

Why I Refuse to Give Up on the Local Church

This is not a time for gloom and doom. The church can shine its brightest in a dark hour.

When my friend Ferrell Hardison moved to the town of Princeton, N.C., in 1990, he began pastoring a Pentecostal church with 70 people. Founded in 1918, it was a tired, aging congregation with a tiny budget. Ferrell was the 25th pastor to lead the church, and some of his predecessors had stayed only a year or two. Not exactly a young pastor's dream job!

Today, the church has a new name—The Bridge—and it has grown to 1,250 in weekly attendance. Last fall the vibrant congregation broke ground on a new worship center, and they've planted a satellite congregation in the town of Goldsboro, N.C., that already has 300 members. A large percentage of the church's \$2.6 million annual budget is marked for outreach, and Ferrell estimates that at least 3,000 people have come to Christ through their ministry in recent years.

"Because of this pervasive negativity, many Christians have settled into a gloomy cynicism. They think America is ripe for judgment (Haven't we been for decades?) and that we might as well shut the blinds, curl up on the couch and wait for the

rapture.”

“In a down economy, our giving has been up,” Hardison told me. “We have discovered that people give when they understand how their giving changes lives for eternity.”

Ferrell is a simple guy who believes in prayer. He’s not a celebrity CEO pastor who runs his church like a business, nor is he a self-appointed “apostolic” tyrant who barks orders to his staff and treats people like dirt. He believes in core biblical values like servanthood, humility, team ministry and compassion. And people are flocking to The Bridge because they find Jesus-focused worship, Bible-centered preaching and, most of all, New Testament-style love.

I’m pretty sure this is how church was meant to be.

I’m sharing this success story because I hear a lot of complaining these days. I know people who have stopped going to church altogether, for myriad reasons:

(1) They were hurt by a pastor or snubbed by church members;
(2) They think all Christians are hypocrites (I don’t know one Christian, myself included, who does not have at least a streak of hypocrisy); or (3) No church within an hour of driving distance meets their standards or suits their tastes.

Because of this
pervasive negativity, many Christians have settled into a
gloomy cynicism. They
think America is ripe for judgment (Haven't we been for
decades?) and that we
might as well shut the blinds, curl up on the couch and wait
for the rapture.

That is really
sad, because this dark hour is our best opportunity to shine.

I refuse to
give up on the church. Every month I meet new pastors like
Ferrell Hardison,
and I see encouraging signs of spiritual life. Many pastors
are trading in old
wineskins and praying for new wine. Congregations are working
with local city
officials to help the poor. Young people are finding Jesus and
passionately
fighting social injustice.

Even though we
are in a desperate hour economically, politically and morally,
some leaders
have decided it's better to light a candle than to curse the
darkness. They
know lost people are more open to the gospel when times are
tough.

When we stepped
into 2012, I felt the Lord told me that this is the year for
local churches to
thrive. He gave me Revelation 3:2a, which was a message
to the ancient church at Sardis: "Wake up, and strengthen the
things that
remain, which were about to die" (NASB).

I also felt He
told me this was the year for smaller churches to grow. It
will require us to
prayerfully change how we've been doing in ministry. But there
are many small
congregations that are wired by God to be like Gideon's army.
If we trust Him,
He will use little churches to do big things.

I know churches
can get off track. They can become mired in religious
tradition or
denominational programs; they can become ineffective because
of sin in
leadership; they can lose their edge because of a loss of
intimacy with Christ;
or they can be derailed by charismatic excess. But in each
case, Jesus offers
the chance of revitalization.

Please don't
give up on the church. This really can be our finest hour.

More than 100 years ago, British preacher Charles Spurgeon
reminded his generation
that God does not have a Plan B for reaching the world. "Some
Christians try to
go to heaven alone, in solitude," he wrote. "But believers are
not compared to
bears or lions or other animals that wander alone. Those who
belong to Christ
are sheep in this respect, that they love to get together.
Sheep go in flocks,
and so do God's people."

I encourage you
to find your flock, pray for your shepherd, love God's people
and use all your

spiritual gifts to bring the lost into a community of faith where they can find shelter from the coming storm.

J. LEE GRADY *is the former editor of Charisma and the director of The Mordecai Project. He is ministering in Uganda this week. You can follow him on Twitter at leegrady.*