

INTRODUCTION

Yes you can!

The fact you have purchased this manual on Turnaround Leadership is a strong indication you can be used of God to lead turnaround in your local church. You have not given up. Possibly you've been beaten down. But you've made it back to your feet and are determined to grow and learn from your experiences. You are not content with the status quo. You feel called to the place of ministry you serve and are not ready to call it quits.

Perhaps your board questions your ability. Do you sense your denominational leaders have given up on you? Do seminars and pastor's conferences cause you to feel defeated, embarrassed, and lonely? Is your spouse the only one in your life who still believes you can overcome all obstacles and be an instrument for positive change? Nonetheless, there is hope. Yes, for you and your church.

Look up the word “average” and you’ll find my picture

Chances are we have not met. There is a reason for that. I'm not famous. I'm a pastor like you. For the past 10 years I've served a church in Glendora, California.

This is the reason I know there is hope for you. I'm average. I'm average in appearance. I'm five feet nine inches, and shrinking slowly at age forty-eight. I go to the gym with some regularity, but that does not disguise the six pillows covering my abdominal six-pack. My face is showing age spots and my hairline is receding.

In high school I wrestled and participated in gymnastics. If you were to visit my alma mater in Auburn, Washington, you would search in vain for my name in the trophy case. I set no records. Left no legacy. Today I enjoy racquetball and played basketball until last year when I began to embarrass myself shamelessly. You see, I'm just average athletically.

I graduated from seminary in 1980. I'm grateful for my training, but I received no awards or scholarships. I doubt if many of my professors could put my name with a face. I was just average academically.

Since seminary in 1980, the Lord has not called me to be a church planter or to pastor churches in rapid population growth areas. Each of the churches I have pastored had long histories. One was over 100 years old. The churches that called me were average.

It probably comes as no surprise my pastoral abilities are average as well. Western Baptist College did present me with a preaching award. But it was a small school and, as I recall, not many men participated in the preaching contest that year. I don't manuscript my messages so any clever turn of a phrase or homiletic masterpiece is more coincidence than genius. Each weekend I preach three times. By the final delivery, I feel I've come close to communicating what I originally intended. By then, however, it's time to place the sermon notes in a file, and begin preparation for the next week. While I work hard at communicating God's Word with relevance, accuracy, and passion, my skills will never compare favorably to those pastors who broadcast their sermons weekly to a national audience.

How is this encouraging you may ask?

If your aspiration is to become one of the great religious leaders of our time, I probably cannot help you much. On the other hand, if you identify with being average, but have a deep unquenchable passion to be an effective turnaround leader, be encouraged. God often utilizes average people with an unusual determination in an extraordinary manner. One of my favorite passages says it this way:

For consider your calling brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the

things that are not, that he might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God (1 Corinthians 1:26-29 NASB).

What that says to me is the power for ministry is found in God and His Word. Since that is true, there is absolutely no difficulty from God's perspective in using average men and women who are committed to serving him in an attitude of self-denial.

While I have no illusions concerning my natural abilities, I have experienced the Lord's hand upon my life for turnaround ministry. God can and does choose to use average people to breathe fresh life into stagnant and even dying churches.

Looking for an easy fix? If so, you have the wrong book. Searching for practical and specific steps for small wins? Keep reading!

The degree of growth you will experience with these principles may be small or massive. That is up to you, your leadership team, and God. But I'm confident in assuring you that rigorous and prayerful application of the principles shared will bring change in your church. Turnaround always demands change. The church can either change their leader or its leader can decide to change.

This book is written with the surgeon-pastor in mind. Some of what is shared will be hard words. Turnaround is not for the faint of heart. I recommend you (pastor) read this book alone.

Envision this product as a tool kit. Pick and choose according to what is most helpful in your unique situation. It is probably unwise to use everything you'll read and hear. Be discreet (see chapter 8). A surgeon selects his instruments based upon the demands of the operation being performed. No two are identical.

The lessons shared in this book are passed along to give you confidence. Confidence is developed through winning experiences, successes and achievement.

You need confidence not more criticism

Pastors are magnets for criticism. They are called to confront sin. They must bring change. They offer advice and counsel. They are expected to be non-retaliatory. If they strike back or even defend themselves, there is

a heavy price to pay. Pastors appear strong. People pay his salary so assume he works for them.

I would also add, many churches set up a form of congregational polity which encourages outspoken criticism in a public setting. The pastor is to sit quietly while his personal finances and professional competency are openly debated.

I assume you, pastor friend, have had all the critiquing needed. How about some proactive and helpful suggestions? This is the heart of this book.

You may also be suffering from burnout. I'm convinced burnout does not come from working hard. It is caused by working hard with few results. Can you identify with the following?

We trained hard . . . but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up teams we would be reorganized . . . I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion inefficiency and demoralization.

—Petronius Arbiter (210 B.C.)

If you are sufficiently weary of restructuring and holding endless meetings only to do the same old thing, then this book is for you. After all, *if we always do what we've always done, we'll always get what we've always got.*

Can turnaround be guaranteed? No! I would be lying to tell you that. Are there risks? Yes! Am I confident these principles provide workable guidance for navigating the treacherous task of bringing life and vitality to your church? Yes—because I've seen them work!

If you're willing to outlive whatever is standing between your church's reality and effective ministry dreams, then you probably are better off approaching the suggestions of this book with caution. Your sense of urgency may not match the price you'll need to pay. On the other hand, if you are consumed by a sense of discontent with the present situation, there is help for you.

Is there really hope for me?

Yes, if you are fully committed to seeing positive change take place in your church and willing to pay the price. Yes, If you are convinced God has placed you in the church where you are, for the sake of winning the lost, building the saints, equipping the workers, and multiplying leaders.

Final note of caution

In ninth grade, Coach Shaw sent all of us out to the baseball field in our first period PE class for a distance run. I was feeling a little frisky and decided I wanted to win that day. Remember I was average. He pointed to a couple of backstops located off in the distance and instructed us to run from our location around both backstops and return to where we were.

Approximately half way I realized, to my amazement, I was running second. The only other boy with me was Dave McGinnis, our varsity runner. For once in my life I would finish first. One hundred yards from the finish line I sprinted. Dave didn't keep the pace. With renewed energy I gave my all. As I approached Coach Shaw, I heard his words of affirmation, "Good job, Wood. Just one more lap."

I don't remember how I placed that day, but it certainly was nowhere near first. I learned two valuable lessons: first, be clear on instructions before you take off; second, pacing is critical.

Turnaround is a worthy objective. It will not likely happen overnight. You should probably plan to invest at least seven years. It's a distance run not a sprint. Through these tools, I will be alongside you to coach you in the journey.

Yes you can!

CHAPTER 1

What Does a Turnaround Leader Look Like?

Predictable ceilings

Church growth literature has documented the predictable plateaus churches face. They are usually identified as an average worship attendance of 75, 200, 400, 800, and 1200 “caps.” These caps, however, are elastic ceilings. You push over them and think all is smooth sailing only to discover a year later nothing has changed. The church’s scope of ministry is approximately where it was twelve months previously. Frustrating to say the least. Methods, programs, and leadership style which worked so well in bringing the church to this size become less effective, even counterproductive. A church which has grown quickly, and seemingly effortlessly, suddenly reaches a brick wall. Now that momentum has been lost, turnaround is required. What type of leader can get the church growing again?

Confidence is critical

Effective turnaround leaders are not clones. They come in all sizes, shapes, personalities, and ages. What they share in common is self-confidence.

How does this square with what was said previously about being average? It is a mistake to confuse self-confidence with arrogance. Arrogant people don’t feel a need for God. Self-confident church leaders are usually painfully aware of their personal weaknesses but have experienced the

power of God working in and through them. They know the difference between natural talent and spiritual giftedness.

I was pleased to hear John MacArthur, pastor of the 10,000-member Grace Community Church in Panorama City, California, say he was not sure whether he would be able to repeat his story of growth in another place at another time. Rick Warren has admitted the same. This in no way mitigates their capabilities, nor is it false humility. And it certainly does not diminish their confidence that they are God's men in God's place doing God's work.

I bring these well-known names into the discussion to segue to a critical point. Whatever the turnaround leader looks like he probably will NOT look like John MacArthur, Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, Leith Anderson, or Charles Stanley. Turnaround leaders seldom mimic another leader. They learn all they can from them, then proceed to package their plans, styles, and timing to the situation in which they find themselves. What they do mirror, however, is the confidence of these great leaders.

Seldom do the mega-church pastors serve as the best models for those seeking to discover patterns and principles to guide them in turnaround. We need to look elsewhere.

Can a pastor do multiple turnarounds?

The answer is usually not. But sometimes.

George Barna in *Turnaround Churches*, Regal (1993) concluded that leaders who brought churches back from the brink were young, and seldom were able or willing to attempt to do so in more than one or two situations. He based his conclusions in the book upon interviews with 30 pastors. Since I happened to be one of those, I was obviously quite interested in his conclusions.

Even more disappointing to many, including myself, was his conclusion that what those pastors did could not be shared in a significantly helpful manner with others. He concluded that their "unique" gift mix and strengths, while observable, were probably not transferable!

... a turnaround pastor is a truly unique human being, skilled in ways that are uncommon even among the ranks of the best-known and most talented clergy. Being a visionary leader is not, by itself, sufficient to prepare a person to lead a

dying church back to health . . . it appears that relatively few leaders currently serving the church are truly turnaround pastors. And because of the enormous personal toll the turnaround process takes on people, even these individuals are likely to revive only one or two churches during their ministry careers. Thus, the chances of finding a turnaround pastor are slim. (p. 108-109)

While I admire Barna's research and literary skills, I simply differ.

Yes, the toll is terrific. I agree the skills necessary to direct a comeback are not synonymous with those of a church planter or the pastor who leads a steadily growing congregation.

No, I do not think turnaround pastors can only do it in one location. Part of their skill is assessing the needs of their particular congregations, the history of their churches, the cultures, the resources available, and then developing tailor-made strategies for their congregations. Neither do I believe the skills cannot be transferred. This book is written with the conviction they can be.

True turnaround pastors usually CAN do it again, and again, and again

One of my ministry heroes is Don Engram, who is currently shepherding the fast-growing flock of Palmcroft Baptist Church in Phoenix, Arizona. Don has effectively led four churches to significant growth in four states over four decades. He is now directing the efforts of this great church in a \$6 million expansion project. Don is 70 years old. I believe he represents what can happen if pastors are lover-leaders, sensitive to the Holy Spirit. Good leaders change their styles to accommodate the needs, but the principles they've learned move with them from location to location.

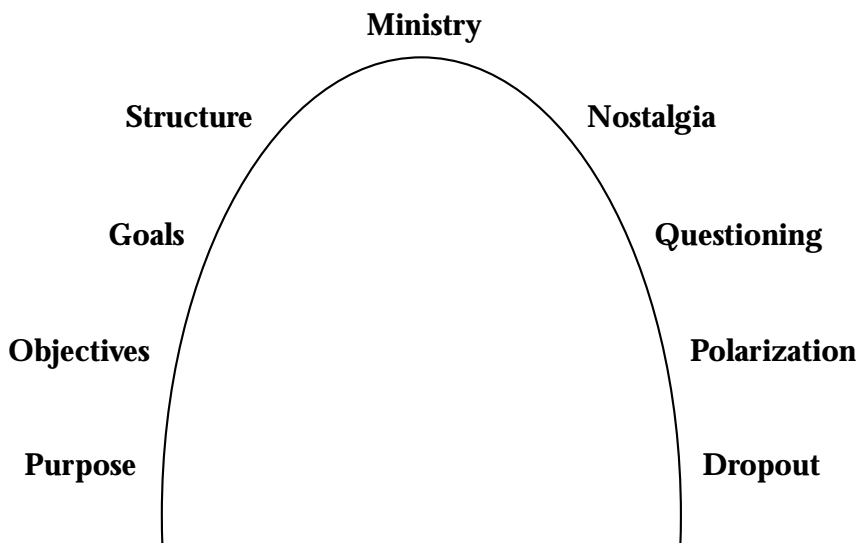
The principles we consider are transferable to any pastor willing to grow and pay the price. Certainly some will have an advantage due to gifts, experience, upbringing, and personality. But if God has called us to a church, He does wish for it to be vital and spiritually alive. If you believe that, there is hope!

Turnaround leaders do not waste energy whining

I have long appreciated the wise writings of Fred Smith, Sr. He has helped me immensely through his writings. His words are tender yet ruthlessly practical. I met him for breakfast recently in preparation for this book. He was early (most superb leaders are). Apologizing for his casual attire, he explained his wife was now a semi-invalid; he had never had complete dexterity of his right hand, and had just undergone surgery on his left for carpal tunnel. He had to dress himself with neither hand able to button his shirt.

Before I could offer my sympathy he added, “Two words have become very important to me. They are *current reality*.” He went on to explain that there is little value in spending energy worrying about what might be or should be. Leaders assess what is and go from there. Get on with it.

What is your current reality?



Where is your church on the bell curve? Have you crested? How many years has the curve continued downward? Denial gets us nowhere. Effective turnaround leaders sense the dynamics of Robert Dale’s bell curve without ever having seen it.

Plateaued ministries will soon become dying institutions if they are not guided by turnaround leaders. What indicators might there be that a church is in danger? Three factors usually warn of impending decay:

1. Extreme and continued member dissatisfaction. When people's needs are not being met, problems lie ahead.
2. Low morale. When regular participants fail to see evidence of life (fruit bearing), they lose a heart for sacrifice and investment in the efforts of the church.
3. Declining or negative bottom lines. While numbers of worshipers, baptisms and dollars are not the sole criteria for gauging health, they are significant indicators.

While not as glaring as the above, a leader can look for more subtle diagnostic indicators. These might be viewed as signs of impending pathology. The main thing has been ignored for so long, the body is in danger of dying if:

1. The church consistently rewards activities unrelated to the main thing. This might be increasing the support of missionaries who do not fulfill your purpose statement, or placing people into positions of leadership who evidence no commitment to what your church purpose statement claims to uphold as important.
2. Activities do not follow purpose. The more programs the better, or so it seems. Yet, in many cases, these programs, which drain the church budget of thousands of dollars and demand thousands of man-hours, do little to produce fruit. Despite the fact that these programs do not produce character or conversions, they continue year after year. Numerous sacred cow programs are a sure sign a church is in trouble.

This might be referred to as corporate cognitive dissonance. The cognitive dissonance theory assumes humans are cognitive beings. That is, what they believe must match what they do or one of three results will be forthcoming. One, they will change their behavior. Two, they will alter their beliefs. Or, three, they will go crazy.

In the church the purpose statement (the main thing) expresses the core values. The programs are what they actually do. When the two do not line up, a form of schizophrenia develops and the congregation becomes dysfunctional.

3. The phantom limb complex exists. Individuals who have a limb amputated may still feel pain in that absent limb, or reach to scratch it. The automatic nervous system is causing them to respond through habit to non-existing needs. Is your church still holding services which meet no one's needs? Is your church practicing evangelistic methods which reach few? Are you insisting on a music style totally irrelevant to the community which you are desiring to touch?
4. There is evidence of a dead man walking. Does the church appear to have much motion without any awareness of purpose or plan? Three questions need to be asked. Can workers in the church articulate the main thing? Do workers understand how what they do contributes to the main thing? Do workers feel freedom to make adjustments to contribute better to the main thing?

Turnaround leaders understand the problems described above. When their church is dying, they sense it and long to do something to prevent further decline. This book will give practical suggestions to help turnaround leaders in assessment and corrective applications.

Must a church be large to be healthy?

Smaller churches can be healthy. Large churches can be sick. A few pastors are uncomfortable talking about change because they fear a knee-jerk reaction from laypeople afraid of becoming a mega-church. They can relax. Few need worry about becoming a mega-church. Of the 350,000 Protestant congregations in the United States:

Half average fewer than 75 at their principal weekly worship service

Three quarters average fewer than 150

Fewer than 5 percent average more than 350

Fewer than 1 percent average over 1000

Size really is not the issue for a turnaround leader. The focus should be health, not size. At age 49, I am not even interested in growing physically in size. I am more concerned than ever before about my overall health. While we cannot point to only one measurable factor to determine the health of a church—any more than a doctor can measure his patient's

health by just one variable—as caregivers of the church we do need to take its pulse and see if it is fulfilling its Great Commission purpose. Dann Spader, founder of Sonlife, encourages pastors to consider the 10 percent rule. That is for every 10 people in Sunday morning worship at least one should be brought to faith that year. Thus, if your church averages 250 on Sunday morning you should expect to see at least 25 professions of faith or baptisms.

I think God loves small churches. Abraham Lincoln observed, “God must have loved the common man, He made so many of us.” I suspect the same is true for the smaller and medium-sized church.

The issue is not size. What matters is how badly you wish to see your church become all God wishes for it to be!

Pastor friend, unless you have a burning desire to see it happen it won't! It's that simple. The role of the pastor has changed from the 1960s. At that time a congregation's expectations centered around the pastor's preaching and pastoral care. “Today the senior pastor must be focused on being proactive in leadership, vision casting and centered on mission.” (*NetFax, Helping Church Leaders Make the Transition from the Present to the Future*, Number 80, September 15, 1997).

A turnaround pastor must be passionate about the need for radical change in his church. Cutting-edge churches have different styles and looks, but their senior pastors all share one common characteristic: big tears spring to their eyes for the lost.”

A leader must have the heart of Jesus. The “want-to” comes before the “how-to.”

Does it matter to you that people around you are lost? Jesus came “to seek and save the lost.” He understood that as the central purpose of His life upon earth. By accomplishing His great redemptive plan He brought glory to the Father as nothing else could have done.

A turnaround leader might apply all the correct principles and practices without seeing the church grow (not likely, but possible). Successful turnaround leaders, however, refuse to allow their church to focus on secondary issues. They steadfastly resist playing church. They are not as worried about keeping their job as they are hearing the Lord say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

The willingness to make tough decisions carries the risk of pain. Michael Jensen of Harvard University studied leadership traits that bring executives and their companies the greatest success. His surprising conclusion was that they understand “pain is good.”

Average leaders assume corporate comfort is to be preferred. They operate under what he calls the Pain Avoidance Model (PAM). When the brain receives a negative report, or statistic, it chooses not to register it, and thus not to deal with it, when possible.

Effective leaders teach themselves to face up to the painful stimuli, and recognize what must be done and act (reported in Leadership Strategies Premier issue, p.8 — source was Geoffrey Colvin, Fortune Magazine).

What about those who say turnaround is nearly impossible?

As mentioned earlier, I had a personal interest in the conclusions drawn by George Barna in his 1993 book on this subject of turnaround. It was among the first to address the subject and for that we must all be grateful. However, I believe he drew some erroneous conclusions. He concludes, “While the chances are slim that a declining church can be turned around (p.6).”

Even more disconcerting for the 350,000 pastors in our country is his claim: “To turn around a church, a new pastor must be brought in to lead the revolution. Some churches probably have come back from the edge of extinction without a change in pastor. However, we did not find such a church.” (p.47)

Aubrey Malphurs quotes Lyle Schaller and Ralph Neighbor Jr. as saying turnarounds cannot be done and/or little is known that will work (Vision America).

I believe Barna and others are wrong. At the risk of offending, there is a certain amount of ego posturing not taken into account by Barna’s research and other similar studies.

Pastors often enjoy deflating the accomplishments of their predecessors and inflating their own accomplishments. Most every pastor I’ve known has considered himself to be walking into a turnaround situation. Few are willing to admit “My predecessor did such a great job of laying a foundation that growing this church is like falling off a log.”

Furthermore, it is a well-known fact that a pastor's most effective ministry frequently does not begin until he has been at a church seven years. How does this reality fit with Barna's conclusion that a pastor must see immediate turnaround or be forever without hope?

In a long pastorate, a church is likely to go through several cycles of plateau, stagnation, and renewed vigor and growth. Womack, in his somewhat dated but nonetheless outstanding book *The Pyramid Principle of Church Growth* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1977) suggests churches are much like the physical bodies of children. The bone structure must be solidified to accommodate the next spurt of growth.

I have been amazed that few have stepped forward to challenge the conclusion that only new pastors can lead a church in effective turnaround. This is manifestly untrue and is circular reasoning. It begins by defining a "turnaround pastor" as one who brings about almost immediate growth to a declining church. Given that definition only a new pastor could qualify.

Recently a number of well-known mega-churches have admitted their attendance has declined for two or more years. Should we assume the only solution is for them to dismiss their excellent leaders?

I think not. The growth may never be as rapid as it was at one point, but my guess is that these competent leaders will figure out a way to turn the decline around and begin growing once again.

A pastor determined to bring about new life in his ministry must, however, be willing to change. Either the church must change its pastor or the pastor must change.

Over a period of 25 years, I've watched with fascination as some pastors have chosen to be voted out of their churches, leave the ministry, or hold a funeral service for their churches rather than change. Why? Is it too painful to admit what they're doing is not working? How can leaders expect their congregations to change if they themselves are unwilling to lead the way?

Turnaround will probably be a little bloodier for a pastor who has been serving in a church for several years than it would have been had he begun the process immediately. But it can be done. Speaking of blood, it is virtually impossible to perform surgery without blood being spilled. Turnaround leaders view themselves as surgeons, not butchers. They know the end result will not only bring glory to God, but good to the people they shepherd.

Summary

There are predictable numeric barriers at which progress stops in most congregations. Once the momentum is lost, a turnaround is required. Turnaround leaders come in all shapes, personalities, and sizes but they are all confident of their calling and have discovered transferable principles which permit them to participate in the miracle of turnaround more than once if required. These principles are best learned from those who have been gifted and called to this particular type of ministry rather than the typical mega-church pastor.

The bell curve is a simple tool to help ascertain how critical the condition of a church is. Once a pastor recognizes where his church is on this curve, he can decide which principles presented in later chapters should be applied.

No church is too small to accept the challenge of regaining vitality and health. God loves small churches too. What is required for any size church, however, is a leader with a fire in his gut for redemption of lost souls. This passion will likely be what sustains him in the heat of the spiritual battle. There is no turnaround without pain. The godly leader, therefore, accepts the role of a surgeon. The body of Christ must be made well.