

HELP FOR PASTORING A STAGNANT CHURCH

STRENGTHENING CHURCH MINISTRIES

Mickey Muse



10 Suggestions for the Shepherd of a Stagnant Flock

By Joe McKeever

This article was from (Joe McKeever / JM) used by permission, and I (Mickey Muse / MM) have given my thoughts on each of the ten suggestions. These suggestions should be taken as that, and not a cure for every church or pastor. I do agree with most of them and believe that they could be of help to some who are honest about their service as pastor, and to the church they are pastoring.

(JM)- How many churches in this country—in your denomination, of your church-type, in your county or parish or town—have stopped growing? It depends on whom you ask. Go online and you'll soon have statistics coming out of your ears on this subject. In our denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, the most significant number—one that seems to have held steady for over three decades—is that some 70 percent of our churches are either in decline or have plateaued. (Note that this article is old! I believe that our Independent Baptist are at 90% in decline or have plateaued as of 2013 –MM)

(JM)- Healthy churches grow. Non-growing churches are not healthy, at least in some significant ways. If it's true that seven out of ten pastors in our family of churches lead congregations either in decline or stagnation, this is a situation that ought to be addressed, and to my knowledge, everyone is addressing it. Everyone has an opinion.

(JM)- My single contribution to this discussion is directed toward the shepherd of a stagnant flock: *"If your church has plateaued, make sure you haven't."*

Bill Day, the numbers cruncher and evangelism professor at NOBTS, (pastor of Parkview Baptist Church in Metairie, LA), gives his definition of growing, declining, and plateauing: *The church that increases 10% in a five-year period is growing. Decline 10% in the same five-year period, and your church is decreasing. Plateauing means your church fits neither group.*

Here are ten statements to pastors of churches that are either stagnant or are in decline. - (JM)

1. Some churches are easier to pastor than others.

When Bob began to pastor Easytown First Church, to his amazement and relief, the numbers turned around almost immediately. People loved him, they began responding to his leadership, the pews filled, and soon they were bringing in chairs. Bob was elated.

That's when he made a mistake. Bob decided the great response was because of his terrific preaching and inspired leadership. And who's to say he was wrong? After all, had he preached poorly or led haphazardly, the story certainly would have been different.

But Bob became critical of churches that were not growing and pastors who were not leading in dynamic ways. Without knowing it, Bob had become part of the problem. He was discouraging pastors of troubled churches, when what they needed was an encouraging word.

I have pastored both kinds of churches. Serving at Easytown early in your ministry can sure be nice. It can also give the young preacher a heavy dose of ego. I'm afraid I pontificated on matters I knew nothing about and criticized denominational leaders for not doing what we were doing. I cringe with embarrassment over some of the statements I made.

Either because of the Lord's sense of humor or of fair play, He let me get hold of a church that did not respond to my dynamic personality (!) or bag of tricks. At the annual associational meeting, when certificates were handed out to those who led in baptisms (a practice of dubious merit, I must say), I was embarrassed by our small numbers. As if to break me of disparaging even one person coming to Christ, the Lord eventually let me see how it felt for our church not to make that "top-ten" list at all.

Some churches are easy to pastor, some are hard, and all are different. Not all methods work in every church.

(MM)- I would agree that not all churches are easy to pastor, there are many churches that are harder to pastor than others. There are many reasons for this, with a lot to be said on the subject, but I believe one of the main reasons is the past history of the church. It's not the former pastors' fault entirely, nor the entire churches fault, which makes it more difficult for the present pastor.

2. Some pastors have the gift.

Argue with this all you please, but I will go to my grave believing that preachers like John Bisagno could grow a huge church in the Sahara. They say "Good morning" in a way that makes you look around for an aisle somewhere to walk down. As the old saying goes, "Some were born on third base and think they've hit a triple." I'm not saying Bisagno is this way; he has helped more pastors (including me) to become Kingdom-growth-minded than anyone I know. But for some of us, those without the "gift," turning a church around is hard work.

(MM)- I don't know about the gift, but certainly you must have some gifts to be able to pastor any church, and even more to help a struggling work. It does help to get as much training as possible and workable experience. We may have a gift, but God expects us to exercise and do our best in developing it for the use of helping to build up the church for His glory.

3. Even if my church has plateaued, I don't have to join it.

Just because my church is not growing does not mean I have to stop growing. Don't give in; don't throw in the towel. Don't stop learning and growing and looking for ways to make a difference.

(MM)- Sometimes a pastor takes a church that is already plateaued or in decline with hopes of seeing it recover. Just because the church is not responding as fast as the pastor would desire, does not mean that he cannot still grow in his own spiritual life. Many times God may be growing the pastor, so He can use him to help the church to grow. When we think of growth, most often we think of numerical growth. In reality the church and sometimes the pastor may need to grow spiritually before God will grow the church numerically; so do not stop growing yourself, but count it as a time for maturing, for both you and the church.

4. Some churches should not grow—at least, not yet.

Some churches do not grow for good reason: They are sick. The last thing in the world they need is for a hundred new members to join them next Sunday. They need to get some matters right with God and with their neighbors before the Lord is going to allow them to grow. I watched as a small congregation tried to self-destruct. The unhappy members ran the pastor off, along with the group which supported him. As pastor of the nearest church, I watched this from the outside and did not understand all the issues, but my personal conclusion was that the pastor was a fine man, and the ones who left would have been excellent members of any church. In fact, several joined my congregation and became just that. As soon as the pastor left, the disgruntled few looked around, found an unemployed preacher, and made him pastor. The man of God walked in, saw all those empty pews, and decided the church needed to grow. He announced a week of revival services. They printed leaflets and hung posters, then held their meeting, but nothing happened. The community wanted none of what that little group had to offer. The merciful Lord in Heaven clearly decreed that little bunch would not be allowed to mess up a new crop of young believers. They did not need to grow; they needed to repent.

(MM)- I totally agree with this statement, "some churches should not grow" and may I say cannot grow. Many churches need to just repent of some of the most basic sins, and get forgiven, and then get back to work for the Lord! No matter how many (revival) meetings a church may have, if they are not willing to face their sin as a whole, and sometimes as a church entirely. (Incomplete sentence) They may need to deal with the church bosses, or maybe a church dictator, in order to see God bless their ministry again. I do not want to sound mean, but I am speaking straight forward to those churches who are in pride and rebellion against God's Word and His pastors. It grieves my heart very much that the work of God, in many churches could go forth, and be greatly blessed, if there was an old fashioned repentance and renewal of their first love to the Lord. So maybe the place to start growing is with self-examination of the church members and the pastor, for anything that may be hindering God's blessings.

5. The pastor's problem is not the church members' or deacons' problem.

“We announce visitation, and no one comes.” “I handed out assignments, but none of the deacons made their calls.” “These people are just like the ones following Moses—headstrong, stiff-necked, hard-hearted.”

The people are not the problem, pastor; they are your opportunity. *You* are your biggest problem, pastor. If you want your people to minister in the community, go minister in the community yourself. If you want your people to visit in homes, go visit in homes yourself. If you want them to take door-to-door surveys or prayer-walk blocks, go do it yourself.

After you've done it for six months on a regular basis *without telling a soul that you're doing it*, invite the rest of them to join you.

(MM)- How many times have I heard this from pastors around the country and the truth is that many things are better caught than taught. The pastor is to lead the way for others by example, that is what Paul told Timothy; (1 Tim 4:12) “Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.” The pastor must not try to make others do what he himself is not doing or willing to do. In the work of the ministry not everyone will be on board all the time or at the same time. Pray for labors, and then get to work in the laboring yourself. This sometimes is difficult and lonely for the pastor and his wife, but just be faithful and see God bless.

6. The most urgent task is to become a person of intense prayer.

If you love your church and have a burning desire to see it live once again and make a lasting difference in your community, tell the Lord. The tendency for pastors with a hurting desire to help their churches grow is to look for human saviors—some pastor of a big dynamic church somewhere whose brain they could pick or whose conference they could attend. That's not entirely wrong, but it's out of order. It's prayer time—time to spend concentrated time on your face before the Lord finding out what He wants for His people. Keep reminding yourself (and Him) that these are His people. He died for them, you didn't, and their welfare and health means far more to Him than it does to you. Seek His face; ask for His will. The Lord may tell you His entire plan during a two-day prayer retreat, but I'd be surprised if He did. More likely, He's going to give you some immediate direction for your leadership and sermons, but you're still going to have to spend quality time on your knees pleading for His intervention. Expect this to take six months, a year, several years. Some have said if the church has been stagnant for six months, turning it around will take six months; if a year, then one year. If 40 years ... well, surely it won't take that long! (I'm not sure what I think about this principle.)

(MM)- There is nothing that can take the place of prayer and seeking the Lord for His will and vision for His local church. When we pray we need also to believe that those things we prayed for will come to pass (that is what Jesus said). (Mark 11:24) “Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive *them*, and ye shall have *them*.” Many times it's our faith that is lacking, rather than God not willing to answer our prayers. Sometimes pastors will share with everyone else the things that are on their hearts, but not with God. There is nothing wrong with seeking help and counsel from others, as long as we have sought the Lord first.

7. Go to conferences and read the books on reversing plateaued churches.

But do not look for a program for your church; look for a key idea.

There are experts out there who would willingly come into your church (for a fee), take over the show, and rearrange all the furniture to get the church growing again. But then they would leave, and you would be left to deal with the consequences. You don't need that.

When you sit before pastors with "turnaround" stories, listen in two directions at the same time: to what they are saying, and to the Holy Spirit.

When something is said and all the bells go off inside you, that's what you came for. The Holy Spirit is fingering this principle, that story, this strategic ministry, that idea.

(MM)- We have many lone pastors today that are not availing themselves to many helpful materials, books, and speakers. This is not saying that you need to spend all your time studying and listening to everyone else, on how to grow a healthy church, but look for those who have been around and have done it with a good track record. There is a world of information out there for helping churches that are not growing or are dying. Make sure your time is well spent and the help is useful for you and the church you pastor.

8. Don't be surprised if the Holy Spirit has you start with small improvements.

Someone in our church called my attention to a needy trailer park. A seminary student in our church wanted to try to reach the people there. We sponsored him. No big deal. At first, it was just an arrangement between the student and me, the pastor. In time, as leaders came and went, God sent us a young man with a real heart for the families in that park. He began reaching the kids, some of the parents began to respond, and our church members began to get involved. This became the finest mission experience of any church I ever pastored. Before long, more than 60 members of our church were involved to some degree with the young pastor, his wife, and that trailer park. It's my observation that this compassionate ministry helped make it a truly healthy congregation. "Who has despised the day of small things?" asks the prophet in Zechariah 4:10. I think we can answer that. Our spirits despise small things. We want big numbers, big programs, big responses. Is there anything wrong with 3,000 people coming to Christ in one day? Not a bit; but great results often begin with tiny deeds, such as prayer-walking a neighborhood or putting someone in a leadership position who becomes a key player.

(MM)- Most men or churches that are greatly used of God started off doing the small things the Lord gave them to do, and did them well with passion. Often we want the great things to happen in our churches, without giving attention to the details of the ministry. Many small things can make a big difference for the first time visitors and those who are looking for a new church home. Some churches may be overlooking the obvious in ministering to the community closest to them, in the little things; and God may be looking to see if we are willing to take care of those small things so that He might entrust us with greater and bigger things in the future.

9. Start even smaller than that.

Walk over your campus. Are the restrooms clean? Do the hallways need painting or brightening up? What do the grounds look like? Never, ever pass a piece of trash on your property without picking it up and walking it to a dumpster.

Even if your sanctuary has not changed since the 1950s and looks every bit as dated as it is, and even if you can't afford a renovation, you can get a bucket of paint and cover the fingerprints on the walls. You can scrub the floors. You can see that wastebaskets are emptied each week.

Schedule a "work day" on a Saturday. Encourage your students to brighten up their rooms.

Appoint two or three of the most persnickety matrons to walk through the buildings with one of the men and make a list of improvements to be made. Talk it up, serve breakfast early that day, and make it fun.

Don't overdo it and don't over-expect, pastor. Don't make this an all-day thing. Two hours on a Saturday morning with 20 or 30 adults can make a huge difference. If they uncover more tasks to be done, ask them if they'd like to have another such work day six weeks later. That's far enough in advance that they'll agree, but not so distant that they'll forget about it.

Go for little improvements at first. See that the church sign represents the church well and is changed weekly, even if you have to do it yourself until the Lord raises up a responsible volunteer. If your sanctuary looks bare, ask a florist to lend you some greenery on the weekends, or even rent you some. When the congregation responds enthusiastically, see how people would feel about purchasing the greenery.

Use the word "experiment," as in, "We're going to experiment with this." It won't sound as threatening or as permanent as, "We're making this change."

(MM)- I remember when I first asked for a work day at Westwood Baptist, we had only been there six to eight months. We were only running around twenty and some told me that nobody ever comes out for work days, and hadn't for many years. We had the work day anyway and had eighteen people come out to help, even some visiting folks came and helped do all the work. Something I've learned is, that we need to ask in prayer, and act in faith that God will answer. It helps people to get out and see improvement to the church and grounds, even if it's only just a few small things. More people will respond to a pastor that enthusiastically promotes anything, rather than one who does not believe in God's faithfulness, or in the members willingness and interested in doing much for the church.

10. Thank people. Encourage them. Praise them. Send them notes.

You have two choices, pastor. You can harangue the people on Sunday because they are not what a church ought to be, or you can applaud them as they take baby steps in that direction.

I'm in favor of the pastor calling names from the pulpit of people who did well this week.

(You'll want to work hard to not leave someone out who should have been included. If you do, be sure to include him/her the next Sunday and apologize for omitting them.)

Write thank-you notes on the church letterhead. One or two sentences are all that's required. Tell them how much better the church looks with those new flowers in front, and how it is a glorious witness for the Lord. Tell the custodian how pleased you were to hear someone comment on the clean bathrooms last Sunday.

I once wrote a column in the church bulletin thanking our custodian. Andy was not an easy man to work with. He could be curt, and more than once he'd offended some member with a sharp comment on the way she kept her classroom. But when you gave him an assignment, he carried it out well. So I wrote a note of appreciation to let church members know that Andy was responsible for the building looking so impressive on Sundays. A year later, while looking for something in the sanctuary building, I opened a closet. There was my column, taped to the inside of the door. Andy had kept it all this time.

I never forgot that lesson. It matters. As nutrients to flowers and as fertilizer to a crop, so is encouragement to God's people.

The Lord's people should be seen as tender plants; if you want them to grow, you must never mistreat them. Instead, handle them with care, treat them lovingly, and keep them in the sunshine with plenty of food and water. Protect them from storms, shield them from careless children, and watch for signs of disease or trouble. They want to grow, and they will—if we do it right.

(MM)- Encouragement to the church members should be a high priority with the pastor and his staff. We need to remember that these people are God's children, and they will need constant patience from the pastor in working with them and building them up. This is what everyone should be practicing in the church, and set by example of the pastor. You will get back what you give to others in the church, it's the principle of sowing and reaping, sow encouragement and you will reap it.

- (Romans 14:19) "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another."
- (1 Corinthians 10:23) "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not."
- (1 Thessalonians 5:11) "Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do."
- (Ephesians 4:12) "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:"
- (Ephesians 4:29) "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers."

(MM)- May the Lord use you as tool in His hands to revive a "stagnant church" and to see God's blessings flow once again in the church to those who are in need of the gospel.

For more information please go to our website at www.strengtheningchurchministries.com or phone me at (417) 350-8820.

In His Service, Serving His saints,
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