

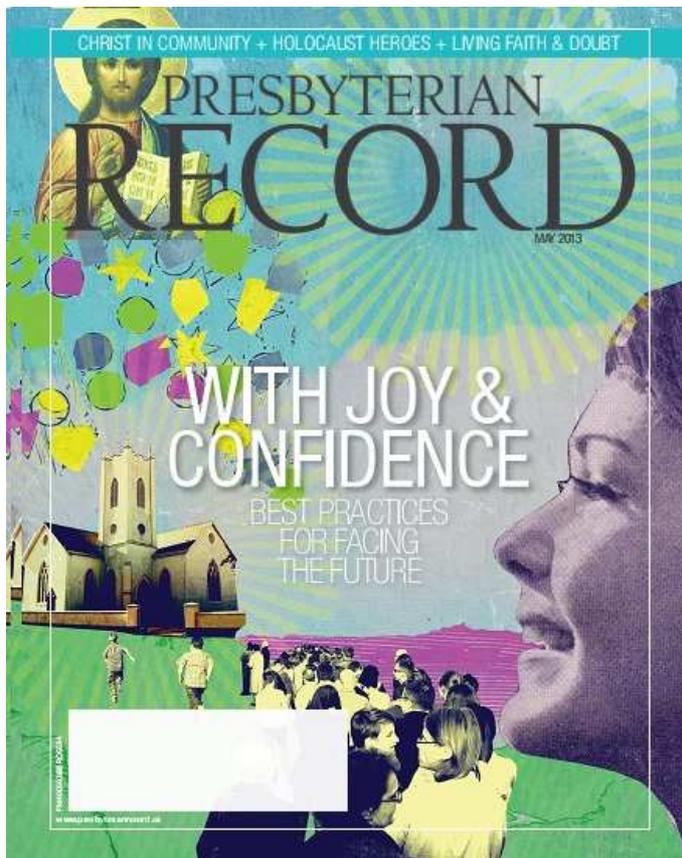
PRESBYTERIAN RECORD

Best Practices

Facing the future with joy and confidence.

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Over the past six years, as the congregational development consultant for my synod, I have been in literally hundreds of churches. Many—maybe even most—of these congregations are in gradual decline and are searching for solutions to reverse direction and increase vitality and growth. Sadly, almost all are going about it in exactly the wrong



way. While there is no simple answer to how to turn churches around, there are some markers that point us in the right direction; there are practices that can lead to a renewed sense of mission and purpose for Presbyterian churches.

Before we get there it is foundational that we understand three things:

- The world has changed and, for the most part, we have not.
- We are called to adaptive change, not technical change.
- This cannot ever be about more bodies in the pews or dollars in the plate.

First, the world has changed. Most of us grew up in a world where church was seen as an integral part of Canadian life. We went to church, our friends and family went to

church, prayer was heard in schools and good citizens of Canada and good Christians were more or less perceived as the same thing. This is no longer true. For many good reasons, faith is no longer a part of civic life and it can be safely said that the values of the world and the values of the church are no longer in harmony.

Church attendance has gone from 70 per cent of the population in the late 1950s to less than 15 per cent today. There are many reasons for this, most of which are not our fault although we did get complacent and expect, for instance, our schools to teach things (like prayer) that we should have been teaching ourselves. It is important to understand that this decline has happened across the board and is not unique to the Presbyterian Church. In other words, the world changed and we did not.

The lesson here is that as long as we continue to believe that staying the course or trying harder are solutions, we will get nowhere. The author Peter Steinke describes a consultation in which a woman jumps to her feet and proclaims, "If next year is 1965, we will be ready!" If we continue to try to build a church for a world that no longer exists, we deserve to die.

Second, technical change is change that can be most easily described as a solution to a problem. Our hymn books wear out so we replace them with a screen and a projector. That is technical change. It doesn't change us.

Adaptive change is change that changes us. It is an ongoing process of change which forms us into a different body than we were before. Perhaps the easiest way to think of this is to consider many of my abortive attempts to lose weight. All of these efforts come down to the expectation that if I just dieted for a while, I could go back to eating like I did before. It never worked. The only way to lose weight is a lifestyle change. Often I hear people say if only we had ... more youth ... more money ... more young families, etc., our problem would be solved. In reality we are not called to solve a problem, we are called to adapt to a whole new lifestyle—a type of change that never ends.

Finally, this can never be about increasing revenue or attendance. I once heard a woman say (without guile) that "we need to find where the rich people live in town and invite them to church." Her reasoning was impeccable; let's kill two birds with one stone. Sadly, this attitude will always backfire.

Essentially what we are saying is "come to my church and do the jobs I am tired of doing and pay the bills I am tired of paying." When we view people thusly, they become prospects; we are fostering the attitude that says newcomers are there to do something for us, rather than us serving them. In a very real sense we become vampires seeking fresh blood rather than Christians sharing the good news of the gospel.

It is hard not to adopt simplistic solutions to a much more complex issue but I hope you can appreciate how self-defeating they actually are.

That said, there are things we can do. I would like to break these down into three categories as well: purpose, passion and practice.

Purpose

In my experience, churches which are thriving are very clear about their purpose and their purpose is to share the good news of Jesus Christ. In fact, it is safe to say that they love Jesus more than they love the Presbyterian Church and more than they love their own congregations.

There are two aspects to this. The first can be summed up in the motto of a program called GenOn Ministries (a ministry for children and youth): “Nothing is more important than a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ.” In many ways and for many reasons, while we firmly believe in the Trinity, in our practice we tend to speak and relate primarily to God. Our prayer language is typically addressed to God, our sermons often about God and while this is not unimportant, we have neglected the invitation to a relationship with our Saviour, Jesus.

The implications of this are profound and perhaps best described by the TV preacher Joel Osteen who said: “You can be committed to church but not to Christ, but you cannot be committed to Christ and not to church.” Too often we love our churches or our Presbyterian identity and fail to see that sharing the love of Christ must not only come first but, in fact, makes the other loves possible. We can never lose sight of the simple fact that Christ’s kingdom is the most important thing and our denomination and our congregations are simply means of incarnating and sharing that love.

Or to put it even more bluntly, if all we are concerned about is congregational or denominational survival, not only do we have little to offer anyone who comes through our doors, but we are almost certainly doomed to fail, having built up treasures on earth rather than in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20).

Passion

The second thing that healthy churches have is passion. One of the realities of the world in which we live is that we are almost chronically exhausted. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in our churches.

Often I will attend worship that can only be described as going through the motions. There is no passion, there is no laughter and there is no joy. In scripture we are reminded that “the joy of the Lord is our strength,” (Nehemiah 8:10) and further that Jesus came in order that we might “have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Most of the time we feel neither joyful nor abundant in our churches, yet not to feel this is an indicator that something is amiss.

By contrast, when I go to healthy churches the energy is palpable. People are happy and excited to be there; there is energy and excitement and the expectation God is

actually going to show up. It is tangible. Please note that this is not a function of size. I have been in small churches and I have been in big churches with and without this presence.

Passion is a cyclical process. Passion produces ministry which in turn produce passion. It can be difficult to start but once it does, it takes on a life of its own. As mentioned, passion produces joy and laughter and abundance, and abundance and joy and laughter produce passion.

One of the other things passion fosters is quality. Too often I am in churches where mediocrity is the order of the day, yet we serve a Saviour who gave his very best and expects the same in return. So, do you have high quality worship, whatever the style? (Or is it “just good enough?”) Is the church scrupulously clean? Does it smell clean? When you interact with others are you giving your full attention or are you thinking about something else? Do you expect to encounter God, Jesus and the Spirit in worship? If we don’t expect to be moved in our encounters in worship or with each other, we ought not be surprised when it doesn’t happen.

I want to qualify a little bit what I have just said. High quality worship does not necessarily mean it has to be slick or professional. Most churches lack those resources and others can become more concerned with performance than worship. Passion is not about technical excellence; it is about giving our very best to whatever we do and understanding at the very core of our being that this is how we are supposed to live. While I am now moving toward the third category, practices, another way of thinking about this is acknowledging that we are often too busy doing church to be church.

Recently I was at a church that had 18 committees for a worshipping congregation of about 70. This is crazy. It was no wonder that passion is hard to find in a context like that. Yes, it is important to do the work of the church, but our calling as Christians is to be passionate followers of Jesus and not dutiful attenders of meetings. In fact, we must remember (and remind each other) that the work of a Christian is prayer, living into God’s word and sharing the good news of Jesus; it is not perpetuating an institution.

Finally, passion is attractive and it is contagious. People do not want to come aboard a sinking ship. They want to experience life and joy and hope—all the things the gospel promises, all things Christians are called to experience and share.

Practices

The final aspect of healthy and growing churches is that they pay attention to their practices. In this respect, it is important to note that there is no silver bullet and there is no one big thing that will solve our challenges. In fact, it is the exact opposite—it is many small things done consistently and well that make all the difference. A colleague

calls it relentless incrementalism. I like that term because it reminds me that it can't end. We are called to a lifestyle change if we want to move to health and effectiveness. It is also important to note how important our practices are. When I graduated almost 30 years ago, there were about seven things that you could do to be effective in ministry and if you got four or so right, you were okay. Now we need all of them. We no longer have the luxury of taking things for granted.

In terms of our practices, it is easiest to divide them into practices inside the church and outside the church. Inside the church there are many individual practices that we could identify which could help us. It is not my task in this article to catalogue them. Instead, let me identify a couple of broad areas of concern.

Healthy churches practice hospitality. Hospitality is more than a warm welcome before church and coffee after, though it is stunning to me how many churches are genuinely unfriendly, especially at coffee hour, where newcomers are routinely ignored as people visit their friends. Hospitality includes a warm welcome and fellowship. It includes a church that is accessible; not just for those with mobility issues, but in a user-friendly bulletin with a lack of jargon and in-jokes. Accessible churches have signs and provide a way for people to safely and easily enter into the life and ministry of the congregation. Hospitality includes offering prayer and faith as well as cookies and tea.

Healthy churches have mature, faithful leaders and understand that their calling is to invite others to become mature followers of Jesus Christ.

The consequence of this practice is twofold. First, it fosters an emotionally and spiritually healthy church. Too often in our churches, belonging is the highest value. If this is this case, we can often put up with terrible behaviour or immature responses because it is more important that everyone belong than that we be held to a high Christian standard. Spiritual maturity, like parenting, demands that we seek the best for our communities of faith in behaviour and practice.

The second outcome of spiritually mature leadership is God Talk. So many of us have been raised in an environment where "faith is felt not told" and it is killing us. Our inability to comfortably share what God is doing in our lives is crippling our churches because not only is it denying us the opportunity to remember why we have been called to be in community in the first place, but it means we have no practice in sharing our faith outside the church. When this happens we have lost touch with our purpose in a most profound way.

A few years ago I read an annual report from a congregation. In it, it said, "we are so small that we cannot meet our own needs, much less the needs of the community." While I understood their sentiment, I also realized that with this statement they had stopped being a church and had become a club for Presbyterians. Healthy churches

impact their communities. Too many churches gear all their activities only for those already in the church. Without exception it is churches that are reaching out that are thriving. There are many things congregations can do; some have prison ministries or after school programs or work with unwed mothers—the possibilities are limitless but all match the needs of the community.

Again, it is not my task to catalogue the opportunities; instead let me identify their common characteristics.

First, they are not a bargain. For most of our history, ministry has been a bargain. “We’ll run Vacation Bible School for you and you send your kids to church.” This does not work. Ministry must come because Jesus loves others and because Jesus loves others, we do too. To expect that people will come to our church because we do things for them serves us, not them. This also speaks to work which is primarily designed to serve the church and not the community. Things like fundraisers might be important but we have to be very careful about calling them ministry; sometimes they are, often they are not.

Secondly, ministry must be done by the congregation itself. There are times when raising money for a cause or a need is important. However, we can no longer pay people to do what we are unwilling to do ourselves. So, for instance, it may be important to support a mission in India financially, but it is probably even more important to roll up our sleeves and get to work in our local context. Jesus calls us to be salt and light and never has that been more important than now. In this there are two final considerations: we cannot be arrogant in our service, assuming those around us to be the objects of our charity. Rather, we must be fellow labourers sharing Christ’s love and we must be prepared to go out into our communities rather than assuming our communities will come to us.

Even with these three things—purpose, passion and good practices—there is no guarantee that our churches will grow. As we remember this, it is important to remember that all the churches the apostle Paul wrote to—Ephesus, Corinth, Philippi—all those churches are closed now. I have tried very hard to not say that any of these will make your church grow; maybe they will, maybe they won’t. What they will do is help us be the church that Christ is calling us to be and that is attractive. And, more importantly, it will remind us that “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:8)—knowledge which will allow us to face the future with joy and confidence and hope.

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