

5 Ways to Lead Your Church to Thrive

Need some hope?

It's easy to get discouraged about the future of the church.

While the world seems to be falling apart, so does the church.

Attendance in many places is shrinking, not growing. Even committed Christians are attending less often ([here's why](#)). And young leaders aren't exactly flocking into ministry.

And often we shoot ourselves in the foot, with everything from [Pharisee-like self-righteousness](#) to downright stupid things Christians do ([here are 5](#)).

Yet it's not all gloom and doom. I'm an optimist.

You can always find the opportunity in every obstacle.

As you think about the future and how you need to change as a church, here are 5 principles that can guide you and your team.

1. Fill The Relational Void

The truth about our culture is this: thanks to an abundance of technology, we have never been more connected as a culture before, and we've never felt more disconnected.

As our lives have moved online, and as people have become more mobile and even (in growing numbers) location independent, people have never felt more lonely.

We know our neighbors less than we ever have before. It's really hard to love someone you don't know.

Our social media feeds give us the illusion of community. But read between the lines and you'll see intense loneliness and even the re-emergence of [tribalism](#) where we only (virtually) associate with the people who agree with us.

When I talk to people in my community and around the world who are working through life issues, I always ask them "Who are you talking to about this?"

The number one answer? *Nobody*.

People may have friends, but few have deep friendships, friendships that can carry the weight of life and faith and hope and meaning and existence.

The church hasn't done a great job of community in the past. We claim to be friendly, but that

usually only means we're friendly to each other.

And catching up on what happened this week and talking about sports or the weather is hardly what Jesus had in mind when he told us to love one another.

But the truth is the real mission of the church is relationship. It defines the vertical nature of our faith (love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength) and the horizontal essences of Christianity (love your neighbor as yourself).

If anyone can get relationship right, it should be the church.

So ask yourself as a church leader: what are you doing to forge the deepest relationships you can forge in this life?

Nobody should be able to out-community the local church.

2. Broker Meaning

In the same way that our lives are awash in hundreds or thousands of half-real relationships thanks to our phones, we are also drowning in a sea of information.

Never in the history of humanity has so much useful and useless information been available to so many so quickly.

And we have no idea what to do with it.

The current and future crisis is not a crisis of information, it's a crisis of meaning.

You've felt this every time you've scrolled through your social media feed and thought "there is nothing of value here at all".

In fact, on some days, the constant rants, drivel, trivial observations, bragging, self-promotion and complaining has made you think about giving up social media altogether.

The challenge for leaders moving forward is not to produce *more* content. The challenge is to provide *meaning*.

I believe the future belongs to leaders who broker *meaning* in the sea of endless content.

It follows, then, that the key to providing meaning isn't *more*, it's *better*.

More content will simply get lost the constant chatter.

More without meaning will make you less relevant. You become yet another unhelpful voice.

Better is not nearly as easy as *more*. *Better* requires thought, reflection, digestion and ultimately resonance (it's resonance that tells you your content is connecting).

This provides a huge opportunity for church leaders. Who better to provide meaning than the leaders called to share timeless truth in an era starved for meaning?

And for business leaders, the opportunity to stand out with your customers, your peers and your clients is right in front of you.

Just know that the race to produce *more* will *compete* with the need to produce meaning.

The meaning-brokers will win the race.

Leaders who read widely, digest, think, and above all publish content that actually *helps* people find meaning will become THE leaders in their field.

3. Embrace Selflessness

Narcissism is a rapidly growing problem in our culture.

You feel the pull to make your life all about you. I feel the pull. And we see it all over our culture.

The Gospel offers a powerful counterweight to selfishness; it calls us to die to ourselves.

When Christians do this, amazing things happen.

A life defined by generosity and service to others (especially those in need) is increasingly attractive to a world suffocating on itself.

A life devoted to the Kingdom of God stands out in a world devoted to the Kingdom of Self.

The church is just as guilty as the culture when it comes to narcissism. We can get obsessed with ourselves as easily as anyone.

But the opportunity to live generous lives of service to Christ and to others is a tremendous opportunity. Those disciplines put flesh on love.

The more Christians sacrifice their own wants and needs for the sake of the Kingdom, the stronger the church will be.

There's even a promise in that. When you die to yourself, something greater rises.

4. Deal Hope

You know what's missing in the cultural dialogue these days? Hope.

We seem to do a great job focusing on the problem and pointing out the shortcomings and sins of others and very little time pointing toward a preferred future.

We've read to the end of the story. We know how this ends. Love wins. Faith wins. Hope wins.

Christian hope isn't a pie-in-the-sky that floats above reality.

It's as gritty as the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection of the dead.

Which means our message and lives need to get into the grit of addictions, conflict, brokenness and the utter fragility of life and fight for hope.

As Bruce Cockburn said decades ago, you need to kick at the darkness till it bleeds daylight.

Hope that's divorced from reality isn't hope at all.

But hope that goes into the darkest places and cracks open a thin wedge of light that eventually floods the room is exactly what we need.

So deal hope. Real hope.

It's what our hope-starved world craves.

5. Make Your Mission THE Mission

So where does that leave you and me?

It probably leaves us changing our churches. Cutting through the junk of who we are. Tearing away the parts that don't work and replacing them with an authenticity and power than do.

This is true whether your church is 50, 500, or 15,000. It's true whether it's growing, flat or declining.

Radical change outside the church demands radical change inside the church.

Just because you shouldn't change the message or the mission doesn't mean you shouldn't change the methods.

If you don't change, irrelevance is a hairbreadth away.

An unwillingness to change is what's fueling the decline and stagnation of 90% of all churches in North America.

Here's some hope for churches that are willing to have the tough conversations and undergo a radical transformation: the future of THE church is secured.

Because the church is Jesus' idea, not ours, the future of THE church is guaranteed.

The mission belongs to Christ, not to us. And he has more invested in the future of his church than all of us put together.

If you make your mission THE mission you will always have a future as a church.

> [Read more from Carey.](#)
