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Plateaued Church: Creating a Culture of Growth

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The Wesleyan Church

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Phil Stevenson

abstract

The plateaued and declining churches are a great challenge for denominational leaders. This paper deals with this challenge. It is the premise of this work that denominations, especially at the judicatory level of their organization, need to be culture creators. Leaders must create a culture where plateaued and declining churches can move from ill health to healthy, fit congregations. Such a culture will only be created when judicatory leaders readjust their role from administration to consulting, coaching, strategizing, and vision casting.

reality check: stating the problem

An obvious current reality in the American church today is an epidemic of plateaued and declining churches. “. . . The vast majority of churches in America (roughly 80 percent) are in a state of plateau or decline.”¹ The research done by David Olson and highlighted in his book, *The American Church in Crisis*, reveals, “. . . the American church is losing ground as the population continues to surge.”²

¹ Stephen Gray and Franklin Dumond, *Legacy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2009), 30.

² David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 15.

The obviousness of this reality has not seemed to have settled into the awareness of many in the church culture. The church culture seems unwillingly to recognize and respond to its new reality. This lack of recognition is a result of two dynamics: 1) parental support and 2) perceived success.

Parental support: The previous generation is still able to fund the existing church.

The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order. The plug will be pulled either when the money runs out (80 percent of money given to congregations comes from people aged fifty-five and older) or when the remaining three-fourths of a generation who are institutional loyalists die off or both.³

This allows the church to live under a false hope of financial stability. The motivation to adapt itself to the culture is nonexistent in most congregations due to this false hope.

Perceived success: It is believed that the few ministry giants are indicative of the genuine status of the church. The growth stories such as Willow Creek and Mars Hill in Grand Rapids, Michigan, lull us into a false sense of security.

Most Christians have not noticed the silent decay of the American church. Instead, we hear the success stories of Willow Creek, The Potter's House, Saddleback, and Rob Bell's Mars Hill . . . and we believe the results of opinion polls that show thriving church attendance. Beneath this veneer of success, however, lies a church in decline.⁴

A willingness to resist taking comfort in *perceived success* is a critical step in moving off the plateau.

These two dynamics are a small sample of the challenging state of the church in twenty-first century North America, but there is hope. Bill Hybels has consistently declared *the church is the hope of the world*. Jesus declared He would build His church (Matthew 16:18).

A local church can apply available means and methods to move off its plateau to new peaks of effectiveness. It will demand doing the difficult. "Evangelical churches have struggled, currently hoping to manage their decline while searching for some magic bullet."⁵ There is no magic bullet, but there are real solutions.

³ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 1.

⁴ Olson, 50.

⁵ Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group and LifeWay Research, 2010), 8.

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The local church should not have to go on this journey of revitalization and change alone. Resources ought to be available in the denominations in which they participate. “Churches need to change in order to reach their communities, and denominations need to help them.”⁶ In order for this to happen, the denomination needs to change as well. “The disease is not terminal. There are remedies. But these will require a deep, systematic change in denominational systems. . . .”⁷ A denomination committed to creating an environment for local churches to thrive will begin to see the decline of churches reversed and plateaued churches reenergized.

This paper will deal with a denomination’s role in assisting local churches that are plateauing or declining. In a day that many believe the denomination is dead, or, at best, aged to the point of incompetence, I believe there is still optimism. I would agree with Lyle Schaller when he says, “. . . this pilgrim is *not* convinced that God has written off the mainline Protestant denominations as obsolete or irrelevant or redundant.”⁸ I would add to Schaller’s sentiments, I am not convinced God is ready to write off *any* denomination regardless of size.

The underlying premise to this optimism is grounded in the hope that denominations will be willing to change. The denomination that chooses to remain rooted in the twentieth century will erode into irrelevance. The twentieth century is more than a decade past. It is time to acknowledge this in our denominational action and embrace the potential of the twenty-first century. “We believe that the era of the twentieth-century denomination is over, but we also believe that the era of the twenty-first-century denomination is just beginning.”⁹ As hopeful and optimistic as we are, we must recognize that hope is not a plan. Therefore, hope alone will not result in denominations being the necessary catalyst for local church revitalization.

The denominational role will need to be restructured. The denomination will have to move from being the *keeper of the torch* to the *creator of opportunity*. Denominational structure will need to be more flexible, while at the same time providing foundational stability. The twenty-first century denominations must be comfortable with tension. Allowances must be made for movement within guidelines, as opposed to rigidity with systems.

⁶ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 18.

⁷ J. Russell Crabtree, *The Fly in the Ointment* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2008) 5.

⁸ Lyle E. Schaller, *A Mainline Turnaround* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 19.

⁹ Bishop Claude E. Payne and Hamilton Beazley, *Reclaiming the Great Commission* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001), xiii.

The Golden Gate Bridge was constructed in contrast. It is both flexible and foundational. Its pillars have been driven deep into the ocean floor. This provides the necessary structural stability. Without this stability the expanse of the bridge would be like spaghetti laced from tower to tower, offering little substance and limited confidence in its sustainability.

In contrast to this stability the engineers designed the bridge for flexibility. The flexibility allows the structure to withstand high winds and earthquakes. Without this flexibility the Golden Gate would be brittle. The changes in the earth and climate could cause extreme damage. Apart from this flexibility, it is conceivable the bridge could maintain its pillars, while losing the spans that connect one side to the other.

200 The Golden Gate construction is a marvelous metaphor for the effective twenty-first century denomination. A *Golden Gate* denomination is built on a firm foundation for stability, yet flexibility in structure. This flexible structure allows for the movement necessary to address today's changing religious landscape. This will demand a radical denominational change. "I am convinced that the denominational systems to produce the desired outcomes in the twenty-first century, and to be able to do what we know must be done, will require radical changes in denominational systems."¹⁰ How might this impact the local church?

This radical change, if the local church is to be impacted, must be extended to the judicatories that populate most denominations. I will use the term *judicatory* to encompass the variety of denominational structures. "Judicatory is a generic term used to describe the organizational structure in various denominations, (i.e. conferences, districts, synods, presbyteries, conventions, dioceses, associations, regions, etc.)."¹¹ The judicatory is the central component of denominational change.

The judicatory is in closer proximity to the local church. Judicatory leadership is better able to respond to local church needs. It is the judicatory that is best leveraged to assist and aid plateaued and declining churches. "If denominations have any hope for the future, it may appear as individual congregations, and in turn middle judicatories, are energized for mission."¹² The key is mission.

The churches that are plateaued or declining have lost the passion for the Great Commission. They have ". . . lost sight of its true mission and purpose to simply make more and better followers of Christ."¹³ The church must ". . . return to its roots, to the early Church, to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission

¹⁰ Schaller, 19.

¹¹ Larry McKain, *Falling in Love with the Church* (Kansas City, MO: NCS Publishing, 2004), 18.

¹² Paul D. Borden, *Hit the Bullseye* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 13.

¹³ Stetzer and Dodson, x.

Stevenson; Plateaued Church: Creating a Culture of Growth of our Lord, Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ The judicatory leadership that understands this and is committed to helping the local church reclaim the Great Commission heart will begin to see dramatic turnarounds in plateaued and declining churches.

The judicatory must shift how it views its primary role. Many judicatories view themselves as caretakers for the machine. They provide services for clergy affirmation and care. They ensure financial support is available, as well as resources for land acquisition and property concerns. It is perceived that they are to be available. They are an *on call* agency. They are responsive and often reactive to problems and challenges that present themselves.

This perspective must change. In order to genuinely address the challenges of plateaued and declining churches, they must function as a catalyst. “In the day of congregational decline the primary role of judicatories is to be a catalyst for congregational transformation.”¹⁵ This is not a judicatory’s only role but its primary role.

Four actions must be taken for a judicatory to be a catalyst for congregational transformation: 1) Judicatory leaders must *increase* their awareness of why churches plateau or decline; 2) Judicatory leaders need to *identify* the current reality of each of their churches; 3) Judicatory leaders must *invest* priority time in the churches that have genuine potential to change; 4) Judicatory leaders need to *invigorate* their churches through creating a climate for congregational growth, health, fitness, and multiplication. An empowered judicatory will be able to empower local congregations.

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increased awareness: root causes of plateau and declining churches

A basic principle of gardening is that if you want the weeds gone, you have to get out their roots. A weed may get pulled on the surface, but if the root is still in place, the nice appearance is short lived. The weed will return. Judicatory leaders must increase their awareness of the root causes of plateaued churches. If not, they will only deal with surface level issues—cosmetic fixes at best.

In the book, *Comeback Churches*, the authors claim, “Over time, most churches plateau, and most eventually decline.”¹⁶ This would indicate that every judicatory leader will have this challenge to confront. The judicatory leadership can deny this or decide to intentionally address the issue head on. “All denominations in North America must of a first-order priority, commit themselves

¹⁴ Payne and Beazley, 10.

¹⁵ Borden, 15.

¹⁶ Stetzer and Dodson, 17.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 2 [2012], Art. 5 to a robust church development effort within their regional bodies.”¹⁷ The intentionally addressing of this begins with increased understanding of why churches plateau or decline. We will review ten causes.

ten root causes

1. *Missional drift.* Churches can easily drift from the biblical purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission to the institutional purpose of survival. Church leaders begin to neglect their communities, those disconnected from Christ, and people living in the margins. They measure effectiveness by the contentment of those in the pews. When in reality, they ought to “. . . constantly monitor its mission to bring the message of Jesus Christ to new generations and new cultures.”¹⁸ As this ceases to happen, the church begins to plateau.
2. *Change resistant.* Gene Wood in his book, *Leading Turnaround Churches*, observes, “A significant proportion of church leaders are content with the status quo.”¹⁹ Initiated change often results in conflict. People will often push back to new ideas, methods, and means of ministry. Change must take place for a church to move off its plateau, but few leaders want to negotiate the process needed to initiate and implement that change.
3. *Leadership deprived.* I served on staff with John Maxwell for six years. Over those six years John told us, constantly and consistently, *everything rises and falls on leadership*. A plateaued church needs a leader who is willing to show the way to the next level of effectiveness. “How can leaders expect their congregations to change if they themselves are unwilling to lead the way?”²⁰ A congregation deprived of leadership will quickly move from plateaued to declining.
4. *Overly tolerate.* Churches often tolerate sin, infighting, complacency, and disruptive activity out of a misguided sense of acceptance. Clinical psychologist Henry Cloud states, “It’s important for leaders to remember that they get what they tolerate.”²¹ The longer such is tolerated, the deeper the rift. The deeper the rift, the stronger the hold on the plateau.
5. *Functional dysfunction.* Much like families and individuals can learn to function with dysfunction, so can churches. Their dysfunction becomes

¹⁷ Mike Regele, *Robust Church Development* (Percept Group, Inc., 2003), 7.

¹⁸ Gary McIntosh and R. Daniel Reeves, *Thriving Churches in the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006), 15.

¹⁹ Gene Wood, *Leading Turnaround Churches* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2001), 151.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

²¹ George Barna, *Master Leaders* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2009), 111.

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their norm. It is their security. They know they are not what they can, or ought, to be, but they are comfortable. Many churches that say they desire to change really do not. This is evident when they are given the opportunity to make corrective changes. “Many churches never experience a comeback because they want the community to change while they remain the same.”²² The church becomes passive-aggressive. They agree with a corporate nod but disagree with their actions.

6. *Systems suffocation.* Every church has systems in place. These systems guide the implementation of their mission and vision. Systems are needed. They play an important role. Yet when the system becomes the mission, the church suffocates. The system is a mere delivery method for mission. In many churches, the systems become their reason for existing. This results in protecting *how* the church does things (system), rather than *why* the church does things (mission). Systems suffocation spills over into the questions asked. “Churches that operate by asking, ‘What do *you* think we should do?’ end up in a different place than churches that ask, ‘What does *God* think we should do?’”²³ When a church asks itself what ought to be done, systems are protected. When a church inquires of God, it edges closer to the abyss of desperate faith.
7. *Cloudy clarity.* I attended a simul-cast of the Leadership Summit. Author and speaker Marcus Buckingham, one of the presenters, stated, “One thing a leader must be is clear.” Clarity in mission and vision is critical for the continued effectiveness of a church. Over time the clarity of direction can become cloudy, confusing, and downright chaotic. “Church leaders cannot expect folks to charge into the chaos of system change if they continue to sound such an ambiguous call.”²⁴ Ambiguity (cloudiness) halts a church’s effectiveness. Lack of clarity freezes a congregation, or it wanders off in the wrong direction. Clarity results in congregational confidence.
8. *Vision indifference.* It has been said it is better to hate someone than to be indifferent. Hate has the potential to be turned into love, but indifference shuns any attempt at reversal. Why? The person simply does not care. An indifferent vision is the same for a church. A visionless church can be rekindled in its vision, yet a community of faith indifferent in its glimpse of a preferred future is on dangerous ground. “. . . An exciting vision

²² Stetzer and Dodson, 16.

²³ McKain, 103.

²⁴ Crabtree, 11.

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brings emotional fuel for change.”²⁵ When this emotional fuel is non-existent, very little can motivate a church off of its plateau.

9. *Inward inertia.* When I am sick, the majority of my focus is on me. I am not concerned about the health of others; it is all about me. “The focus of the church is on itself, on what it takes to succeed.”²⁶ This is the corporate attitude of plateaued churches. They are hurting so they focus inward. It is about them.

Unlike the majority of congregations that are either on a plateau or declining, effective congregations are healthy, growing, committed to reproduction, and open to changes that will move them from one level of effectiveness to the next. Healthy congregations are **outward focused** [emphasis mine], and they maintain that focus against tremendous forces that are constantly encouraging an inward bent.²⁷

A key distinction for Borden between a healthy and unhealthy congregation is the corporate focus. Plateaued is inward, while growing and healthy is outward.

10. *Success syndrome.* Churches that have had a season of ministry effectiveness tend to continue to do the same thing over. They bask in their success. They wrongly believe that what got them to where they are will get them to where they want to be. The past success of the church has put blinders on its current state. The culture has changed, yet too many churches refuse to adapt.

The point is, the world is profoundly different than it was at the middle of the last century, and everybody knows it. Even the church culture. But knowing it and acting on it are two very different things. So far the North American church largely has responded with a heavy infusion of denial, believing the culture will come to its senses and come back around to the church.²⁸

Denial may enable a church to enjoy the present, but it will have little hope for its future.

These root causes must be addressed for plateaued churches to be re-engaged, re-energized and re-tooled for twenty-first century effectiveness. “There is no doubt the church in America is experiencing a crisis. We really have only two choices in the midst of the crisis: panic or plan.”²⁹ The reality is many churches are in a

²⁵ Borden, 66.

²⁶ McNeal, 25.

²⁷ Paul D. Borden, *Direct Hit* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 22.

²⁸ McNeal, 2.

²⁹ Gray and Dumond, 32.

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panic. They feel alone, isolated, and inept to develop the necessary plan to
repurpose for the Great Commission. The need is not for new methods but a
recapturing of God's mission. "The need of the North American church is not a
methodological fix. It is much more profound. The church needs a mission fix."³⁰
This becomes, as mentioned previously in this paper, the role of judicatory leaders
in the twenty-first century, to create an environment for missional change.

In order to be such an *environmental creator*, denominations will need to
change. "Denominations are not going to go away; however, they are going to
continue to morph within our ever-changing context."³¹ Denominational
leadership will need to move from caretakers of the constitution to carriers of the
mission and vision. Paul Borden, former Executive Minister of the American
Baptist Churches of the West, said, "I see my primary role as the Executive
Minister to be the keeper and caster of the vision and mission."³² This is the role in
which judicatory leaders will need to see themselves.

It is the judicatory level of denominational leadership that is the most effective
in moving churches off of their plateaus. "A good case can be made that these
regional associations are the best choice for developing transformational
churches."³³ The judicatory leader who recognizes this transformational role, and
engages in creating the environment for such to happen, will begin to see
significant positive congregational transitions.

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identify where the churches are currently

Prior to moving ahead, the judicatory leadership must make a determination as to
the current status of the churches they oversee. It is difficult to move from point A
to point B if the starting point is unknown. The challenge at identifying a church's
current reality is that of oversimplification. A church is multi-dimensional. It is
never easy to categorize. Often, overgeneralization is more harmful than helpful.
This being said, it is still necessary to have some handles from which to grasp a
church's status.

I suggest the following four general church categories: hospice, unhealthy,
healthy, and fit. Under each category I will suggest some health indicators. When
most people visit the physician, he or she typically checks three measurements—
temperature, blood pressure, and weight. These are seen as baselines of overall

³⁰ McNeal, 10.

³¹ Craig Van Gelder, ed., *The Missional Church & Denominations* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 10–11.

³² Paul D. Borden, *Hit the Bullseye* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 67.

³³ Crabtree, 17.

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health. I suggest the following three base indicators for churches: conversions,
believer's baptisms (those baptized as a result of a first time commitment to
Christ), and evangelism budget.

Hospice church This is a dying church. Her best days are gone. She may have wonderful memories, but she has gotten to the point of ineffectiveness. Her future is grim. She will die. Much like a person who finds himself in hospice care, the focus is on comfort. Long-range planning and talk of future goals is nonexistent. Instead, the past is celebrated.

This is not negative. People die. Churches die. This may seem harsh, but it is a fact. This does not negate the contribution the church has made to God's story. "We have to be willing to accept that local churches were not intended to be eternal. Instead, we should view them as stopping-off points in the history of God's Kingdom work in the community."³⁴ A hospice church is in rapid decline. The best approach for the judicatory is to provide a chaplain to love them. The key strategic question is, what can be done to help make this church comfortable in its last days?

INDICATORS

<i>Conversions</i>	<i>0 in 12 plus months</i>
<i>Believer's Baptisms</i>	<i>0 in 12 plus months</i>
<i>Evangelism Budget</i>	<i>Less than 1% of yearly budget</i>

Unhealthy church This church is able to function. She may have a dream, a vision, and a sense of mission. She has a picture of what must be done. However, she does not have the energy to pursue it, or her pursuit is wrongly focused. Unhealthy churches usually know they are in a state of ill health, but they have learned to function within their dysfunction. An agreement on the church's current reality must be made, and a willingness must be shown to move toward health. The judicatory and local church leadership must "agree on [the] reality in order to focus [their] efforts."³⁵

An analogy for this can be found in the encounter Jesus has with the lame man in John 5:1-9. It was no secret as to this man's ill health. He had been in this condition for thirty-eight years (v. 5). He appeared to want to get well. He was in a location where a remedy was available (v. 3). Yet, even with this observable data, Jesus asks the optimum health question, "Would you like to get well?"³⁶ Why

³⁴ Gray and Dumond, 34.

³⁵ Richard Kriegbaum, *Leadership Prayers* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishers, Inc., 1998) 12.

³⁶ John 5:6. *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004). All scriptural references will be taken from the New Living Translation unless otherwise noted.

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would Jesus make such an inquiry? Jesus understood human nature. Acting like you want to get better and a willingness to act on getting better are not, necessarily, the same.

The man responded with his remedy. “‘I can’t, Sir,’ the sick man said, ‘for I have no one to put me into the pool when the water bubbles up. Someone else always gets there ahead of me.’”³⁷ This let Jesus know he was trying to move from ill health to health. Jesus challenged him to action. “Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!”³⁸ The man accepts Jesus’ challenge and walks (v. 9).

The unhealthy churches on a judicatory need the same discernment and challenge. Judicatory leaders need to know if the unhealthy church, which is either in decline or plateaued, wants to *get better*. Ask the question. Give the challenge. The judicatory needs to provide the leadership with an agreed upon health plan. The key strategic question is, what is the church willing to do in order to get healthy?

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INDICATORS

<i>Conversions</i>	<i>5% of avg. weekend worship attendance</i>
<i>Believer’s Baptisms</i>	<i>10–20% of reported conversions</i>
<i>Evangelism Budget</i>	<i>1–2% of total budget</i>

Healthy church This church is clear on its mission. She has developed a presence in the community. She is meeting needs. People are coming to Christ and being baptized. This church has a spiritual vitality. “Healthy churches understand the spiritual steps of obedience, the divine moments they need from God.”³⁹ A healthy church has a sense of God-dependence.

The healthy church can get caught up in itself. This church can be very programmatic in its orientation. They do so many things well, but they have a resistance to self-evaluation and change. “The difficulty, of course, is that the entire church ministry is going so well that no one senses a need to change anything.”⁴⁰ This can result in the church becoming ingrown. She becomes obsessed with her own health. This obsession can move her away from seeing those God has called her to serve. This could result in plateauing.

What gets a church to health is not, necessarily, what enables a church to maintain its health. The judicatory must pull alongside, providing resources for the church to understand a healthy corporate lifestyle. The church leaders need to be

³⁷ John 5:7

³⁸ John 5:8

³⁹ McKain, 42.

⁴⁰ Gary McIntosh, *Taking your Church to the Next Level* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 59.

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spiritual nutritionists. They need to teach regularly on balanced spirituality and
exercise. The key strategic question is, what is necessary to ensure a healthy
corporate lifestyle?

INDICATORS

<i>Conversions</i>	<i>8–10% of avg. weekend worship attendance</i>
<i>Believer's Baptisms</i>	<i>30–35% of reported conversions</i>
<i>Evangelism Budget</i>	<i>5% of total budget</i>

Fit Church: A healthy person is not necessarily a fit person. An individual could be relatively healthy and get a minimum of exercise. Fitness implies activity. A fit person has a tendency to engage in actions that will help tone, strengthen, and increase endurance.

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The same might be said of churches. A church can be healthy but not fit. Fitness implies some level of corporate activity. This corporate activity would revolve a missional approach to ministry. “A missional (fit) church invests beyond itself.”⁴¹ When a judicatory reviews its churches, it is vital to identify those that are fit, or missional, in nature. This will be a huge challenge. No crystal clear definition of a missional church exists. There are indicators, but not dictionary definitions. “Missional church is about an alternative imagination for being the church.”⁴² Missional is much more about *being* the church, than *doing* church.

The judicatory will need to create space for such churches to thrive. The key strategic question is, where is God working in our community that we might participate with Him?

INDICATORS

<i>Conversions</i>	<i>10% of avg. weekend worship attendance</i>
<i>Believer's Baptisms</i>	<i>50% of reported conversions</i>
<i>Evangelism Budget</i>	<i>10% of total budget</i>

invest in high potential churches

This is the most difficult choice judicatory leaders will need to make. It goes against the grain of what we believe leadership ought to be. We think every church has potential. We believe every church can make a turnaround. After all, “leaders

⁴¹ Phil Stevenson, “Fit Churches Missionally Engaged,” *Journal of the American Society of Church Growth* 20 (Winter 2009): 66.

⁴² Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 45.

Stevenson: Plateaued Church: Creating a Culture of Growth are hope dealers.⁴³ It is in the *dealers of hope* mode that judicatory leaders can unnecessarily invest extensive time and dollars in less than hopeful situations. Instead, a leader's *optimistic approach* must be balanced with a *realistic attitude*. Not every plateaued church has the ability to turn around. Not every plateaued church wants to turn around. Not every plateaued church ought to turn around.

In my work with judicatories, I have discovered the following church perspectives:

- The **adaptable**-willing to make changes
- The **creditable**-unwilling to change and are honest about it
- The **deniable**-unwilling to change, but pretend they are
- The **unfeasible**-cannot change
- The **teachable**-willing to change and want to know how.

A judicatory leader must focus on the *adaptable* and *teachable* churches. Typically these churches are unhealthy, know it, and want to move toward health, or they are healthy churches that recognize a need to be fit. These churches must receive the majority of the leader's time, attention, resourcing, equipping, empowerment, encouragement, and training. Gil Stieglitz, Executive Pastor of Adventure Church in Roseville, California, defines leadership as "causing action in the right direction."⁴⁴ It is this type of leadership judicatories must provide. This leadership, exerted on adaptable and teachable churches, will produce the greatest results.

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The *creditable* church is unhealthy, but it has learned to function within its ill health. They have become comfortable. They understand that action can be taken to alleviate the situation, but the side effects are too cumbersome.

The *deniable* churches are excuse makers. They give all the indicators they want to change, but they always have a reason why now is not the time. These churches ought to be tolerated but not engaged with totally. They ought to be invited to change here and there but not fussed over.

The *unfeasible* church is in hospice. This congregation is too far gone to turn around. Its history ought to be celebrated, but no false hope should be given. This would be a church Stephen Gray and Franklin Dumon would identify as a legacy church. It is a church that had a marvelous history, but it has a limited future. "Legacy always carries a connotation of a past event."⁴⁵ Judicatory leaders ought to strategically engage the *unfeasible* church toward investment in future generations. A primary future investment would be through church planting.

⁴³ Kriegbaum, 41.

⁴⁴ Gil Stieglitz, *Leading a Thriving Ministry* (Minden, NV, Thriving Churches Int'l, Inc., 2011), 11.

⁴⁵ Gray and Dumon, 37.

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“Leaving a legacy should be the hope of every church. The simplest way for an aging church in the final stages of life to leave that legacy is through giving birth to another church.”⁴⁶ Church planting is not only a means to fulfill a corporate legacy, but it infuses energy and vitality into a judicatory.

Some will bristle at the idea of *unfeasible* (hospice) churches. It is their opinion that no church ought to be written off. Illustrations will be given of churches that were at the proverbial point of having one foot on a banana peel and one foot in the grave. These churches were revitalized and restored. I know of some myself, but they are the exception to the rule. God is still in the miracle business, and this will never be devalued. The reality is, though, that churches will close. Churches will die. It is this reality that judicatory leaders must address.

Judicatory leaders who grasp the difference in congregational attitudes and life stages will begin to invest the necessary time and dollars in high potential plateaued churches. This will result in criticism, misunderstanding, pressure to give more time to the low potential churches, questioning of motivation, discouragement, and an inner temptation to compromise what one genuinely knows to be the right approach. The late Senator Jack Kemp was credited with saying, “Right is still right if no one is doing it, and wrong is still wrong if everyone is doing it.” Judicatory leaders must be willing to do right for the judicatories they lead, regardless of the isolation they may encounter.

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invigorate through climate creation

Creating a climate that fosters churches to grow toward health, fitness, and multiplication is essential for judicatory leaders. “Leadership emerges as the most important factor in church development. It is the leadership with the capacity to guide efforts and move them forward that is considered the top reason for growth in the regional commitment.”⁴⁷ Four elements a judicator must incorporate into its climate creation include the following: 1. Defining the win, 2. Assessing churches and leaders, 3. Training, and 4. Coaching.

defining the win

Wins are easily determined in the sports world—most points/runs, least points/strokes (golf), and first one to cross the finish line. These are examples of win determination. Clarifying the win determines everything. Once the win is

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Regele, 55.

Stevenson: Plateaued Church: Creating a Culture of Growth determined, then the strategies are developed to achieve the specified desired result(s). “We defined success and then found ways to measure that success.”⁴⁸ The win in church life is not so clean cut.

In the judicatory leader’s role as a climate creator, he or she must determine the win for his or her particular judicatory. The win definition must take into consideration the following several factors: biblical validity, historical denominational values, Great Commission vitality, and contextualized venues. The defining of a *win(s)* is difficult work. A leader need not rely on limited resources.

Numerous writers and thinkers can be explored as starting points. Christian Schwartz, author of *Natural Church Development*, identifies eight qualities of a healthy church. These are outlined in material developed by New Church Specialties.⁴⁹

- Empowering leadership
- Gift-based ministry
- Passionate spirituality
- Effective structures
- Inspiring worship
- Holistic small groups
- Need-oriented evangelism
- Loving relationships

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The Kansas District of the Wesleyan Church, in an effort to contextualize to the uniqueness of their environment, identified eight indicators of a missional church.⁵⁰

- A missional church understands that it’s *the* agency Jesus has chosen to work through to bring lost men and women into a relationship with Him;
- a missional church is more outward-focused than inward-focused and often does its ministry out of the creative tension that arises between the two;
- a missional church instills within the redeemed that they are to “live sent” when they go to buy milk at Wal-Mart, medicine at Walgreens, gasoline at Quick Trip, and interact with bank tellers and operators of grain elevators;
- a missional church is led by healthy leaders, pursues agenda harmony, and works diligently to help followers of Jesus mature into fully devoted followers;

⁴⁸ Borden, 54.

⁴⁹ Lonnie Bullock and Larry McKain, *New Church Blueprints* (Kansas City: MO, NCS Publishing, 2010), 36.

⁵⁰ Ed Rotz, District Superintendent Conference Report, July 22, 2011.

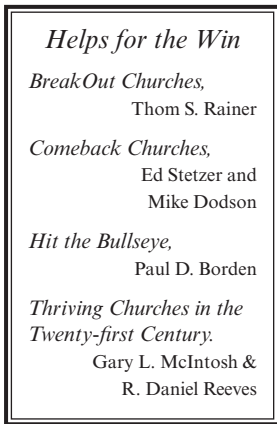
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- ☑ a missional church researches the needs and opportunities of its neighborhood and community and leverages its resources to bring Jesus' hands and feet to the needs around it;
- ☑ a missional church so invests itself in the life of the community around it that if it disappeared, its absence would be noticeable;
- ☑ a missional church participates in a multiplication effort by helping plant other churches;
- ☑ a missional church stays in close touch with the heart of God so that He sustains its redemptive purpose (thus insuring that it doesn't veer off into thinking that it is little more than an ecclesiastical social service agency).

These are only two examples of what might be considered, adapted, and developed. Whatever win(s) that are chosen, it is imperative they are communicated clearly, concisely, consistently, and constructively. A judicatory cannot hope to motive and mobilize churches off the plateau if they do not know what *off the plateau* means.

In defining the win, the following include some questions you may want to consider:

1. What does a church need to effectively fulfill the Great Commission?
2. What biblical values must be evident in healthy, fit churches?
3. What denominational distinctives must be present in our effective churches?
4. What does contextualized ministry look like?



Assessing Churches and Leaders

When a judicatory leader decides to be in the climate creation mode, his or her leadership must transition. He must transition from a caretaker to a catalyzer. Judicatory leaders need to lead with vision, a sense of mission, and clarity of purpose. Gone are the days of guarding the denominational initiatives. Gone are the days of attempting to control the troops through overly encumbering systems. Today's judicatory leader will need to free those in the churches to relentlessly pursue Great Commission fulfillment. "Strong judicatory leaders in the twenty-first century must be people who have a passion for God and the Great Commission, for it is out of such passion that one derives courage."⁵¹ Much like a

⁵¹ Broden, 77.

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missionally connected, healthy, fit, multiplying church needs a different kind of leader, so does a judicatory, if he desires to create a climate for growth.

In his book, *Leading a Thriving Ministry*, Gil Stieglitz⁵² identifies ten leadership skills necessary for effectiveness. Although this was written for local church leaders, I believe these skills need to be honed in the lives of judicatory leaders.

- Conceive and communicate vision
- Define reality clearly
- Recruit next-level people
- Develop leaders
- Initiate and manage change
- Use people skills
- Make wise decisions
- Systematize and delegate
- Raise and manage resources for vision
- Self-discipline

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These provide a wonderful template for assessing judicatory leaders.

A judicatory leader who is creating a climate for growing, healthy, fit, and multiplying churches will need to assess local church leaders. A multitude of leadership assessment tools are available. Ideally the tools used will, at some level, help in the evaluation of the following five key areas:

- Calling: What indicates that the leader is where they ought to be?
- Character: What are the leaders doing to mature?
- Charisma: How does their leadership style reflect their personality strength?
- Competency: What do they need to get the job done?
- Capacity: What is their leadership cap?

In all likelihood no single tool will effectively measure all leadership traits.

Therefore, a battery of leadership assessments ought to be used.

Leadership is critical for plateaued churches. Helping leaders understand their gifts, strengths, and style might be the most significant investment a judicatory leader makes in a church. Yet, regardless of the uniqueness of each leader, a common factor in growing, healthy, fit, multiplying churches is a leader who is clear regarding the mission of the church. “What is required for any size church, however, is a leader with a fire in his gut for redemption of lost souls. This passion will likely be what sustains him in the heat of the spiritual battle. There is no

⁵² Stieglitz, 12.

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turnaround without pain.”⁵³ Once a local church leader gets clarity, the fuel is in
place to lead a church off its plateau.

Along with the leadership, the judicatory needs to set up assessments for the church. This assessment process should include three primary themes. 1. Identify the current reality of the church. 2. Clearly define the desired result. 3. Formulate a workable plan to move from the current reality to the desired result. Assessment is not a one-time event. Instead, it is a continual process of discovering, learning, changing, and renewing.

The assessment process will demand change. “For anything to change, someone has to start acting differently.”⁵⁴ This begins with the judicatory leadership, flows into the lives of local church leaders, and floods the dynamics of a local congregation. It is important that judicatory leaders keep in mind that any change impacts others. It can wound. “Change often wounds people, and the leader who champions those changes has a unique reason to stay close to the wounded.”⁵⁵ It is the wise leader who recognizes this and keeps a close watch on those affected.

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A wide variety of systems and processes are available that can assist a judicatory in devising a healthy assessment process. Larry McKain in his book, *Falling in Love with the Church*,⁵⁶ suggests eight questions:

1. Who are we?
2. Where are we?
3. Where does God want us to go?
4. How are we going to get there?
5. When will it be done?
6. Who is responsible for what?
7. How much will it cost?
8. Did we do it?

McKain continues on to say, “When we do spiritual strategic planning with a local church or judicatory, we walk through answering these questions with the team responsible for seeing the vision of the church realized.”⁵⁷ It must be noted, those responsible for implementation must be part of the investigation.

In personal consultation, I have used the acrostic C.H.A.N.G.E.S. for an assessment process. C-current reality; H-have an end result in mind; A-advance

⁵³ Wood, 24.

⁵⁴ Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2010), 4.

⁵⁵ Kriegbaum, 33.

⁵⁶ McKain, 108.

⁵⁷ McKain, 108.

Stevenson: Plateaued Church: Creating a Culture of Growth strategically; N-negotiate the challenges; G-get the right people involved;

E-evaluate as you go; S-show results. Regardless of what process is used, make sure it fits your leadership style and the context in which you find your churches.

Training

My good friend, and Executive Pastor of 12 Stone Church in Lawrenceville, Georgia, Dan Reiland (<http://danreiland.com/>), says training is the combination of equipping and developing. He shared with me that equipping is providing the tools to do a ministry task. Developing is geared toward the person. It is helping him grow as a leader. When you both equip and develop, this is training. Judicatory leaders need to provide both equipping and developing, therefore they need to train.

Judicatories will never create a climate for church growth, health, fitness, and multiplication without proper training. Church leaders might be motivated to move from the plateau on which they currently reside, but unless they have tools to move them, they will languish where they are. This means judicatory leaders have to view themselves as trainers, consultants, equippers, and developers. They cannot afford to be reactive (answering the phone when it rings to solve problems), but proactive (initiating plans for effective training). “They [judicatory leaders] can do on-site training, mentoring, and facilitation without it costing an arm and a leg and a gold filling.”⁵⁸ This will take a shift in thinking for many existing denominational executives.

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Coaching

The judicatory leaders who provide coaching will achieve two highly sought after benefits. The first is better leadership development. “Leadership development, in some form or fashion, is always about leaders being coached.”⁵⁹ The second is increased loyalty. Leaders highly value personal growth. The judicatories that provide this will be appreciated. “One thing we learned is that developing leaders is probably the most appreciated benefit in the company. When current or would-be leaders realize that you are investing in their growth, it’s more important to them than money.”⁶⁰ Better leaders and increased loyalty contributes greatly to dynamic climate creation.

What is a coach? Robert Logan and Sherilyn Carlton in their practical book, *Coaching 101*, declare, “A coach is someone who comes alongside to help others

⁵⁸ Crabtree, 17.

⁵⁹ Barna, 60.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 2 [2012], Art. 5 find their focus.”⁶¹ Russell Crabtree, Presbyterian minister and consultant, further refines the definition. “A coach is a person who works with another to optimize their performance in a specific endeavor through a personalized course of instruction, guidance, and support.”⁶² The personalized course of instruction, for our purposes, would be in the area of church revitalization, turnaround, and overcoming a plateaued environment. This purpose is clearly articulated by trainers Steve Ogen and Tim Roehl when they observe, “Coaching as we see it, enables transformation, which in turn leads to missional ministry.”⁶³ When church leaders are coached toward transformation, their ministries transition to missional. A missional church seldom stays on a plateau.

Coaching is critical in judicatory climate creation. In order to be effective in the implementation of coaching, the following elements must be in play: 1) Increase the value of coaching across the judicatory. 2) Recruit respected leaders as coaches. 3) Train coaches. 4) Develop a coaching network. 5) Match coaches to the person being coached with great care. 6) Build in expectations, accountability, and evaluators.

These six elements, intentionally implemented, will greatly increase the effectiveness of church leaders. An effective church leader will be more likely to lead his congregation into growth, health, fitness, and multiplication.

conclusion

The primary role of judicatory leaders is to be climate creators. They are to create a climate that allows for leaders and local churches to thrive and passionately pursue Great Commission fulfillment. “Judicatories need to be known for empowering pastors and lay leaders to become agents of change and transformation within their local congregations.”⁶⁴ Great Commission congregations will never settle for status quo. It is what every plateaued church ought to be motivated to achieve.

Judicatory climate creation begins with understanding the root causes of plateaued and declining churches. Equipped with this understanding, each church is identified as to its corporate life situation. Once the churches are identified, the judicatory leader courageously invests time, energy, and dollars in the high potential churches. The climate is created for these high potential churches to

⁶¹ Robert E. Logan and Sheryllyn Carlton, *Coaching 101* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2003), 13.

⁶² Crabtree, 56.

⁶³ Steve Ogen and Tim Roehl, *Transforming Missional Coaching* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 7.

⁶⁴ Borden, 17.

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transform through defining the win, assessing leaders and churches, training, and coaching.

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