

Re:VISION

THE KEY
TO TRANSFORMING
YOUR CHURCH

AUBREY MALPHURS
AND GORDON E. PENFOLD



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We dedicate this book to those pastors and their families who commit themselves, often at tremendous personal cost, to transforming established churches from the throes of death to new life and vitality. You have hung in there in spite of people's resistance to change and innovation. Sometimes the saints can make church work difficult. Regardless, out of a deep love for Jesus Christ and his body, you struggle against all odds to direct the churches you serve back to the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. We thank God for your dedication and sacrifice not only to the church, but to those who are not yet Christ-followers. May your number grow exponentially and may the Lord use you to create such a stirring that North America will never again be the same. You are our heroes. We need more leaders like you.

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Introduction

During the 1970s and '80s, churches and denominations were on the cusp of decline but did not see it coming. Consequently they weren't interested in church envisioning (church planting) and church re-envisioning (church revitalization).

Early in the twenty-first century, however, 70–80 percent of churches and denominations have plateaued or are in serious decline. If 70–80 percent of our churches are plateaued or declining, what might this signal about the state of those who are pastoring these churches? The answer is that many are disillusioned, are questioning their “call to pastoral ministry,” are questioning whether they have a leadership gift, and wonder if they should even be in the ministry. Others have jumped every two to three years from church to church, looking for the perfect place where they can make a difference, and in the process they, not necessarily the church, may be the problem. Somewhere along the way the vision has been lost.

As a result, many denominations, networks, conferences, and churches have become most interested in church planting or church envisioning, knowing it is key to their very survival. However, in their pursuit of visionary church planters who can plant spiritually healthy churches, they've overlooked the need for and importance of the re-envisioning or the revitalization of our established churches. Re-envisioning or revitalization are so essential to our future because most successful church plants are nurtured by a strong, vital, supporting established church. The demise of established churches means there are fewer strong churches to nurture church plants, making planted churches less viable. We must place as much emphasis on re-envisioning our churches as we do planting new ones if we are to have any hope for the future of the church in America.

Most important, the key to re-envisioning churches that are able to plant healthy, robust churches is visionary leadership, especially on the part of the senior pastor. The problem is that church re-envisioning is a fairly new solution and most know very little about it. We believe that everything rises or falls on visionary leadership. Thus the focus of this work is on *who* more than *how*, though it will include a chapter on how.

The major reason so many churches are plateaued or in decline is that they've either lost their vision or adopted the wrong vision. When churches experience lots of turnover in their pastors and personnel, vision is one of the first things to be lost. And in America today the tenure of pastors is often short. Ron Sellers, president of Ellison Research in Phoenix, Arizona, writes:

The average SBC minister has been a senior pastor at 3.6 churches in his career, and 37 percent of all SBC pastors have led four or more churches. Only Methodists exceed this—but Methodists usually are assigned positions by their denomination, and the average assignment lasts only about four years before the pastor is moved to another church by the denomination.¹

Todd Breiner writes, “The average tenure for a youth pastor is 1 year to 18 months.”² Finally, Thom Rainer writes, “In our national surveys of pastors, we found the average pastoral tenure to be 3.6 years. But in different studies of effective leaders, those pastors had an average tenure ranging from 11.2 to 21.6 years.”³ Then they and their churches need to be re-envisioned, and it takes visionary leaders to re-envision Christ's church. Note that in this book, we will use such terms as *re-envision*, *re:vision*, *revitalize*, and *turnaround* as synonyms and not separate concepts.

This book is based on our exploration of envisioning and non-envisioning pastors and their churches. Our work is observation based. We're not sitting in some ivory tower guessing at the characteristics of re-envisioning pastors or basing our work on hearsay or on one or two unique examples. We've conducted quantitative research (using the Pastoral Leadership Survey), which we've given to more than one hundred pastors. We've followed this up with qualitative research, interviewing each pastor one-on-one.

I (Aubrey) must confess that initially I was concerned about using a research approach. Would it turn some pastors off? Would it confuse others who aren't familiar with the terminology? We realize that the average leader isn't as interested in the research itself and how it was done but in the results. Therefore we've tried to be careful not to overwhelm our readers with research terminology, statistical studies, and other concepts and have put some of our findings in the appendixes and endnotes.

Using a research approach has turned out to be a delightful process of exploration resulting in exciting discoveries. The differences in God's leaders and the ways he has wired them to lead his church are most exciting and can really make a difference. We've discovered much about how he's wired us for ministry as well.

We have several suggestions for how you can get the most out of this book.

- If you're a senior pastor or the point person of a parachurch ministry, you should work through the material on your own as it asks some hard questions that you might not be ready to answer in a group.
- Before working your way through this material with your key leaders, such as the staff and the board, consider the vulnerability of these people and their willingness to speak out honestly and lovingly on the material. Then it would be your call as to whether you work through the material together.
- If you are attempting to lead a church through revitalization, you should work through the material with your leaders after you've read through it at least once. Again, be prepared for resistance on the part of some of your people.
- If you're a leader in a denomination, midlevel judicatory (for the purposes of this book defined as a subgroup of churches in a denomination or association of churches, often called districts, associations, or presbyteries), network, or conference, this material can be extremely important to you, as outlined in chapter 14. Early in the twenty-first century, such organizations, like their churches, are struggling for viability. Younger pastors in particular are asking why they should be loyal to or a part of these groups. However, we will proclaim that for such ministries this material can mean a new day! You may use it to counsel pastors under your leadership or help churches to find the right person for their ministries.
- If you're a seminary professor, you might find it most instructive to assign the re-envisioning process presented in this book as a vocational project for your students. It will help them understand themselves better and determine if they're really wired to lead a plateaued or declining church or possibly some other ministry. And this could save them from much unnecessary pain and disappointment in the future.

All of the chapters include questions at the end for personal reflection, discussion, and application for you and/or your team. You would be wise to work your way through them.

Preparation for Discovery

Before we launch into the “how to” or process portion of this book found in chapters 6–8, we must first prepare ourselves for that process; otherwise we will likely fail in our attempts to re-envision Christ’s church. We see this in the world of sports. Teams do not launch their season without some type of preparation for it. Baseball has what they refer to as spring training. Football sponsors summer minicamps. Months before the season begins, the players report to camp where they prepare for their season by learning the plays, conditioning their bodies, and addressing any injuries. Those who lead churches would be wise to learn this lesson from the sporting world. Preparation precedes process and practice. So we begin with preparation in chapters 1–5.

The State of Pastoral Leadership in America

It was the typical “First Church,” founded within a few weeks of the establishment of a railroad town on the old Santa Fe Trail. This was truly a Wild West town. A few concerned parents gathered to launch what was considered to be the first church west of Dodge City, Kansas. The original church building doubled as the community’s only school and community center. In 1874 the first bell to be rung in Southeastern Colorado pealed from the steeple of the brand-new building. Joy filled the hearts of those committed to serving the Lord Jesus Christ in this newly developing frontier.

The church grew, matured, and declined. In 1979 the graying congregation knew that times were desperate. Their pastor of thirteen years was on cruise control. Effective in his first three years of ministry, their shepherd was gliding toward retirement, and the church followed suit. He was comfortable and secure, but the church was in steep decline, moving precipitously toward death. Eventually the pastor was released.

In 1980 the church called as their next pastor a recent graduate from Fuller Seminary, a young man deeply schooled in the principles of church growth but with little experience in church life. He came to the church full of ideals, ideas, and passion. Slowly the church began to alter its course. However, in his youthful exuberance the pastor alienated about half of the congregation while endearing himself to the other half. This young man bore the marks

of a turnaround pastor but his rough edges had rubbed too many influential people the wrong way. When he left after two and a half years, this church that was already on the downside of its life cycle was one step closer to its own funeral.

In 1983 the church called another pastor. This one was a little older with a few years' experience. While helping to unload the U-Haul at the parsonage, the church treasurer casually said to the new pastor, "I suppose you know this church is ready to split right down the middle." The new pastor was stunned. No one from the pulpit committee or the church had bothered to mention that rather important fact!

The good news was that the young Fuller graduate had primed the church for change. This congregation, whose average age easily exceeded 65, was ready to do whatever was necessary to continue a long tradition of effective ministry. The church turned around and 14 years later had grown from 86 to 110 in spite of 64 funerals for church members. The average age of the church membership dropped to about 35. All of this occurred in the midst of a shrinking population base.

Down the street one block to the north stands another church facility, the largest in the county. The building boasts a seating capacity of 440 in a community that at one time had a population of 5,000. This church could and did accommodate almost 8 percent of the city's population. It had a storied history. In the 1930s when the congregation hosted Billy Sunday for a two-week crusade, the church was packed with standing-room-only crowds. Several hundred people came to Christ in that two-week period. Every evangelical church in the community was impacted.

In the late 1980s this church also called a young man, a recent seminary graduate. He was energetic and had lots of ministry ideas. Outwardly he was very much like the current pastor of Old First Church. However, his ministry did not go well. The church closed its doors in the mid-1990s. The pastor's idealism and dreams for ministry were dashed on the rocks of discouragement and disillusionment. He left the ministry.

Now the building's only inhabitants are pigeons and bats. The structure with its massive stained-glass domed cupola sits as a dark, empty hulk, a bleak reminder of the death of a vision.

Many factors contributed to the death of one church and the renewal of the other. Both had dreams of effective, fruitful ministry. Both were looking for the "right" pastor. Both were seeking renewal. Certainly the makeup of the congregations contributed to the demise of one church and the renewal of the other. However, pastoral leadership was a major factor, perhaps the key factor, in the differing outcomes.

The authors have observed over the years that there are two essential elements for church renewal. The primary need is the right pastor. The second factor is a willing congregation. When these two dynamics come together, vibrant, renewed ministry is the outcome.

So how are we doing? What is the state of the American church and the state of pastoral leadership in the church?

The State of the American Church

In this chapter we will explore the state of the American church and the state of pastoral leadership in the American church. These two subjects are inextricably linked.

Majority of Churches Plateaued or in Decline

In the mid-1960s church leaders began to notice a disturbing trend, something hitherto unnoticed in America: many major denominations had ceased growing. In 1988 Win Arn, church growth pioneer, shocked the American church world with the following statement. “Today, of the approximately 350,000 churches in America, four out of five are either plateaued or declining. . . . Many churches begin a plateau or slow decline about their fifteenth to eighteenth year. 80–85 [percent] are on the down-side of this cycle.”¹ After the shock wore off, Christian leaders began to examine more closely the state of the church. Arn’s statement proved to be disturbingly accurate!

Troubling signs do appear at every juncture. Church researcher David T. Olson, whose database includes information from 200,000 churches, declares, “In summary, the future looks grim for the American church. The conditions that produce growth are simply not present. If present trends continue, the church will fall farther behind population growth.”² He explains that if the church continues on its present course, the percentage of the population attending a Christian church each weekend will decline from 20.4 percent in 1990 to 14.7 percent in 2020.³

Church researcher Thom Rainer describes the state of the church in North America based on his years of consulting with many different churches and denominations, saying, “Eight out of ten of the approximately 400,000 churches

THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN CHURCH	
Majority of Churches Plateaued or in Decline	
Percentage of Church Attenders Declining	
Young People Leaving Church	
Growth of Cults and Non-Christian Groups	
Church-Planting Needs versus Church-Planting Ability	

in the United States are declining or have plateaued.”⁴ He includes the following in a footnote: “Of the churches for which we have data, 84 percent are declining or experiencing a growth rate below the population growth rate for their communities. The latter is defined as a plateaued church.”⁵

The church of Jesus Christ in North America is in a free fall with no bottom in sight. Consider the comments of the leaders of two large judicatories in the Rocky Mountain Region that I (Gordon) received while collecting information for Discovery 1 (research for my doctor of ministry thesis project at Talbot Seminary). One stated, “I am reluctant to direct you to pastors who have led churches into decline, not wanting to subject them to further humiliation.” This district superintendent supplied the name of only one turnaround pastor. Another judicatory leader wrote, “We do not have any pastors in our district who meet your requirements for turnaround.” This means that this judicatory had no churches growing at what we determined for our study was a minimum rate of 2.5 percent per year!

While speaking at the Great Commission Research Network in 2011, Gary McIntosh declared, “I have been working with a judicatory in the Midwest. In their district 97 percent of the churches are in decline. Not plateaued, but in decline.”⁶

Here’s another example of the challenges we face. I (Gordon) completed a study of a midlevel judicatory in 2008. Between 2001 and 2008 the judicatory lost 15 percent of its affiliate churches. This same group lost 23 percent of its average worship attendance in the remaining churches between 1997 and 2007.

These examples from four different judicatories reflect the realities that denominations, districts, and churches face in present-day America. The need for revitalization is great. Struggling churches, disillusioned pastors, and disenchanted believers litter the church landscape. Many of the survivors have no vision for the future! They are simply hanging on by their fingernails hoping for a better day.

Recently church renewal specialist Matthew Bohling of the Presbyterian Church in America made this statement to me: “We can no longer simply ignore struggling churches. We must give attention to these churches before they die or we all lose!” With proper care, plateaued and declining churches can become healthy. Healthy churches are normally the incubators of church plants. Vibrant, healthy churches produce vibrant, healthy offspring.

By the way, we are not advocating that every church should be rescued. The stark reality is that some churches need to die. They have outlived any further usefulness. They need to die with dignity and invest their resources in healthy church plants and church renewal efforts.

Percentage of Church Attenders Declining

Once again, researcher David Olson paints a realistic portrait of the state of the American church. He shows that the percentage of the population attending church on any given weekend in America in 2007 was 17 percent. This figure includes Catholic, evangelical, mainline, and orthodox churches.⁷

The Census Bureau tells us that the population in the United States continues to climb. It went from 248,709,873 in 1990 to 308,745,538 in 2010, a 24 percent gain, which yields an average annual growth rate (AAGR) of 1.1 percent. At the same time Olson informs us that the number of worshipers remained virtually unchanged: 51.8 million in 1990 and 51.7 million in 2006.⁸ Large churches have grown larger, smaller churches have grown smaller, and many churches ceased to exist. The net effect is no measurable growth in church attendance. These figures scream, “Stagnant!” Had church attendance simply kept pace with population growth, the number of those attending would have grown at 1.1 percent per year for 16 years, resulting in church attendance of 61,708,000 people, an increase of nearly 10,000,000 people!

Young People Leaving Church

Many churches lose their young people between their teenage years and age thirty. David Kinnaman comments:

The ages of eighteen to twenty-nine are the black hole of church attendance; this age segment is “missing in action” from most congregations. . . . Overall there is a 43 percent drop-off between the teen and early adult years in terms of church engagement. These numbers represent about eight million twentysomethings who were active churchgoers as teenagers but who will no longer be particularly engaged in church by their thirtieth birthday.⁹

This is a huge problem considering that young people in this age group will soon need to take the mantle of leadership from their parents’ generation. Our discovery process clearly reflects this reality as only a small number of our pastors were under age forty.

Growth of Cults and Non-Christian Groups

In contrast to the stagnant condition of the church, cults and non-Christian groups continue to grow. In the United States, the Mormons have grown from 2,487,000 to 3,158,000 from 1990 to 2008.¹⁰ The Jehovah’s Witnesses

have increased from 1,381,000 to 1,914,000 in the same time frame.¹¹ Between 1990 and 2008 the number of adherents to Islam expanded from 527,000 to 1,349,000.¹² Those who follow Buddhism have enlarged their camp from 404,000 to 1,189,000 during the same period.¹³ The fastest growing religious group has been the Wiccans, who have increased dramatically from 8,000 in 1990 to 342,000 in 2008.¹⁴

The table below shows the growth rates for various cults and non-Christian groups and compares them to the growth rate in the church.

Total Growth, Percentage of Growth, and Average Annual Growth Rate (AAGR) for Cults and Non-Christian Groups Compared with the Church in the United States

Group	Total Growth	Years	Percentage of Growth	Average Annual Growth Rate (AAGR)
Mormons	2,487,000–3,158,000	1990–2008 (18 years)	27%	1.3%
Jehovah's Witnesses	1,381,000–1,914,000	1990–2008 (18 years)	39%	1.8%
Muslims	527,000–1,349,000	1990–2008 (18 years)	156%	5.4%
Buddhists	404,000–1,189,000	1990–2008 (18 years)	194%	6.2%
Wiccans	8,000–342,000	1990–2008 (18 years)	4,175%	23.2%
U.S. Population (U.S. Census Bureau)	248,709,873–308,745,538	1990–2010 (20 years)	24.1%	1.1%
U.S. Church Attendance	51,800,000–51,700,000	1990–2006 (16 years)	–0.2 %	–0.01%

Before looking at these statistics one might think that people in America simply aren't interested in spiritual things. Obviously this isn't the case. They are interested in spiritual matters, but they're not looking to the church for the answers as did earlier generations.

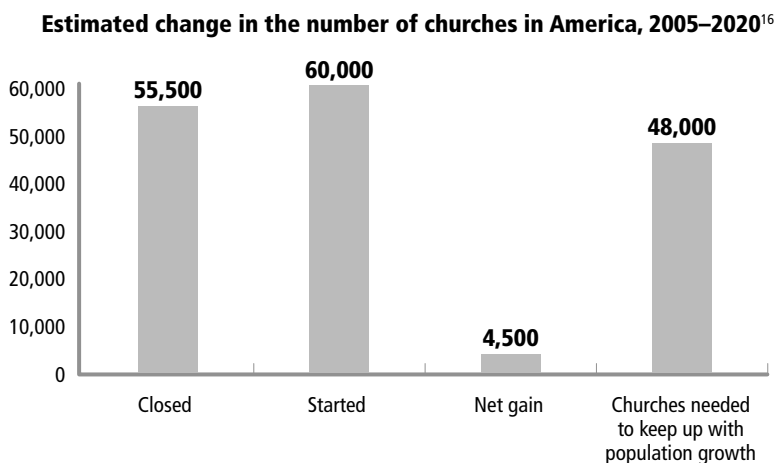
Church-Planting Needs versus Church-Planting Ability

Not only does the picture look grim for existing churches, but the overall outlook is not much better when one considers the impact of church plantings compared to that of church closings. We are simply not able to plant enough churches to replace those that close. Olson notes that, based on current trends,

church closures will nearly equal the number of church plants between 2005 and 2020. He asserts:

Approximately 55,000 churches [sic] will close between 2005 and 2020, while 60,000 new churches will open, producing a net gain of 4,500 churches. However, to keep pace with population growth, a net gain of 48,000 churches will be needed. In those 15 years the American church will fall short of this mark by almost 43,500 congregations.¹⁵

The table below gives a graphic view of this reality.



Church planting and church closure can be likened to a truck at the loading dock. Forklifts on one side of the truck load the freight—that’s church planting. On the other side of the truck there are forklifts that unload it—that’s the effect of church closures. The truck never gets loaded! Church planting alone will not solve the problem of the decline of the church in the United States.

Reflect on the following sobering reality. An aggressive evangelical church-planting denomination recently celebrated the successful planting of forty-five new churches out of fifty attempts (a 90 percent success rate), when one of the pastors reminded them that they were also closing one church every eleven days! The denomination closed thirty-three churches that same year. The result was a net gain of twelve churches, a positive gain for that denomination. However, most denominations do not enjoy a 90 percent success rate with church planting but they may experience the same rate of closure. We must let these figures sink into our thinking. Coming back to the truck metaphor, we unload the truck at nearly the same rate we load it.

The church in America faces great challenges. Most churches are plateaued or declining in worship attendance. The percentage of people attending church is shrinking, and young people eighteen to twenty-nine are abandoning the faith. The problem is not a lack of concern for spiritual things but a turning from the things of God to cults and non-Christian groups or simply dropping out of church altogether.

The State of Church Leadership

The state of the church reflects the state of church leadership in America. If 80–85 percent of churches are struggling, what does that say about those who are pastoring these churches? We believe there is a direct correlation between the state of the church and the state of pastoral leadership in those churches.

THE STATE OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP
A Key to Success or Failure
How Are Church Leaders Doing?
The Problem
The Challenge

A Key to Success or Failure

A number of years ago I (Gordon) heard this statement: “Everything rises and falls with leadership.” At first, I battled with the concept. Could it be true? I think it troubled me because it painted a bull’s-eye squarely on me as a pastor. Is there any justification for such a statement?

Leadership is a key to success or failure of a given enterprise. On the football field, the success or failure of the offense normally rides on the shoulders of the quarterback. In a school, good administration will draw the best out of the teachers, and good teachers will draw the best out of their students. A business leader such as Steve Jobs produces a work environment conducive to massive creativity that leads to exceptional success. In the local church, pastoral leadership is also a key, if not the key, to vibrant church life.

Unfortunately, pastoral leadership appears to be absent or seriously restricted in many churches. Perhaps the dearth of leadership in the church points to a deeper problem—poor pastoral preparation. A secondary cause may be the high expectations placed on pastors by the church membership. Pastors stay so busy chasing the church’s tail that they have no time to dream and lead. Pastors are considered the hired guns to do the work of the ministry—something far removed from Christ’s design (see Eph. 4:11–12).

Let’s see if this leadership maxim, Everything rises and falls with leadership, is discoverable in the Scripture. Indeed, we see this truth reflected in many

places: in Old Testament kings and leaders; statements from the prophets; Jesus's words to the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees; New Testament statements concerning pastoral leadership; and finally, Jesus's communication to the seven churches of the Revelation.

LEADERSHIP IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

When trouble reared its head in Israel, the Lord frequently held the leader accountable for his actions as well as the actions of the nation. This can be seen in Moses' striking the rock (Num. 20:7–13), King Saul's disobedience concerning the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15), Ahaz and Judah's rebellion against the Lord's rule (Isaiah 7), and Elijah and his classic conflict with King Ahab (1 Kings 17:1). Had the people sinned in these situations? Of course they had. But the Lord made the leader answerable for the nation. In the following telling account, Manasseh's sins caused judgment to fall on all Jerusalem and Judah (2 Kings 21:10–13, emphasis the authors').

The LORD said through his servants the prophets: "*Manasseh king of Judah has committed these detestable sins. He has done more evil than the Amorites who preceded him and has led Judah into sin with his idols. Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I am going to bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. I will stretch out over Jerusalem the measuring line used against Samaria and the plumb line used against the house of Ahab. I will wipe out Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down.*"

Manasseh was called to account for the sins of the nation. Why? It's very simple. He led and the people followed. Both the king and the people were accountable to God, but Manasseh, as king, bore the greater responsibility because of his leadership. This theme repeats itself many times in the Old Testament.

JESUS'S WORDS TO THE SCRIBES, PHARISEES, AND SADDUCEES

In the New Testament our Lord Jesus Christ often spoke tenderly to those who humbly sought him, but his words to the leaders of the day were harsh. He called them to account for the anemic spiritual condition in Judea and Galilee. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites," is echoed through Matthew 23:13–36. He held these contemptible leaders responsible for "all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah" (v. 35 NASB). On another occasion he called the Pharisees blind leaders of the blind (see Matt. 15:14). Those in leadership carry a heavy weight of responsibility.

NEW TESTAMENT STATEMENTS CONCERNING LEADERSHIP

The apostle Paul stated, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Hebrews 13:7 states plainly, “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” Both of these passages speak to the tremendous impact of a leader’s influence.

Hebrews 13:17 (NASB) reverberates with leadership responsibility. “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” This statement ought to weigh heavily on every Christian leader and every church member. Leaders will give an account for their leadership. Members are to make their leadership task a joy!

JESUS’S COMMUNICATION TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION

This brings us to what we believe to be the strongest statement about pastoral responsibility found in the New Testament. As a young pastor I (Gordon) was preaching a series on the seven churches of Revelation. As I read the texts of Revelation 2–3 in Greek for the first time, I stopped in my tracks. I noticed that the pronouns (you) were second person singular. As I read and reread these texts, they shook me to the core. I understood that the “angels” of Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14, the messengers, were the pastors of the churches.¹⁷ It is highly significant that the messengers were the ones being evaluated by the Lord. All of the pronouns in the opening lines addressed to the messenger of each church are masculine singular. When the Lord rebukes, he rebukes the messenger. Thus the Lord Jesus Christ spoke to the earthly shepherds, the pastors, whose character had become the character of the church. For example, when the Lord Jesus said, “Yet I hold this against you [singular]: You have forsaken the love you had at first” (Rev. 2:4), he was addressing the earthly shepherd, the pastor of Ephesus, whose character had become the character of the church. Each church had become the lengthened shadow of its pastor. I understood this to mean the Lord Jesus himself would hold me accountable for the churches that I would pastor for the time that I led them. Understanding the gravity and responsibilities of serving as the pastor, I nearly resigned from ministry.

Ultimately Christ extends the application of the text to all churches and all believers when he says, “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7, and others). But don’t miss the initial point: Christ addresses the pastors first!

When pastors have been leading a church for five years or longer, the church assumes the character of their pastor. As goes the leadership, so goes the

church! So the maxim, Everything rises and falls on leadership, is discovered and confirmed repeatedly on the pages of the Word of God and practically in the lives of pastors and the churches they serve.

How Are Church Leaders Doing?

A great number of churches are characterized by an inward, self-serving focus, territorialism, bullies, power brokers, passivity, disillusionment, lack of a clearly defined purpose and vision, all accompanied by division and conflict. The result of such attitudes and actions is a mass of churches that are plateaued or declining in membership, attendance, and vitality. Many have become havens for the disgruntled and fortresses against the Great Commission. These “country clubs” have become the antithesis of everything the gospel represents.

Where are the pastors in all of this? Many pastors feel they have their backs against the wall. They want to make changes but either they are afraid to roil the waters or they don’t know how to lead. Church bullies intimidate them. Church boards are uncooperative and controlling. Consequently, pastors struggle and the churches they pastor struggle. The resulting gridlock causes attenders to leave in frustration.

Other pastors are simply on cruise control. They draw their pay and don’t rock the boat. Many are content to leave Jesus outside knocking at the door (Rev. 3:20). Many also lack the skill and backbone to develop a vision of a preferred future and pursue it to a fitting conclusion. Others simply walk down the path of ministry blissfully ignorant of the impending cliff before them.

The Problem

LACK OF STRONG, VISIONARY LEADERSHIP

The problem is that there’s a lack in the church of strong, visionary leadership, not necessarily a lack of leaders (there’s a difference!). Churches aren’t really developing visionary leaders. How many churches have in place a process for developing leaders at every level of the church? The answer is few. How many churches in the search for a new pastor or staff person ask about the candidates’ ability to develop leaders, because the church believes it is an important role of their ministry? Following are some insightful questions that every pulpit committee should ask of a potential pastor or staff person, though the answers may not be encouraging.

1. Do you know how to develop leaders?
2. How many leaders have you developed over the years?
3. Who are you currently developing as a leader?
4. Who has developed you as a leader?
5. Who is developing you now as a leader?
6. Is it okay to include your development of leaders on your annual evaluation?

J. L. Penfold, Gordon's brother, clearly articulated the leadership crisis in the American church. One of his district superintendents in Florida lamented, "Only about 25 percent of our pastors can get the job done. We simply hope the churches can endure through three pastors before we can finally send another good one." The problem is not a lack of pastors. It is the lack of capable, visionary pastors. A large segment of pastors occupy the pastoral position but don't lead their congregations into fruitful ministry.

LACK OF SEMINARY AND BIBLE COLLEGE TRAINING

Seminaries aren't *fully* developing visionary leaders. If you check the catalogs of most major seminaries, you'll find little if anything in the curriculum on leadership and leadership development. There is much on church history, the original languages (Hebrew and Greek), Bible knowledge, preaching, Christian education, and so on, and these are important to the curriculum. It's what's missing that concerns us. Seminaries tend to attract leaders but are doing little to train them specifically in the area of leadership. At best, most seminaries train scholar-chaplains, not scholar-leaders. The church is crying out for visionary leaders.

In 2010, I (Gordon) traveled to the Russian Far East to train pastors and denominational leaders in the principles and practices of visionary leadership. During the last two weeks, a team traveled nearly sixteen hundred miles visiting and assessing four local churches. One of the churches was pastored by a middle-aged man with a remarkable story. After perestroika, he rode his bicycle seventy kilometers in the winter (-30 degrees Celsius) one way to hear the Word of God. He did this week after week. After he came to Christ, he and his wife sold their possessions and moved their family to Donetsk Christian University where he graduated with a three-year degree in theology. He and his family of five then returned to Primorye, the Russian Far East, to minister.

His nineteen-year-old congregation was languishing in deep conflict. The primary cause of the conflict was lack of leadership on the part of the pastor. The church people wanted to move forward; they desired to be led, not

to lead. (In Russian culture no one moves without the okay from the leader.) My friend could not point the church in a direction and pull the leadership trigger. The church people longed for him to point them in a direction, any direction, and they would follow! The pastor is a great guy, a wonderful father, but he has no leadership skills and little vision. The result is a fractured, struggling church.

This problem is not unique to Russia. It is prevalent in North America.

The Challenge

On the one hand, re-envisioning pastors (REPs) are swimming upstream against the prevailing current. They are fighting, scratching, clawing to move the church toward fruitfulness and joy. Often their efforts exact a terrible cost from them and their families. Nevertheless, they move forward, impelled and compelled by their love for the Savior and his commission to return churches to their glorious Head and to productive ministry.

On the other hand, non-re-envisioning pastors are often paralyzed by fear, afraid to upset the power brokers, church bullies, the status quo, and the sacred cows of ministry. At the very core of their being, their divine design prevents them from leading their churches out of the doldrums to vitality and new life. Bob Humphrey, founder of Fresh Start Ministries, notes, “Others have positioned themselves as ‘hirelings’ rather than shepherd-leaders of God’s flock. Some seem incapable of articulating a vision for the church. They have not been trained to see the dream, say the dream and seize the dream. . . . Others see themselves as bricklayers rather than architects.”¹⁸

In *Courageous Leadership* Bill Hybels describes the wondrous beauty of a vibrant local church.

There is nothing like the local church when it’s working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breathtaking. Its potential is unlimited. It comforts the grieving and heals the broken in the context of community. It builds bridges to seekers and offers truth to the confused. It provides resources for those in need and opens its arms to the forgotten, the downtrodden, the disillusioned. It breaks the chains of addictions, frees the oppressed and offers belonging to the marginalized of this world. Whatever the capacity for human suffering, the church has a greater capacity for healing and wholeness.

So to this day, the potential of the local church is almost more than I can grasp. No other organization on earth is like the church. Nothing even comes close.¹⁹

He further describes the role of visionary leadership in the life of the church.

The local church is the hope of the world and its future rests primarily in the hands of its leaders. For the first time, I realized that from a human perspective the outcome of the redemptive drama being played out on planet Earth will be determined by how well church leaders lead. Many churches are filled with sincere, talented, godly people who would love to leverage their spiritual gifts in order to impact the world for Christ. The question is this: Will the men and women who have been entrusted with leadership gifts take their gifts seriously, develop them fully, and deploy them courageously, so that the willing and gifted believers in their churches can work together to make a difference in the world?²⁰

If Hybels is correct in saying that “the outcome of the redemptive drama . . . will be determined by how well church leaders lead,” and if 80–85 percent of the churches are failing for lack of visionary leadership, then the church in America may have little hope left.

The hour is late, the challenge is great. Let’s rise to the challenge and allow the Lord once again to awaken the church in America. President Kennedy once asked, “If not us, who? If not now, when?” Will you join our Lord in this great adventure of church renewal? If you will, then we all win!

Questions for Reflection, Discussion, and Application

1. Is your church in the 15–20 percent of churches that are growing in worship attendance? If it is stagnant, do you understand the reasons why?
2. Is your district, association, or fellowship of churches growing or declining? Have you done anything to try to reverse the trends? If so, what? Has it been successful?
3. Do you think the statement, Everything rises and falls on leadership, is fair? Why or why not?
4. Are you the “hireling” of the church or are you the “servant of the Lord”? Stated another way, whom do you serve first: the congregation or Jesus Christ?
5. Are you a chaplain or are you the leader in your congregation? Which role should take precedence?
6. Does the loss of young people in our churches trouble you? Are you retaining your eighteen- to thirty-year-olds? Why or why not?