

# Guest editorial: What if churches re-evaluate instead of scapegoat?

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My colleague Bob Dale often asks me a simple question: “Bill, what are we hearing out there in the churches?”



Bill Wilson

He knows that every week members of our team are fanning out across the country to work in dozens of churches of every size, shape, denomination, setting and orientation. We hear and see first-hand what many others only know second-hand.

The news is usually a mix. Some churches and clergy are fully awake and leaning into the challenge of being a vibrant and thriving church in the 21st century. Others are frustrated and bewildered by the challenges they face. They tend to want to revert back to what worked in an earlier programmatic era rather than embrace the new. When that, inevitably, doesn't work, the mood and tone of the church often turns dark.

## **Litany of woes**

The halls are filled with anxious deacons or elders and worried finance

committee members. During these rocky times, a familiar scenario seems to play out in many churches. Attendance is trending down. Offering plate receipts are sliding. Soon, budget adjustments have to be made. And since the vast majority of a typical congregation's budget is fixed—on facilities and personnel—mission and ministry dollars bear the heaviest cuts. Despite belt-tightening in increasingly creative ways, the bottom line remains troubling.

Into this highly anxious mix a voice begins to be heard. The Bible calls it “murmuring.” It is a voice that seeks someone to blame for the metrics and economic ills that plague the congregation.

Leviticus 16 describes a community-blaming practice known as “scapegoating.” On the Day of Atonement, an innocent goat was burdened with the sins of the people and sent out into the wilderness to perish. The goat's death was an attempt to distract judgment from the actual sinners, of course.

Thankfully, Jesus brought us a much more appropriate way to deal with our sin when he taught us about grace, repentance, forgiveness and redemption.

### **Someone to blame**

Sadly, scapegoating has become far too common among people as a means of diverting attention from actual causes to projected ones. When we find someone to blame for some event or reality that seems out of our control, we absolve ourselves of the need to self-reflect and never consider the possibility we may be part of the problem, or the problem is much more complex than we would want to believe.

One of the reports from the frontline of the American church is that clergy and other leaders increasingly are being blamed for societal shifts that they have no control over. Never mind that nearly every congregation

established prior to 1970 has experienced significant declines in attendance and financial support in recent years. If it happens in our church, there are those who believe it is their calling to find someone to blame and to do so loudly and regularly.

Many clergy are living in fear that the blame for such declines will be laid at their feet alone. Granted, clergy need to take the lead in being responsible, proactive and innovative with regard to declines, but there are seasons when only measuring success by counting “nickels and noses” will result in negative results for nearly everyone. When that happens, the temptation to scapegoat often will rear its ugly head.

Unfortunately, the opportunity to go deep beneath the symptoms and ask important and challenging questions about how we do church, why we do what we do, how we have cheapened discipleship and a host of others is lost. Scapegoating always is ugly, usually very expensive and blatantly un-Christian.

### **What if ...?**

What if, instead of scapegoating, we use our season of crisis to re-evaluate how we live out the Great Commandments and Great Commission in our particular time and place? What if, instead of resorting to blaming, we drop to our knees and collectively began to open our hearts to the possibility God is about a new thing among us? What if, rather than buy into the notion that replacing a pastor or minister will solve our problem, we dig deeper and discover how to be the church in a culture, time and place that no longer implicitly supports our efforts to do so? What if we stop pointing fingers and instead grasp each other's hands and support one another during this rough stretch?

These are challenging days to be and do church. Could we agree on that? Then, might we join together to launch out into our new world as a united

group of men and women who are willing to adapt and adjust to the changing landscape of congregational life?

If that sounds familiar, you might want to re-read the book of Acts. What you will hear from that church will reassure you and inspire you.

*Bill Wilson is director of the [Center for Healthy Churches](#).*