

10 Reasons We Keep Seeing Established Churches Failing

Where I live, dozens of large old church buildings that used to hold thriving congregations strewn along a major avenue in Brooklyn, New York. Some have been torn down and developed, while others are supported by social programs and/or rentals from other congregations. As I ponder this, I have come to the conclusion that there are 10 primary reasons established churches eventually fail.

1. They are not intergenerational.

Many of the churches in my community were at one time ethnic churches that have failed to pass down their faith to their children. When we first moved into this community we noticed that the average age of the believers in these churches was probably over 60 years of age. Consequently, there are many large congregations populated primarily with older people, and the concern of this article is whether these churches will exist in two decades.

2. They refuse to adapt to the changing demographics.

Many churches refuse to reach beyond the culture and predominant ethnic makeup of their congregation. It is the job of the lead pastor and elders to continually analyze the changing demographics of their community so they can stay ahead of the curve. I once warned a group of ethnic pastors that they would not have a church in 10 years if they did not adopt their strategies to the rapid gentrification taking place in their community. In other words, in order to reach certain people groups, a church has to focus on developed leaders representing that group and eventually give them a prominent role in decision-making and public ministry.

3. They use old methodologies.

The outreach strategies and methods of ministry in some churches are the same today as they were 40 years ago. The way we do evangelism, dress, speak and relate to our congregation has to be relevant without compromising the gospel. In the same way we are called to exegete Scripture, we are called to exegete our communities if we are going to continue to thrive.

4. They lost the zeal of its founding members.

Many established churches start with great passion and vision in their founding and move to merely consolidating, maintaining and administrating their vision in the next generation. Every mainline Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox denomination was in its beginning a thriving apostolic movement (read the book of Acts along with church history). It is the challenge of every established church to generationally pass on the torch of its original vision and zeal so that their love for Christ doesn't dissipate. Established churches that lose their vision and zeal eventually go from power to programs, revival to routines and community transformation to perpetuating mere church traditions.

5. They fail in their succession plan.

Truly, there is no success without a successor. Established churches that pick the wrong lead pastor to succeed the original apostolic visionary risk losing everything they built. Succession is tricky and often messy and hard to map out since every local church has a different culture, context and community. This is why succession planning needs to be done with much prayer, fasting and inside and outside consultation along with checks and balances. In most cases (there are always exceptions), the best successor is a spiritual son of the congregation who already has within them the DNA and vision of the house.

6. The core leaders lost their oneness.

Satan's No. 1 plan to thwart the vision of a local church is

to sow seeds of discord, disunity and division in the ranks of the elders and leaders of a congregation. Churches that fail to maintain biblical oneness among their key leadership will have a rocky road ahead due to the intense spiritual warfare and complexities every church has to navigate through. Only a strong, unified core team will continue to move forward and perpetuate the church's vision. Leaders have to keep first things first and learn to overlook petty differences for the sake of kingdom advancement.

7. They succumb to the values of secular culture.

Many established denominational and independent churches in the past several hundred years have gradually gone down the slippery slope of secular accommodation. In order to be relevant and/or to be accepted by the surrounding community, whole church movements and denominations have accepted cultural norms that are antithetical to biblical values and ethics. When churches allow culture to inform their ethics and values instead of Scripture, they lose their distinction from the world and begin to decline. All historic Protestant denominations that have embraced liberal theological constructs are rapidly losing members and dying off.

The only churches that are continuing to grow worldwide are evangelical churches that are biblically based. Jesus said that if the salt has lost its saltiness, it is good for nothing but to be trampled under the feet of men (see Matt. 5:13). Churches that cease to reflect His light fail to be salty and risk being closed down by none other than the Lord Jesus Christ (Rev. 2:5).

8. There is no provision for a lack of vision.

Proverbs 29:18 teaches us that without a vision, the people become discouraged (or perish depending on your translation). When there is no longer any compelling vision in an established church, there will not be enough volunteers

motivated to serve in the ministry (read Ps. 110:3) and the finances will rapidly drop. Truly, God only gives provision for that which reflects His Vision.

9. There was no long-term financial solution.

If at all possible, established churches that own their building should attempt to utilize their facilities in ways that can help financially support their ministry. Whether it is developing their property or renting space to another entity, if at all possible, creating an income stream enables a church to function even when their tithes and offerings drop (sometimes because of the weather, or other times because of a crisis in leadership or a church split). Creating a long-term financial base is a wise move to compensate for the vicissitudes of the life of a church.

10. They lost their prophetic edge.

Established churches who fail to maintain consistent corporate prayer and fasting eventually lose their prophetic edge and operate according to fleshly wisdom. This results in them missing divine opportunities, *kairos* moments and presumptuously making decisions that result in a loss of momentum, key people and kingdom advancement. When lead pastors, elders and core members are too busy to spend quality time seeking God together, they will miss what the Spirit is saying to the church (Rev. 2:7) and are on the road to failure.

My prayer is that every church planted by God will last for generations and be effective until Jesus returns for His bride.