

Overcoming Objections from Struggling Churches  
Dr. Don Nations, DNA Coaching, 2009

Change is difficult. Making changes can be met with some level of resistance even in transforming churches. For struggling churches, however, suggestions of change are often met with objections, rationalizations and a denial of the seriousness of the situation. It is usually better to take the time to address these instead of dismissing them. In doing so objective truth is shared, the past investment of the people in the church is honored and the opportunity for real dialogue is created.

Below are some of the more common statements made by struggling churches in response to a call for them to change. Some ideas for responding to each statement are also presented.

But our situation is different?

It is true that every church is unique in that it has its own specific history, traditions, personalities, setting, etc. It is also true that struggling churches tend to have a lot of things in common. There are general principles which apply to just about every church and then it is important to customize those principles to each specific local church. Struggling churches face a host of different challenges but likely all could benefit from having great hospitality, thorough guest follow-up, dynamic worship, a clean/repared facility, inviting more people to church, etc.

We are doing what we have always done; why is that now not enough?

The world has changed significantly over the past 50 years – computers are everywhere, television and the Internet have “made the world smaller”, communication happens almost instantly, a declining percentage of people in the US attend church, young children regularly interact with incredibly sophisticated technology, musical styles have come and gone and much more. Simply doing what has worked in the past is not creating great results today. Seeing this, judicatories are starting to ask congregations to act in new ways – not to save the judicatory but to help the local church be more successful in its mission to reach the world and make disciples.

We always seem to find a way to get by and we will do so in the future?

It is true that historically churches have “found a way” to make ends meet. Often this has occurred through fund raisers or the generosity

of a small number of families in the congregation. Years have passed and our congregations have aged, many of those generous families are no longer with us and worship attendance has often declined. Think of the people who attend worship in your church, what will the congregation look like in ten or fifteen years? "Getting by" has often come at the expense of investing in programs, advertising, evangelism, church maintenance and denominational askings. The goal isn't for churches to "just get by" but, rather, for them to thrive. Church should be about more than finding ways to squeeze the budget, take care of maintenance issues, find people to serve on committees and "run the church".

Young people don't go to church any more.

It would be more accurate to say that most young people who attend church choose to be part of growing, dynamic churches which offer vibrant worship and speak to their heart issues. While a percentage of young people do not attend church at all, there are many churches which are filled with young people. Most mainline congregations are struggling to reach young people and keep them involved. It is possible to do so but it takes a lot of intentionality . . . and usually a fair amount of change.

So you are saying that what we are doing is "bad" or "wrong"?!

We simply want to help the church be more effective in reaching and retaining people. Most people in churches want their church to grow, they want to see new people come to faith in Jesus, they want to see more people get involved and they want to see lives change for the better. Unfortunately these things are not seen enough in most churches. The goal is to help every church maximize its effectiveness and impact on the community. In light of the many ways in which the world has changed, churches must also make some changes. We are not talking about compromising faith or distorting the Gospel but, rather, changing some of the tactics we use to reach out and be the church.

But we are a friendly church and would welcome all guests.

Almost every church considers itself to be a friendly church. This is true both for vital growing churches and for churches which are about to close. Friendliness is important but it is even more important for guests to feel like the church is a place in which they could find and make friends. It is more important for a guest to get to know the names of two or three people in the church on their first Sunday than it is for half of the church to shake hands with the guest. It is also

important to remember that few first-time guests will come simply because the doors of the church are open. The congregation needs to be visible in the community and actively invite people to participate. This may include advertising, evangelistic efforts, community events organized by the church, door-to-door flyer distribution and those in the congregation inviting their friends, relatives, associates and neighbors to church.

So it is more important to try to get new people than it is to take care of our own members?

It is not a case of "either-or". It is important to provide appropriate care and support for those who are already in the congregation. In fact, that is the area in which the vast majority of programming and spending in most churches is focused. It is also important for churches to be intentional about reaching out to new people. Just as the church seeks to meet the needs of its members it also should seek to meet the needs of people in the community. Just as people in the church warmly greet their friends, they also need to warmly greet new people. The call of Jesus is both "love one another" and "go make disciples".

If we were given as much money as a new church starts gets, we would be growing too!

In many denominations and church systems, especially those which invest heavily in starting a new church, the judicatory did make a significant investment in starting the church. The church already received funding and assistance to get started, even if that was decades ago. Starting new churches has been demonstrated to be an effective way of reaching new people. The goal would be to both start new churches and help existing churches become more effective. Simply giving an existing church a significant amount of money with no strings attached has not been shown to help the church reach new people. A lack of growth is usually not a resource issue. Growth can happen in just about any church if the congregation is willing to do whatever it takes to reach new people.

So traditional worship is bad and we have to get rid of it?!

No. As long as worship is authentic, then the style used in worship is simply a tactic. If a traditional style of worship helps a certain group of people connect with God, then that is great. If a different style of worship helps a different group of people connect with God, then that is also great. Regardless of the style of worship, it should have life and energy and be crafted with great intentionality. It is important for

all churches to regularly evaluate their worship service(s) and seek to make them even better. If reaching new people would require making some changes to the worship service or creating a new worship service, that is a small price to pay to help more people connect with God in the person of Jesus.

We don't have the resources to be able to change.

It is true that some churches have more resources available to them than others. It is also true that a lack of resources is rarely the major reason why a church is not growing. Churches with limited resources may find it difficult to pay for a flashy direct mail campaign but they could likely print flyers and distribute them door-to-door; they may not be able to afford TV ads inviting people to church but it doesn't cost anything for current participants to invite their friends, relatives, associates and neighbors to church; they may not be able to afford to take our full page ads in the newspaper but it doesn't cost anything for current participants to call members who have not been active recently. There is always something that a church can do to reach more people. The goal is to help churches leverage the resources they do have (money, people, facilities, connections, skills, talents, etc.) in order to help them become more effective. As they reach new people, the resources available to them will also grow.

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