

Help! Our Community is Changing!

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*(*names have been changed)*

With tears in my eyes, I realized God had accomplished what He had set out to do among us. Our church now looked like our urban community, over 90% Hispanic. We had intentionally followed what now was a very clear road map. It had not been easy, nor without opposition. Yet before me that Sunday was a worship center that mirrored our city. The process of change from a small, dying, predominantly white church to the vibrant and growing, Hispanic-lead fellowship was a work of God's grace.

It ain't pretty, just true!

As the quality of American cities is declining and churches are disappearing, pastors and denominational leaders across our nation are asking hard and honest questions. Most of these deal with the issue of change.

Change. The word evokes many emotions: fear, trepidation, excitement, wonder and bewilderment. Community change. The phrase is a reality all too common for us. It conjures up such obstacles as aging, mobility, ethnicity, and technology. Church change. To many this phrase may seem an oxymoron. Every week dozens of congregations in America choose to dissolve compared to the few who are willing to redefine their role in a changing world.

As a whole, the Christian community for the past several decades has been more interested in the American Dream than the Great Commission. When the city goes through urbanization, the church often folds up shop and moves to the suburbs. With a pastorate of eleven years at the Pico Rivera Bible Church (CA), I was able to see the stages of urbanization have its effect upon the local church. How does this happen?

The natural process of decline

Stage One: Inception / Formation. As our community began in the 1920's, so did the optimism. In 1926, several folks came together to start a work under the American Sunday School Union. People were saved and growth was the norm. As optimism reigned, people said, "Let's get over there!" There is the excitement of "new birth" all around.

Stage Two: Expansion. As the Bible study / Sunday School grew, people began to say in their enthusiasm, "Let's start a church!" Eventually our church sprouted up among the orange orchards on the far eastern side of Los Angeles County. With the birth of this new church, a more permanent platform for evangelism and discipleship in the community took root. Each step of growth brought the infant church into its young adulthood.

Stage Three: Stagnation. With the building of the church came a great expenditure of energy, time and financial resources. People got tired. However, the optimism was still

there and the call of the faithful was “Let’s grow our church!” As the community grew, so grew the church, often through transfer growth.

Communities however grow to a certain point and then begin to stagnate. So did the community. Affluence took over. The automobile made it easier to drive further to work and people moved again, out of the community. With this stagnation of the community, the church changed its focus from evangelism to edification. “Our needs” replaced the needs of others. “Middle age” symptoms had set into the church as a whole.

As John Ortberg says, “It is possible for a church to go 20, 30 years or more without producing fruit. People are not challenged, volunteers not trained, resources not well-stewarded – and no one complains (Leadership, Spring 2000. 29).” This is stagnation at its clearest.

Stage Four: Invasion. The inevitable demographic change then occurs as “white-flight” took its toll. “They” arrived. Whether that is the Hispanics, as we experienced, or the Chinese, Koreans, Iranians, etc., “they” arrive in increasing numbers. Soon the church was supported by “long-haul” Christians who lived in the suburbs and commuted to church on Sunday. Increasingly, the local church looked less and less like its community. At this point, a clear message was proclaimed quietly: “Let’s close our church to ‘them’”. The church became more like a Country Club and less like a Rescue Station. Like parents whose grown adults return to cramp their new found freedoms, these immigrants caused prejudice to rear its ugly head.

Stage Five: Evacuation. “Let’s flee out church!” became the cry. People admitted their fears of the “way the neighborhood is going.” We heard people say, “This used to be such a nice community.” Our church felt the deepest wounds of evacuation in the 1970s and 1980s. Even the long-haulers began to drift away and the church went through a period of decline. The heart for evangelism had been lost and the masses all about the church facility were almost ignored. As the old-timers went into retirement, having done their bit for God, the church suffered deeply. Our church became a church of extremes with several very young families and several very old families. Only those who were unable or unwilling to get out of town remained behind.

Stage Six: Deterioration. A lack of people means a lack of finances and people to work on the facilities. The services suffered from a limited pool of talent and ministries were curtailed or terminated. I can remember the church organ sat on the platform for five years – never being played in all that time for lack of someone to play it – before we decided to remove it. Selfishness had set in and those now long gone had forgotten about “their” church. Now in the midst of survival hope was lost. The church was now in its “old age.”

Stage Seven: Degradation and Death. In most churches, defeat comes when the few who have attempted to “hold out” now admit the cause is lost. With a heavy heart the dissolution clause is enacted and the church facilities are sold. With the sale comes the loss of the new cultural community for Christ.

Somewhere between the birth and the death of the local church selfishness took center stage, replacing self-sacrifice. From a clear goal of reaching that community with the Gospel the church has wandered to an aimlessness that brought about its death.

God has a better plan!

In September of 1988, God sent me as pastor. The church was in stage six, and as I walked towards my car the evening I accepted the call, the head elder told me, "Well, I hope you can make this place go. You're our last hope." Driving home I had no idea of what to do or what had happened to this church. What was most intriguing to me was the demographics of our community. When the church was formed, only a few thousand people lived there, and yet a vibrant church flourished! When I arrived the community had over 56,000 people and was struggling to survive.

That night began my long road trip towards understanding the dying, urban church. Here's what I learned in that eleven year "on the job" training God afforded me.

This is work, the ministry!

Stage One: Focused on Mission. As I examined the stories of the few who were still at the church at the time of its birth, they told of the excitement of winning people to Christ. In their stories came comments like this: "We all got into a car and brought our friends with us to hear the evangelist at church. Two of my friends received Christ that night." In the birth of the church there was a clear focus on the Gospel mission. Seeing people brought to Christ provided the life and energy to continue the hard work of the ministry.

Stage Two: Focused on Discipleship. As the church expanded, it did so because it taught its people to reach out and grow in faith at the same time. It hit me while sitting at a mortuary one day with a family: Churches grow because they are filled with babies! There is an incredible excitement with new life that is missing when one is constantly losing people. Just as sorrow and hopelessness often result from the death of a loved one, so too joy and enthusiasm are generated at the birth of a new child. Expansion occurred at our church because of the constant excitement of new life.

Stage Three: Focused on Leadership. As each child grows, their parents teach and train them in the skills needed at that stage of life. So too, the growing church, often out of necessity, trains more and more new converts to take over ministry. By giving away the ministry, ownership developed at our church. One old-timer Charlie, then an elder, told me, "They gave me a three-hour training and put me in charge of a group of 5th grade boys. I was terrified at first. As the weeks passed I grew more confident. Then I started to love those boys. Pretty soon all of them had received Christ, been baptized and brought a friend to Sunday School." It is here that the church takes on depth. It is also at this point that the focus must once again, intentionally be refocused on mission.

Stage Four: Refocuses on Mission. Here is where the invasion into the community occurs. It is at this time that those who make up the church must make a Kingdom choice. Will they stay and “do it all over again?” Attempts were made in the 1970s and 1980s to reach out to the incoming Hispanics. Some were faulty in philosophy. Others were still jaded with prejudice. It wasn’t until we were deep into stage six that we effectively did the things necessary at this stage.

We began with a Spanish-speaking service. We sought out friends who were bi-lingual. We established relationships with children who were more fluent in English than their parents, inviting them to Sunday School and our youth programs. We made them a part of our church, of our family. As we intentionally sought to reach out to the second cultural generation of our church, we would be successful. Growth came slowly at first. With every new convert came new excitement and energy. With the new faces came new music styles and new ideas. Each energized the church in new ways.

Stage Five: Refocuses on Discipleship. Here we began a one-on-one discipleship program after mass teaching some 30 people in a program. Appointing a couple to head up this program made the pastor’s job easier, and shared ownership in the ministry. The church began to regain strength, slowly reversing the effects of stage six. Roofs were repaired. Buildings were repainted. New music was purchased. New life began to rise from the decay. As the team of disciplined men and women grew the possibilities also grew. After one particularly successful multi-church rally, the team members sat together in the back of the sanctuary, almost unwilling to go home. Drawing out their hearts I asked, “So what are you thinking?” Maria said, “We did it!” “And ...?” I asked her. “And ... it feels so good!” she said. As the old-timers “parent” the new cultural generation, the church energy, financial and ownership levels rise. Ministry to others becomes the norm again as people are praying for their unsaved friends, relatives and co-workers. New babes in Christ bring more enthusiasm.

Stage Six: Refocuses on Leadership. In order to assure the stability of the church when the “old-timers” of the first cultural generation are gone, (of which now – some 18 years later – almost all at the church are), these new disciples must be trained and handed the reigns of leadership. It is at this point that the graciousness of our first generation came forth. “We aren’t going to be here forever,” Raul told me one day as he nominated a young man for a position. “It’s time they learned like we did – by doing it!” In this transformation of ministry, hearts are shared. There is no longer the destructive language of “them” and “us.” Only “we” exists. Color and nationality no longer mean anything. All are one in Christ, and all are one family in him.

Stage Seven: Re-Refocuses on Mission. And so the community will no doubt change again. If we have done our job right, the second cultural generation will make the hard choice and choose to birth a third cultural generation by focusing again on the Gospel mission. Soon, many people will have received Christ from several cultures and in several generations.

A vibrant, discipling church!

In order for this process to repeatedly occur, leadership must help the people maintain a focused mindset on three gospel elements: mission, discipleship, and leadership development. When the local church acts on these three priorities, seeing those who are all around them as their responsibility, its future is bright with hope!