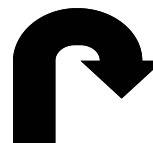


Preachers' Pen Points



Causes of Church Decline



(Editor's note: I urge you to read patiently as I seek to lay the ground work for a Scriptural approach to church growth. At that time, I will focus more on the Scriptural texts that provide solutions to the challenge of declining membership.)

Professional analysts of churches have noted and affirmed that church decline can occur in any religious group regardless of faith or organization. In addition, they have discerned a number of contributing causes to the phenomenon. In most cases the church may have prevented some of them; yet others may have been out of their control. Here are some of the key ones, not necessarily in order of importance:

Demographic changes

A church may often suffer from dramatic losses that come through demographic change. One of these changes includes the transfer of members to other places to work or to gain access to more attractive neighborhoods. A church that was once at the right place at the right time may suddenly lose the benefit of that position through demographic changes.

Moreover, demographic shift can also significantly alter the composition of the population surrounding the church's meeting place, replacing it with those who are less similar to the church's makeup and making it harder to reach and enfold them.

Building projects

Ironically, a church may become a victim of its previous "success" in numerical increase and become distracted by the need to provide adequate facilities for the increased numbers. Regrettably such endeavors are also fraught with potential for conflicts that may lead to disunity and loss of members. Conse-

quently, anything that gets a church's mind off of saving souls is ultimately harmful to the congregation. Building projects are notorious for this.

Ingrown family & "old blood"

As the church enters the later stages of development there is a natural tendency to focus primarily on the needs of those attending rather than place the emphasis on those who are outside. This inward focus causes the church to depend more and more upon the "faithful few" who may eventually grow weary of the burdens of service. In addition, the lack of fresh-minded newcomers robs the church of energy and enthusiasm for future work.

Lack of authentic spirituality

The fundamental motivations behind evangelism are a devoted commitment to God that grows out of a strong faith and a sense of blessing in being a Christian. When the spiritual health of a church suffers, the overall effort to win souls will be diminished as well resulting in a declining membership.

Failure to implement a unified vision

Churches are heavily dependent upon their leadership to provide a vision for evangelism and personal growth. The church must own the vision and there must be conscientious effort to implement it. If this leadership is lacking, the church will inevitably drift into a pattern of inactivity and a non-evangelistic mindset.

(In our next article we will talk about what to do when we identify the symptoms of decline in a congregation).
—Johnny Felker