

Turn-Around Churches by George Barna

CHAPTER 3—FROM DREAM TO REALITY

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

When it comes to the ministry of the declining church a turnaround requires that certain perspectives and practices be introduced.

1. **Select a New Pastor**—Although the pastor in office during the decline may not have been primarily responsible for the negative growth of the church, he is similarly unlikely to have a sufficient positive attitude toward the people and resources of the church to develop and to forcefully champion a dynamic turn around.
2. **Release the Past**—A turnaround pastor is one who focuses on the future of the community and the church. The future is not won by reliving the past.
3. **Define Outreach**—In turnaround situations, we found that the new leadership instituted a simple plan for specific forms of outreach. Rather than turn everyone loose to do whatever he or she felt was a comfortable ministry to perform, structure, purpose and guidelines were applied to the ministries the church sanctioned and supported. People's energy for ministry was channeled into specific directions; the church's resources were allocated with greater care and precision. The selection of ministry thrusts was tied to the larger vision of the church, and people were assisted in their efforts to comprehend how all of these elements fit into a unified ministry.
4. **Equip the Congregation**—Turnaround pastors gave top priority to *equipping the laity for effective, targeted ministry*. In some of the comeback stories, we observed that the pastor focused the people on one or a few areas of ministry expertise based upon the pastor's personal outreach gifts. In this way, the pastor transferred his experience and knowledge so that members of the congregation were better prepared to achieve success.

THE RESOURCE BASE

The turnaround churches we studied had a war chest of resources that permitted the comeback. Several common elements were found in that arsenal. Notice that one of the resources NOT mentioned as being critical in the turnaround process was a treasure chest full of money.

1. **Seek Outside Perspective**—Gaining an objective, outsider's perspective on churches and church dynamics was as resource common to all but the poorest of the churches we explored. The aggregate experience of turnaround pastors suggests that this is such a specialized area of ministry that an "any growth consultant will do" attitude may wind up hurting rather than helping the church.
2. **Staff Support Essential**—Often the turnaround pastor would reshape the staff, either in terms of the positions filled, the people filling those positions, or both.
3. **A Committed Core Group**—The other irreplaceable resource was having a core of zealots remaining in the church and supportive of the new pastor. In the turnaround churches, we saw how a small group of faithful participants—usually no more than a half dozen people—remained ready to die for the church. Because the church is nothing more than the heart of the people that comprise it, the absence of people who have a heart to save the church and to bring it back to a position of ministry prominence is undoubtedly a major deficit if not a thwarting condition.

CHAPTER 4—ATTRIBUTES OF TURNAROUND LEADERS

BASIC QUALITIES—Although the turnaround pastors shared many characteristics in common with the pastors who successfully led more stable churches, they also possessed some unique qualities. The attributes that turnaround pastors had in common with other effective pastors included the following:

1. **A Team Builder**—It is rare to find a pastor leading a healthy, growing church who is not committed to moving the spotlight off himself and onto the people who must do the brunt of the ministry; the laity.
2. **Provides Vision**—The pastor is the initial disseminator of the vision. When the church is truly healthy, the pastor becomes the protector of the integrity of the vision while the people become champions of the vision.
3. **Grows Spiritually**—The focus in his life is upon becoming a “deeper” Christian, knowing God even more intimately and being increasingly sensitive to His call, more responsive and obedient to His will.
4. **An Encourager**—The congregation not only needs a leader who provides direction and builds skills, but also recognizes what the people are doing and acknowledges and celebrates their growth.
5. **Strategic Thinker**—Perhaps nobody in the church will see the “big picture” of the church’s ministry as clearly as the pastor. A pastor must provide people with the strategic direction and tactical concepts that will propel the church forward.
6. **Takes Risks**—A true leader does not wince at the necessity of change, at the possibility of failure or at the need to take risks. Risks are part and parcel of the game. In fact, real leaders relish the opportunity to take risks because it makes the challenge more interesting and puts them on the spot.

UNIQUE TRAITS—In addition to these common traits, turnaround pastors also possess a few unique traits that prepare them for the world-class challenge of returning vitality to a congregation that is battered and on the ropes.

1. **Youth**—Almost all of the turnaround pastors assumed the pastorate of their church before they had reached the age of 45. In other words, not only does it perhaps take a younger person to create the comeback environment, but also living through more than one turnaround church might be asking for disaster. Although we did encounter a few pastors who made a habit of restoring life to dying churches, even these pastors stated that continuing to invest themselves in such churches would be foolhardy after their mid-40s.
2. **Workaholicism**—None of these pastors was proud of being a workaholic, but most of them admitted that this was one trait that enabled them to lead the turnaround. One of the unfortunate realities of the turnaround experience is that it may virtually require a pastor who accepts the turnaround challenge as the dominant purpose and focus of life.
3. **Spiritual Commitment**—It appears that the severity of the circumstances of the church pushed these leaders into a deeper state of submission and dependence upon Him than is found in most church settings.
4. **Strong Personality**—Most turnaround pastors are self-assured and self-confident. It takes someone who does not have a battle with self-doubt to concentrate on battling all of the other barriers to a comeback.

5. **A Potential Visionary**—These leaders generally had not given prior evidence of being visionary. Although they had exhibited some leadership qualities and had displayed some visionary tendencies, they generally had not distinguished themselves through previous service as visionary leaders. While many of these people might also be drawn to initiating a new church, a significant proportion may be drawn to restoring the heartbeat to a fading congregation.
6. **The Indispensable Quality of Leadership**—A church needs a strong leader from the outside to accomplish the turnaround.

CHAPTER 6—POTHOLES ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

1. **Resistance to Change**—The resistance movement may start with the familiar “bet we’ve never done it that way.” Invariably, as the new pastor moves to make his mark on the ministry and begins to reverse the downward spiral of the church murmurs can be heard that “the pastor is moving too fast.”
2. **Small Church Mentality**—The assumption is that the church may have to remain small, and that a small congregation is innately superior—or, at least more comfortable.
3. **Growth Paralysis**—The problem represents a vicious cycle that the leadership must aggressively shatter: Because growth requires change, growth is feared, but without growth, the church will stagnate and die.
4. **Sense of Identity**—The turnaround leader must often define character as well as purpose so that the church can begin to love itself.
5. **Teachable Congregation**—Until the people are open to hear what the leader has to say, to consider the directions they may pursue and to understand the reasons behind that strategy, the chances of sustaining the necessary level of support are minimal.
6. **Willingness to Submit**—The membership must be willing to submit to leadership. In an atmosphere of fear, disappointment, self-doubt and skepticism, gaining the confidence of the people is no simple task.