

Introduction

According to Lifeway research of 34 denominations and other groups representing 60% of U.S. Protestant churches, “More protestant churches closed than started in 2019.”¹ The typical reaction to this statistic is to double down on birthing new ministries and opening new churches, but an alternative may be to consider whether denominations are over-planting and under-cultivating and what is required, instead, is weeding, watering, and pruning faltering churches. Or cleaning up the rubber and repairing the rigging to ensure a seaworthy vessel.

Some rationalize that the decline being experienced in these denominations is God’s way of closing the door on ministries in certain geographic and demographic areas to open ministries in more ripe and receptive fields. Others legitimately wonder: what is there to maintain? These churches may have aging members and be situated in areas of economic and population decline. Isn’t it time to move on? But too often, congregations are so busy trying to get visitors and new members through the front door that they forget about those leaving through the back door, like their own children and grandchildren.

Most of the eleven churches I served over the last 27 years, (from Michigan, Maryland, and Pennsylvania to Kansas and California, some with large schools and others with an average weekly attendance under one hundred) all appeared to want to grow more than they wanted to steward what had been entrusted to them. The popular view was that to focus on attending to souls on the raft was less important than pursuing swimmers who had fallen out of the raft (possibly even downright selfish because there are lost people out there). Unfortunately, I observed this approach was diluting relationships and hindering growth and understanding of the

¹ Protestant Church Closures Outpace Openings in U.S. - Lifeway Research.

faith to which they were inviting others to become a part. Jesus explains in the Parable of the Talents that those who are faithful in a little will be trusted with much², most particularly with “true riches,” riches of the kingdom of Heaven. As a result of their under-focus on maintaining the vessel, these churches were not equipped to accommodate the envisioned growth. Perhaps they were perfectly designed to remain in their current state.³ Sometimes, leaders of such churches appear to cull their congregations down to the size they can humanly manage.

Other times, an under-focus on stewarding what God has entrusted appears to temporarily benefit a congregation. After a few months of new leadership emerging, a member of the church board, pastor, school principal, or other church leader will declare, “Wow, the new board members make all the difference! The life of the church has dramatically changed.” Likewise, one pastor or principal goes and another comes. The ministry context is transformed. The difference is night and day—according to the new leader. What gives? How can the change be accounted for? Well, too many churches, schools and ministries are overly dependent on the stewardship principles and spiritual discipline aptitude of an individual leader. When that faithful, and possibly charismatic, leader leaves, the congregational raft gets *wrapped* up against a rock or other obstruction (really embarrassing). Remove a single widget and the machine stops working well, maybe altogether. This is a congregational stewardship problem, and it is not a technical one. You cannot fix a congregational problem by removing parts, or people, and replacing them. You cannot just relocate or partner your way into a new marriage. There is something deeper going on, something more spiritual in nature, and more adaptive in kind.

² “But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” (Luke 12:48)

³ “A system is perfectly designed to get the results it is getting,” ...

Theologian and pastor W.C. Birkner wrote, “Unfortunately, the term ‘stewardship’ in our circles has received a connotation that too often is too distinctly financial...almost automatically the mere mention of the term ‘stewardship’ when used in our churches is identified among the members with the ingathering of funds.”⁴ Not much has changed about stewardship in congregations since Birkner wrote this in 1946.

Stewardship in *Paddling in Tandem* is whole-life, whole-congregational stewardship, both for the individual and for the church. God tells us in His Word that “In Him we live we move we have our being,” (Acts 17:28) and “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). Whole-life, whole-congregational stewardship means faithfully stewarding everything that God has entrusted to the church: the Word of God, the people of God and the things of God. To steward these divine vessels requires everyone pulling on both paddles, and on both sides of the boat: teaching the Biblical truths (stewardship principles) and putting them into practice (spiritual disciplines). Congregational stewardship is hard work with great returns. Paul exhorts Timothy, “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (I Timothy 6:12).

This book, with Bible studies and resource guide, is designed to encourage stewardship learning in local congregations, and other church organizations, culminating in the creation of a visual stewardship map of the “whole life” of congregational stewardship, church ministries operating together. *Paddling in Tandem* provides a theological basis, practical tools, and devotional materials for leaders and congregations in each chapter. *Paddling in Tandem* can be

⁴ Laetsch, Theodore, “The Abiding Word: An Anthology of Doctrinal Essays for the Year 1945, Volume One.” (1958), 458.

used:

- A) As a 6 to 8-week congregation wide, or small group, Bible study on Sunday morning or mid-week.
- B) As a 12-month guide for congregational leaders to facilitate an annual stewardship program. Selecting this option will require the collaboration of church leadership teams and staff. It is recommended to study one to two chapters per quarter and recruit the congregation's participation in the corresponding "Dry Bag" stewardship activity (spiritual discipline) each quarter.
- C) As a weekend retreat, or leadership training conference. Ideally, congregational leaders would be selected from a cross-section of the congregation's ministries and invited to a retreat or conference venue. For the selection of this option, it is recommended all attendees read the study guide and all chapters before attending, and complete and bring to the retreat their answers to the "Digging In with Both Paddles" sections for all chapters. Also, prior to the retreat all congregational members (not just those attending the retreat) will be invited to complete the online *Gospel Impact Survey* Questions (Appendix Two, page 261) and the staff and financial leaders will be asked to complete the *True Cost Analysis Factfinder* (Appendix Three, page 269). **Chapter Seven, *Pulling Together to Ace the Rapids***, will be used to unpack the meaning of your congregation's stewardship ministry map at the retreat. Your congregation's ministry map will be generated by Church Organizers Foundation.⁵ The map will be used during the retreat to discuss strategic ministry pathways, plans and various gospel imperatives for decision-making, including mergers, partnerships and legacy planning.

⁵ A Recognized Service Organization of Palisades Lutheran Church, Pacific Palisades, CA.