

Growth Points

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Restoring Hope

One of the crucial issues facing churches, especially those in decline, is the loss of hope and the possibility of recapturing it. Indeed one of the major responsibilities of church leaders is keeping hope alive, even in the face of major obstacles and challenges.

Growing churches have a positive feeling about the future. They are convinced that they have an important role to play in their communities for Christ's sake, and that they can do it. They are hopeful that the future will be better than the past or present.

“A major responsibility of all church leaders is keeping hope alive.”

—Gary L. McIntosh

Does your church feel it has something of value to give to its community? Are your people full of hope that the future of your church will be better than it currently is? It is possible to measure hope. Consider the following.

First, engage in active listening. Since pastors, and many other church leaders, are verbal speakers, listening is often a difficult practice to learn. But, actively listening to key people and groups is one way to evaluate the morale of your church.

Begin taking time to ask leaders questions that will reveal your church's overall morale or hope. Ask . . . what are people saying about our church? Do people feel good about our church? About themselves? How do you feel about our church?

Second, engage in passive listening. What do you hear others saying about your church? Is there a hopeful buzz of excitement or a quiet silence about the future? Do you hear positive comments or negative ones? Be sure to take into consideration the people who are talking, but generally positive comments go hand-in-hand with hope.

Third, listen to complaints.

Since all complaints are not related to morale, listen particularly to ones that focus on deep issues. Concerns that reveal deep frustrations, or possibly even anger, often point to low morale and a lack of hope. The old adage that “hurting people hurt people” is true. Those who are most critical may harbor feelings of despair.

Fourth, listen to nonverbal language. What is the tone of conversations in the hallways? Do people exhibit pride in the facilities? Are people on time for events or habitually late? Is it difficult to recruit workers? Is the financial giving down? All of these may be nonverbal clues that moral is low.

Fifth, decode the information. Putting all of your listening together, what are people saying about your church? What are you hearing? Are your people full of hope?

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Bless the past and the future.

At the heart of every hopeful church is spiritual vitality.

Steps for Building a Hope-Filled Church

If you believe that there is the possibility of a new day for your church, then the question is how do you move from a feeling of *no hope* to *new hope*?

Using the word H.O.P.E. as an acrostic, consider doing the following to help raise morale and hope in your congregation.

H—Hearts beating for what God desires.

At the heart of every hopeful church is spiritual vitality. Preach and teach on passages of Scripture that highlight faith in God. Most importantly, highlight passages of Scripture that illustrate how God gives hope to His people and Church.

Organize a sermon-based small group program where people discuss the pastor's sermons weekly. Gathering people into groups where they study the Bible, pray, and share together is a solid way to bring about a new spirit of hope in the congregation.

O—Outline a clear direction.

Bless the past and the future by reminding people how God worked in your church in earlier years AND how God is going to work in the future. Establish a vision for the future and begin aligning your talk, work, and all ministry around that vision.

Celebrate the positives in your church. Be sure to call attention to anything that happens for the good. Continually thank workers and leaders for the jobs they do. Highlight all victories, no matter how small.

P—Pastoral leadership that inspires.

Be positive yourself. People watch everything a pastor does. The way you speak, preach, and teach sends out clues of your own morale and hope for the future. If

you do not believe there is hope for your church, your people will never be hopeful. In fact this is perhaps the main key to knowing when it is time to leave a church ministry, that is, when you no longer have hope for the church. If you do have hope for your church, then set a hopeful example in the language and tone of voice that you use.

Change your language. Stop talking about problems and recast them as opportunities. Do not talk about your failures, but begin talking about what you learned. Give your leaders permission to fail. Ask your leaders to try five new things this year, and tell them you expect three of their efforts to fail. Then ignore the failures and praise the successes.

E—Evangelistic outreach that is effective.

Focus on those outside your church by finding ways to get your people serving others in the community. Begin with servant-evangelism efforts and gradually add more conscious efforts to share the Gospel with people in the community. Ask your people to make a list of the non-churched people they know and begin praying daily for them. Offer friendship evangelism training for ten percent of your people each year for the next five years.



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