

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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It has been reported that 80% of the churches in the United States are plateaued or declining. Unless they are able to discover and successfully negotiate a path to renewal (or redevelopment or transformation, depending on your language), the overwhelming majority of protestant churches in America will disappear in the next 25 years. Anxiety among pastors and church members has spawned a cottage industry of conferences, consulting firms, coaching networks and books all promising to renew the church.

Usually the books and articles take one of two paths. Some tend to be academic and diagnostic. Others are rigidly formulaic, prescriptive and even unforgiving (and often incompatible with Baptist congregational culture). Recently I have become aware of a third path—denial. Those writers insist that everything is fine and will work itself out, just relax.

More than one pastor has found themselves “moving on” after trying to apply a sure-fire strategy for renewal. More than one church has surrendered to futility after putting up a brave skirmish based on someone else’s battle plan for renewal. Now our own David Laubach has jumped into this maelstrom with his recent book **12 Steps to Congregational Transformation: A Practical Guide for Leaders** (published by Judson Press). Does Dr. Laubach bring anything new to the situation?

The short answer is “No.” David brings no startling new research data or unexpected analysis of the situation. He has not discovered a grand “theory of everything” (TOE) that explains church renewal. He has not received from God the true map to ecclesiastical Shangri-La.

What my good friend has done is distill an incredible range of authors into less than 150 pages of winsome, engaging, practical guidance for churches feeling God’s call to prevail into the 21st Century.

Those of us who have studied church renewal (and related areas) for the last 20 years will recognize the work of Nancy Ammerman, Tom Bandy, George Barna, George Bullard, Jim Collins, Robert Dale, Bill Easum, Richard Foster, Daniel Goleman, Patrick Lencioni, Loren Mead, Brian McLaren, Reggie McNeal, Roy Oswald, and Eugene Peterson. It is obvious that Dr. Laubach is not some uninformed newcomer, but has read and studied widely.

David gathers his presentation under the metaphor of a “twelve step program.” I think that is a good image on several counts. It reinforces the essential idea that church renewal is a process akin to dealing with addictions. Transformation is something that takes time, involves pain, never really comes to an end, and can be treated without demonizing the patient.

The book is practical. For example, **Step 9** is “Make the Connections.” At the very beginning David identifies four connections that need to be made: (1) Connect with the culture, (2)

connect with the context, (3) connect with the congregation, and (4) connect with scriptural precedents. This is followed by a real-life story. Then each of the four connections is explained. Finally, the step concludes with suggestions for further reflection or action (good for group studies).

The book is full of insights that often escape pastors and churches struggling with renewal, such as: "Awareness of a congregation's emotional location is more important than knowing the church's zip code..." "There is always spiritual warfare when we seek to grow spiritually and strengthen Christ's church." "There can be no cheap transformation." "Because church renewal is a process, it requires a spirit of cooperation." "Don't retro-fit your church to be Seeker-Sensitive, GenX-Friendly, or PostModern-Emergent for the wrong reasons."

The best thing about this book is that it is easily accessible for lay leaders in a church. Unlike many in this genre, I would not hesitate to recommend it to my entire leadership team. In fact, I would use it for ongoing study among the leadership, and invite the entire congregation to read the book. It would not be difficult to turn each step and its scriptural connection into a sermon series. **Twelve Steps to Congregational Transformation** is a good entrée into an intimidating array of analyses, opinions, and resources.

I share this with you because I am concerned. I am concerned about our denomination. I am more concerned (because I am more focused) about our Region. But I am most concerned about churches, because churches are the most important thing. The concern is not about the resilience of God, or the sufficiency of Christ, or the persistent witness of the Holy Spirit. The concern is about our faithfulness to what God has called us to be as the community of faith, citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven, and family members in the household of God. God is doing some wonderful things among churches in the Great Rivers Region. It is always exciting and inspiring to share those stories. Unfortunately, those stories are the exception rather than the rule.

***Twelve Steps** is one of the 34 books I read in 2006 as recently reported to my colleagues during a staff meeting. From that list, I also commend to you:*

Charles Marsh **The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today** Basic Books, 2005.

Glen Stassen and David Gushee **Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context** InterVarsity Press, 2003.

Lyle VanderBroek **Breaking Barriers: The Possibilities of Christian Community in a Lonely World** Brazos, 2002.

Dallas Willard **The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship** Harper, 2006.



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