

CURE ALL: ONE PASTOR'S ACCIDENTAL QUEST TO DEBUNK EVERY REVITALIZATION THERAPY

BY CORY HARTMAN

In chapter 5 of **Future Church**, we analyzed Lower Room growth pills taken by large and recently plateaued churches. In this bonus chapter we explore what Church Pharma has to offer small and declining churches. We will especially examine the priorities that are purported to turn around decline and bring growth back again. This complex of prescriptions wears the labels **renewal**, **replanting** (especially in more extreme situations), and most often **revitalization**, and it has rapidly grown as a sector of Church Pharma as more and more churches are being driven to the brink.

Unlike the wide-angle view we have taken in thus far, however, this chapter is an intimate portrait. Similar to how Will told some of his personal story in portions of **Future Church**, this is my (Cory's) story. Not every revitalization journey goes the way mine did, but I suspect that stories like this one are more common than the prescribers of revitalization typically admit.

In 2004, the same year Will launched Auxano, I began serving my first church as a professional minister. It consisted of thirty mostly Euro-American English-speakers in a rundown, hulking building in an immigrant-filled urban neighborhood. The median age was seventy-five. The church had been in decline since the Kennedy Administration. With a full-time pastor on the payroll, the church was projected to run out of money in three years.

Fortunately for that church (I thought), it called me and God called me to go there. Therefore any outcome other than success—defined as numerical conversion growth—was inconceivable. I would succeed where forty years of my predecessors' efforts had failed.

I was, of course, completely wrong—I vastly inflated my ability compared to those who came before me.

Three years later I moved on to a church that in several ways was markedly different from my first. It was located in a small town next to a small city in a different cultural region of the country. It was genuinely multigenerational. Like the first, it was a small church, but it was about triple the size of the one I served before. It too was in decline, but its last burst of missional momentum was a bit more recent.

Like my previous church, this church was looking for renewal, and I was confident that, God helping me, I could bring it. **Unlike my previous church, it did experience revitalization. Also unlike my previous church, it died.**

Revitalized churches aren't supposed to die—in fact, that seems to be the point of revitalization. But this one did. For that matter, the first church I served should have folded long ago, but contrary to all expectations it is still going (though that is not part of my story, so I won't tell it here).

In fact, the churches I served defied my expectations at every turn. To borrow Winston Churchill's famous phrase, they were each "a riddle, wrapped inside a mystery, inside an enigma." They did not obey the principles that I learned were supposed to work. The methods, techniques, schemas, and priorities that were claimed to bring about turnaround and church growth failed.

As I look back now, a few years later, the riddle-mystery-enigma has not been completely unlocked yet. But also echoing Churchill, "perhaps there is a key." That key is what **Future Church** is about—the contrast between attachment to the Lower Room of place, personalities, people, and programs and attachment to the Upper Room of disciple-making vision.

My journey exhibits Upper Room intentions and Lower Room actions. I had a disciple-making vision in my heart, but because I was constrained by Lower Room assumptions and influences, I expected the vision to be realized in a certain way and tried doggedly to bring it about. Trapped in a model I could not see, feel, or name, I could not imagine that Upper Room living and leading might look very different from what I thought.

My ministry followed a path through **four widely promoted solutions** that were supposed to work, but they didn't for me—at least not how I assumed working would look. The pat answers of yesterday were not up for the challenges of today. Although I learned that the hard way, I also found hope on the other side.

SOLUTION #1: WHY DIDN'T BIBLICAL TEACHING WORK?

When I was a Christian college and seminary student, I somehow learned (without being formally taught) that evangelical churches were thriving and mainline churches were dying because our conservative theology was superior to the liberals'. We were biblical and they were not, so God blessed us.

I later learned by firsthand experience that this was a distorted picture of mainline churches. Of course it was easy to find heretical proclamations from the top of mainline Protestant denominations, but most of those denominations include theologically faithful congregations too. This was especially true of the denomination I served in, and my first church was a prime example.

Here, then, was the puzzle I faced: I was serving a church whose theology was rock-solid, whose members had strong faith in God's word, and whose conversion testimonies were genuine, but it had been dying a slow death for four decades. **If God blessed sound doctrine, why had he not blessed this church?**

Over time I did arrive at some answers that applied to that congregation, yet the question continued to haunt me when I left that church for the one where I spent the next decade. The second church was not as well-grounded theologically as the first one. Previous pastors and current Sunday School teachers did not promote falsehoods, but many people in the church had a weak grasp of doctrine and little personal familiarity with the Bible.

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Fortunately, over the next ten years people grew in their knowledge of Scripture and biblical truth. By the end of my tenure I could honestly say that I was blessed to pastor a church that knew the Bible fairly well and believed it.

From my education to prominent authors to conference speakers, I was assured that this would cause the church to flourish. I planted and tended the seed of the word, so God was supposed to bring the growth (1 Cor. 3:6–7). But the church kept declining anyway—in fact, for the first couple years things got drastically worse before attendance leveled off.

So what was the problem? Why didn't biblical teaching work?

It wasn't that biblical truth is insufficient, of course. Yet I now realize that my teaching was not as biblical as I thought it was. **I was strong on the message of Jesus but weak on the method of Jesus.** I taught people to have faith in the right things, but faith without works is dead, and I didn't model the specific works that might have brought the growth that Scripture promises. I believed that if I was faithful in proclaiming the Bible, God would send us people—never mind that the Bible said that God sent us to them. I was bound enough by the givens of Program Church that I mistakenly expected a mere Bible injection to do the trick. Improved teaching content was still being

mostly distributed according to the expectations of the Lower Room—place, people, programs, and above all personality.

SOLUTION #2: WHY DIDN'T GIFTED LEADERSHIP WORK?

When I started in my second church, the best thing it had going for it was that it called the correct pastor—the demographically correct pastor, that is. I was a married 30-year-old man with 2.5 kids (almost literally—my wife was pregnant with our third when I arrived). I was well-educated, and I had just enough experience under my belt to prove that I was not a total risk. I also had a commanding presence in the pulpit. In other words, as we outlined in the previous chapter, I was catnip to a search committee.

But although **I was demographically correct**, I was gift incorrect. More accurately **I was gift eccentric**—as we all are—and this had a fateful impact on the church.

In the typical church, both pastor and people expect the pastor to be exceptional. They may not agree on **how** the pastor is supposed to stand above the herd. (For instance, some churches expect

the pastor to be **exceptionally** accommodating to the desires of the laity.) But all agree that to a significant extent, the church rises or falls on how good a job a pastor does at being unlike everyone else.

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Christian history is replete with singular leaders who place an unusually strong stamp on a church movement. Yet these extraordinarily gifted leaders are far rarer in the history of the church than in the way our churches are structured. The typical church is organized to place undue burden for its health and

direction on a single human being with incomplete gifts. Earnest pastors are prone to accept that burden even when their leadership ability is not sufficient for it.

That certainly described me. I was a gifted leader but not a great one and definitely not a mature one. My gifts, therefore, had a great impact on my small church, but exactly for that reason, I was tilting the church off balance even when I was operating at my very best (which was probably also true of many who came before me).

According to the APEST schema—a model of spiritual giftedness derived from the apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers of Ephesians 4:11—I am a classic teacher-prophet. The team at 5Q says that the teacher-prophet “has a dynamic understanding of truth and an urgency to respond to the implications of truth” and is “motivated to highlight the central claims of Christianity and to explain how this informs our identity, calling, and action.”¹

Imagine leaving a teacher-prophet at the helm of a church, going away for a decade, and then coming back for a visit. What do you think you would find? If that leader did their best, you might expect to find a church that had become richer in its knowledge of the Bible, wiser in its judgment, sincerer in its worship, holier in its behavior, purer in its community, and simpler in its structure. Yet you also might expect it to have become dangerously small with no reproduction and minimal influence for Jesus on its surrounding community. That is a pretty good description of what my church looked like when I left it.

I came to wonder whether the body should have called a shepherd-teacher instead of calling me. A shepherd-teacher would have been familiar and welcome to a church of that size and background. However, the church had had other pastors of that type in the past, and the people were weary of the institutional complacency that had set in, which was partly why they called me.

Perhaps the church needed an evangelist-shepherd, a relationally talented person who would have drawn new people in and made everyone feel at home. But if that type of person had served instead of me, even if the church had grown numerically, deep-rooted, long-neglected infections of sin in the body would have continued festering and would have poisoned the whole project.

The truth is, **no** type was the right type of pastor. **Every** possible pastor would have been gift incorrect. Personality was a major pillar in my church’s Lower Room, but it could not bear the load.

SOLUTION #3: WHY DIDN'T ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH WORK?

As a teenager, I loved playing complicated PC strategy games with one of my best friends. (**Sid Meier’s Civilization**, anyone?) Rather than play against each other, we would lead the same nation or army together. He was about quantity, always wanting to explore new territory and conquer everyone we found. I was about quality, always wanting to make our civilization as efficient and advanced as possible. He was about more; I was about better. Together we made a great team.

As a pastor, I wanted my church to grow, and I bet if my friend became a pastor he would want the same thing. I am sure his approach would be intensely outward-focused—never in the office, always making a connection with someone new to advance the enterprise. But I had reason to believe that even with my different personality, I could succeed as well.

In one blog post, article, and conference after another I heard successful pastors asserting that **“healthy things grow.”** I was told that the key to church growth was church health; if the church is healthy, then growth takes care of itself.² So that became my growth strategy: I would foster health in the church. I was built for it.

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So my church persistently pursued organizational improvement through a raft of initiatives over ten years: worship renovation, small groups launch, new member assimilation, renewed student ministry, a website, upgrade of A/V systems, doctrinal articulation, improved member care, conflict resolution, organizational restructuring, leadership development, guest services, and a fresh visual brand. And outreach was not ignored either; we put on activities to connect with our community, especially in our small town’s events, from manning a kids’ crafts booth at Pumpkinfest to handing out gloves at the Christmas tree lighting on the town square.

Bit by bit, as an organization, as a community, and also as individuals, **the church really did get much healthier. And yet numerical growth did not follow.**

From my perspective today, I can see that we were spending a huge amount of energy and time thoroughly remodeling the church’s Lower Room, which badly needed the renovation. But the Upper Room was still missing. We did pour time into getting clear on our mission, values, and strategy, the stuff of the Upper Room. Yet **even with the right missional language, we struggled to do much more than fix up the furniture of Lower Room programs.**

SOLUTION #4: WHY DIDN’T SPIRITUAL GROWTH WORK?

It is not entirely accurate to say that my second church did not grow numerically while I was the pastor. **It actually grew and shrank at the same time.**

Frankly, the shrinking mainly happened because of me. From even before I set foot in the church as its pastor, I felt great pressures from some people to Change Things Now and from other people to Change Things Never. Each hoped that I would win a fight for them that they were reluctant to take on themselves against the other side. I believed that many things needed to change, but I tried not to hit the beach with guns blazing, instead watching and waiting and learning. Yet I discovered even before I made changes that I **was** the change. That caused disruption from the get-go.

Early on I made plenty of unforced errors, exhibited immature behavior, and failed to grasp deep cross-cultural disconnects between my formative environments and my new home. Quite a number of people left the church because of things I did badly but also because of some things I did well. (Much of my activity was probably a mixture of the two.)

Fortunately, over time and by God's grace, I grew up more as a person and as a leader. Even better, I saw that many who remained were growing too. **The most genuine Upper Room activity I engaged in as a pastor was to encourage and teach growing people one on one.** Over time the church's culture did begin changing for the better. After a few years we were far more spiritually healthy and unified than even many of the old-timers remembered the church ever being.

Although the transition had been very painful, many of the departures that happened were probably inevitable and ultimately good for the church. Even as some people flaked away, somehow the new culture did attract new ones. They were mostly Christians from other churches or locales, but some were people who were groping their way back to God and found us. Ten years after I began, fewer than ten percent of the church that called me remained. **Over the same period we gained almost as many new people as the number we lost from the original group.** From that point of view, then, we had added quite a number of people and had grown significantly, even though it was not reflected in our attendance statistics.

But there was a catch. Even though I could sense that spiritual growth was happening, the church and I were operating with a **cloudy, unspoken ideal** of what a mature Christian looked like, and **all of us were missing an important element.**

As I mentioned earlier, when I arrived at the church, people did not have a strong grip on biblical teaching by and large. If most of the people who called me could have put their vague idea into words, they would have said that the marks of Christian excellence aren't much more than being nice

and helping out. (Without other virtues to support them, unfortunately, these qualities produced many relational situations that were not nice and much service that was not helpful!)

Over time we settled into a more biblical discipleship target. We sensed that Christian maturity included knowledge of the Bible, the fruit of the Spirit, and volunteer participation. However, this too was incomplete. Our concept of maturity also meant believing that it was very, very important to make disciples, but it did not require us to actually make them. Looking back, I see that I did not lead them into a very mature definition of maturity: head, heart, and hands were all represented, but the reproductive system was missing. **Spiritually speaking, most of the best of us were something like adults who had never gone through puberty.**

Evangelism did remain a part of my personal life throughout most of this period. I saw people take steps toward the Lord, but unbelieving friends of mine were not interested in coming to worship. I didn't know why. I think they knew that they mattered to me as people. Yet I now wonder if they silently sensed my secret hope that their conversion and attendance would validate my ministry too.

WHY REVITALIZATION FALLS SHORT

By the time several years had passed, a lot was going right in the church. God was changing people's lives. They were growing in the knowledge of the truth. People joined together to make dramatic

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improvements in the church's Lower Room in a short amount of time—decades worth of work in just a few short years. We were a smaller group than before, but we were much more unified, healthy, and mature. It all sounds like a great platform for future growth, just as revitalization promises.

I actually think that if we had undertaken this same journey in an earlier generation, it would have worked, so to speak—that is, the institution would have drawn enough people that it would have flourished whether

we made any disciple-making disciples or not. In the twentieth century, the wind was at church leaders' backs in ways not recognized at the time. If my church had undertaken the revitalization journey in a different age, even in the new permission era, I believe there would have been enough interest and goodwill from the outside to build and fill a great Lower Room.

But when I was serving my church, **we did not have the wind at our back.** It was turning into our face, as it has for churches everywhere. We were revitalizing against oppositional forces that did not exist in an earlier era. **The revitalization therapies of Church Pharma**, whatever value they may have, **do not grapple with these forces seriously enough to overcome them**, especially in many small churches.

My church faced two of these forces. One was **participation frequency decline**, as described in other chapters of **Future Church**. In some churches, frequency decline threatens success. But in the 57 percent of American churches with fewer than one hundred attenders on a Sunday,³ it can threaten survival.

In my church, progress slowed because it became difficult to get leaders face to face in a timely fashion. Volunteers became more scarce. Strong efforts at onboarding new recruits were sabotaged by Sunday morning no-shows and last-minute calls to beg off. Faithful volunteers picked up slack they did not sign up for, depressing their morale and accelerating their own resignations. The percentage of seats in worship with people in them dropped below the threshold where it felt like a reasonably full room, diminishing the volume of singing (since few want to stand out) and sapping the emotional energy of the worship experience. All this created the vicious spiral of people not showing up because people weren't showing up.

The other oppositional force was diverging behavioral norms, the widening gap between what the world calls decent behavior and what the church does. It is becoming very difficult to maintain biblical expectations of believers' conduct because those expectations violate society's expectations. It is increasingly hard to be good according to the church and according to the wider world at the same time.

Along my church's revitalization journey, we articulated what the Bible teaches on hot-button relationship issues as a standard that members intended to walk by. In my tenth year, however, one of the leaders who participated in crafting that statement started to diverge from it. After extensive discussion, he decided to leave peaceably, but his departure triggered a firestorm in the church.

It appeared that the earlier culture of the church, which was biblically and spiritually weak, hadn't been replaced or transformed after all. **Instead it had just gone underground, and now it suddenly arose in full, reactionary force** against the new culture that present-day leaders had established. The whole situation was complex, but at one level it was simple. Some people wanted a church

whose leadership—especially the pastor—was held accountable to be nice (that is, permissive and accepting). They did not want a church whose members were held accountable to be holy. These people left the church at a stroke, and the strife inclined other people to stay home.

Participation decline and diverging norms are common to all churches today, and your church may face other opposing forces besides the ones we were dealing with. Ours, however, created so much drag that the best revitalization techniques could not pull us out of the dive.

I thought we had taken radical steps toward renewal over the years. Some people's lives were indeed renewed. **But it would have taken even more fundamental changes that I could not yet see to put our body on the path to real church growth.**

THE MISSING WHOLE

I was not in good shape in my last year at the church. The losses of so many people that I cared about, enough occasions of being fingered as the bad guy, acceleration toward organizational collapse, and my own great disappointment took a terrible toll. I stepped down, believing that was the Lord's desire. Once I did, I was more amazed than anyone at the astounding ways that the Father restored and refreshed me.

Distance brings clarity; I entered a time of reflection, learning about myself and about the church in our day. Among many things I considered and re-examined, I kept coming back to this thought: "Sure, I made mistakes as a leader. **But I did everything I knew to do. So why didn't God bless my efforts?** Why didn't God make the church grow?"

I can name many things I wish I had done differently. But I now believe that **the number-one thing I was missing was a biblical, missional paradigm.** It was not that I did not believe the right things. It was that I looked at those things through hand-me-down church lenses and didn't know I was doing it. **I was searching for the missing piece when I really needed the missing whole.** I needed a revolutionary mindset, something that organized my longings into something big and real that would cast everything in my ministry in a different light. I needed the Seven Laws of the Upper Room.

About a year after I left the church, I returned once more, this time to the final worship service of the church's existence. The doors were closing on that congregation forever. It might have been a sad

and awkward experience, but to my surprise I did not feel that way. I had changed, and so had my perspective on the church and ministry success. That allowed me to see that even though the Lower Room was ready to close, some Upper Room impact remained. I looked at this individual and that, comparing what they were like when I first met them to the person standing before me now. Amid many disappointments, some of my efforts did bear fruit that lasted, thanks to the Vine.

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In a striking way that Sunday aptly summarized the last few years of that church. On its very last day of existence a new attender was present, longing for Christian community in her new town. **The whole experience made for a strange juxtaposition of a dying institution, a living kingdom, and a body of believers caught in between**—a parable of the church at large in North America.

Meanwhile, those believers have now scattered to seed other churches. Over the next twenty years, those fellowships will face the same dilemmas we did. Some of them will live and some will die. Yet my friends and I still have a choice and a chance to mature into disciple-makers who make Future Church.

NOTES

¹ A personal APEST assessment with report is available at <https://5qcentral.com/product/apest-vocational-assessment> (accessed March 16, 2019).

² Rick Warren, **The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission** (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), loc. 20 of 304, NOOK.

³ Aaron Earls, “The Church Growth Gap: The Big Get Bigger While the Small Get Smaller,” Christianity Today, March 6, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/march/lifeway-research-church-growth-attendance-size.html>.