

Sometimes, a Church Needs to Die

When Pastor Raymond Trembath arrived at Pilgrim Congregational, he was excited about the work ahead. It was the early 1980s and the surrounding area of Oakland was a vast mission field, and the people were desperate for anything hopeful to cling to.

However, it wasn't long before Trembath realized that the neighbors around the church didn't care about his message. He spent long hours knocking on doors, inviting people to visit, but with little success.

In the meantime, Pilgrim's congregation continued to struggle, even as the demographics of the neighborhood grew from its historic white base to a more diverse urban population. White flight characterized urban Oakland throughout those years, both in Trembath's neighborhood and beyond.

For Trembath, this change was met as an opportunity and not something to be feared.

The leaders at Pilgrim felt the Spirit's prompting to seek out ministry partners to join them in their mission. Specifically, they sought partners that matched and ministered to the changing demographics of their neighborhood.

Filled with renewed hope, Trembath began a discussion with Pastor Gary, who led a predominantly Black congregation, on the state of their neighborhood and the potential for a partnership. After much prayer, the pastors proposed for their congregations to consider a merger: for four weeks, the churches would worship together as one.

The trial run did not go well.

Years later, Trembath reflected on the experience. “At the end of four weeks, everyone hated everybody. I would never say it was wrong; it was just that our worship styles and services didn’t align. How God handles that in heaven is His business. For us, it just didn’t work out.”

Studies conducted in recent years estimate that four out of five North American Protestant churches have plateaued or are declining. And that was before COVID-19 surged across the globe, with the majority of pastors now reporting only 73 percent of their pre-pandemic attendance levels. In the wake of economic uncertainty, massive layoffs and general disruption to how church is done, more and more congregations are wondering if they are viable, if their buildings and church body will be around in five, fifteen or fifty years. And for some, the answer is no.

With decades of real estate experience, I help struggling churches, like Pilgrim, think through these questions as they reconsider their mission and space. Together, we identify each church’s underutilized assets and we discuss how these spaces could be used in a way that benefits both the church and the local community. But there are no fail-safe solutions for dying churches.

Many of these congregations follow a similar, painful path: Attendance drops year over year. Community demographics begin to shift while the church’s demographics remain stagnant. Outreach and external ministries lack vision, volunteers and impact. Costs to maintain underused property grow while giving declines. Leadership begins to whisper about mergers and even closing the doors. And finally, a pastor reaches out to me for help.

My first piece of advice to every pastor? You’re never going to regain your glory years.

And often I go even further: Should we be fighting to save

your church? Or should you be learning how to die well? After all, churches were never meant for hospice care and the death of a local congregation by no means foreshadows the death of the corporate church.

The best option, at times, is to die—so that others may live.

Thinking about embracing death can sound foreign, even counterintuitive. After all, didn't Jesus come so that we may have abundant life?

As the entirety of the Gospels show, Jesus' primary calling is one to follow Him, to follow His path and only there do we find abundant life: in death. Jesus commands that we each take up our cross, deny ourselves and live for Him. In 1 Corinthians, Paul draws on this teaching as he writes: "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies" (15:36, NIV).

Ultimately, we are called to habits of discipleship that cumulatively speak to self-denial and concern for others. This is as true for individuals as it is for congregations.

In a church's death, another congregation can find life. Property that once sat dusty and deteriorating is enlivened with preschool laughter and potluck dinners. Auditoriums that were once half-filled now feel cramped as they accommodate a thriving, multi-ethnic congregation that could never before afford a church home. Empty Sunday school rooms are converted to co-working spaces and the church kitchen now feeds the homeless. Death begets new life. Old spaces become new. From what was broken, Jesus makes something beautiful.

God's desire for every church—even those struggling—is to use all energy, resources and vitality to serve surrounding communities and invite them into the life of the Triune God. We must abandon ministry gimmicks. We must sacrifice our personal dreams and goals. We must acknowledge the needs of the whole church, and how our properties and assets may meet those needs. And then we must act.

In this cross-shaped abundant life, we resist our survival instincts. We abandon church growth strategies that encourage us to survive at all costs. And, as we're commanded, we embrace death.

What Trembath attempted so many years ago was gutsy, even pioneering. While the merger wasn't successful, Trembath understood that struggling churches must not huddle together and look inward but rather work together, to the point of discomfort, in order to pursue the greatest kingdom good.

In the end, Pilgrim decided to give up their space. They could have continued indefinitely as a tiny congregation in a large building, scraping by with the proceeds they gained from renting out a few offices, but Trembath realized that such an arrangement wasn't beneficial to the larger community. "This building belonged to God," said Trembath. "We had to find another solution. We were hoarding resources that needed to be used for the community."

For Trembath and Pilgrim Congregational, that solution looked like selling their property to a congregation in need that better reflected their changing community.

What this church courageously demonstrated to me is a lesson that we all need to hear: God's plan extends beyond the organizational life of any local church body.

Assessing the health of a congregation is intense and exhausting. It forces us to ask questions that could lead to uncomfortable answers. It, much like Scripture, provides a mirror that illuminates where we may fall short in serving our communities. And ultimately, like Scripture, this reflection provides a path toward the greatest kingdom good.

Today, I invite you into death. I invite you and your pastors and your congregation to die to self, whether that means continuing on in joyfully serving your local community or whether it means reevaluating your needs in contrast to your

property's excess. Regardless, know that God is good and, when we're aiming to grow His kingdom, He is faithful to multiply our efforts. {eoa}

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