

2nd Opinion: A word to declining congregations—it's not your fault

July 5, 2017

I was working with a church with a long history and many years of vibrant ministry. But now it was struggling. The church was down to its last 40 or so members, and most of them were older.

The church was founded years ago as a downtown church. More recently, it had moved into a then-booming new neighborhood. Now the neighborhood was in decline. In fact, the whole city was experiencing depopulation.

I met with some of the church's leaders. At one point I asked, "How long can you afford to keep going at the current rate you're using your reserves?" Two people said they thought the church could last for five years, another one guessed seven. The church treasurer silently raised two fingers in the air. They were only two years away from closure.

The leaders asked if I would return a couple of weeks later to meet with "anyone in the congregation who might be interested" in this conversation. When I came back, almost every single member of the congregation was present.

Painful conversation

I talked about what I had learned during my conversation with their leaders and how something different needed to happen—and happen soon. I invited them to imagine as many faithful options for going forward as they could. They came up with everything from selling their property to relocating to a storefront back in downtown to merging or nesting with another

congregation. No one mentioned the possibility of closing.

I asked them to assess how doable each option was.

“Do you have the financial resources for that option?” I asked. “Do you have the spiritual depth it would take to give up everything that option would require you to relinquish? Do you have the physical energy to undertake the needed work?”

As we assessed each option, there was a shift in the feeling in the room. People began to look more defeated. Some of them hung their heads or looked out the window. A few insisted they could just continue things as they were, and they would be fine.

I realized my own soul was reacting to their distress. Something was stirring in me, but I couldn't figure out what it was.

Spirit speaks

And then—as if the Spirit had whispered in my ear—it dawned on me.

“I want us to stop for a moment,” I said. “I realize there is something I need to say to you before we go any further. I want all of you to look me in the eyes as I say it.”

I waited for heads to be lifted and bodies to turn back in my direction. I softened my voice a bit, wanting to speak more as a pastor than as a consultant.

“What I need to say to you is this: ‘This is not your fault. You haven't messed up. You haven't been bad people. You haven't been unfaithful. That's not the reason you find yourself in your current situation.’”

Almost immediately, there was a shift in the feeling tone—a collective sigh of relief and a relaxing of shoulders. A few people were trying to suppress

the tears forming in the corners of their eyes.

“You are good and faithful followers of Jesus Christ,” I continued. “What has caused the dilemma you now face is that the culture shifted out from under you. The culture in which you know how to ‘be’ church is gone, and you haven’t yet figured out how to be the church for the new culture in which you find yourselves. But the truth is that no one else has, either.”

Now, hope

A few months later, the congregation still hasn’t decided on its future. But it is facing its challenges more intentionally. It has asked the regional church body to help it as it discerns its future. People are courageous enough to put all options on the table, including the possibility that they may be called to close their church.

Lots of congregations across America are struggling in silence with these same issues. They struggle in silence, because they are afraid it is their fault. They worry they haven’t been faithful enough or smart enough. They worry there are things they should have done but failed to do.

You may be one of those congregations. If so, I want you to look me in the eyes. This is not your fault. There is nothing about which you should feel ashamed. There are faithful options still available to you, no matter how deep the decline has been. With honesty, with prayer and with faith, you can discern that right path forward.

It’s not your fault.

Jim Kitchens is a consultant with the Center for Healthy Churches and coordinator of the [Center for Healthy Churches-West](#).