

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



5 Reasons

Why Some Churches Won't Recover

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If you've been paying attention to our world over the last few months, you've no doubt seen some dramatic economic news.

You've probably seen things that made you wonder about the future of your church.

You may be worried about what might come next.

We've seen the initial impact that COVID-19 has had on people, and we're just now starting to get a clear picture of the impact that it's going to have on both the economy and broader culture. There has been an overwhelming amount of precedence setting, historically astronomical things happening. It's seemingly never ending as the media keeps coming at us on a daily basis with the latest string of bad news.

Who would have ever thought that we would see **oil prices below zero**? There was [so much oil in the world](#) that companies were paying other companies to take it off their hands. Just a few months ago we probably wouldn't have been able to imagine the circumstances necessary to make that a reality.

Not to mention the fact that we lost over 20 million jobs in the month of April 2020 alone. To put that in perspective, it took the best 10 years of the economy in recorded history to gain 20 million jobs and [those were all erased in a single month](#).

Lots of traditional economic stalwarts are being turned upside down as new upstarts and

aggressive competitors are seizing this season as an opportunity for expansion and growth.

What difference does all that economy talk make for your church and for my church? As we encounter the reality of those economic effects in the coming year, **we're going to see more churches close their doors than we have in any other period of modern history.**

However, the factors driving this landslide of church closures won't just boil down to economic reasons; it will be a mixture of economic and leadership pressures. **It pains me to distill a list of some of those factors that will ultimately close churches.** I am a "pro local church" leader. I've spent my entire adult life cheerleading for and trying to build up churches that make a difference in their communities. But brothers and sisters, in all truthfulness, I do think we're facing a season of unprecedented pressure on churches across the country.

Unless we look soberly at what's happening within our churches, we may find many churches simply not existing anymore in a matter of weeks or months. In fact, I was recently talking with a ministry leader who asked probably one of the saddest questions I've ever heard. Having not been able to pay their insurance and their bank accounts being closed because they were upside down on payments, the question he simply asked was, **"At what point do we just not exist anymore?"**

I share this list of five reasons why some churches won't recover as a set of warning signs

but also as guidance for how we can think differently and lead differently in this season. I don't share these thoughts in an attempt to be unnecessarily harsh about what might be coming, but rather as a friend on the journey who is trying to think about how we can all come out of this crisis stronger. So, here are some reasons why churches in our communities won't recover from the pressures that we're currently facing.

Entitlement Mindset

In times of great economic and cultural upheaval, the worst type of leader to deal with these kinds of changes is an entitled leader.



These are the leaders who think that the world owes them something. And it's a dangerous attitude to have. We're in a season where we need to dig entitlement out of our own leadership and out of those who lead around us. Here are just a few ways that entitlement leadership might be showing up in your church today:

- **You're expecting everything to just go back to normal.** The economy and our culture have changed so much in the last two months and they're not going to just snap back to normal. Even when we do shift into a more familiar setting after this pandemic, nothing will be the same as it was before. If you're anticipating that everything is going to be the same as it was, you're indulging in an entitlement mindset. If you're tempted to

just "wait it out" until things "go back to normal," then you're acting out of an entitlement mindset.

- **You think that what you did in the past will work in the present and future.** This is always a dangerous posture as a leader because the culture around us is constantly changing. If you expect everything to continue to operate the way it did eight weeks ago and aren't asking, "How do we change in light of what we currently know?", then your church won't survive. Entitlement leads to method inflexibility; that inflexibility will be deadly to churches in the coming months.
- **You're expecting someone else to solve your problems.** If you're looking to the government or your denominational structure to make decisions and chart the path for you, you are operating in a risky zone. God put you in the place of leadership in your church. So, you need to lead. You need to be humble enough to look at the situations and realities in your community and make decisions based on what you're seeing on the ground to define a path forward.
- **You expect church to only "happen" inside your building.** The bible is full of evidence that God is more interested in working in the marketplace than inside religious buildings. Think about instances where God called people into service; it was rarely in a religious building. (God called Moses at the burning bush while he was working, David while he was a young shepherd, Peter while he was fishing, Paul while he walking on a road—the list goes on!) If you think church only happens inside your building, then you're missing out on what God wants to do through your ministry. Churches that will survive are the ones getting out of their seats and into the streets. If it's just about a 60 minute show on Sunday, you won't survive.

More than ever before, we need to be leaning into humility and responding to the communities around us. Churches that will thrive in the next normal will listen carefully to their communities and leverage what they learn to point people towards Jesus. Our leadership needs to be postured in such a way that we are humble rather than entitled and seeking to

serve the community that we're in rather than turning inward.

Poor Communication

One of the fascinating things about this pandemic is how quickly churches pivoted to a much stronger communication strategy.

Gone are the days where you might look down your nose at those leaders who leverage social media, email lists, digital tools and more to communicate with their people.

There was a time where you could get by without a robust communication strategy but those days are gone. The churches that will survive and thrive into the future are those that are using communication to ultimately drive activity throughout their entire organization.

Communication is going to have a seat at the senior leadership table of thriving churches in the next normal.

This goes back to the basic elements of Church Communications 101:

- You need to build an email list of the people who are connected to your church.
- You need to be actively engaged on social media platforms to stay in front of your people, regardless of where they're at.
- You need to work on a communication plan that gets the right message to the right people at the right time.
- You need to leverage your church database to ensure people aren't falling through the cracks.



Churches with poor communication methods are already disappearing from people's view.

As people develop their next normal rhythms (both now and beyond this pandemic), it's our job to encourage them to come and be a part of what we're doing. **Part of what we've always done in the local church is fight the cycles of non-attendance.** We've taken a massive hit to our understanding around this area, as most churches have gone six to eight weeks without anyone at their physical locations and have a really unclear idea of who attended online or not.

We'll inevitably be moving into overdrive in the coming weeks and months as we pass through the various phases of recovery. Most churches will be facing the likely reality of needing to run multiple experiences at the same time in the coming weeks:

- Church online for those who can't or won't attend a physical location
- Smaller group in-person experiences to help people reconnect with others
- Staggered "normal services" that will have ever increasing audience sizes (from 25 people to 50 to 150, etc.)

If your church has a poor communications strategy (or worse, you sneer at the need for one), it's not only unlikely that you'll survive the complexity that is coming your way but you'll also fail to serve your people where they're at right now.

Insider Focus

Churches that have always been solely focused on those who are already attending have been on the brink of extinction for a long time. The recovery period will accelerate the decline of churches exclusively focused on those already attending.

Gone is the day when people just showed up to church because they felt a certain amount of obligation to be there. Models that rely on just passing church from one generation to the next and not reaching out to see new people come into the faith don't live up to the reality of people's lives anymore. Churches that reach out to people who are truly disconnected from the message of

Jesus will win the day long term as those people eventually come to know him and are ultimately disciplined in him.

This pandemic happened at a fascinating time in the spiritual makeup of our culture. If this happened a generation or two before, **the religious community would likely have been seen as leaders in this crisis and there would have been a collective call to prayer**, but what's been made clear through this experience is that the church has been marginalized in its place in society.

You and I need to double down on our efforts to connect with people who don't follow Jesus and to lovingly see them get connected to his message. Churches that are just focusing on the insiders, that are more worried about the “keep” than the “reach,” will find themselves increasingly marginalized and unable to survive what comes next.

The local church has always been the only organization in the world whose sole mission is to serve those people who are not connected yet. Churches that get that mission backwards won't recover from this crisis.

Volunteer Erosion

One of the potentially most dangerous aspects of this season has been the radical shift towards an increasing professionalization of the church.

I was recently speaking to a leader of a church of about 1,500 people, and this church leader was a bit distressed about the fact that their Sunday service experience went from a volunteer team of about 450 people to just four staff producing their online weekend services.

While many companies around the world are celebrating the shift to digital and consider it a great savior of their businesses as they reduce costs, the volunteer erosion that this shift represents could ultimately damage the local church long term. There's a risk associated with reducing volunteer roles so dramatically, and churches that don't find new ways to increase their volunteer culture in the coming weeks will find themselves at a loss in the future in many ways.

The people who serve in your church represent the core of your ministry. **Those who serve are most likely to invite their friends, they're most likely to give financially, and they're most likely to push the mission forward.** As we've had to sideline a large percentage of our volunteer force, a re-engagement strategy needs to be central to our recovery efforts. Looking for ways to increase the volunteer core and draw people into the mission is part of what thriving churches will need to do in the coming weeks and months.



If your church is unable to articulate a desired path forward for volunteers, it will be difficult for your church to recover. If your church is sliding towards fewer volunteers, you are moving away from survival. A church with no volunteers is a dead church.

Financial Issues

The financial issues that some churches are going to face (or are already facing) are really last on the list of reasons why some churches won't recover.

“The borrower is slave to the lender” [ref], and in the coming weeks and months we're going to hear stories of churches being closed across the country because of bad financial deals.

There used to be an axiom in the church lending business that no lender really wants to close churches, but when we're facing an economic situation that looks like it is going to be at least the worst recession in a generation or two, **it's not hard to imagine that some**

lenders won't hesitate to foreclose on church buildings across the country. This isn't really the fault of the lenders; the church has made an arrangement on that financing and by defaulting on loans, they're breaking a covenant with a third party.

These loans were made in good faith and if churches don't go out of their way to manage the debt and repay at a reasonable rate, it's only reasonable that the banks and other financial institutions take whatever action they can to recover their investment. **Churches that struggled with debt before the coronavirus crisis are going to struggle going forward.**

I was recently in a conversation with our friends at [CDF Capital](#), and they told me that they reached out to 100% of their churches and offered an extension in payments to give them a rest for six months during this crisis. What an incredible leadership move! I was even more encouraged to hear that **more than half of the churches turned down the need for a break on payments.** Those churches are the ones that are moving strongly into the future!

Although many institutions are offering similar loan relief at this moment, those offers will come to an end at some point, and if your church is struggling with debt, you need to start dealing with it now.

The issues we've talked about above represent a much larger risk. In many ways, your financial position as a church is a reflection of the positions you've taken on the issues discussed above. However, as a perhaps more visible or immediate issue of concern, we will see financial tensions overwhelm churches in the coming weeks and months.

I'd love to hear your thoughts. **What are some factors that you could see impacting churches and ultimately pushing them to the point where they can't recover?** Leave a comment [here](#) or send me an email. I'd love to hear more.

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