

1-1-2012

Turnaround Church Ministry: Causes of Decline and Changes Needed for Turnaround

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Recommended Citation

Eymann, D. (2012). Turnaround Church Ministry: Causes of Decline and Changes Needed for Turnaround. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 3(2), 146-160. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/gcrj/vol3/iss2/2>

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Dan Eymann

abstract

“If you always do what you always did, you will always get what you always got.” This familiar saying is the crux of this paper. With 85% of the churches in North America in plateau or decline, change is desperately needed. Change is the name-of-the-game in turnaround church ministry.

This paper examines the following three crucial questions in turnaround ministry: (1) what are the primary causes of decline in North American churches, (2) what are the changes needed to effectively turn around plateaued or declining churches, and (3) what is the relationship between the changes implemented for turnaround and the causes of decline. Nine turnaround principles are offered for turnaround pastors and churches.

the need for turnaround

The decades of the 1940s and 1950s saw significant growth in North American churches and an expansion of missions, church-planting, and para-church

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 2 [2012], Art. 2 ministries. As early as 1960, however, sociologists and missiologists began warning that church growth was not keeping up with population growth. Now, fifty years later, the predictions are ringing truer than ever. The following statistics demonstrate the desperate need in our country.

- About two-thirds of the United States population are non-Christians (190 million).¹
- Less than 20% of the population regularly attends church on any given weekend.²
- Church attendance is steadily declining, lagging far behind population growth. By 2050, the percentage of the United States population attending church will be almost half what it was in 1990 (only 10.5 percent).³
- About 85% of all churches in America are plateaued or declining in attendance.⁴

The North American church is in desperate need of turnaround. A familiar saying strikes at the root of the problem: “If you always do what you always did, you will always get what you always got.” The problem in many North American churches is that they continue to do what they have done for decades and expect different results. It simply will not work. If we want different results, change is imperative. In turnaround church ministry, change is the name-of-the-game.

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turnaround research

Having served as senior pastor in three turnaround churches to one degree or another, the subject of turnaround was a natural fit for further doctoral research.

the research process

As I began researching turnaround churches, two key questions surfaced. First, what were the causes of plateau or decline in churches? Second, what changes were implemented in order to turn churches around into healthy, growing churches again? These two questions formed the core of my research. I also took it a step further, seeking to analyze the relationship between the causes of decline and the changes needed for turnaround. It was my belief that change for the sake of change alone is insufficient to sustain long-term turnaround. The changes implemented in an effective turnaround must be intentional and must directly

¹ George Barna, *Grow Your Church from the Outside In* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2002), 23.

² David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 2–9.

³ David T. Olson, “12 Surprising Facts About the American Church.”

⁴ “Back from the Brink: A Leadership Special Report” *Leadership Journal* 26, No. 4 (Fall, 2005), 24.

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address and reverse the factors that led to decline. Otherwise, the changes only serve as band-aids, not real solutions, and the church will eventually fall prey to the same root issues and suffer the same demise as before—eventual plateau and decline.

In formalizing the research, the following three key questions were asked:

- (1) What are the causes of plateau and decline among churches in North America?
- (2) What are the essential changes that are necessary to turn around churches in North America?
- (3) What is the relationship between the essential changes and the causes of plateau and decline?

The primary instrument used to research these questions was a survey of eleven causes of decline and eleven subsequent changes implemented for turnaround. Thirty turnaround pastors were interviewed in five western states—
148 Arizona, California, Oregon, Washington, and Colorado. The research was limited primarily to conservative, evangelical churches similar to the churches I have served. As the participating turnaround pastors were interviewed, they were asked to rate each of the potential causes of decline and potential turnaround changes on a Likert scale ranging from one to five—from no significance (1) to primary significance (5).

First, participants were asked to rate eleven causes of decline.

1. Inadequate pastoral leadership
2. Loss of vision
3. A changing community (demographics)
4. An aging congregation
5. Inward focus (lack of outreach)
6. Resistance to change (traditionalism)
7. Power struggles (internal politics)
8. Church split (divisiveness)
9. Inadequate facilities
10. Spiritually unhealthy (no growth process)
11. Low morale (discouragement)

These eleven causes of decline were followed up with eleven potential changes that may have contributed to the church's turnaround.

1. Called new pastor
2. Renewed and recast vision
3. Targeted new demographic

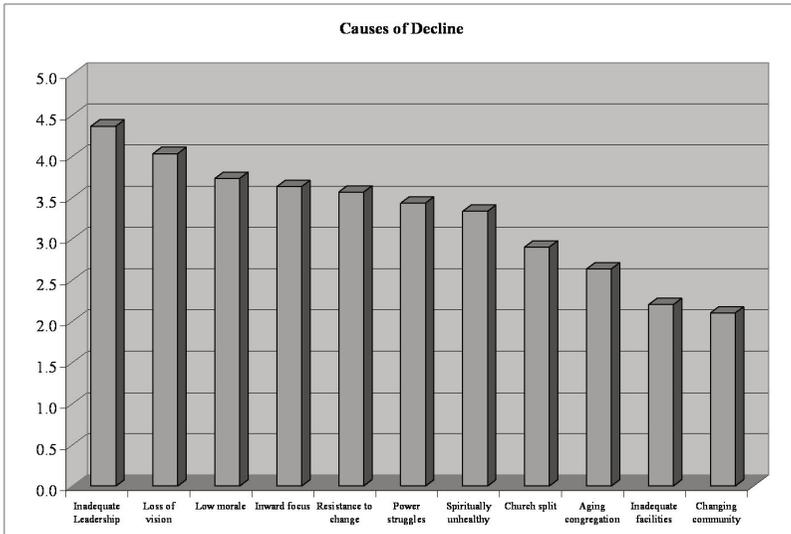
4. Targeted younger age groups
5. Community outreach
6. Contemporary worship
7. Confronted/removed divisive people
8. Forgiveness and reconciliation
9. Remodeled or new facilities
10. Small groups (or growth initiatives)
11. Positive and encouraging atmosphere

The changes are numbered in direct relationship to the causes of decline.

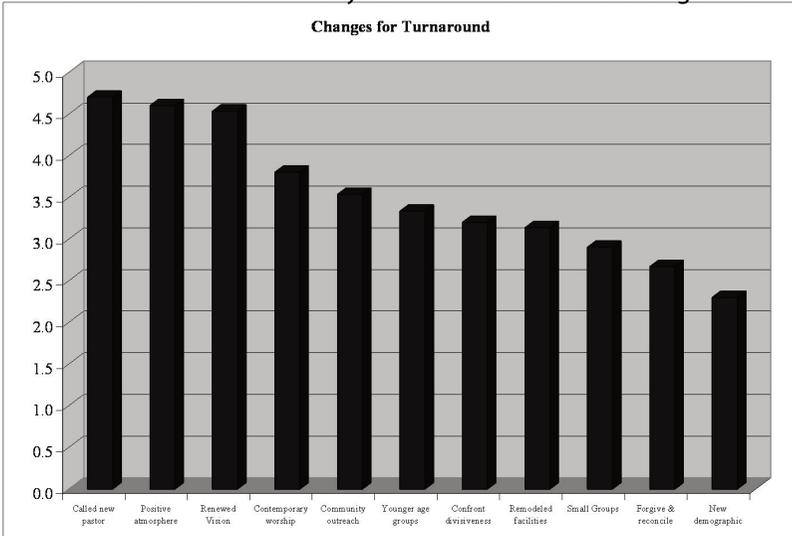
Calling a new pastor (change #1) was a direct response to inadequate leadership (cause #1); casting a new vision (change #2) was a direct response to loss of vision (cause #2), and so forth through all eleven changes and causes. This allowed a careful analysis of the relationship between the causes of decline and the changes implemented for effective turnaround.

The following graph indicates the average numeric ratings of the eleven causes of decline from the most significant (inadequate pastoral leadership) to the least significant (a changing community).

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Likewise, the next graph shows the average numeric ratings of the eleven turnaround changes, from the most significant (calling a new pastor) to the least significant (targeting a new demographic).



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research conclusions

After careful analysis of the data, several conclusions surfaced regarding the causes of decline, the changes for turnaround, and the relationship between the causes and the changes.

Causes of Decline

Upon analysis of the overall numeric ratings of the eleven causes of decline, two primary conclusions can be drawn.

First, plateau and decline are caused by multiple factors. Decline has more than just one reason. All of the participating turnaround pastors gave ratings of four or five to multiple causes of decline. The number of factors identified as being of high significance by individuals ranged from three to nine. While some factors may be primary causes of decline and others secondary causes, multiple factors always contribute to plateau and decline in a church.

Second, the top two causes of decline are clearly identified. Inadequate pastoral leadership received an overall rating of 4.4 as a cause of decline, and loss of vision received a rating of 4.0. These were the only two factors that had an overall rating of 4.0 or higher. While these two factors often accompany each other, they are clearly the leading causes of decline.

Changes Needed for Turnaround

After analyzing the data regarding the changes implemented for turnaround, two more conclusions are drawn.

decline has multiple causes, multiple changes are needed for turnaround. Once again, all of the participants gave high ratings of four or five to multiple changes. As with the causes of decline, some of the changes are primary factors in turnaround while others may be secondary factors; but once again, multiple changes were implemented in all turnaround churches. Turnaround clearly requires change, usually multiple changes.

Second, the top three changes implemented for effective turnaround were identified. While they are ranked in a different order than in the causes of decline, pastoral leadership, renewed vision, and a positive atmosphere were clearly the top three factors in turnaround. Pastoral leadership (4.7) was the top-rated factor in both sections, as a cause of decline and as a change needed for turnaround. While loss of vision was ranked second as a cause of decline, renewed vision (4.5) ranked third as an essential change for turnaround. That order was reversed for atmosphere. Low morale was ranked third, with a rating of 3.7 as a cause of decline, but a positive atmosphere was rated second (4.6) as an essential change for turnaround. These three factors are critical to an effective turnaround.

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The Relationship Between Causes and Changes

After comparing the scores and accompanying comments from the participants, it was concluded that a significant relationship indeed exists between the causes of decline and the corresponding changes for turnaround. Ten of the eleven categories demonstrated an identifiable relationship. As already indicated, the top three causes of decline were directly answered by the top three changes for turnaround. Even those factors not rated as significant in the overall ratings still demonstrated a significant relationship between the cause and the change for those churches in which they were rated high.

With all the data and comments analyzed, it can be concluded that indeed a significant relationship can be seen between the changes implemented for turnaround and the causes of decline. The causes of decline were, in fact, addressed and reversed by the changes implemented, resulting in subsequent turnaround and church revitalization.

turnaround principles

From the conclusions above, several turnaround principles can be identified that are helpful for turnaround pastors and churches.

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1. every turnaround is unique.

Every church is different, and every pastor is different. Therefore, the causes that lead to plateau and decline are unique to each church, and the changes needed for revitalization are unique in each church. No two churches are alike. Every turnaround is unique.

Some turnaround churches are relatively small, while others are large. Some churches are relatively young, while others are older. Some are rural, some are urban, and still others are suburban. The characteristics of each turnaround church are unique, as well.

152 The three churches in which I have served illustrate well the uniqueness of turnaround churches. In the first church I served as senior pastor, the turnaround was primarily an issue of location and facilities. The facilities seated a maximum of only 100 people. Thus, the church had a history of growing to 100, then slipping back down to 80, then growing to 100, and slipping down to 80. This cycle had been going on for awhile. After only serving four years in this church, we purchased new land and built a new facility that could seat about 250. Upon moving into the new facility, the church saw an immediate fifty percent growth in the first six months. When I went to the second church, I initially believed the primary issue of plateau was one of traditionalism. While that was certainly one of the primary issues, I found multiple issues of divisiveness that needed to be addressed and confronted. In my first five years, our church grew backward, from 220 in attendance to 120. We dealt with four divisive issues in those first five years. Once the divisive issues were addressed and the divisive people confronted and/or removed, we added a second service—a contemporary service—and the church started growing again. By the time I moved, we were a church of over 300 in attendance. We probably would have grown much larger, but inadequate facilities again became an issue. However, my present church is clearly the biggest challenge. Of the eleven causes of decline, this church would probably rank a four or five on all of them.

Every turnaround is unique. While the principle is simple and obvious, the implications are significant.

First, the uniqueness of each turnaround suggests that there is neither a simple answer nor a simple solution for decline. One of my personal goals in this research project was to discover some solutions to my present turnaround ministry. While hoping to find a “silver bullet” to help in my present ministry, I never did. No quick fix, no “silver bullet,” no magic formula for effective turnaround is available.

A second implication of this principle is that turnaround strategies are not necessarily transferrable. Just because certain strategies and methodologies were

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effective in one church does not imply that they will be successful in the next church. If a pastor comes from a church where he was successful in turnaround, there is no guarantee that the strategies and methodologies used in that ministry will be effective in the next church. For instance, in the previous church I served in the Seattle area, we had a very effective small group ministry. In our present church in Phoenix, we have not been able to get the same kind of small group ministry off the ground.

Third, this principle also applies to ideas and strategies one might learn at a conference. The wise turnaround pastor does not come back from a conference and immediately attempt to implement the speaker's strategies and programs in his church. The turnaround strategies are not one-size-fits-all.

The wise turnaround pastor will take some time to carefully analyze the church to which he has been called, seeking to discern the unique culture and specific needs of that particular church. What caused this church's decline? What is needed to revitalize this church? This analysis requires much time just listening to the people in the church.

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2. every turnaround is multi-faceted.

Rarely, if ever, is there just one cause of decline. While there may be both primary causes and secondary causes, there are inevitably multiple factors that contribute to the decline of a church. This naturally implies that multiple causes of decline require multiple changes for effective turnaround.

3. turnaround changes must be intentional.

This principle stems from the primary question of this research project. Change for the sake of change alone is insufficient for effective turnaround. The turnaround changes implemented must intentionally address the causes of plateau and decline. Change must be purposeful.

After comparing the scores and the accompanying personal comments of the participants, it was concluded that indeed a significant relationship exists between the cause of decline and the corresponding change for effective turnaround. Ten of the eleven categories measured demonstrated a clear, identifiable relationship. Even the factors that measured low in significance as a cause of decline demonstrated a strong correlation with the corresponding change needed for turnaround.

The wise turnaround pastor will once again take time to assess the specific causes of plateau and decline unique to the church. He will then develop and introduce a purposeful turnaround strategy that intentionally addresses the causes of decline and reverses the course of the church. While some of the secondary

Eymann: Turnaround Church Ministry: Causes of Decline and Changes Needed factors may be dealt with simultaneously, the primary causes must be addressed before effective turnaround can take place. Eventually, every factor contributing to a church's decline must be reversed for effective turnaround. Otherwise, any growth that is seen will eventually be undermined by the previous causes of decline that were not adequately addressed.

For instance, if traditionalism is one of the causes of decline, the wise turnaround leader will dig a little deeper to discover the source of the traditionalism. If the entire church is an older congregation, the pastor may address this issue by intentionally targeting a younger generation. If there are some power brokers—pillars of the church—whose motto is “we’ve never done it that way before,” the divisiveness of these people must be addressed and confronted, as well. Otherwise, divisiveness will eventually rise again and squelch any progress that has been made.

154 One turnaround pastor that was interviewed learned this the hard way. He was called to a church in a city of about 20,000 people. He immediately began to initiate some turnaround initiatives, including a seeker model with contemporary worship and other outreach initiatives. The church began to grow substantially. Many new people came, and many people were saved and baptized. However, as the church grew, he began to hear the “old guard” make comments like, “We’re losing our church,” or “This isn’t the same church it used to be.” Since the pastor failed to confront the divisiveness, it grew amongst the members of the church who were there prior to the pastor’s arrival. Eventually, the old leadership of the church pulled a legal maneuver and forced the new pastor to resign. The denomination’s leadership offered the pastor several other positions, but he chose to stay in the community. A group of people in the church came to him and asked him to start a new church, which he did so reluctantly. Today, the new church has far surpassed the previous church in attendance and is continuing to grow and have a significant impact in the city. The lesson learned is secondary changes are not sufficient. The primary causes of plateau and decline must be addressed first. When facing divisiveness, no amount of surface change will effectively turn around the church on a permanent basis. Change must be intentional and purposeful, especially when that change requires confronting and removing divisiveness.

4. leadership is everything.

The number one factor in turnaround is leadership. The turnaround pastor is clearly the most important factor in effective turnaround. In rating pastoral leadership as a factor in turnaround, all but one of the thirty participants rated a “new pastor” with a score of four or five. Even more telling than the survey is the

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fact that all but one of the participating churches required a new pastor in order to turn around. Leadership is everything. While it is possible for a pastor who has led a church through plateau and decline to also lead the church in turnaround, it is extremely rare.

In the second church in which we experienced a decline of attendance from 220 to 120 in my first five years, it may appear that it was the same pastor who presided over the decline that also led in the turnaround. However, it should be noted that those five years of decline were a necessary factor in the turnaround as various divisive issues were addressed and confronted. Several of the turnaround pastors interviewed indicated that it took four or five years before the church began to turn around. Many times, appropriate decline is necessary prior to turnaround growth. The turnaround pastor must be patient, persistent, and purposeful.

Turnaround pastors come in all sizes and ages. Most are younger but not all. While every turnaround pastor is different, four primary roles of a turnaround pastor emerged. A turnaround pastor must be (1) a visionary, (2) an effective preacher, (3) a shepherd, and (4) a change-agent.

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5. vision is essential.

A turnaround church also requires a compelling vision. Lack of vision in a church inevitably leads to plateau and eventually decline. Turnaround requires a renewed hope in a better future. In this research project, loss of vision ranked second only to pastoral leadership as a cause of decline. It ranked third as a necessary change for turnaround. Vision and leadership always go hand-in-hand. They always accompany each other, for vision flows from the leader.

Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger suggest four crucial elements of a compelling vision in their book, *Simple Church*. First, vision must be clear. It must be simple and easy, rather than complex and confusing, for everyone to catch and understand. Second, a compelling vision must have movement. It should move people along sequential steps in the spiritual growth process. This is best accomplished by keeping ministry simple, having only one program for each phase of the growth process. Third, there must be alignment throughout the church. Without alignment a church becomes a plethora of sub-groups and programs, each doing its own thing. Alignment assures unity in the church. Finally, a compelling vision has focus. Without focus a church will naturally drift toward complexity and confusion. Focus means saying “no” to everything that distracts from the clearly defined vision and strategy.⁵

⁵ Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Publishing Group, 2006), 67–76.

A positive and encouraging atmosphere is also crucial to church growth and particularly in a church turnaround. The research in this project clearly demonstrated the importance of atmosphere. A positive and encouraging atmosphere was the second highest rated factor in turnaround. One hundred percent of the pastors interviewed rated atmosphere as being significant in the turnaround process. Over seventy-five percent rated it as a primary factor (5.0).

While somewhat surprised myself at how high this factor rated in turnaround, it should have been expected. Atmosphere or climate has been a primary focus in my present church. When my wife and I walked out the front door of our church five minutes after our first service, no one was in sight. Everyone—and that means everyone—had left within five minutes of the closing prayer. No one stuck around and visited with anyone else. We immediately determined that the atmosphere of the church needed to change. We wanted people to enjoy each other. I am happy to report that I rarely leave now before an hour after the service is over.

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The wise turnaround pastor will pay careful attention to creating a healthy and positive atmosphere or climate for turnaround. Five particular factors stood out as being a part of building a positive atmosphere.

Positive Leadership—First and foremost is the turnaround pastor himself. Attitude flows from the top. The pastor sets the tone for the entire church. His pulpit ministry and his relational ministry are both vital links in building an atmosphere for turnaround. If the pastor is friendly, the people will be friendly.

Celebrative Worship—The worship experience of a church is also crucial to the overall atmosphere of the church. I found it very significant in my research that one hundred percent of the turnaround churches utilize contemporary worship in some way. Contemporary, celebrative, inspiring worship builds a positive and encouraging atmosphere for growth.

Church furnishings can also be a significant factor in the worship atmosphere. Many turnaround churches have removed the old pews and are using chairs which are less formal and more versatile. Many churches have also removed the old hymnals and are using modern technology, such as video projectors and presentation software. Pews and hymnals tend to create a more traditional, formal, and stuffy atmosphere, while chairs and technology tend to create a contemporary, casual, and positive atmosphere.

Casual Atmosphere—Closely associated with the worship experience is a casual atmosphere. Most turnaround churches emphasize a casual atmosphere in their services. Suits and ties are rare today. Casual pants (even jeans) and casual shirts

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are very common. Once again, it starts with the pastor. Many turnaround pastors wear casual attire through the week and on Sundays, as well.

Atmosphere is more than attire, however. The smell of coffee and the sight of a comfortable lobby is also very inviting. Many churches today have a small café or coffee stand in the lobby. Some even have a barista to make and serve lattes and cappuccinos. In our present church, we have converted an old classroom with old room dividers into a large café that seats about sixty people. It is a big hit. It is usually full at least thirty minutes before the service.

Remodeled Facilities—Inadequate facilities may not be a primary factor in a church's decline, but they are often a secondary factor. Facilities can be a very important factor in creating a positive and encouraging atmosphere for turnaround. Facilities that are in disrepair often contribute to low morale. A little remodeling and some paint can go a long way in building morale and renewing a positive atmosphere.

Particular attention should be given to the church entrance and lobby. First impressions are important. The nursery and children's departments are also important, as parents care deeply about their children.

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As mentioned earlier, inadequate facilities were an issue in my first two churches. We eventually engaged in major building projects in both churches, which were important in subsequent growth. In my present church, while we have sufficient facilities, they were very dated, cluttered, and in disrepair. We have repainted walls in every room in the church building, as well as completed some significant remodeling. These changes have done much in turning around the atmosphere in our church.

A Spirit of Unity—Another critical factor in creating a healthy atmosphere for growth is church unity. Any divisiveness that is allowed to fester in a congregation will inevitably grow and impact the overall attitude of the church. Divisiveness must be confronted and removed. While divisiveness is damaging to a church's morale and atmosphere, unity is a very positive force and a powerful testimony to the community.

In my previous church we dealt with four divisive issues in the first five years. That divisiveness was the primary factor in the church's decline. As soon as the last divisive issue was addressed and a spirit of unity prevailed again, the church began to grow.

Atmosphere is crucial. When morale is high and people are excited about their church and about what God is doing in their church, they are apt to invite their family and friends.

Another common thread that ran throughout the turnaround churches in this research project was their target audience. All turnaround pastors recognized that if a church was going to experience renewed growth, it was imperative that they target younger generations. This requires a sacrificial attitude on the part of the older generation in the church as they are asked to give up some of their personal preferences for more contemporary methodologies.

In targeting a younger generation, two primary factors are most common—contemporary worship and a dynamic children’s ministry.

Contemporary Worship—The first factor in targeting a younger generation is contemporary worship. Younger generations simply do not relate to the musical styles or lyrics of many traditional hymns. Thus, contemporary worship is an important ingredient in targeting a younger generation. This often involved disbanding the church choir in favor of a smaller praise band. A praise band involved trading in the church organ for guitars, keyboards, and drums. Praise music involved trading the hymnals for modern technology.

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Children’s Ministry—Another common factor in targeting younger generations is children’s ministries. When young adults begin having children, they often start thinking about heading back to church. Their children are very important to them.

Thus, a wise turnaround pastor will pay careful attention to the children’s ministries in the church. This may require new ministry styles and new curriculum. This may involve remodeling the children’s classrooms. Several turnaround pastors also stressed the importance of hiring a children’s ministry director. By doing so, the church clearly demonstrates the priority of its children’s ministries to young parents.

Targeting younger generations is an essential strategy in turnaround ministries. Contemporary worship and children’s ministries are two important ingredients in that strategy. It is a winning combination when parents and children both enjoy a positive experience at church.

8. turnaround churches are outward-focused.

This turnaround principle is of utmost importance. While vision is essential, that vision must include outreach. The eyes of an inward-focused church must be turned outward. Churches that are already outward-focused must maintain outreach as a priority.

While a variety of outreach philosophies and strategies abound, all turnaround churches are outward-focused in some way. Some utilize a *seeker model*; while others are *missional*. Some emphasize *relational evangelism* through attraction

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 2 [2012], Art. 2 events, encouraging members to invite their unchurched family and friends to special events designed for outreach. Others emphasize *service outreach* by getting involved in various community projects. Some utilize more traditional programs like Evangelism Explosion or Awana. Others utilize modern technology, such as church websites, blogs, and social networking. However a church chooses to do so, a turnaround church always emphasizes outreach and evangelism.

9. effective turnaround is ultimately a God-thing!

Why do some churches turn around, while others do not? Why are some pastors effective in turning a church around, while others cannot? Why do some churches grow exponentially, while others struggle to see any significant growth? Although some sociological issues and missiological issues may be identified, ultimately church turnaround is a God-thing. It is a spiritual issue.

In Revelation 2 and 3, the apostle John had a vision of Jesus walking among the seven churches of Asia Minor. Although each church is different with its own unique context and circumstances, a common thread runs throughout. Jesus calls each church to repentance. He calls them to turn around so they can experience spiritual renewal. These seven churches were once thriving churches. At the time of John's writing, however, forty to fifty years after the churches were started by the apostle Paul, each one is infected with some spiritual disease that led to its poor spiritual health. Sin was the root cause of their plateau and decline. Thus, repentance was necessary before God could bless them once again.

Sin is still at the root of plateau and decline in most churches today. As in the seven churches of Revelation the root cause of decline may be heresy, immorality, divisiveness, an inward-focus, legalism, insubordination to leadership, indifference, or apathy. A wise turnaround pastor will not only deal with surface issues, but he will also deal with the root issues. A wise turnaround pastor will not only deal with sociological issues, but he will also deal with spiritual issues. Like Jesus, the turnaround pastor will confront sin and call the church to repentance. Only then can a church effectively turn around and experience renewal.

Ultimately, effective turnaround is a spiritual issue. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus promised to build His church. If Jesus is the One who builds His church, Jesus is also the One who will rebuild His church. Turnaround is a God-thing!

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