The Impact of Church Age and Size on Turnaround

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THE IMPACT OF CHURCH AGE AND SIZE ON TURNAROUND

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abstract

Other than a congregation's beliefs and values, the two key aspects most helpful in understanding a local church are its age and size. While other studies have compared the growth and decline of a church to its life cycle and size barriers, this article examines the primary intervention strategies found most helpful by church consultants for different size and age categories.

Twenty-three years ago, one church growth expert, Win Arn, shocked church leaders in the United States by declaring, "Today, of the approximately 350,000 churches in America, four out of five are either plateaued or declining. . . . Many churches begin a plateau or slow decline about their fifteenth to eighteenth year. 80–85 [percent] of the churches in America are on the down-side of this cycle."[i] Arn's statistic continues to be the typical understanding today and is often quoted by church leaders. However, I have found that some denominations are seeing an

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[i] Win Arn, *The Pastor's Manual for Effective Ministry* (Monrovia, CA: Church Growth, 1988), 41, 43.

even higher percentage of churches in decline. For example, in 2010, I led a training seminar for one state denomination located in the mid-western portion of the United States, which had ninety-seven percent of its churches in decline.[ii] While this particular denomination is facing an unusually large number of churches in decline due to its location, i.e., a high number of churches in rural communities, it illustrates the huge challenge faced by many denominational executives and local church leaders throughout the United States. Turning churches around is, and will continue to be, a major concern for years to come.

According to the online *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, the term *turnaround* was first found in the English language in 1926.[iii] In general usage it means, "To return to something." The context tells whether it is to be interpreted positively or negatively, for example, a statement like "The company experienced a big turnaround in its profits from last year," may be good or bad. Did the profits go up or down? We have to know more about the company in order to say. Yet, in most situations *turnaround* is used to indicate a positive return to something good. Thus, when encountering the question above, the first impression is that the company's profits had been down, and now they are up.

When we talk about turning around a church, the implication is that it needs to return to a former state of health and vitality. The assumption is that the church experienced a time in its past lifecycle when ministry was going better than it is today, and it is desirable for it to return to a similar season of strength. Historically, of course, we talked about church renewal, revitalization, and revival, but they are all synonyms for turnaround.

As church consultants, we often engage churches in need of turnaround. The truth is turning around a local congregation normally takes some level of coercion—initiation, intervention, mediation—to get the church moving. My observation tells me that it takes two forces—one internal and the other external—working simultaneously to turn around a local church. The internal force is most often a pastor who desires to see a church reach a new level of vitality, while the external force is often a church consultant. The external consultant may be an independent contractor or a denominational leader from outside the client church. However, change mediated from inside and outside a church is a powerful force to initiate a turnaround.

Other than its basic beliefs and values, the two major influences on a church are its age and size. Hence, the way in which turnaround is mediated (coerced?)

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[ii] To protect the privacy of this state director, I do not wish to name the denomination. However, of 148 churches in the district, 144 were in statistical decline in 2010—ninety-seven percent.

[iii] http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/turnaround?show=0&t=1320435930 accessed 11/4/11.

depends on the age and size of the church itself. For example, when a church is less than fifteen or twenty years old, turnaround is reasonably easy to bring about since the basic culture remains pliable. However, by the time a church is over sixty years old, the culture is deeply embedded, which takes more effort and time to change. From the standpoint of size, small churches are like rowboats, while larger churches are like ocean liners. All things being equal (which they never are), a small church may turn around in a relatively short space of time, but a larger church takes much more time.

The processes for turning around a local church are directly related to its size and age (life stage). In general the smaller and younger a church is, the more likely turnaround occurs through revolutionary change processes. The larger and older a church is, the more likely turnaround occurs through evolutionary change processes. This perspective is illustrated in figure #1.

Normally, one person directs revolutionary change; in most church situations, this is the pastor. However, in some situations a group may also lead this type of rapid turnaround. A revolutionary change process is appropriate for a church that is in a desperate situation, concerned about survival, or has turned myopically inward. It is often done quickly and may involve drastic and destructive changes, particularly when a church is at the end of its lifecycle.

Evolutionary change, in contrast, is usually appropriate for larger, stable churches with a rich history of successful ministry. The senior pastor guides the turnaround, but carefully involves others in the process. Emphasis is placed on
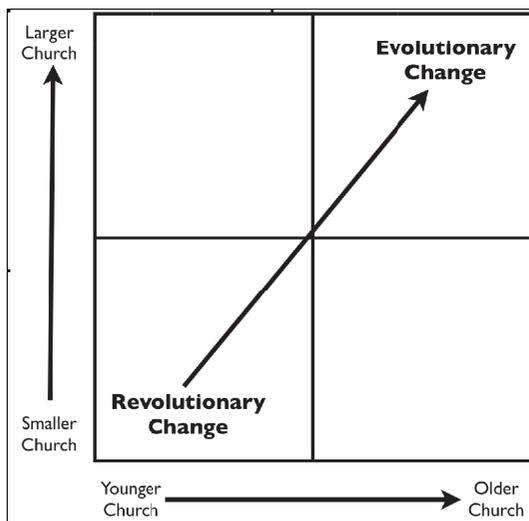
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Figure 1

THE IMPACT OF CHURCH AGE AND SIZE ON TURNAROUND

Age/Size	Turnaround Process	Consultant's Role
Younger/ Smaller	• Collective analysis • Redefinition of core priorities • Movement to next level of development • Adoption of models that appear safe	Assist the church to . . . > See itself > Define priorities > Learn next steps > Decide to move forward
Younger/ Larger	• Identify ministries that are doing well • Systematically promote insiders • Learn from larger churches and organizations • Reinforce core identity	Assist the church to . . . > Design systems > Discover what's missing > Realign structures > Expand ministry reach
Older/ Larger	• Build a new coalition • Systematically promote outsiders • Introduce parallel ministries • Communicate deep	Assist the church to . . . > Think globally > Involve new people > Design a succession plan > Identify new opportunities
Older/ Smaller	• Identify or create a crisis • Reorganize/Rebirth • Merger/Take over • Loving Coup	Assist the church to . . . > See reality > Find alternatives > Make hard decisions > Leave a legacy

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Figure 2

communication with people throughout the numerous levels of church ministry. As a result, the turnaround process is much slower. However, the stability of the church allows time for a turnaround that smaller churches may not have (figure #2).

dynamics of turnaround

The essential key to all turnarounds is the presence of a leader who not only knows the way to go, but more importantly also has the courage to move forward. As consultant Sam Chand says, "Leaders only grow to the threshold of their pain."[iv] This truism is particularly apparent in turnaround situations. Turning around a church is one of the most, if not the most, challenging role of a pastor. I was recently telling a pastor about my forthcoming book on turnaround, *There's Hope for Your Church* (Baker 2012), when he commented, "It must be a work of fiction!" Given the difficulty of turning around a declining church, it is understandable that

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[iv] Sam Chand, *Ladder Shifts: New Realities, Rapid Change, Your Destiny* (Niles, IL: Mall Publishing, 2006), 18.

the assistance of a church consultant is often a vital aspect of any turnaround strategy. Understanding how turnaround strategies change along with the age and size of a church is vital if we are to advise churches properly.

younger/smaller churches

Turnaround in younger/smaller churches begins as the church collectively wrestles with its strengths and weaknesses. If the founding pastor still leads the church, he or she will carry a lot of power and authority in the change process. However, since small churches tend to exhibit traits similar to families, involving the congregation in a thorough analysis of itself brings forth a collective level of understanding and cooperation.

Movement forward occurs naturally in many younger/smaller churches as the pastor and leaders become acquainted with the necessary steps to take the church to the next level or stage of ministry. My book, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level* (Baker 2010), outlines the steps that churches generally must take to move from one size to another. As churches move from one size to another, they must redefine their core priorities from an inward focus to an outward one. This happens as they are introduced to and adopt models of outreach that safely build on their core beliefs and values. The consultant's role with these churches is to aid in the analysis, teach the next steps for growth, guide them to the right models, and encourage the church to make the needed changes. This requires working closely with the founding pastor or controlling family to bring influence to bear in the right places.

younger/larger churches

Many churches today grow quite large in just a few years. In most cases these churches are not in need of a turnaround. However, the best guard against a downturn is for the pastor and leaders to consistently make changes that prepare the church for the future. Since the church is larger and growing, preparations for the future take place incrementally.

Larger churches are comprised of many smaller groups or mid-sized congregations. Over time, some of these sub-ministries will do well, while others will simply get by. One key strategy for churches in this size and age category is to identify which sub-ministries are doing well and are in-house models of where the leaders want the church to move in the future. Change toward the future is then empowered as people from these successful ministries are systematically promoted to positions of influence in the church. The well-known policy of larger churches to hire people from within no doubt is one reason they continue to thrive. As

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workers from fruitful ministries within the church are moved to other areas of the church ministry, they naturally train, teach, and model a better way, thereby biasing the church in a new direction.

To avoid becoming static, younger/larger churches must reinforce their core identities, what some leaders call managing the brand, while learning from even larger churches and organizations. As churches grow larger, they quickly discover that fewer churches from which they can learn actually exist. This is especially true for churches within denominations. Since most churches are smaller, as churches grow larger there are fewer and fewer churches of their size within the denominational family. Of necessity, the younger/larger churches must look outside their denomination in an effort to learn from churches larger than themselves. The consultant's role with these churches is to help them see what is missing in their ministries, realign structures, and design mundane systems for welcoming guests, recruiting volunteers, and building leaders.

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older/larger churches

Older/larger churches face a different situation than younger ones do. After years of ministry, a church's identity and culture is deeply embedded in the people and overall church structure. The organization, programs, and distinctive "way-we-do-things-around-here" is taken for granted. At this point it is difficult to make people aware of the need for change, particularly if the church has a long history of success. Suggesting any changes in the church meets with resistance as it brings into question the validity of the past.

Bringing about a turnaround in an older church normally takes five to fifteen years, as leaders gradually introduce change into the static system. A pastor wishing to bring about change will need to build a new coalition—read staff, board, and leadership team—comprised of global thinkers (people who think widely about ministry). The practice of new pastors bringing along staff members from another church is one way to begin rebuilding a new coalition.

Another mechanism for turning around older/larger churches is to systematically promote outsiders. A common rule states, if you want change, promote from without; if you want things to remain the same, promote from within. Younger/larger churches promote from within due to a desire to influence the entire church with the positive bias of successful ministries. However, promoting from within in older/larger churches simply biases the church toward ineffective ministry. Real change is initiated from the new ideas brought in from without. Since new people are not emotionally embedded in the tradition of the past, they are better prepared for seeing what is needed for the church to move

toward the future. In addition, they bring to bear fresh experiences from other churches and organizations that may spark a renewal of growth and vitality.

New ministries, however, are often resisted in older/larger churches due to the reliance on past programs that have emotional value to long-term worshipers. To overcome such resistance, the use of what are sometimes called *parallel learning systems* is often helpful in introducing new ways of doing things. A well-known example of this is observed when a church starts a second worship service targeted to a different audience. The new service is started parallel to the older service, which allows the testing of a new ministry without interrupting the old one. As the new worship service grows through the use of fresh forms and styles, resistance and anxiety are reduced, while a new way of ministry is added to the church.

Closely related is the introduction of new technologies, which brings about new ways of thinking and operating, and thereby introducing gradual change to the older/larger church. Fresh technologies always bring subtle changes in beliefs, habits, and practices, which in turn require people to rethink their underlying assumptions. In turn, they often adopt new beliefs, habits, practices, and assumptions, which help in the turnaround process. A clear illustration of this turnaround mechanism is seen in the use of computer projection of worship songs and sermon notes. The usage of this technology has led churches into discussions about values, beliefs, and core assumptions.

The consultant's role is to assist older/larger churches in developing a succession plan for leadership transition, particularly for the leaving of a long-term pastor. In addition, outside consultants aid church leaders to think globally and investigate new opportunities for reaching new units of people not on the church's radar.

older/smaller churches

The churches most in need of a turnaround are ones in this category. Being older and smaller, many are in survival mode, facing severe challenges, which may eventually lead to closure. However, they are also quite resilient and work hard to keep the doors open as long as possible.

Turnaround in older/smaller churches takes place when a crisis is identified or created by some leader, usually the pastor. Pointing to the crisis of survival, the pastor convinces the remaining church members that "something has got to change." Using a gracious or a hard-nosed approach, the pastor directs a rebirth of the church for a new generation or audience. This usually requires a drastic reorganization, a merger with a sister church, or a friendly (or not so friendly) take

Revolutionary Change	Evolutionary Change
Faster	Slower
Destructive	Adaptive
Drastic	Gradual
Radical	Incremental

Figure 3

over. Occasionally, a denominational leader orchestrates a take over, but more often it happens through the direction of a strong-willed pastor who is willing to suffer the pain of criticism.

The role of a church consultant is to help the church see reality and then to show them the alternatives. Turnaround in older/smaller churches only takes place when people are willing to make the hard decisions, which allows them to leave a legacy for the future.

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conclusions

Turnaround is coerced in different ways depending on the age and size of a congregation. In younger/smaller and younger/larger churches, the overall culture of the church tends toward being a positive growth force. As consultants assist church leaders to work with the upward momentum by redefining priorities, learning next steps, establishing mundane systems, and realigning structures, a successful turnaround is hopeful.

In older/larger and older/smaller churches, the overall culture tends toward plateau and decline. As consultants assist church leaders to reverse the downward momentum by promoting new leadership, establishing a new coalition, designing new ministries, and making the hard decisions, it is hopeful that a turnaround will happen.

The implications for church consultants are multiple. First, we are called to a challenging work, but one that is genuinely fulfilling. Second, a canned approach is not very effective. Success is more likely as we design our mediation to fit the age and size of the church being served. Third, we must provide a safe pathway for leaders to face the traumatic learning process that will ultimately lead to a turnaround. In the first two aspects, our skill as a consultant will come primarily into play, while in the last, our skill of coaching will take center stage. It is important to remember that, while God will use us to aid pastors and other church leaders to engage in the process of turning around plateaued and declining

churches, we only have the power to recommend and advise. Local church leaders must ultimately make the hard decisions and changes that will result in a turnaround. May God grant us success in our work for His glory and the growth of His church.

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