

**WILL WE BE A TURNAROUND CHURCH?****GALATIANS 6:9-10**

Today's message will not feel like a normal message. There are times when, as your pastor, it's necessary to share with you important information that affects our congregation as well as thoughts and feelings that I trust are prompted by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the best place to do that is in a Sunday morning worship service. Two and a half years ago I began work on a Doctor of Ministry degree because I needed to grow and learn. I wanted to discern and do whatever was needed to help our wonderful church move forward and become all that God wants us to be. This summer I was approved by Northern Seminary in Chicago for what's called an Independent Study which is a course that I pretty much designed by myself. I have read several books and spoken with several pastors around the country on the subject of plateaued or declining churches as well as turnaround churches.

Let me define those terms for you. A plateaued church is simply a church where the worship attendance has remained roughly the same or flat for several years. A declining church is a congregation where the worship attendance has actually gone down or decreased over several years. A turnaround church is a congregation that had been either plateaued or declining in terms of worship attendance, but something happened and now that congregation is growing again numerically over several years. Brothers and sisters, we need to face the uncomfortable fact that our beloved congregation is by any statistical definition a declining church. Here's some data Carole Reynolds in our church office made available to me. Our average worship attendance way back in 1971 was 384. It climbed to 508 in 1976 and went down to 433 in 1978. Attendance increased to what was apparently our most recent high water mark of 550 in 1992. Average worship attendance dropped down to 415 by the end of 1999. Since 1999 our average worship attendance has continued to decline pretty dramatically.

**OUR PROBLEM IS PART OF A BIGGER PROBLEM.**

I've learned through my Independent Study that our situation here is really a reflection of a much larger problem. Let me throw some troubling statistics at you. There are some 300 million people in the United States. Roughly 100 million or 1/3 of the population can be considered genuine followers of Jesus. Another 100 million might have some affiliation with a local church, but it's a question mark whether they are truly born again by the Spirit of God. The final 100 million have no vital, sustained relationship with any local church at all. By the way, if that group of 100 million were its own separate country it would be the eleventh largest in the world. If you consider the larger group of 200 million lost people – some who affiliate with a church and some who have no church affiliation whatsoever - you're now talking about a group of people that represent the fourth largest country in the world.

Researchers tell us that the Church of Jesus Christ in the United States is having less and less impact on the country as a whole. Back in 1900 there were 27 churches for every 10,000 people while in 1990 there were actually only 12 churches available for every 10,000. Researchers tell us that if nothing changes only about 10.5% of the American population will attend any worship service by 2050. It is very sobering to hear that 340,000 literal, actual local churches or 85% of all churches in the United States are either plateaued or declining. You might have heard that evangelical, Bible-believing, Gospel-preaching churches like ours are growing, by in large. Think again. In 2000, 9.2% of Americans attended an evangelical church. In 2005, 9.1% of Americans attended an evangelical church.

Now, you might think that the answer is to start new churches here, there and everywhere, and that is certainly part of the answer. Yes, it is easier to start new churches than to turnaround a plateaued or declining church – that’s true – but actually both are very much needed if Christians are going to keep up and increase their influence on the growing population of the United States. Researches predict that approximately 55,000 churches will close in our country between 2005 and 2020, while 60,000 new churches will open, producing a net gain of 5,000 churches. However, to keep pace with population growth, a net gain of 48,000 churches will be needed. So just starting new churches will not accomplish the mission of reaching our expanding population. Part of the answer has got to be that some plateaued or declining churches like KRBC experience a Holy Spirit inspired turnaround and start to grow again – reaching new, lost people with the good news about Jesus and helping them to grow in their faith. What I’ve been learning from my study here in recent months is that turning around a plateaued or declining church is not impossible, but it’s very hard work. There’s a lot of downward momentum that is very hard to reverse.

### **CAUSE OF DECLINE & CHANGES THAT PRODUCE TURNAROUND**

Why do churches plateau or die? My study has revealed to me that there are many possible reasons and never just one reason. Part of the answer is that churches – like any human organization – have a life cycle. Human beings are born, go through adolescence, experience adulthood, retirement, old age and finally death. Well, churches go through the same kind of experience. Churches are born, develop to a place of “adulthood” which is the time when they’re most productive, and then even churches begin to age and eventually die. There’s one very important difference, however, between human beings and churches. The human life cycle cannot be altered, can it? Every last one of us here today will die – it’s inevitable. But death is not inevitable for a church. Churches can indeed experience revitalization. It’s not easy, but it’s possible. Churches can stop their decline and experience a time of growth and expansion once again. Our church is probably in the retirement to old age time frame on that church life cycle chart. I firmly believe, however, that we have the potential to enter into a new period of growth and expansion. It won’t be easy, but it’s possible. It won’t

just happen on its own. It will be a combination of God's blessing and our intentional, determined efforts as a congregation to live into God's future for us.

Again, why do churches plateau or die? Here are the most common causes of decline. In addition to the life cycle dynamic, here are what might be generally considered the top eleven causes as to why churches plateau or decline: 1) inadequate pastoral leadership; 2) loss of vision; 3) low morale; 4) inward focus; 5) resistance to change (traditionalism); 6) power struggles (internal conflicts); 7) spiritually unhealthy (*i.e.*, no concern for the lost, no prayer emphasis, few – if any - vital small groups); 8) a church split or divisiveness; 9) an aging congregation; 10) inadequate or dilapidated facilities; and 11) demographic changes. Now, those vary from church to church depending on their own histories. How would you rank those causes in relation to our church's decline? In your opinion, what's first, second or third for KRBC and why?

But, frankly, I'm more interested in what changes result in a turnaround. Here are the most common changes that plateaued and declining churches experienced that led to a turnaround: 1) called a new pastor; 2) a positive and encouraging atmosphere; 3) renew and recast vision; 4) contemporary worship; 5) community outreach initiatives; 6) targeted a younger age group; 7) confront/remove divisive people; 8) new or remodeled facilities; 9) small groups and other spiritual growth initiatives; 10) forgiveness and reconciliation, and 11) targeted a new demographic. Again, congregations are unique. What ends up being first, second or third depends on each church's situation. In your opinion, what would you put down as first, second or third in importance for our church and why?

## **SIX POSSIBLE KEYS TO OUR CHURCH'S TURNAROUND**

What resonates with me after all this reading, interviewing, thinking and praying that I've been doing in recent months? Let me address six possible key areas that resonate with me today as I think about helping KRBC become a turnaround church. The first one is an attitude. It's the stubborn refusal to accept the status quo. Or, to put it another way, it's a willingness to change that almost borders on desperation. What kills a church quicker than anything else is a kind of deadly passivity that creeps into it: "Things are OK the way they are... We can't do much of anything about our decline... I hope we can start growing again, but not have to change anything... As long as my friends are still here and I get my spiritual needs met, it will be OK."

I am in no way satisfied with the status quo. We need to get better as a church in many areas. And we're blessed to have leaders in our church who are not satisfied with the status quo either. One demonstration was the recent 100 Days of Prayer where over 50 of our most influential people committed to meet together ten times in groups of three for discussion and prayer for and about our church. Most of those groups have finished their meetings, but it's too early to assess the impact of that event yet. Nevertheless, the very fact that we did it

was recognition that we are declining as a church and we want God to help us turnaround. By the way, George Bullard, a church consultant who came up with the 100 Days of Prayer idea, will be here on Sunday, September 22 to observe our church, talk with our leaders, and then recommend some next steps. That refusal to accept the status quo – that willingness to change – that passion to be anything and do anything short of dishonoring God in order to be effective for His Kingdom – needs to seep down into and throughout the entire congregation.

The second key area is an atmosphere. It's cultivating and keeping a positive, encouraging atmosphere. Here's an irony, but it's an important one. You can stubbornly refuse to accept the status quo but, at the same time, still have a positive, optimistic and encouraging attitude about our church. I sure do! I look around this sanctuary today and thank God for many wonderful, godly people here who love Jesus. You want God to use you to reach lost people and grow His people. We have many people who have a great heart for outreach. For example, how many of you helped out with Day Camp last week? Please stand. How many of you have helped with the free food program this summer? How many of you were reading buddies at Valley Forge Elementary this past year? How many of you are involved this week in serving students through International Friendships? That's just a few examples.

I think of the incredible joy and privilege our church is experiencing right now in sending Emerson and Ivy Wu as missionaries to Macau, China. Do you realize, church, how special and unique that is? That just doesn't happen in most churches across our country. I think of the beautiful facility God has given us to serve others and it's completely paid off – no debt – because of your faithfulness and those before you. Last year, we had some struggles financially, but have you ever responded this year! Through June we are running about \$60,000 more in receipts than in expenditures. I praise the Lord and I commend you! Of course, we have to change, get better, and do some things differently – we dare not accept the status quo - but we have every reason to stay positive and encouraging all at the same time.

The third key is an idea that might surprise you. I believe we need to consider starting a second, more contemporary worship service. Sometimes the Lord speaks to me in a way that I call "heavenly nagging." He just keeps bringing something up to me in a variety of ways over an extended period of time. Some of you might say, "We've done two services before and it didn't stop our decline" and you'd be right. But, a few years ago, there seemed to be some good reasons to have just one service that may no longer apply today. I'm not saying we must have a second service. Instead, I'd like to lead a conversation about it and see where the Lord takes us.

Here are some reasons why I believe we should, at the very least, have a conversation about it. First, by an 11 to 1 margin, plateaued or declining churches that have experienced a turnaround either moved their existing service

intentionally in a contemporary direction or they started a second service. That's strong. A second reason is the demographics of the community where God has placed us. The average age is 37. The largest generation is between the ages of 33 - 53 (31.6%) The second biggest generation is between the ages of 13 – 32 (24.6%). The third largest generation is between the ages of 0 – 12 (19.1%) In other words, our church is right smack in the middle of a community where 43.7% of the people are under the age of 32 and 75.3% of the people are under the age of 53. It is reasonable to guess that most younger people tend to prefer a more contemporary worship service? A lot of it has to do with music, yes, but it's more than just that. It's an atmosphere, a style, a vibe that's just different.

I believe we need to consider creating a service that can be as aggressively contemporary as it needs to be in order to reach new people for Jesus. I believe it's preferable to offer that while still continuing to offer a more traditional or blended worship experience for those of us who just can't appreciate a more contemporary worship style for whatever reason. Here's a graph to help me explain this a bit better. Here are a variety of worship styles all the way from liturgical (think Catholic) to contemporary. Our current worship style is blended – some Sundays it might feel more traditional, other Sundays it might feel more contemporary. Here's what can happen sometimes. Both those who prefer a more traditional worship style and those who prefer a more contemporary worship style can tolerate blended worship but not necessarily be inspired by it. When you tolerate something but you don't fully enjoy it, you're not as likely to be inspired by it or invite others to come with you. My concern is that if we pursue aggressively a more contemporary style in just one service we might unintentionally bruise those who prefer a more traditional or blended style. So, let's just have a conversation about it and see where God might lead us.

A fourth key is also an idea. It's also something that I have felt "heavenly nagged" about for a long time. So, also, has Beth Ash, our Christian Education Director. I believe we need to have a conversation about starting a full-fledged pre-school and/or daycare center in our facility. I had a preliminary meeting with an architect about 10 days ago and he told me that our facility is set up for that kind of usage already and would require very little upgrading to meet current building codes. Do you remember those community statistics I shared a few minutes ago? Guess what age group tends to have the most pre-school aged kids? The second biggest generation around the church is between the ages of 13 – 32 (24.6%). The third largest generation is between the ages of 0 – 12 (19.1%) A pre-school and/or daycare ministry gives us the opportunity to build relationships with people in those specific age groups. I don't know about you, but it's physically painful for me to walk around that beautiful two-story educational wing of our building and see it largely unused most of the week. What could God do with it? Let's have a conversation about a pre-school and/or daycare ministry and see where God might lead us.

A fifth key is to continue to emphasize outreach and being outwardly focused. We've been making some strong progress in that area thanks to Aimee Worley, our Youth and Outreach Director, as well as others. No church ever turned around without resisting that pull towards an inward focus and intentionally moving towards an outward focus. We have to keep a good balance between "attractational" outreach and "incarnational" outreach. Attractational outreach is where you try to attract a non-believer or an unchurched person to an event or program at church hoping thereby to both build a relationship with him or her and share the Gospel. Our worship service is attractational outreach. So is Engage, our current youth ministry. So was last week's Day Camp program. Our clubs ministry on Wednesday nights is attractational outreach. Now, that word "incarnation" is used to describe God sending His Son, Jesus, into this world as a human being. So, incarnational outreach is where we go out to the community and seek to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Our reading buddy ministry at Valley Forge Elementary is an example. So, also, is the ministry of Fred and Kathleen Stith at Oakleaf Village helping seniors with their breakfast. Aimee was telling me recently of an emerging incarnational outreach possibility with Forest Park Elementary. Just last week the new principal at Parkmoor Elementary called me wanting to establish some kind of a relationship with our church.

We're will keep beating that outreach drum loud and long! On Sunday, August 25, I'm going to start a new message series entitled "Our Inviting God" which underlines how God is always inviting people – even spectacularly unworthy people – to come and enter into a relationship with Him. On Sunday, September 15 we want to have a Back to Church Sunday and encourage you to invite several unchurched friends or family members to attend the worship service with you and perhaps a luncheon afterwards. It'll be a wonderful day. It's not a new idea, by any means. It's just an opportunity for all of us to remember that God invites each and every one of His children to share the message of Jesus with others. Then on the weekend of November 9-10, we are going to have Brian Hardin with us. Brian heads up the Daily Audio Bible ministry that some of you have accessed. Why are we doing that? Outreach. Some of the people Brian first reaches through his ministry – Daily Audio Bible – might be seeking a local church. When he turns up to speak anywhere in the country, some of those folk come to hear him. They get exposed to us; we get exposed to them.

A sixth key is a request. Come pray with me on Wednesday nights this fall. I'd like to offer a weekly prayer meeting from 7:00 – 8:00 pm. Again, I felt like God spoke to me several weeks ago to offer this time of prayer and invite you to join me. I kind of figured the devil probably wouldn't entice me to pray. Yeah, I'm perceptive like that.... I love this quote, "Prayer is God's way of adjusting his people to him. It is not a time for us to ask God to adjust to our plans and desires. He loves us too much to do that" (Henry and Richard Blackaby). This will be a time to try and get aligned with and adjusted to God as a congregation. This will be a time to pray for God's empowering and discernment, a time to pray for our community, a time to pray for the needs and concerns of those who bring

their children to us on Wednesday nights. Over 50 of us have just come through a 100 Days of Prayer event. But we need to keep on praying now more than ever. So, here's my question today. If you're not helping to lead one of our Wednesday night ministries or you're not practicing with the Choir, what possible reason or excuse can you offer not to come and pray with me this fall?

## CONCLUSION

I don't have time today to talk about other possible keys to a turnaround. Some of us – myself included – feel that establishing more small groups is very important. Others of us – myself included – want to see a more intentional discipleship process emerge. But here's the central question. Will we be a turnaround church? I don't know. Time will tell. Will it be hard? Yes, it will be difficult. There will be moments when we will feel like giving up or walking away.

Then why do it? I believe we know and serve a turnaround God. He turns around individual human beings, doesn't he? The Bible says, "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Cor 5:17 NLT) We are in a relationship with a God who loves to take declining human beings – spiritually broken, dead human beings, in fact, – and resurrect and revitalize them. Then He gathers those resurrected, revitalized folk into groupings called churches where they can become and be a channel of His love and grace to other messed up human beings. When I read my Bible, I find that God's primary vehicle to bring lost, broken, damaged human beings into relationship with Himself is the local church. This church is worthy of your blood, sweat and tears, for one reason and one reason only. Jesus died for the Church. The Bible says, "So guard yourselves and God's people.... God's flock—his church, purchased with his own blood...." (Acts 20:28 NLT)

Are there any guarantees? None whatsoever. All of these six keys might have a great impact. By the same token, none of them might have any impact at all. We're going to have to walk by faith. But there is a Bible principle and promise I leave with you today. "So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up. Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone—especially to those in the family of faith." (Gal. 6:9-10 NLT) I invite you in Jesus' Name and for His sake to help us – this "family of faith" - become a turnaround church.