

Five Options for a Church in Decline

It's simple and straightforward.

Leaders of declining churches have five choices.

Let me clarify. In theory, the choices are simple. But putting them to practice is not so easy. So when pastors or other church leaders ask me what they can do about their declining church, I ask them to begin at the high level before looking at a lot of details. One of these five choices must be made.

1. DO NOTHING.

Anecdotally, I can tell you the majority of churches make this decision. Such is the reason that two-thirds of the churches are declining or plateaued.

Advantages: You avoid conflict. You may get to keep your job.

Disadvantages: If you do nothing and are declining, you will still decline. You are disobedient to the Great Commission. And leading a declining church is no fun.

2. INCREMENTAL CHANGE.

I wrote about this kind of change many years ago in a book called *Eating the Elephant*. You attempt to discern a pace that can take as many members as possible with you.

Advantages: Change is taking place, hopefully for the better. You minimize losses of membership and criticisms, but not completely. You probably keep your job.

Disadvantages: Today most churches don't have the luxury of changing incrementally. The world is so different than just a few years ago. Incremental change may not stop the bleeding.

3. SIGNIFICANT CHANGE.

Leadership recognizes the simple choice is, "change or die." The church decides to make significant leadership, methodological, organizational, structural, and philosophical changes.

Advantages: The church may reverse the decline and become a gospel influence in the community again. For those who are on board, there can be a sense of radical obedience to the gospel.

Disadvantages: The church almost always loses significant numbers of members. Ironically, the church may not survive the change created for survival. Leadership is inundated with criticisms. You could lose your job.

4. PREPARATION FOR CLOSURE.

Unlike the “do nothing” choice of option one, the church acknowledges it is declining and headed toward death. It makes preparation for an orderly shut down and disposition of property and other resources.

Advantages: This option is one of death with dignity. The church is not scurrying at the last moment to consider options. The process is orderly and well planned.

Disadvantages: The church dies. The gospel presence in the community once represented by this congregation no longer exists.

5. PREPARATION FOR ACQUISITION.

The church seeks to become a campus or site of a healthier congregation. It yields its leadership and gives its resources to the acquiring congregation.

Advantages: There is a continuation of the gospel presence in the community. The acquiring church provides leadership and resources to effect a turnaround. The church does not close.

Disadvantages: The acquired church is not the same congregation. The members of the acquired church often have a false notion that the new church will let things stay fairly constant. They never do

At its basic levels, declining churches really have one of five choices. And if a church makes no choice, it has really decided to choose the “do nothing” option, the worst of the five choices.

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