

From the Heart of the VP: A collection of writings focused on the Life-Cycle of a church **By Rev. Terry Smith, Vice President for Church Ministries**

The Structure of The Alliance

In the next few editions of these reflections from my heart, I want to challenge us to think about the lifecycle of a church, often pictured by using the bell curve, and how district teams can influence and assist churches at various points in that lifecycle. Let's establish from the beginning that influencing local churches is the core of what district teams should be doing. In the district I was privileged to lead, our team adopted as our vision statement, "Every church maximizing its Great Commission potential." Our mission was to come alongside leaders and churches to help move them toward the realization of that vision.

As The Alliance, we are not a loosely knit association of independent churches; we are truly an alliance of churches. Our congregations have an integral family connection, and they carry out their ministry within a structure defined by our governing documents. We also live in a balance of autonomy and accountability. On one hand, there is plenty of autonomy for an Alliance church to determine its own ministry philosophy and worship style. As a local church pastor or district leader, I've never felt handcuffed by our system of governance. On the other hand, every Alliance church carries a level of accountability to the district and denomination. All of them function under a common Statement of Faith and local church constitution. Churches receive their accreditation from the district in conjunction with the policies of the denomination, and official workers are licensed by the district according to those policies. We could site several other examples of accountability within our structure and polity.

The point is that churches in The Alliance function under the authority of the district, although this authority is limited. Therefore, district teams bear the responsibility of engaging with the churches and their leaders to help them move toward maximizing their Great Commission potential. We cannot exercise our authority as denominational muscle that overrides the will of the local church. But we should work diligently to establish relational trust, so our leadership and influence will be welcomed.

We don't wait for churches or pastors to contact us and ask for help. Nor do we sit quietly and hope to be invited in—we stay relationally connected to pastors, lay leaders, and churches by spending plenty of time in the field and on the phone, finding ways to genuinely express our love and care for those under our leadership. We also gather and develop resources that will be helpful to churches at various points in the lifecycle. And we share stories from congregations who have used those tools effectively so that other churches will be inspired.

Except in extreme cases, we don't force our way in to help churches, but we do passionately and persistently extend the opportunity for them to invite us to assist them. We lovingly yet boldly help them see their current reality, so they become ready to seek our help.

If we just wait for churches to request our assistance, many of them never will. The district team must take the initiative to help churches become open to receiving help. I offer this as the foundation for what I'll be sharing in the next few editions of *From the Heart of the VP*. In the next one, I'll focus on ways we can help churches on the upward-moving side of the bell curve continue to advance.

Three Helpful Ways to Engage Churches

In this latest series of reflections from my heart, I've focused on the lifecycle of churches and how we might extend help to them at various points along that cycle. In the last edition, I highlighted the structure of The Alliance, which strikes a balance between autonomy and accountability. This system allows and calls for district office teams to

engage local churches in ways that help them remain healthy or get healthy. We open the door to this engagement through relational connections that build trust and allow us to have influence.

This edition will address three helpful ways to engage churches when they are on the left side of the bell curve and moving upward—or in a place of “incline,” as Bill Malick says. I’ll share three more ideas in the next edition.

These congregations are generally healthy and have forward momentum in ministry. How do we help them maintain this momentum, so they don’t slip into decline?

First, these churches will benefit from the regular use of a self-evaluation tool. As soon as churches stop evaluating how they are doing or seeking to make improvements, they will inevitably slow their ministry momentum. Even relatively healthy churches always have areas of ministry that are weaker than others, and it’s important to identify and address them. Districts should recommend and provide tools to assist with this process.

One example is Natural Church Development (NCD), which has proven helpful to many congregations, including the one I pastored in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. We used NCD three times in an eight-year period and benefitted each time. Also, Bruce Terpstra developed a self-evaluation tool for churches called Peak; I believe it too has great potential to help churches. And there may be other useful resources out there. Find one you like and would feel confident recommending to churches. Providing coaching along with the tool will enhance its effectiveness.

Second, encourage churches to continue to launch new ministries aimed at outreach and evangelism, as well as provide ongoing reminders and training for members in relational evangelism. The normal inertia of a church always pulls its focus inward, not outward. Left to its own devices, a church will find itself gradually providing more ministry for those who already know Jesus and less for people who still need to know Him. Lack of a sharp evangelistic focus causes churches to stagnate and stall.

District leaders need to help congregations keep an eye on the harvest field. To that end, you can suggest various outreach methods, tell stories about what other churches are doing to effectively reach people for Jesus, and provide venues for those congregations to share their successes. Help stimulate new ideas and share fresh approaches, so churches are intentional about resisting the inertia to draw inward.

Finally, encourage healthy churches to have an ongoing process of discipling through which every disciple becomes a discipler. Such a process promotes multiplication of disciples that will bring exponential spiritual fruit. Several districts are using Mike Breen’s 3DM approach to discipleship. Rob Parker, our Northeast Region church-planting coordinator, has developed a process called “Launch,” which churches in several districts are beginning to use. Again, promote ministry tools like these to the churches you oversee. Make sure your church plants are employing such methods from the very beginning. This will help keep healthy churches healthy.

Three Additional Ways to Engage a Church

Recently in this column, I have been discussing the life cycle of churches and how district teams can engage with congregations at various points in their life cycles. In the last edition, I offered specific ideas on how to help churches on the left and upward side of the bell curve—those that are generally healthy and have forward Kingdom momentum. I suggested encouraging these churches to regularly evaluate themselves; to keep starting new outreach and evangelistic ministries; and to have an ongoing discipling process. Now let’s consider three additional recommendations to potentially help these congregations.

We should urge these churches to have an ongoing process of developing new leaders. As district superintendents,

we've all sat around church leadership tables with the same people who were there 10 or even 20 years ago. There is value in continuity and stability. However, without the influx of some new leaders, we can become stale in our approach to ministry.

Truly good leaders are more interested in the health of the church and the advance of Christ's Kingdom than in maintaining the status quo. Therefore, they will want to equip, empower, and release new ones—even if that means some of our more established leaders transition elsewhere. To address this issue, regularly ask pastors about their leadership pipeline and help provide tools that they can use to train new leaders. In Eastern Pennsylvania, we put together the Leadership Training Academy, a [video-based leadership lesson series](#) that we nicknamed "leadership training in a box." Just add mentors. You may have a better plan to accomplish this goal. If so, great! In whatever manner you choose, encourage your pastors to develop and implement a method of cultivating new leaders.

Additionally, we need to assist our churches in developing a culture of peacemaking. I wonder how many congregations could mark the beginning of decline by an unresolved conflict in the church. I've met with leadership teams that cite decades-long conflict but seem to have few tools to deal with it effectively. Alliance Peacemaking, led by Rick Stein, is a great resource that is available to all our districts to help equip their churches in dealing with disputes biblically and to help imbed peacemaking in our churches. If you haven't been doing so already, I urge you to invite Rick and his team in for peacemaking training (especially Levels 1 and 2) that includes pastors and lay leaders. Peacemaking can help forward-moving churches avoid ongoing tensions that can become negative turning points.

Finally, do all you can to nudge healthy churches toward a plan to multiply themselves. Encourage and help them become Greenhouse Churches. When I first became the pastor at Immanuel Church in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, in 1999, the congregation was in the process of planting a new church in less-than-ideal circumstances. After a great season of growth, the members had become divided over ministry philosophy and worship style. Decline had set in, and a consultant advised them to address the problem by planting a new church.

Shortly after I arrived on the scene to help steady the mother church, I had a conversation with Mick Noel, who had previously served as the church-planting director in the Eastern PA District. By his assessment, the church had been "pregnant" during their years of strong growth but had chosen not to plant a church. By being pregnant without giving birth, toxicity set in. The health of the church was compromised, and conflict began. While a church was eventually planted, how much better it would have been had it happened while the church was still healthy.

District leaders can't force churches to multiply. However, you can encourage a culture of multiplication, provide tools for multiplication, and have conversations with pastors and lay leaders about multiplication.

In the next edition, we'll begin to talk about how to help churches on the top and right side of the bell curve—plateaued and declining churches that make up a significant percentage of congregations in The Alliance and other evangelical denominations. Is there hope for these churches? I believe there is!

Understanding Plateaued and Declining Churches

Recently in this column, we've been considering the lifecycle of a church and how district team members can engage congregations at various points on that lifecycle. We've pondered how we can help churches that are advancing with relative health. In this edition, we will focus on churches that are on the top of the bell curve—plateaued churches—and those that are on the right or downward side—declining churches.

At all stages of the lifecycle, prayer is a vital component. Every congregation is totally dependent on Jesus, the Lord

of the Church. The wind of His Spirit provides forward Kingdom momentum and redirects us when we need to see turnaround. Do everything you can to seek to develop and nurture a culture of prayer in your district. That way, you model well what needs to happen in churches. I'll write more about that another time.

Meanwhile, how do we define growing, plateaued, and declining churches? While there is much more to a church's story than attendance statistics, the Sunday morning service turnout is typically used to distinguish into which category a church fits. In the Eastern PA District, we landed on a 6-percent differentiation in attendance over a three-year period as the demarcation point between these categories. If attendance increased by 6 percent or more over three years, that church was growing. If attendance decreased by the same percentage, the congregation was declining. If attendance changed by less than 6 percent in either direction, that church was considered plateaued. Some use 10 percent over five years. The math works out the same.

While noting attendance statistics, we should also watch the number of professions of faith and baptisms a church records each year. If attendance growth is all or mostly through transfers from other churches among existing believers, it would be difficult to declare that church healthy even if it meets the attendance criteria for the growing category.

It's essential to pay attention to the key statistics of the churches we oversee and nudge their pastors and lay leaders to do the same—regardless of a congregation's spiritual atmosphere. Although this is important, it is subjective and therefore hard to measure. In most instances, if the spiritual environment is what it should be, then a church will also experience conversion growth. Visitors will come and stay; people will accept Christ and be baptized.

By paying attention to objective statistics like attendance, membership, conversions, and baptisms, we can help keep churches from being detached from the reality about their trends and trajectories. In his book *Breakout Churches*, Thom Rainer tells the story of his first church, where attendance had dropped from 191 to 118 in the previous seven years. Yet whenever he asked members about the church's condition, everyone would say, "We're stable" (pg. 175). That may have been how they felt about their congregation, but it wasn't the reality based on objective statistics. Yes, there may well be a story behind the statistics, even a legitimate one. However, the figures tell a story that we must not ignore in assessing where churches are and how we can best come alongside them to help.

Are they on the top of the bell curve and therefore plateaued? If so, address them quickly because churches typically don't stay plateaued long. Without intervention that helps create new vision and purpose, they will soon be in decline. If they are already, how long has this been going on, and how far down the right side of the bell curve are they? Assessing these issues will help you know if they need tender loving, acute, intensive, or hospice care.

In the next edition, we'll address the help that plateaued churches might need—tender loving care. In closing, some of those on intensive care may well benefit from Fresh Start, which I'll say more about in a future edition. For now, be aware that Bill Malick will lead a Fresh Start training in Birmingham, Alabama, May 8–10. Go to Freshstartchurches.org or contact Bill at bill@cmaspd.org, if you'd like to know more about this valuable training.

Assisting "Plateaued Churches"

In this edition of my series on the lifecycle of churches, I will address how we can assist plateaued churches—those that have had no more than 6-percent growth or decline over a three-year period. They are stuck. Although they aren't yet in serious trouble, they don't have forward momentum. Leave them alone and they'll likely slide into the declining category sooner rather than later.

Plateaued churches need what I call tender loving care. They may not require the lengthy and intense consultation I recommend for declining churches, but they do need assistance. They can likely benefit from two of the evaluation tools I mentioned in an earlier edition—the Natural Church Development (NCD) survey or the PEAK assessment that Bruce Terpstra and his team developed. These resources examine a sampling of the congregation to identify what NCD calls the minimum factor: the church’s weakest area of ministry according to survey participants.

Options with this type of survey include bringing in an outside assessment team. My predecessor in Eastern Pennsylvania, Wayne Spriggs, developed teams of assessors from within the district—pastors and laypeople, men and women. After three days in a church interviewing people, talking to focus groups, and hearing from leaders, the team makes recommendations for the congregation to implement. During my tenure, we found this process to be especially helpful for stuck churches during a pastoral transition. It helped to identify less-than-stellar areas of ministry that needed work and to inform the pastoral search process. I wish I had learned this tool’s value for churches in transition sooner. If you’d like additional information or training in this assessment team tool, contact Wayne at jwspriggs@verizon.net.

If funding is available, professional consulting firms will perform similar services. While they may offer greater expertise, most plateaued churches can’t afford them. By using a developed team of assessors from within a district, a church will still bear some cost for the assessment team but only a fraction of what it would have paid a consulting firm, and the assessment will pay great spiritual and Kingdom dividends.

The effectiveness of the tools above—church health surveys, assessment teams, and consultants—are greatly enhanced when they are supplemented with coaching. My friend and mentor, John Fogal, compared churches that had conducted NCD surveys with and without coaching. Those that implemented coaching experienced a far greater boost. Coaching provides accountability, which increases the level of follow-through in addressing the issues that evaluations and assessments reveal. Keep in mind that any tool for church health is only as good as your plan to address weak ministry area(s) and its execution.

Indeed, good coaching alone may help some plateaued churches find new ministry energy and direction. I’m not necessarily a fan of coaching that only asks questions. But when a coach knows what to ask and when to speak strategic counsel into the conversation, the result is a valuable process that can help churches get unstuck. Do you have a network of well-trained and equipped coaches in your district? If not, I encourage you to contact Alan Rathbun in the Eastern PA District at alan.rathbun@epdalliance.org. I know he’d be happy to share what he’s doing to train, lead, and deploy his network of coaches.

I hope you’ve gleaned some ways to help your plateaued churches. Next time we’ll address how to assist declining churches.

Assisting “Declining Churches”

We’ve focused in several editions on how to help churches at various points in their lifecycle, including those that are healthy and growing (on incline) and churches that have plateaued or are in decline. Now we’re going to focus on congregations that are on the right side of the bell curve—those that are declining. I’ve suggested a decline of 6 percent over three years to distinguish them.

It’s a long way down that side of the curve, so you will find churches at various points of decline. To discern where they are and provide proper care, you will need to conduct a type of triage. In medical use, this is the sorting of patients according to the urgency of their need for care to increase the number of survivors.

In church triages, we ask: What is their condition? With limited time and personnel resources, whom should we treat first, and how should we treat them? Some congregations may be in the early stages of decline and need acute care. Others may be further along in the process and require intensive care. Finally, there will be a group of churches that you determine are beyond help unless God intervenes. They need hospice care.

How can we discern whether a church needs acute or intensive care? We should consider the following:

- The length of time it's been in decline
- The steepness of the decline
- How many attendees the congregation still has
- The church's leadership potential
- The leaders' and church's openness to make necessary changes.

By and large, we want to work with churches with the best opportunity to survive and even thrive again. If we invest all our time with those in intensive care, we may not see much success in terms of churches turning around.

Let me balance that with a word of caution: Don't give up too easily on churches. We aren't working to see a business turnaround but a church transformation. Every congregation is sacred because Jesus bought and owns it. And since He rose from the dead, there is hope when otherwise there might not be.

An Eastern PA colleague, Duane Stine, and I engaged with a church that seemed hopeless. Attendance had dwindled to approximately 25 people; the members were discouraged and divided. When we arrived for our second month of consultation, we heard that the previous week's board meeting had devolved into not-so-pretty conflict. We sent the pastor home for the first part of the night to let the board members tell us what was on their minds. They ranted for about an hour. I thought to myself, *We're dead. This isn't going anywhere.* However, much to my delight, the Holy Spirit broke into that meeting and turned things around. The members reunified and refocused on the harvest field. The year after the consultation, they baptized 16 people and 8 the following year.

Attendance bounced back to about 50 people. So, as you choose carefully where to invest your resources, don't give up easily. If we give up on every church with fewer than 50 members, we'll give up on more than a fourth of Alliance congregations.

With some churches, however, you will conclude for a variety of reasons that they would need a miracle to survive—they aren't places where you should invest limited resources. These are congregations where attendance is extremely low, ministries seem totally ineffective, there is little leadership potential, and the church has demonstrated long-term resistance to change. Do for them what you do for all other churches in your district. Keep them comfortable, so to speak, but don't engage in heroic measures to try to save them.

Next time, we'll talk about specific treatment options for churches needing acute care.

Providing "Acute Care"

Recently in this column, I've been addressing how district leaders can engage with churches at various stages in their life cycle. Since we're publishing the *CM Connect* once a month this summer, I'll provide a double-dose article in this edition. In the last edition, we talked about doing triage—discerning which churches need acute care, intensive care, or hospice care. In this edition, we'll focus on churches that need acute care and consider ways to assist them, so they return to healthy evangelistic and discipleship ministry.

Helping these churches is a passion of mine. Ruth and I had the privilege of leading Immanuel Church in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, through an eight-and-a-half-year turnaround process. It was one of the greatest joys of our ministry. Out of that experience, I wrote the book *Changing Course: Leading Older Churches in a New Direction* that is available at www.churchsmart.com (all profits go to the GCF). I'm grateful that from time to time I hear stories about how God is bringing hope to churches through this resource.

I assume we would all agree that the biggest factor to seeing a church change course is pastoral leadership. No doubt there are other factors, but this is the one that matters most. There are times when you will be given the opportunity to work with one of these churches in a pastoral-transition process. When this happens, do everything in your power to place someone that fits the profile of a "turnaround pastor"—a church-planter type, who also has the ability and heart to shepherd the congregation. The challenge is that it doesn't seem like there are enough pastors with these qualities to help revitalize these churches, so we must try to help the congregations that aren't going through pastoral transition.

Here's my theory—we have a lot of pastors who know change is needed in their church, but they aren't innately wired to lead a turnaround. They aren't the kind of leaders who can read a book or attend a seminar and know immediately how to apply what they've read or heard to the ministry of their church. They need someone—a district leader or consultant—to walk with them through the initial stages of change. John Maxwell always says that he can't take leaders who are a 4 and make them a 10, but he can help a 4 become a 6 and a 6 become an 8. I believe that is true of some of our church pastoral leaders. If we will walk alongside them, we can help raise the level of their leadership and perhaps help them lead their church in the turnaround process.

While I was in Eastern PA, Duane Stine assisted me in developing and implementing "Changing Course Consultation," which is based on the book I mentioned earlier. This is a six-month, prayer-based engagement/consultation guide for district leaders working with a church in need of turnaround, specifically with the pastor and lay leaders. E-mail me if you'd like to receive the consultation guide to learn more about this process, which involves an assessment of the pastor and the church and the development of a one-year strategic plan for the church's life and ministry. In using this guide, many pastors have developed a strategic planning tool that they began to use annually. This helped them to become more intentional about how their church ministries were carried out. We saw pastors and leadership teams regain hope that their churches could make a difference in their communities. Unity was restored and churches became more focused on the harvest field.

What I've just described is acute care. It requires a fairly long-term, hands-on commitment on the part of a district leader to walk alongside a pastor and his team—six months in addition to the time invested in regular follow-up. "This is the doctor who makes house calls," as my coach/mentor, John Fogal, likes to say. The investment of time is huge, but we found it to be worthwhile. We never forced this consultation on a church. We promoted it through our regular rounds of meeting with church boards. We'd encourage pastors to consider it. When invited, we'd come in and conduct an introductory session with the pastor and lay leaders. We would not take yes or no as an answer at the meeting but asked them to pray and give us an answer in a couple of weeks. No one ever refused the consultation.

In the fifth month of the "Changing Course Consultation," we dealt with impediments in the life of the church that might be grieving or quenching the Holy Spirit—unresolved conflict, individual sin that hadn't been dealt with, corporate sin that needed to be confessed, forgiveness that needed to be asked for or granted, etc. For some churches, this will need to become a longer focal point than just a two-hour meeting; they have spiritual issues in their past and/or present to uncover and address that require more time. Some will need to be led through Kenneth Quick's book *Healing the Heart of the Church* or need to engage with Mark Barnard's Blessing Point Ministries.

There are many other forms of acute care out there. Dan Scarrow has been leading “Uprising in the Central District,” an engagement with plateaued and declining churches of which I’ve heard good things. Dan Wetzel is currently training to be a church consultant through “Fanning the Flame,” which is based on Harry Reeder’s book *From Embers to a Flame*. I’m less concerned about which tool you choose than I am about you choosing or developing a tool you will use to engage plateaued and declining churches.

Here’s a word of caution. We tend to equate plateaued and declining churches with small churches, but that is not the case. Churches of all sizes—large, medium, and small—can be plateaued or declining. After a number of years of robust conversion growth, the largest church in the district I served hit a plateau and then declined over the next few years. If we just focus on helping smaller churches, we will fail to realize the positive impact of helping some of our larger congregations. Be sure to build relationships and trust with the pastors and leaders of those churches so they will have confidence to call on you for help.

If I can assist you in this area, I’d be pleased to do so. I’m available to train you and other consultants in the “Changing Course Consultation” process. I’ve led a “Changing Course Weekend” in a church and presented a “Changing Course Seminar” for a group of pastors and leaders that whetted their appetites for engaging in a consultation. Let me know if I can assist you as you seek to provide acute care for your churches.

Facilitating a “Fresh Start” to Declining Churches

We’ve taken several editions to talk about how district teams can best serve churches at various places on the life cycle. We are now focused on the right side of the bell curve where we find churches that are in decline. We’ve said that some of these churches either need tender loving care, intensive care, or hospice care.

A slightly more radical level of intensive care than we highlighted last time is Fresh Start, which has been developed by Bill Malick. This is a proven method that gives an existing church a new beginning in partnership with the district and a healthy church. Bill would tell you that it typically takes months of communication with the leadership of a declining/dying church to bring them to the point of “holy desperation”—essentially willing to die and yield authority to the district to have the opportunity for new life. The district and the partner church, along with a steering team that often includes a few members from within the declining church, share the new direction. Under new leadership, both the building and the ministry of the church are renovated to prepare to connect with and reach people in the surrounding community. Not all Fresh Starts look alike, but the basic 12 markers of Fresh Start provide the roadmap to a new beginning.

While Bill has some great stories of incredible new life resulting from seven (and counting) Fresh Start churches in the South Pacific District, a great illustration comes from a church in the Western Great Lakes District.

The Alliance church in Belgium, Wisconsin, considered their options during a time of pastoral transition and settled on the hope-filled phrase “An End with an Expectation.” The people loved their town and its people. Nevertheless, the church was not seeing conversions or baptisms. They were an older group, and the sound of children had left the building. In May 2016, South Side Alliance, working with the district and the congregation’s remnant, agreed to become the partner church and brought enthusiastic support. The impact on both churches was and still is tremendous. It is being described as a flower that is blooming again! This brief account barely begins to tell [the whole story](#) and the possibilities for you.

Inevitably, every district has churches that are so far down the right side of the bell curve, attendance is so low, ministry so weak, and vision so absent that closure is the only real option. This is where hospice care comes in. You

must try to keep the church as comfortable as possible while you walk with them through the difficult closure process. I have never forced closure on a church. In my opinion, we should only do so under extreme circumstances. I allowed the leaders of the local church to make the decision, though I would seek to influence their decision by defining current reality and the nearly impossible challenge in their circumstance that would prevent turnaround.

But how can we determine when to close a church as opposed to doing Fresh Start or replanting? As a district team, ask yourselves the question, "If we didn't have a church in this location, would we be planning to plant one here?" If the answer is yes, then consider a replant or Fresh Start. If the answer is no, then it's better to take the resources from the closure and sale of this church's property and put them into a church plant(s) in a more strategic location. If you haven't read *Legacy Churches* by Stephen Gray and Franklin Dumond, it is worth a read and may even be something you should ask leaders to read in a church that is facing the possibility of closure.

I worked with a church in the Lehigh Valley in Eastern PA that had not had a visitor come and stay for three years. They had a strong history but had long since lost their way and only had about 20 people left. They loved Jesus but didn't have the resources to implement an effective ministry or run an attractive worship service. The church had languished in a rather isolated location for 25 years, so it didn't seem wise to try again. I walked through a few conversations with the pastor and leadership team. The question I asked them to frame their decision was, "What can we do that will have the greatest Kingdom impact on the Lehigh Valley?" By the way, there are more than 800,000 people living in the Lehigh Valley. I assured them that if they decided to close the church, most of the sale of their property would be used to plant churches in their area. They made the decision to close.

Even though this was a fairly positive closure experience, there were still a few people who were resistant and upset, so I made sure I attended their closure service. In the past, I allowed a church to schedule its closure service on a Sunday when I couldn't attend. I lived to regret what that communicated to the pastor and perhaps others. I unintentionally undermined the trust I had earned through an otherwise good but still hard closure process. Attending these services as a district superintendent is akin to being at a funeral where some people believe you have killed the deceased. This will not be your favorite Sunday ministry of the year, but it's important to be there.

While we were in the closure process in the Lehigh Valley, I thought the value of the building and property was around \$400,000. However, it sold for \$750,000! As promised, much of it was reserved for church planting in the area. At about the same time, the remaining Alliance church in the Lehigh Valley, Hope Alliance Church in Bethlehem, became a Greenhouse Church. Their church-planting resident, Jim Entwistle, will launch a new church in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, in the next couple of months, with funding coming from the proceeds of the closed church. All that will happen through this new church will be part of the legacy of the closed church. And we find ourselves back on the left side of the bell curve with a new church pulsating with life and vision.

As you think through these things that we've covered in this series of articles, it might be easy to conclude that if you're already doing some of what I've mentioned then you can keep doing what you've been doing. May I respectfully challenge you not to come to that decision easily? Ask yourself if what you've been doing is really working. Is there tangible evidence of churches advancing and churches experiencing turnaround? Are more churches growing? Are fewer churches closing? Most importantly, are more people coming to know Jesus? If not, prayerfully consider making some changes to your approach.