

Recalibration: Hope for the North American Established Church

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Eighty percent of congregations across North America have either plateaued or are moving on a fatal track if a renewed vision does not infuse their pastors' hearts. George Barna voices his trepidation for today's North American church: "The local church is one mechanism that can be instrumental in bringing us closer to [God] and helping us to be more like Him. But, as the research data clearly show, churches are not doing the job. If the local church is the hope of the world, then the world has no hope."¹ Thom S. Rainer's research echoes this sentiment. After examining the 350,000 churches in America, he found that 150,000 churches are either deceptively healthy or have symptoms of sickness.² Even with the growth of mega churches and the missional movement, the church in North America currently struggles to survive.

A report completed by the Healthy Church Network, drawn from the Assemblies of God Annual Church Ministries Report (ACMR) from 1980-2011, reveals that roughly two-thirds of all Assemblies of God churches in the U.S. are either plateaued or in decline.³ Dave Ferguson and Jon Ferguson provide further insights of the North American church: "Today, fewer than 20 percent of Americans attend church regularly, and only 22 percent have a positive view of church."⁴ However, the lack of conversions lies at the heart of Ferguson's concern: "Half of all churches in America

did not add one person through conversion last year."⁵ This presents an enormous problem. The Assemblies of God—indeed, all Evangelical churches—must address this erosion of the local church.

To address this problem, the Assemblies of God (AG) and other denominations often make the primary focus church planting. Although church planting is mission critical to the future of the AG, one of the unintended consequences to a sole focus on church planting is that many associate pastors and Bible college students receive the subtle message that if they desire effectiveness, they must plant a church. These pastors and students are less likely to dream about leading an established church and more likely to have their focus on planting a new church. As a result, established churches experience continual decline, as the leadership pipeline for pastors of established churches continues to disappear. Although church planting plays a vital role in Kingdom growth, the Assemblies of God must create a distinctive model to awaken and invigorate established churches. God's heart for broken humanity requires the planting of new churches coupled with the simultaneous revitalization of established churches.

My concern is more than purely academic. It is personal—a concern that has defined my passion and burden for the kingdom of God.

In the spring of 2010, I was talking with my great friend, missionary Alan Johnson. Alan was there when I gave my life to Christ at age twelve; he continues to be a pivotal person in shaping my life. We were discussing the recent growth of New Life Church, the congregation I pastor, and what God has done in the last ten years.

“Something is happening at New Life that is bigger than a new building, cool services, and paint on the walls,” Alan observed. He asked me: “What transferable principles can you teach other pastors? You need to do the diligent work required to unearth significant principles easily transferable to fellow pastors.” Our conversation struck a chord in my life, yet I had no immediate answers. About the same time, Mel Ming told me, “You know intuitively how to lead your church, but that won’t help other pastors. You need to develop principles that will practically help pastors reinvigorate their churches.”

As a result of these discussions, I dedicated five years of my life in my doctoral studies to identifying and honing a few transferrable principles that could help embolden and encourage pastors of established churches. After analyzing New Life Church’s growth, working with and studying churches of all sizes and philosophies, and coaching many pastors, I have formulated one core transferable principle: *Recalibrate your church or it will stagnate and eventually die.* Congregations will slowly drift off mission if they don’t adopt a practice of recalibrating culturally every three years and recalibrating specific programs and ministries annually. The lack of implementing this single principle explains why 80 percent of churches in North America are sluggish. These churches haven’t restarted, rebooted, or launched anything new for years, perhaps decades!

Recalibrate: reboot, restart, realign, reset. This needs to happen whether a congregation is

- Missional or attractional
- Large or small
- Urban, suburban, or rural
- Pentecostal or non-Pentecostal
- Offering loud, contemporary worship or softer, liturgical worship.

The need for recalibration should not surprise any pastor or leader. *Everything* in this world needs to be periodically recalibrated:

- One’s body shuts down every night and wakes up every morning.
- When a computer gets sluggish, the experts tell us to reboot it—shut it down and restart it.
- When the WiFi stops working, a person calls the Internet provider, who says, “Reset your modem.”

Recalibration begins with a distinctive question taken from Andrew S. Grove, Andy Stanley, and corporate re-engineering literature: “If we all got kicked off the staff and the board, and an outside group (a group of leaders who were fearlessly committed to the mission of this church) took our place, what changes would they introduce?”⁶ Stanley follows up this question by asking, “Why shouldn’t you and I walk out the door, come back, and do it ourselves?”⁷ Recalibrating requires pastors metaphorically to walk out the door, come back, and start over. Michael Hammer and James Champy provide a parallel definition concerning business reengineering:

When someone asks us for a quick definition of business reengineering, we say that it means starting over. It doesn’t mean tinkering with what already exists

or making incremental changes that leave basic structures intact. It isn't about making patchwork fixes—jury-rigging existing systems so that they work better. It means asking this question: “If I were re-creating this company today, given what I know and given current technology, what would it look like? Reengineering a company means tossing aside old systems and starting over. It involves going back to the beginning and inventing a better way of doing work.”⁸

Pastors of established churches need to reengineer them, not simply offer some quick fixes as patchwork that he or she hears at a conference or church growth seminar. Pastors often experience natural momentum during different seasons of their tenure. Momentum may occur during their first year of leadership: a move into a new facility, the hiring of a new staff, or a time of unexpected tragedy (a moral failure or a church crisis). Recalibration requires pastors to harness deliberate momentum aside from honeymoon periods, new facilities, staff hires, or tragedies. Rainer's research indicates that a pastor experiences momentum during the honeymoon period, and during the sixth through tenth years (“fruit and harvest”). His research suggests that during the eleventh year of a pastor's tenure, a pastor has two choices:

During this relatively rare tenure beyond ten years, the pastor will go down one of two paths. One path is to be reinvigorated as a leader and ready to tackle new challenges and cast new visions. Or the pastor will be resistant to change, and then become complacent.⁹

Many pastors who have been in their churches for any length of time face two options: (1) plummet into complacency, or (2) recalibrate their vision and

congregations. One may naively believe longevity builds a healthy and dynamic kingdom-minded church, but research indicates otherwise. Many pastors have simply repeated one year of experience ten times, instead of gaining ten years of experience.

It is imperative that a pastor answer clearly this question: “What is God birthing in my heart as a vision for the church?” Having answered, a pastor must develop a well-defined and time-bound Recalibrate Initiative—setting a specific date on the calendar for God to reignite the vision for the church. This process requires honest diagnosis, gut-level brutal questions, and input from trusted relationships but, ultimately, a clear and compelling vision that God stirs in the heart of the pastor. Until a pastor states, “this is the date—this is the moment God is going to do something new at our church,” he or she is only day dreaming—not taking action. Often pastors make a grave mistake when they imitate another ministry or church. Larry Osborne declares that each vision has to be personal:

A compelling vision comes from within. When leaders develop their vision by looking out the window to see what everyone else is doing, they don't end up with a vision. They end up with a poor imitation of someone else's vision.¹⁰

Darrin Patrick and Mark DeVine communicate the clarity of a divine vision:

By vision I mean a picture of what it might look like for a particular band of believers to live and serve as the people of God here and now. Not a vision conjured out of the musings of the pastor's head but one received from God.¹¹

During the Recalibrate Initiative, the pastor is leading the influencers and congregations through what he or she deeply believes is from God.

That divine vision is the catalytic tipping point for a congregation trapped by years of mundane ministry and status quo. The impetus of recalibration begins when the pastor has a clear, unequivocal picture of the future, and then communicates it to the congregation in such a way that people wholeheartedly follow it. Stanley says clearly, “The catalyst for introducing and facilitating change in the local church is a God-honoring, mouthwatering, unambiguously clear vision.”¹² Vision creates a chain reaction within a congregation. Once people see the future, they have an urgency to move forward. Craig Groeschel says an intrinsic link exists between clear vision and momentum:

Ministries that have it always have a clear vision. The people know the vision, understand the vision, believe in the vision, and live the vision. The vision guides them, motivates them, and energizes them.¹³

When a pastor paints a clear and compelling word picture of the preferred future, the people in the church will make enormous sacrifices and take far-reaching actions to accomplish this vision.

When one recalibrates something, the goal is to return it to its original efficiency. Pastors need to study the story and historical roots of their church. They will make a fatal mistake if they belittle or minimize the history of their church or the spiritual giants of its past. Patrick and Devine view the history of an established church as a vital component for effecting change. They assert

that when recalibrating a church, a pastor needs

to recognize that history and tradition can be allies in forging a path toward revitalization. Many times these churches have a valuable gospel DNA; a theological tradition, lost, that needs to be recovered; and a history of God’s faithfulness that needs to be retold.¹⁴

Established churches were often pioneered with a well-defined mission and vision, their histories reflecting past sacrifices and Kingdom passions. James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner recognize that this may seem counter-intuitive, but understanding the past can help leaders with the future:

Understanding the past can help you identify themes, patterns, and beliefs that both underscore why you care about certain matters now and explain why making them better into the future is such a high priority.¹⁵

It is indispensable during the diagnosis process for a pastor to know the church’s history and story he or she leads.

There are three phases of recalibrating a congregation:

Phase 1: Rethink Everything: Challenge the Status Quo

Recalibrating requires confronting brutal realities and then embracing a process of straightforward assessment—regardless of any pain it may create. Joseph Grenny, Kerry Patterson, David Maxfield, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler provide strong language for influential leaders: “Diagnose before you prescribe. Anything else is malpractice. Most leaders fail to take this essential step and simply throw together an

influence strategy they believe should work under any circumstances.”¹⁶ Rainer, reflecting on his autopsy of declining churches, concludes that congregations could have circumvented this slow death if they had faced reality: “In most of the cases, indeed all of them I studied, the issue was slow erosion. There would be no autopsy to perform if they had faced reality and, in God’s power, reversed course.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, too many pastors circumvent their brutal realities, spiritualizing their church’s results. Patrick and DeVine scrutinize established churches that grow spiritually defensive:

When churches settle into extended periods of decline, they sometimes adopt a defensive rhetoric that touts spiritual growth or spiritual health over numerical growth. Such false dichotomy often masks a tragic loss of vision, a lapse into spiritual sloth, and even defeat.¹⁸

If a pastor does not create a culture of candid assessment and diagnosis, the established church will accept the status quo as the congregation’s normative culture.

Phase 2: Realign the Culture: Embed Change in the Church’s Cultural Fabric

Realigning the culture is the most difficult phase of recalibrating a church. Many pastors make the mistake of writing out their mission statement and core values, then adding a “cool” service, hoping the church will magically grow. It won’t! Without cultural realignment, revitalization cannot occur; transformational change will not infiltrate the congregation’s DNA.

Explaining why most revitalizations do not work, Alan Hirsch states: “The reason for this is actually quite simple, though it is often overlooked: unless the paradigm at the heart of the culture is changed, there can be

no lasting change.”¹⁹ John Kotter explains that change will never stick until it permeates the bloodstream of the organization:

In the final analysis, change sticks only when it becomes “the way we do things around here,” when it seeps into the very bloodstream of the work unit or corporate body. Until new behaviors are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are always subject to degradation as soon as the pressures associated with a change effort are removed.²⁰

During the Recalibrate Initiative, the pastor must infuse kingdom cultural DNA into every stratum of the established church.

When a culture shift occurs at a church, people will feel it deeply and personally. In a fictional story, Gordon McDonald creates the narrative of a new pastor who brought changes to his congregation. At first, the congregation wanted and welcomed these changes; however, the congregation anticipated program changes, not a cultural transformation. McDonald explains the expectations of the people: “merely a fresh voice in the pulpit and a program or two imported from more successful churches.”²¹ The pastor underestimated the cultural shift:

What he and his fellow church members had not anticipated was a total shift in the church’s culture, a reinvention (a favorite word of mine) of ways to love God and serve people. What they did not see coming was a reshuffling of the church’s priorities, so that lost and broken people rather than found and supposedly fixed people became the primary target audience.²²

After the cultural shift, the people in the congregation felt their church had been stolen, hijacked. The people were comfortable with new programs . . . not with a holistic cultural shift!

Samuel Chand communicates that leaders need to focus on crafting a culture: “Top leaders need to spend at least as much time analyzing their culture as they do crafting their new vision, strategy, and marketing plans.”²³ Understanding culture helps a pastor provide pastoral—not impetuous—leadership. Peter Greer and Chris Horst describe how leaders create culture:

Thoughtful leaders intentionally craft the culture of their organizations and know it is too important to delegate. They create, reinforce, and celebrate the traditions and practices undergirding the culture. Ignoring the little things will mean drastic consequences in the long run, because a culture without purpose and intentionality will leave no defense against drift.²⁴

Pastors can change the church lobby to make it more inviting, or even add a contemporary service; however, if they do not “intentionally craft the culture,” they will not achieve long-term revitalization. Shawn Parr depicts the relationship of long-term success and culture: “Long-term success is dependent on a culture that is nurtured and alive. Culture is the environment in which your strategy and your brand thrives or dies a slow death.”²⁵ Any plan to renew the vision of a congregation must include cultural realignment.

Phase 3: Relaunch Your Church: Stop Tinkering with Change—Do It

At some point, pastors have to stop talking about recalibrating their congregations; they

must lead the Recalibrate Initiative with courage and confidence—set a precise date and do it! Pastors must face their fears and ask God for the courage and confidence to lead into the future. Patrick and DeVine define the resolve necessary:

At some point, leaders in a declining or plateauing church have to look at themselves in the mirror and say, “Enough is enough.” Leaders need clarity about what the Scripture says the church ought to be, and courage to stand against those who refuse to let the Scripture inform their view of the church.²⁶

Kouzes and Posner state that leaders must be definitive: “‘Enough is enough. I’m not going to take it anymore.’ And you have to be resolute about it. No fence sitting. No hemming and hawing. No equivocating. This is the moment; this is the time when you have to act.”²⁷ Established churches need a pastor who will take a courageous leadership stance—someone willing to lead their congregation confidently and wisely in revitalization.

All too often, pastors tinker with things without ever leading the congregation into change, fearful of losing people or credibility. Grenny, Patterson, Maxfield, McMillan, and Switzler share two fatal outcomes from tinkering:

Whatever the rationale for tinkering, the cost of putting forth a tepid effort can be extraordinary. In addition to the fact that addressing profound problems with trivial solutions doesn’t create the changes you desire, you do create a reputation for not being able to create change.²⁸

Simply tinkering will never address the deep-seated cultural changes needed within

an established church, nor will it solidify the pastors' credibility. Osborne challenges pastors and innovators: "Serial innovators don't fall into the tinkering trap. They don't try to fix everything that's broken or improve things that aren't running perfectly. Instead, they focus on fixing the things that will make the biggest difference."²⁹ Pastors need to stop tinkering with matters that do not provide momentum.

Conclusion

Ultimately, recalibration is about the church getting back to its original design, its original purpose. It asks: "What is God saying to His church? What is the purpose of the church? What kind of passion and sacrifice did this church begin with that we

need to recalibrate into its culture and soul today?" The future of the AG (and the Evangelical church as a whole) is at stake. While this Fellowship needs church planters, it desperately needs innovative leaders with the courage to unplug and restart established churches. The Assemblies of God (and other denominations) cannot give up on the established church.

I pray God would stir within you a desire to step up and dream for an established church in our Fellowship, perhaps having enough courage to recalibrate one. As you approach this divine responsibility, do so with humility and courage. Honor the faithful saints before you. Dream about established churches once again having full kingdom impact on their community and their world!

¹ George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2012), Kindle location 500.

² Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2014), Kindle location 159, 692-696.

³ "Assemblies of God ACMR data 1980-2011," Springfield, MO: Healthy Church Network, n.d. Approved for communication by the General Council Executive Leadership Team. See also, Assemblies of God, "Assemblies of God ACMR and Related U.S. Statistics, 2004-2014," AG.org, accessed August 19, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1KwxfPu>.

⁴ Dave Ferguson and Jon Ferguson, *Exponential: How to Accomplish the Jesus Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 148-152, Kindle.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Andy Stanley, *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), Kindle location 303. Andy Stanley borrowed and contextualized this question from Andy Grove. His version is, "If we got kicked out and the board brought in a new CEO, what do you think he would he do?" See Andrew S. Grove, *Only the Paranoid Survive* (New York, NY: Crown Business, 1999), 89.

⁷ Stanley, 303.

⁸ Michael Hammer and James Champy, *Reengineering the Corporation: Manifesto for Business Revolution* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001), Kindle location 34.

⁹ Rainer, Kindle location 489-491.

¹⁰ Larry Osborne, *Innovation's Dirty Little Secret*, Leadership Network Innovation Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), Kindle location 2013-2015.

¹¹ Darrin Patrick and Mark DeVine, *Replant: How a Dying Church Can Grow Again* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2014), Kindle location 345-351.

¹² Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 270.

¹³ Craig Groeschel, *It: How Churches and Leaders Can Get It and Keep It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), Kindle location 39.

¹⁴ Patrick and DeVine, Kindle location 55-57.

¹⁵ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, 5th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 106.

¹⁶ Joseph Grenny, Kerry Patterson, David Maxfield, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler, *Influencer: The New Science of Leading Change*, 2nd ed. (Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill Education, 2013), Kindle location 295.

¹⁷ Rainer, Kindle location 159.

¹⁸ Patrick and DeVine, Kindle location 183-186.

¹⁹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 53.

²⁰ John P. Kotter, *Leading Change, With a New Preface by the Author* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), Kindle location 14.

²¹ Gordon MacDonald, *Who Stole My Church?: What to Do When the Church You Love Tries to Enter the 21st Century* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), Kindle location 84.

²² Ibid.

²³ Samuel R. Chand, *Cracking Your Church's Culture Code: Seven Keys to Unleashing Vision and Inspiration* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series, 2010), Kindle locations 348-349.

²⁴ Peter Greer and Chris Horst, *Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities, and Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2014), Kindle location 156.

²⁵ Shawn Parr, "Culture Eats Strategy for Lunch," Fast Company, accessed May 19, 2014, <http://www.fastcompany.com/1810674/culture-eats-strategy-lunch>.

²⁶ Patrick and DeVine, Kindle location 413-415.

²⁷ Kouzes and Posner, *Finding the Courage to Lead* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013), Kindle location 269-271.

²⁸ Grenny, Patterson, Maxfield, McMillan, and Switzler, 295.

²⁹ Osborne, Kindle location 507-509.