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Introduction

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Alan McMahan, General Editor

In the service of the church it is hard to imagine a more challenging and important task than to breathe new life into plateaued and declining churches that have lost their missional effectiveness. Of the estimated 300,000 Protestant churches in America, 80–85% of them are not growing fast enough to sustain numerical growth beyond what they lose to attrition, much less keep up with the surrounding population growth. Many are much worse off, faced with declining memberships and budgets and considering the prospects of closing down a ministry that has served a community for decades. The decline in interest in church growth followed by a rising appeal in the church health movement, and more recently a focus on the missional church may have served to divert attention from these grim realities but it has done little to arrest the trend.

The fact remains that many denominational and mission leaders as well as countless pastors ponder what to do to help the church regain its footing and once again become an outreaching community that wins new disciples to Christ and brings healing to the land. Responding to this question was the priority of the recent annual gathering of the Great Commission Research Network that met at Biola University this past November. Centering their presentations around the topic of “Turnaround Churches: Best Practices for the Twenty-first Century”

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conference presenters reflected on the strategies and approaches that had produced the greatest benefit for churches that wished to regain their growth momentum. This issue of the Journal as well as the next continues that dialogue with helpful perspectives and fresh research.

The first four articles explore this subject from a variety of perspectives by researching the root causes of decline, and effective responses. Dan Eymann opens the investigation by reporting on his research on 30 turnaround pastors in five western states. From that he identifies eleven causes for decline and the solutions that were implemented to reverse these conditions. He concludes by offering nine principles that should guide these efforts.

Ken Priddy extends the conversation to consider distinctive characteristics common to various stages of the church's lifecycle and examines them for their impact on the church's ability to grow. He then suggests four disciplines that help a congregation turn around.

144 Gordon Penfold, pointing out that church renewal requires both capable pastors and a willing congregation, centers his attention on the leadership characteristics of pastors who are effective in turning around their congregations and compares them to the characteristics of the pastors who aren't. Using a variety of tools he paints a profile of successful turnaround leaders.

Phil Stevenson looks at the role that denominations or regional supervisors play as they work with churches in various stages of health and decline. Surfacing ten root causes for decline he recommends to denominational leaders to take on a new role less described by an administrative focus or more centered on creating an organizational climate where churches are coached toward health and new growth.

Each of these four studies serve to surface transferable lessons and effective strategies that should propel the church forward and the next issue of the Journal will include more articles on this important subject. The next three articles, in keeping with our goal to provide a variety of topics in each issue of the Journal, highlight the influence of culture on the growth and health of the church and church planting within multi-generational, multi-ethnic and international contexts.

Eunice Hong and Rich Starcher look at the sensitive issue of intergenerational church splits among Korean-American churches by looking at the factors that contribute to this division. Though this phenomenon sometimes leads to the establishment of new churches it is not a method encouraged in seminary training! Through their research Hong and Starcher describe the journey these churches go through as they move toward separation, the values and unmet needs that fuel it, and then offer suggestions for bridging the divide. Servant leaders who adopt a

“missionary mindset” in both generations can be a key to address this important problem.

Re-entering the dialogue featured in previous issues of this Journal on the multi-ethnic church, Gustavo Suárez offers a study on multi-ethnic church planting strategies. Critiquing some of the assumptions, theology, and practice of multi-ethnic church planting he concludes with implications for the church and recommendations for the future.

Realizing that there is much to be learned from church growth practitioners outside North America, the last article by Patrick Hubbard II features a case study from the church planting history of Living Bread Ministries in the context of serving the urban poor in Brazil. Through the development of strategic partnerships with indigenous leaders unhealthy dependencies that inevitably lead to negative results have been avoided. The author concludes with guiding theological principles and practical suggestions.

As usual this issue of the Journal also features a number of insightful book reviews on a variety of topics. Through the capable efforts of our book review editor, J.D. Payne, a team of scholar/practitioners offer their summaries and evaluations of these new works. Much thanks goes to Joel Rainey, William Brooks, Anthony Casey, Tereso Casiño, Warren Larsen, Timothy Sisk, Tom Steffen, Rod Earls and Steven Ybarrola who contributed these helpful reviews.

145

In like manner, Gary McIntosh, our dissertation editor, offers nine helpful summaries of dissertations and theses that have been produced on the subject of church turnaround. Gary’s own prolific publishing history and decades long engagement in the church growth field place him in a good position to spot recent research that is helpful to our ongoing dialogue.

Finally, appreciation goes to Joy Bergk, our publications manager, and Laura McIntosh our technical editor for their fine work. Without this outstanding team this Journal would not go forward.

Though the subject of church turnaround is one not easily exhausted it is hoped that what is found in these pages will offer new insight and perspective as the church continues to seek the lost and complete the Great Commission. In the next issue we will continue these conversations.