

LeaderLesson 15: 10 Signs of Hope for a Declining Church

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The question didn't surprise me, but I wasn't ready with an answer. I was a young church consultant, and the church's leadership team had several questions. The one for which I had no answer at the time was, "What characteristics have you seen in churches that seemed to be dying, but that experienced growth after a consultation?" After many more years of consulting, here is my answer today.

1. ***The leader is preaching the Bible.*** Numerical growth can occur without preaching the Word, but genuine personal and congregational transformation doesn't happen apart from the Word. The struggling churches I've seen experience healthy change have been led by leaders who preach the Word. They don't compromise on this task, knowing that the Word still changes lives.
2. ***Somebody is praying.*** Sometimes it's the leader, and sometimes it's another church member – but somebody is beseeching God to help the church turn around. I've met church members who prayed daily for their church for years, and they never wavered in that commitment. Consistent prayer is a confession we can't change a church's direction apart from the power of God.
3. ***Leaders are willing to face the truth.*** Attendance numbers are in decline. Giving is decreasing. The church is not reaching their neighborhood. Signs of congregational decline are everywhere. Never have I seen this kind of church experience new life unless the leaders are willing to admit, "Our future is death if things don't change."
4. ***The leader takes responsibility for growth.*** I realize this sign is a controversial one, and I'm not suggesting that leaders can produce growth on their own. Nor am I implying that leaders are solely responsible for a lack of growth. I'm simply reporting what I've seen: turnaround church pastors determine, "It's my responsibility to lead this church out of decline."
5. ***The leader still has a vision for growth.*** The leader's vision might be clouded by discouragement, but it's still there in his heart. Ask him, and he will still talk of people who need to be reached. He still grieves over the unchurched and the undisciplined. His belief that Christ will build His church remains strong, even through a time of church decline.
6. ***Somebody is evangelizing.*** Often, the leader is the primary evangelist in these churches, but not always. Sometimes a layperson whose spiritual fire is burning brightly takes the lead. In one church with whom I worked, that person was a new believer whose passion reignited others in the congregation. As long as someone is excited enough about God and the church to tell the gospel story, hope exists.
7. ***The leader is investing in someone else.*** Congregational decline is at times so emotionally draining that leaders fail in their personal ministry to others. In turnaround churches I've

seen, though, the leader has continually invested in a few believers. Even in the most difficult times, seeing life change in one person can be encouraging enough to keep pressing forward.

8. ***The church is still reaching out to the community.*** The efforts may not be as strong as they once were, and congregational participation may be less, but somebody is still thinking outwardly. The outreach may be as simple as passing out water on a street corner or passing out tracts in a neighborhood. It takes only a few people obedient to the Great Commission to change a church.
9. ***Somebody has a global vision.*** Years ago, I consulted with a declining church that had international partnerships, but they did little local evangelism. Several of their leaders had a passion for particular people groups around the world. When they learned through our consult that those people groups also lived in their city, the church began to think locally – and turnaround slowly began. A global vision led to local outreach and growth.
10. ***Leaders refuse to give up.*** Frankly, church turnaround is not easy. Honest evaluation is painful. Admitting failure is personal. Change can be draining, and any change may cause even more turmoil. The churches I've seen turnaround, however, have leaders that simply do not give up. They believe the church is still God's church.

Most churches in North America are plateaued or declining. Given that reality, many church leaders need signs of hope today. What signs have you seen that give you hope?

[This LeaderLesson is by Dr. Chuck Lawless, and is used by permission. He serves as Professor of Evangelism and Missions and Dean of Graduate Studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary here in North Carolina. Special thanks to Dr. Lawless for sharing this encouraging and challenging post with us. For more helpful articles, please visit: www.ThomRainer.com.]

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