

# Stirring

Over time, churches become inwardly-focused on maintenance rather than outwardly-focused on evangelism. Some churches worry more about having a well-equipped kitchen than a well-used baptistry. Churches need a plan to help them stay focused on outreach.

## the Waters

By Ed Stetzer

First in a series on growing your church

**A**s a church planter, I've heard the stats a thousand times—new churches reach and baptize more people than established churches. Will McRaney at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary writes, "In a newly planted church there are 14.4 baptisms per year for every 100 people in regular attendance in worship. When a church has been in existence 16 years or more, the baptism rate is half that: Only 7.3 baptisms per year for every 100 people in attendance."<sup>1</sup>

The stats are true—no denying them. But they prompt an important question—why can't established churches keep (or restore) a good "baptismal ratio?" (In a church of 200 in attendance with 20 baptisms, the baptismal ratio would be 10:1—a good ratio.)

The reason may be obvious. Over time, too many churches become inwardly focused on maintenance rather than outwardly focused on evangelism. Some churches worry more about having a well-equipped kitchen than a well-used bap-

tistry. Churches need a plan to help them stay focused on outreach.

So, if younger churches baptize more people, is planting new churches the answer? Yes, that's one effective solution, but there's another. We need a strategy for church revitalization. Established churches already have the facilities to handle growth, they often have the internal structure to assimilate new Christians, they are frequently financially stable, and they are already well-known in the community. Stagnant churches are untapped sources of kingdom growth.

How can established churches reignite their passion for outreach and refocus their purpose? It isn't easy—otherwise, 80 percent of our churches wouldn't be stagnant or shrinking, stuck on a plateau or sliding into decline.

Churches with a low baptismal ratio need to make changes. Doing the same things the same way won't revitalize them. The chart on page 59 illustrates the need for change and the degree of change required.

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Usually, a church will not see its need without a systematic analysis of its situation. It's not easy, but it's essential if a church is to become outreach-focused once again. A church can go through the process if it's willing to take a hard look and work through these steps:

1. Determine your church's current condition. All good planning starts with knowing where you are.

Chart attendance, baptisms and baptismal ratio over five years (or 10).

- a. If baptisms and attendance are increasing, rejoice and keep on working.
- b. If baptisms are increasing but baptismal ratio is declining, recognize that you are probably growing by attracting transfer members from other churches and not really reaching the lost.
- c. If baptisms and attendance are declining, you need a turnaround. (The good news is that Jesus likes turn arounds!)

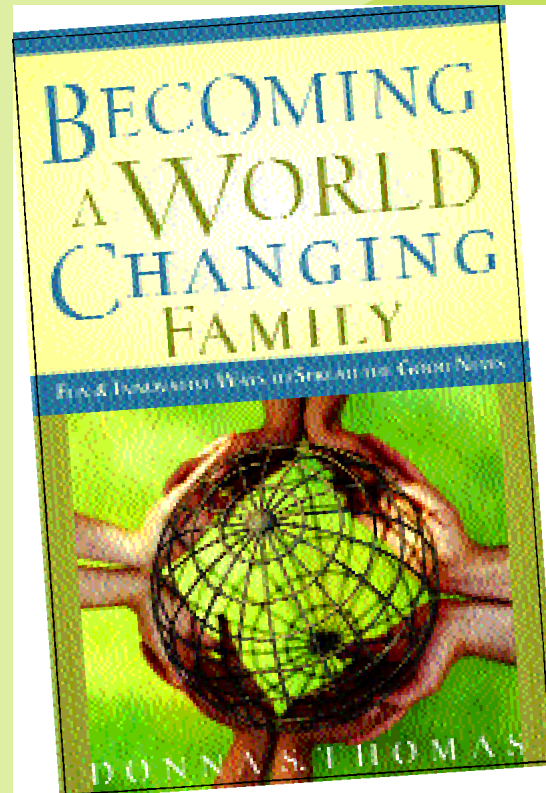
2. Involve everyone. The church needs to take a realistic look at its current effectiveness. This does not mean just the pastor and lay leaders—the entire congregation must identify and understand its current state before it can move forward. It needs an honest look so it can make an honest effort.

Systems issues should be addressed, an exercise requiring research and self-study on the part of the congregation, maybe with help from a ministry or denominational consultant. Systems issues might include:

- Spiritual dynamic
- Congregational dysfunction
- Inadequate leadership
- Faulty or non-existent processes
- Lack of vision

3. Decide on a course of action. This may require a change of style, location, systems, leadership or plan, especially a new plan for evangelism. Most churches need a tool to help them begin to evangelize. Providentially, God has provided such tools. For example, the

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Re-energizing

Restructuring

Restarting

Greater—Change—Lesser

stagnant in size. (It needs to have a clearer focus on evangelism and outreach.)

declining in size. (It needs to deal with some internal issues and begin to reach its community again.)

experiencing substantial decline. (It needs large internal changes and a new outreach strategy.)

near death, with such a long history of decline that it will close if current trends continue. (It needs to restart with new leadership or as an entirely new congregation.)

North American Mission Board provides The NET evangelism training. Lifeway Christian Resources has the FAITH Sunday School outreach plan.

My dad used to tell me, "If it was easy, everybody would be doing it!" He was right. Since 3,500-4,000 churches (of all denominations, not just SBC) shut their doors each year, it's obvious that most churches won't make the turnaround. Two main reasons for this problem are:

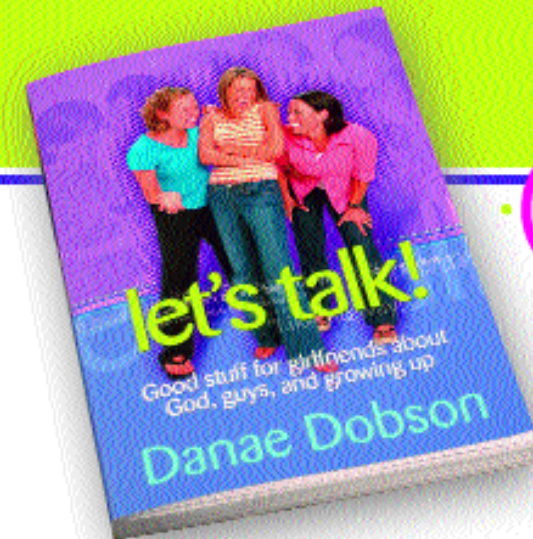
- 1. A church will not admit how serious its problems are.
- 2. A church will not make the necessary changes.

If they can take a close look and make appropriate changes, every church can be back in the business of reaching the lost. Churches from one to 200 years old become new again as they focus on the principles of the New Testament. New and revitalized churches can impact their unchurched communities and be faithful to the task of the Great Commission. They can reach the lost and grow in membership. They can become vibrant again. @

*Ed Stetzer, Ph.D., has trained pastors and mission leaders on five continents. His latest book is Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age (Broadman & Holman, 2003) He is working on a revitalization research project. If your church has experienced a "turn around," you can participate in a study at [www.comebackchurches.com](http://www.comebackchurches.com).*

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