



Incentives for Decline:

Why Some Churches Really *Don't* Want to Grow

By John Flowers and Karen Vannoy

Your congregation has been in significant decline for years. Members acknowledge that something must be done to reverse the decline. Plans are discussed and official votes are taken to make church growth a top priority, but with few results. Nothing seems to gain traction. When growth is a priority but nothing happens, low-grade depression and lethargy inevitably follow.

The United Methodist Church's slow death has been charted by polls, study groups, seminaries, and think tanks. Countless sermons are preached, classes are taught, books are written, and consultants are hired, in order to revitalize congregations. Denominational executives establish committees, task forces and study groups. Conferences are held and encouragement is given lip service, while privately, everyone knows the sad truth: few congregations will ever reverse decline once they are in its grip. The money, time, and effort are better spent on starting new congregations, because the old ones seem incapable of rebirth.

How can this be true for a faith founded on new life? If the gospel can prevail against the gates of hell, why can't it prevail against the massive decline facing our congregations?

No church members want to see their local congregation die. It would seem that their motivation to keep the church alive would be strong enough to overcome any obstacle, yet each year more churches close their doors while lamenting their fate. It is as if there are counterforces at work against the very changes that would bring new life.

We know along with Paul that there is perversity at work in the human heart and believe that same perversity can be at work on an organizational level as well. At an unconscious level, members of dying churches may be influenced by some hidden payoffs in the church's decline. Until we're willing to name and confront the *incentives for decline* that exist alongside the desire for new life, we may find our churches continuing to not do the thing they want but instead to do the very thing they hate.

Incentives for Decline

1. The individual member becomes more powerful the smaller the church. Members often hold more than one office in dying churches, their individual financial contributions carry more weight, and their absence has a bigger impact.
2. The church feels more intimate and familiar as it declines. With fewer people, you can know more about each other. Programs, traditions and experiences are more easily shared. Communication is easier because someone will call you to fill you in on what happened. Also, not as much *is* happening, so it's easier to stay informed.
3. The growing sense of familiarity and intimacy also make the church feel more caring. People notice when you aren't there. The pastor knows your name, and you are more likely to get personal pastoral attention.
4. While youth and children's programs are the first to decline in numbers, fewer children and youth provide for less disruption in worship, less pressure for change, and ease the strain on budgets and volunteers.
5. Fewer people make assimilation less work. Getting to know people is hard work. It requires an emotional investment in strangers, which gets more difficult as we age. As church growth ceases, the members can spend more time visiting with existing friends, which is more fun and enjoyable anyway. Six to ten new people a year is a manageable number to get to know.
6. The Church as a place of safety becomes primary over the risk of following Jesus. Just as some people live in a gated community to keep the world out, some church members feel safer

with a symbolic gate around the church too. Laypersons with a high priority on safety and security issues are likely drawn to a church in decline. As churches decline, it becomes easier to exercise control and to minimize activities. Church growth brings increased vulnerability for a local congregation.

7. Finally, members with limited gifts and graces for leadership now find themselves in leadership positions. As the church declines and gifted leaders die off or leave, the remaining members are called upon to fill vacancies even if they don't possess the necessary gifts. Sometimes they are asked to fill multiple offices, and feel indispensable. The ill-suited leaders can become resistant to losing this recognition and power.

We can't begin the process of change without a frank discussion of the behaviors that feed the decline. Some individuals, like some congregations, will never get there. But healthy processes can be built while incentives are phased out.

Addressing the Incentives

Limit everyone to one office. This will meet with resistance and may need to be implemented over a 2-3 year period. In all likelihood, some offices will be left vacant. Begin by eliminating at large committee members and use the minimum number required. Name coordinators for broad ministry areas—witness, outreach and nurture—without naming committee members. Coordinators can recruit volunteers as needed. The Leadership Committee must train for a new kind of leadership that focuses on uncovering new ministries and allowing existing programs to “maintain” themselves.

1. To counterbalance the disruption that comes from growth, lay a new groundwork to meet the members' need for intimacy. Develop a lay-led system for caring for the membership that doesn't place you at the center. (Some members will undoubtedly feel this is “your job.” Lead Bible studies, write articles, and preach on Acts 6:1-7 until the membership understands and values the practice of caring for one another.) As you develop the network, make sure that caring for newcomers takes place as well. They aren't as easily missed as longtime members are, so save your oversight to make sure they don't fall through the cracks.
2. Change the focus of what it means to lead. Most dying churches are already organized into small groups for existing members through Sunday school, UMW, and informal friendship networks. It isn't the job of leadership to maintain these groups; celebrate that these groups are self-sufficient. The job of leadership is to develop new small groups for new people to connect. When you can identify twenty people who attend worship but aren't connected anywhere else, it's time for a new group to form. Solicit one or two longtime members to help you lead the new group, with the idea of taking over the leadership from you. If no one steps forward, start a new group anyway, knowing God will provide!
3. New people will neither know nor value the church's history as much as longtime members do. Let the established members channel their energy into writing both a detailed history and a brief history of your congregation. (By brief, we mean no more than one page). Use the brief history with newcomers. When too much emphasis is placed on a church's history,

we communicate that our best days are behind us, not ahead. Who wants to join a church whose best days are gone?

4. With growth comes difficulties in communication. Develop the idea that members can't know everything that's happening by modeling it yourself. We hope for the day when our church is so active that we can't know everything going on at the church. Hallelujah when something happens without our knowing it! Instill new methods of communicating while constantly reinforcing the idea that no individual can know everything that's happening in the church. Make sure that websites, online newsletters, e-mail, prayer groups, telephone trees, and bulletin boards are up-to-date. If information is readily available, communication complaints tend to be about control issues.
5. Nothing can change the enjoyment received from visiting with old friends, so it is important to intentionally recruit and train people whose sole job each Sunday is to connect with newcomers. Surf the websites of growing congregations to see how they welcome newcomers. (Letting visitors know what to expect is especially important.) Select the people who seem naturally outgoing and friendly with a heart for the gospel, and place them near the doors. Check in each week for their contacts, how their conversations went, and what they learned. Maintain a list of the information, and every 4-6 weeks contact the new people to see if they are becoming connected to your congregation (if they aren't, it's time to start a new group). When the numbers get too big for you to handle, you'll know it's time to turn this task over to your lay leadership!
6. If you have limited children or youth, accept that this will take a while to grow and begin to look for possible seeds. Who in your congregation has a passion for ministry with children or youth? Which schools and childcare facilities are closest to your location? What needs might your church meet for those families? After-school care? Drama, arts, or singing groups? What about the grandchildren of your members? Are there children in your neighborhood? Your assets are that you have a big, empty building! Host birthday parties, Saturday playtimes, “Friday Night Out” babysitting services. Whatever you do, make sure you are tying these families in with your congregation, not just with a service you are providing.

Some members will never be positive about the work of growing the local church. As leaders, we need to listen to their concerns, measure the effect of those concerns on others, and yet stay focused on the vision that God calls all churches to make new disciples. In his book *Hope Within History*, Walter Brueggemann points out the importance of naming our pain. Only when we do that can we begin to dream again. □



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