

A Thriving Church Can Save a Faltering One

A congregation merger might sound radical, but evidence shows it can work.

By Ron McCoy

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A row of pews is closed off for social distancing at Old Saint Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco, March 6, 2021.

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American churches are in trouble. Even before the pandemic, thousands of them were [closing](#) every year. Only 47% of Americans said they belong to a church, synagogue or mosque, according to a 2021 Gallup [survey](#), down from 70% in 1999. Last year only 28% of Americans went to church [regularly](#). An overwhelming [majority](#) of churches believe they have plateaued or are in decline.

Why is this happening, and can more church closings be averted? Many churches are declining from a lack of leadership. There may be an older pastor who has a good heart and has been serving a long time but struggles to connect with the younger generation. Some long-established churches have a hard time changing even though the community around them has. Combined with the pandemic, it's no wonder so many young Christians have left the churches they were raised in.

If this sounds overly simplistic, visit a couple of churches, especially the local, smaller churches that sit in the middle of residential neighborhoods across the country. The sad but indisputable truth is that this is the reality for most Christian churches.

The good news is that there's a way to save a failing church: a partnership, or merger, with a thriving one. Most often this means a comprehensive relaunch for the struggling congregation—rebranding the church and giving it a new vision, staff, programming, facilities and training.

One reason mergers of this nature are so successful is that thriving churches simply have better resources. They have more people, which means more money to invest. But money alone can't change a bad culture or bring an end to outdated ministry programming.

Larger, thriving churches have much more to offer than money. They can provide talented and forward-thinking leadership, as well as other systems and tools the struggling church likely doesn't have and can't create on its own. Many thriving churches, for instance, have systems to identify and develop young leaders critical to a congregation's future. They also have a movement of the Holy Spirit—an intangible that provides the momentum that makes them thrive.

These churches also make efforts to remain relevant. If the church is called to make disciples and help connect people to the community of Christ, it's awfully difficult to do that if the church hasn't created an environment people want to be in. Churches must ask themselves: Does this look and feel like a place people—and especially

those who don't yet know Jesus—could engage? Is the music current or have we been singing the same songs since the early '70s? Does the physical space look outdated and neglected? Is the church using the same Bible school content for children that it did 30 years ago?

These churches think about these issues and are willing to take risks and experiment. They're willing to look at ministry through fresh eyes and, for the sake of the Gospel, change up how ministry gets delivered. This doesn't mean that they're willing to compromise God's word, but a church must be willing to let things go that may now be barriers to furthering that word.

Excellence matters. A successful church aims to create moments that are so impressive, people want to share the experience. For a church to determine whether they are providing excellence, it must be a thriving community. That means friendly and smiling faces and engaged members. These churches sing; members are excited to come back and want to invite their friends. The church serves an excellent God, and it must provide excellence in return.

Here in California, we have witnessed firsthand what can happen when churches that are on a downward trajectory become open to change. We have watched many local, struggling churches grow, including Palm Avenue Baptist in Riverside, now Sandals Church Palm Avenue, which went from fewer than 40 to more than 1,000 weekly attendees.

For believers, the hope of the world remains the church. God uses churches to tell others about himself and to share the love of Jesus with the world. To save itself, we, the body of the church, must be willing to be challenged by difficult realities. We must be willing to be open-minded and make church more appealing, exciting and relevant to everyone.

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