one day the options would be expanded to include a full menu. By the grace of  
God, the church grew in every way and was able to offer a growing number of  
services that fulfilled the needs of the community.

*Should we start anything new?*

It is wise to consider postponing the beginning of any new program until gifted  
and committed leadership is leading, and overseeing the foundational ministries  
has stabilized.

### **upcycling ministries**

It is timely at this point to further explain the upcycling principle and clarify how it  
ties into strengthening what remains. The forms of a church's existing ministries,  
while possibly appropriate for earlier generations, will likely have to be evaluated  
for their contemporary effectiveness and transformed for present and future  
ministry needs.

175

For example, most Christians know that heartfelt and united prayer has  
tremendous power. The promises made by our Lord concerning the various  
benefits for and results of righteous people petitioning a willing and powerful  
God are all that is needed to pull believers to their knees in gratitude and  
praise.

A problem is introduced, however, when the forms in which it has been  
exercised in the past limit this powerful resource. Wednesday night prayers  
designed primarily for missionaries, pastoral prayers on Sunday mornings given  
only by the pastor, prayer chains that only go out to a few links, and monologue-  
type prayers are examples of forms of prayer that limit its exercise.

What if this limitless potential in praying were to be stripped of its present  
forms, reduced to its essential properties, and poured into new forms that invite  
additional people to enjoy praying more? For example, instead of limiting praying  
for missionaries to one meeting, broaden the prayer team network to include  
everyone in small groups. Instead of reserving the worship service prayer for the  
pastor, make room for mature, non-staff people to offer congregational prayer on  
behalf of the entire congregation. Instead of writing and reciting lists of prayer  
requests for people to write down and pray for, focus on the omniscience, love,  
power, and willingness of God to know and meet every need.

The element and exercise of praying would be strengthened, though, if it  
would no longer be practiced in its previous forms. More people would be praying  
and praying together, and the actual practice of praying would become more  
powerful and effective.

## Frazer: Upcycling Church: New Hope for Transforming Declining and Plateau

As a caterpillar offers its rotund body with endless legs to the miracle of metamorphosis so that it will become a beautiful butterfly, ministry leaders must be willing to surrender outdated forms of doing service to God in order to experience transformed and potentially more effective means of accomplishing the will of Jesus for His church. Leadership teams that apply this upcycling process to significant areas of ministry ensure their ministries will continue to transform and take full advantage of the potential for transformation.

### 4. strengthen who remains

The greatest asset ministries possess is the people who have committed themselves to the lordship of Jesus Christ, to the expansion of the kingdom of God, and to the ministry of the local congregation. In fact, in her most basic form, the church IS people.

In Sardis, a few people remained faithful to the Lord and to His church. They had “not soiled their clothes with evil. They walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.” (Rev. 3:4). These had not gone unnoticed by the Head of the church. He was intent on giving them the honor they deserved.

So should the church. If they are worthy to walk with Jesus, they should be identified, recruited for ministry, and honored. They may not be the most vocal or visible, but they are the few righteous ones who have prayed, stayed, and worked to sustain the church.

Why did these faithful people remain in a dead church? Why did they continue to strive and serve among a people who were spiritually dead or dying? The answers to these questions remain unanswered, except that they walked with God and did not allow the evil around them to influence them. They were the redeeming feature of the church that kept the church from dying. They were the remnant that refused to walk where unworthy people walked.

It is imperative that leaders of revitalizing churches value the faithful. Because God looks on the heart, so should ministry leaders. Too often men and women who lead churches undervalue and overlook the ones Jesus considers worthy, while presuming those who will be most advantageous to the success of the ministry are also the most popular.

Below are questions ministry leaders should ask about the people who remain.

*Who remains?*

In the previous discussion, leaders were encouraged to inventory the activities that were being performed and the resources that the church possessed. Next, leaders are asked to inventory those who call that ministry their home church.



People should be encouraged to discover how God has wired them for life and ministry. This is a significant responsibility of the leadership corps. Dr. Rick Warren has developed a five-fold strategy for helping attendees identify their unique calling in the body of Christ. Below are the five areas *The Purpose Driven Life* identifies:

- Spiritual Gifts—What has God gifted me to do?
- Heart—What do I want to do?
- Abilities—What can I do?
- Personality—How has God wired me?
- Experiences—What have I done that will help others?

*How will they continue to grow?*

Once a person has found his most productive place for ministry, systems for ongoing equipping and developing these ministers need to be established. It is the responsibility of leaders in the body of Christ to equip the saints for the work of ministry for the building up of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11–12). Discovering and providing ways of developing people will make stronger disciples who will strengthen the church.

*Who are the future leaders?*

Leaders should be able to identify future leaders from the pool of people who are committed to the local church, are aware of and serving in their areas of greatest effectiveness, and are taking advantage of opportunities for growth. Leaders will emerge organically from a healthy church that is performing well in these areas.

Church revitalization is essentially a lay movement of people who want to know Christ, find their place in the church, and experience fulfillment as they execute their ministries. Leaders serve the body of Christ well when they promote others to their most effective and fulfilling exercises of service.

## 5. return to spiritual roots

Jesus goes on to describe the root of many of the reasons for decline—churches lose their grip on essential spiritual matters.

*“So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent.*

*Therefore, if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.” (Rev. 3:3)*

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<sup>4</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 227–278.

## Frazer: Upcycling Church: New Hope for Transforming Declining and Plateau

When He instructs the church to remember, He is not prodding them to revisit traditions of the recent past. In fact, it is likely traditionalism was a major contributing factor in their spiritual decline. He is inviting them to revisit and recommit to their timeless spiritual roots. For the Sardisians—and us—that would require remembering, holding on, and repenting.

The church belongs to Jesus Christ. He is the Bridegroom; the church is His bride. He is the Head; the church is His body. He is the cornerstone; the church is the other bricks. He is the builder of the church (Matt. 16:18).

How would a declining church that has lost its way recover? How can a ministry that is on a downhill slide provide a platform for the Lord to bless and work in His church?

The following are recommendations for reacquiring spiritual anchors for establishing an upcycling church.

- *Honor the authority of the Word and will of God in every context.* Often church authority structures (boards, elders, presbyteries, and synods) disregard or replace the will of God from the Word of God with bylaws and constitutions. In many ministry settings, “Robert’s Rules of Order” supersede the call to demonstrate love, compassion, and preference for one another. It must be remembered that the constitution was made for the church, not the church for the constitution. The authority of the will of God found in the Word of God must be in first place in the church’s teaching, preaching, strategic planning, budgeting, vision casting, and serving.
- *Submit to the leading of the Holy Spirit.* Two kinds of churches include those that believe the Holy Spirit is still at work in the church, and those that do not. Those who do not trust the leading of the Holy Spirit are left to the meager resources of their wits, their entitlements, their record of accomplishment, and their flesh. Believers and ministry leaders are to walk by the Spirit, to allow the Spirit to lead, and to live in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 18, 25).
- *Pursue the purposes of God.* Jesus Christ is still revealing His will to His church. He is the Head, and the church is His body (Col. 1:18). Aligning budgets, activities, programs, and personnel to fulfill God’s purposes for the church is the responsibility of wise and Spirit-led ministry leaders. Seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness is still the highest calling of the church.
- *Recruit a gifted leader as senior or lead pastor.* One of the major contributors to declining churches is the presence of visionless pastoral leadership. On the other hand, according to Dr. Paul Borden, who has overseen the

“The biggest human factor in the process of transforming a dysfunctional congregation to a healthy one is the leadership ability of the pastor.”<sup>5</sup>

Discovering God’s will for a church and staying on track in fulfilling His will is largely dependent on the leadership of gifted and visionary pastoral leadership.

- *Create an inspiring worship environment.* The worship setting provides an opportunity to recognize the Lord’s place of authority in the church. People will recognize the imminence and availability of God in the environment. It is an opportunity for people to find refuge and encouragement. The worship service also provides the setting in which God’s people will realize something fresh and new is happening and will give occasion for members to be hopeful about its future. In this environment, leadership has the platform to communicate vision and demonstrate passion for the body fulfilling the will of God in their context. At this time, leadership can highlight people’s gifts and ministries before the rest of the body.
- *Anticipate the blessings and leadership of God.* Living by faith is acting and giving before seeing and receiving. It is courageous hope of audacious behavior that precedes the blessings of God. Loving obedience invites His favor. It is sowing the seeds of faithful ministry in anticipation of a bountiful harvest. Churches will reap what they sow (Gal. 6:7–9).
- *Expect biblical standards for leaders.* The church deserves leaders who lead Christ’s church in a Christlike manner with Christ-honoring priorities. Seek the most mature and godly leaders to fill the most important leadership positions.

179

While this is not an exhaustive list, church leaders who are intent on pursuing revitalization will find these recommendations crucial to the upcycling of their ministries.

## conclusion

One of the overarching principles of creating an upcycling church is the pursuit of transformation rather than restoration. When church leadership teams have abandoned returning to what the church used to be and are wholeheartedly intent on discovering what the church can be, they have turned a critical corner in their collective thinking. They have chosen to submit to transformation rather than

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Borden, *Hitting the Bull’s Eye: How Denominations Can Aim the Congregation at the Mission Field* (Abington Press, Nashville, TN: 2003), 17.

Frazer: **Upcycling Church: New Hope for Transforming Declining and Plateau** restoration. The following list describes the contrasts in transformation and restoration.

- Transformation honors vision rather than traditionalism.
- Transformation builds for the future rather than duplicating the past.
- Transformation requires listening for the next story, not repeating former ones.
- Transformation often requires demolition and reconstruction, not decoration.
- Transformation requires adopting or creating new forms for ministry objectives, rather than continuing former programs.
- Transformation celebrates movement, not monuments.
- Transformation evaluates the present in light of the future, not the past.
- Transformation draws out devotion to the mission, rather than the institution.

180

Clearly, transforming churches are miracles of God. However, they are miracles redeemed largely in response to faithful and faith-driven believers who courageously step into the battle to save the church and outfit it for future effectiveness. An upcycling church may end up looking nothing like it did, but everything like it should.

The upcycling process may seem drastic for some applications of church revitalization. However, local bodies of believers who are in danger of losing their effectiveness will hopefully find the courage to recast themselves into a powerful, fruitful, life-giving ministry that will be a testimony to God's ability to transform a dying church to become a powerful fighting force for the kingdom of God.

The following charts are the result of the assessment of the present leadership and preaching paradigms that existed in the church this writer began pastoring.

### **Upcycled Leadership**

- Lone Ranger
- Doing Most Ministries
- Reactive
- Caretakers
- Boss
- Activity-Oriented
- Vulnerable to Church Bosses
- Constitutional
- Team-Centered
- Equipping for Ministry
- Pro-Active
- Risk-Takers
- Mentor and Discippler
- Results-Oriented
- Guarded by Team and Accountable
- Biblical and Effective

### **Upcycled Preaching**

- Monologue
- Pulpit-Centered
- Formal
- Non-Integrated Information
- Word-Dominated
- Interactive
- Using More Room
- Informal
- Sermon-Centered Small Groups, etc
- Creative Elements Integrated

181

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