

7 WAYS *to* BEAT CHURCH DECLINE



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About this Ebook

You hear the stories of what God is doing at other churches. You know you shouldn't, but you feel a tinge of disappointment each time. You wish them well. You want to see God do the impossible through them, but it's often a stark reminder of what might feel like an inescapable reality at your church.

You're not alone though. Most observers believe the vast majority of churches in North America are declining or have plateaued. But there's hope. Every week in America, God is turning around declining churches. And your church could be next.

The principles in this ebook are designed to propel you forward and help your church thrive again.

About Tobin Perry

Tobin Perry has served as a writer and editor for Saddleback Church, the North American Mission Board, and the International Mission Board, where he has frequently focused on church leadership issues. He has also served as the lead pastor of a church in Southern Indiana. He has written for numerous publications, including Christianity Today, HomeLife, ParentLife, Baptist Press, and On Mission magazine, and has ghostwritten for a number of Christian ministry leaders. He has served as managing editor for Rick Warren's Ministry Toolbox and as the editor of the pastor's version of On Mission magazine. He was also a contributing writer for Zondervan's The Jesus Bible. A graduate of the University of Missouri School of Journalism and Gateway Seminary (formerly Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary), He is a certified content marketer through Hubspot and the Content Marketing Institute. Tobin lives with his wife and three children in Evansville, IN. For more information about Tobin,

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All of the first person pronouns in this book are his.

The Very Beatable Epidemic of Church Decline

The numbers are startling—and painful for anyone who loves the church.

[Last year 6,000 to 10,000 churches closed their doors.](#) Churches that, at one time, were beacons of light in dark communities no longer exist. Churches that once reached people far from God have disappeared. Churches that filled empty bellies, stood beside the vulnerable, and preached the gospel now sit empty week after week.

[In a decade, church attendance has declined from 42 percent to 38 percent, that's between 2008 and 2017.](#) Even the people who attend church regularly these days attend less often. People who once attended three times a week now come once. People who attended weekly now come biweekly. Those who come monthly only come for Christmas and Easter.

But none of those numbers are why you downloaded this ebook.

It's not the 10,000 that has you concerned. It's your church. You're seeing the number of empty chairs in your church grow each week. Giving has declined. Involvement has dropped.

You see the trend. You know where it's heading. If nothing changes, your church will join the 10,000. It's only a matter of time.

Or is it?

Is your church's decline set in stone? Should you throw in the towel.

Of course not.

Just check out Mark's story.

Reclaiming God's Glory

When Mark Clifton moved from Montreal to Kansas City, MO, in 2003 to serve as a Southern Baptist associational missionary in the city, he was struck by the differences he saw in churches. A longtime church planter, Mark had spent much of his life trying to get new churches off the ground in places where there were relatively few Southern Baptist congregations.



But Kansas City was different. You could find Baptist churches on nearly every corner in the city and surrounding communities. There were about 150 Southern Baptist churches in Canada at the time stretching across six time zones. Kansas City had nearly 130 SBC churches in just two counties alone.

But many of those 130 churches were stagnant or declining.

As he visited these declining churches throughout the city, one question kept nagging him: *What about a dying church brings glory to God?*

Nothing. He kept coming to a clear and simple answer: A dying church robs God of glory.

That question changed his life. He decided to do whatever it took to help declining churches turn their ministries around.

In October of 2005, a declining Kansas City church, with only a handful of people remaining, asked Mark to be its pastor. Over the next few years, he leaned into many of the same strategies that he had used to start new churches. He prayed. He loved the church's remaining members. He expounded on scripture. He simplified the church's strategy. He discipled young leaders. And he made disciples who made disciples who made even more disciples.

In the next few years, God replaced that declining church with a healthy one. Mark shares the story of what God did in his book, [Reclaiming God's Glory: Creating a Gospel Legacy throughout North America](#).

In the book, he writes: "Wornall Road doesn't look much like the 1940s version. We don't do ministry the same way. We don't serve the community in the same manner. And we certainly don't have the same cast of leaders. But we are relevant and reaching our community once again. The power that enabled the first generation of Wornall members is again empowering this present generation—that is the power of the gospel as revealed and lived out in the lives of our members."

Hope for Declining Churches

Your church's future hasn't been written yet. Your church doesn't have to join this year's 10,000 dying churches.

Resurrection has always been God's idea. For the past 2,000 years, the church has preached about how God can bring new life out of death.

Your declining church has the opportunity to not just preach that message.

You can demonstrate it.



Ultimately, it's God's job to bring new life to your church, but you have a part to play. This ebook will point out seven strategies that can help any church beat church decline.

Your church's best days can be just around the corner.

Read on to find out how to get there.





Diversify Your Leadership

It doesn't matter where you live. Your demographics are changing.

Of all the factors impacting the declining churches in America, the impact of changing demographics is probably the most resounding. For generations, most American churches have been mono-cultural, just like the neighborhoods they served. Martin Luther King Jr. famously quipped that 11 AM on Sunday was the most segregated hour in America.

But for years, despite the fact they were only reaching one ethnic group, churches kept growing because they still had an ever-growing pool of people to reach. Today, demographics are changing though. The number of all-white counties have plummeted since 1980. According to a September 2012 *USA Today* article, [less than a third of U.S. counties are 90 percent Caucasian](#). Almost every neighborhood in America is more diverse than it was 50 years ago.

Many urban areas in America are already majority-minority communities. By 2045, Caucasians will be a minority of Americans.

Your church can't run from diversity and grow. Diversifying your church isn't just a moral imperative (though it's certainly that), it's a practical necessity.

If your church finds itself in the midst of decline, one of your church's first question has to be this: *Does our church reflect the community where we reside?*

Churches that don't look like their communities don't typically grow. Many of the declining churches in our communities, particularly in urban areas, no longer look like their surrounding neighborhoods. A generation or two ago, they did. Because they looked like and lived like the people they were trying to reach, they grew.

But as urban areas grew more diverse, many churches haven't followed suit. Decline has followed.

Why Leadership is the Answer

You know the old adage, "Everything rises and falls on leadership." It's still true, but it's particularly true when it comes to diversifying a church. If you want to see your church reach a diversifying community, your leadership must reflect who you're trying to reach.

Churches will often take on the characteristics of those who lead them. That's true in all demographics. A church that has older leaders will likely struggle to reach young families. The same is true of education level and socioeconomic status.

And the same is true for race and ethnicity.

This doesn't mean you need a new pastor. (Although if you're looking for a new pastor currently, you should strongly consider finding a leader who matches your community.) It does mean that you should intentionally look to incorporate lay leaders and other staff who come from diverse backgrounds.

You'll share your vision many ways as a church. You'll preach it. You'll teach it. You'll budget for it.

But maybe most importantly, you'll show your vision. If your vision is to reach a diversifying community, you'll show it in the people you place in leadership.

What do you do if you have no diversity in your church to put into leadership positions?

Get a diversity coach. Seriously. Sit down with a nearby pastor whose church reaches a more diverse crowd and ask for recommendations. Maybe that church has leaders who would be willing to serve at your church for awhile. Maybe the pastor will have suggestions of new staff to hire.

In fact, the simple act of partnering with more diverse churches in an effort to reach new people will likely have a positive impact on your church's ability to connect with a more diverse community.



Jump into Technology

Over the past three decades, technology has been the most disruptive force for change in the world. You don't have to guess as to why only 60 Fortune 500 companies from 1955 still exist. Just note the staggering number of industries that have been transformed by technology since 1990.

- Telecommunications
- Maps
- Television
- Newspapers
- Books
- Mail
- Music
- Travel

Those categories just scratch the surface. The digital transformation of the past three decades has been staggering.

[And it is changing churches, too.](#)

No, it's not changing our message. Our message will never change, but it is shifting how people engage our ministries.

How people consume sermons, give, study the Bible, and connect with other Christians has changed rapidly in the past few decades thanks, in part, to technology.

And these winds of change show no sign of slowing down. [Church strategist Tony Morgan notes](#) that the church "industry" has the potential for a "perfect disruptive storm" in the coming years. Citing a *Harvard Business Review* article on how tech disrupts business, he notes that churches embody two characteristics of industries primed for disruptions: 1) it's easy for new startups to get involved and 2) most current organizations are using large, legacy models.

Morgan writes: "It should be no surprise that the church has both qualities. This generation of church planters has proven they can start without large resources or even a building. And many established churches are running off the same model they've used for years. These are the makings of a perfect, disruptive storm."

Churches that don't dive deep into technology won't survive much longer. Like the church did with

radio/technology, the printing press, and even the Roman Road system of the church's apostolic era, it's time for the church to embrace technology.

Leaning harder into church technology isn't primarily about the coolness factor either. Nor is it about relevance. It's about reaching new people.

Your church is declining because you're not reaching new people and/or you're not engaging the people you reach (so you're not keeping them).

Here are three tech solutions that will help you turn that around.

1. **Social media ads.** You won't find a more cost-effective way to get the word out about your church today than Facebook ads. The average person spends [1.72 hours a day](#) on social media (and 40 minutes on Facebook alone)—and they're doing it throughout the day.

It's also cheap compared to other marketing and advertising avenues. You can start off with a small investment in Facebook ads and grow it over time. For more about how to use Facebook ads and to get some ready-made templates to get you started, check out Pushpay's free resource, [27 Plug-and-Play Facebook Ad Templates That Will Grow Your Church](#).

2. **Mobile app.** People spend an average of five hours a day on their mobile devices. Twenty years ago you needed a website if you were going to reach new people and engage the ones you had. Churches that didn't have websites simply died.

Soon the same will be said of those without church apps. Church apps are particularly critical to level up how your church engages people you already have. Thanks to mobile notifications, you can push out your messages and have instant access to nearly every person in your church with a mobile app. In a single tap, you can take them to a place where they can give, watch a sermon, check out a devotional, etc. To find out how you can use a mobile app to better engage your community, talk to one of [Pushpay's mobile giving experts](#).

3. **Digital giving.** Just take a look at Europe for the future of financial transactions and it quickly becomes clear that cash is becoming historic. Cash only makes up 34 percent of UK's financial payments. In Sweden, a cash represents a mere 2 percent of transactions. Though the United States isn't quite there yet, it's getting closer.

According to Pushpay's free resource, [2018 Digital Giving Trends in the Church](#), digital givers donate 44 percent more than non-digital givers. Why? They have the opportunity to give in the same digital manner they make other financial transactions (like booking travel, buying groceries, and paying bills). To tap into the resources you'll need to beat decline in your church, you need to embrace digital giving.



Redeem Your Building

Maybe the most disheartening aspect of church decline is the monumental waste in empty church buildings nationwide. Even when a church building is full each Sunday, it can sit empty the rest of the week. A declining church exaggerates the situation.

And the community notices. They look at your under-used building and see you as a drain on the neighborhood—not a benefit.

Your building costs you money every single day. You may have to pay mortgage or rent. You have electricity and heating bills. You have maintenance. For declining churches that are often seeing a drop in giving, it doesn't take long for a building to become an albatross hanging around your neck.

But it doesn't have to be.

Your building can become an asset, rather than a liability. Instead of looking at your building as a relic of what God used to do at your church, begin seeing it as a tool to help other churches and your community.

For example, consider the following possibilities.

- 1. Allow new church plants to use your building (either by giving the space away or renting it).** New church plants desperately need places to host worship services. Most young churches can't afford to have their own building right away. Your building may be the key to the new church's next stage of growth.

If you meet on a Sunday morning, invite a church plant to use your building on Saturday or Sunday night. Open up your sanctuary or allow the new church to use a fellowship hall or other room in your building.

Even if you can't provide a meeting place, you could provide much-needed office space during the week for the church plant's pastor or other leaders.

- 2. Allow local nonprofits to use your building.** You probably have a variety of nonprofits in your community that are using a shoestring budget to fund some incredible work. You can help their funds stretch further if your church loans them space (or rents it to them for a minimal cost).

Your community will often tie any nonprofits in your building with your church so make sure it's an organization that aligns with your vision of the future.

- 3. Host community events.** Meeting spaces that can hold a crowd and provide adequate parking are at a premium in many communities. Let your community know that they can use your building for meetings, concerts, and graduations. You can even charge a rental fee (particularly to cover expenses you'll incur for utilities, cleaning, etc.). Even with a small charge, it'll be a huge benefit for the organization you're hosting.

Plus, it gets new people through the doors of your building! No, they aren't coming for a church service, but you've still helped people take an often tough first step. Enlist some volunteers to serve the guests as greeters, ushers, or snack servers. Let the community meet the people who already attend your church.

Your church may not have many resources to draw on. You may not have many people to mobilize for ministry. But regardless, your building can become an incredible blessing to your community. Begin to do the three ideas mentioned above, and you'll become an indispensable part of your local neighborhood.



Nurture People through the Community Member Journey

For many declining churches, it's not getting people through the front doors that's the problem—it's stopping them from sneaking out the back. Rick Warren often makes the point that anyone can draw a crowd, but a crowd isn't a church. You can turn a crowd into a church though.

That's what assimilation is all about—turning a crowd into a church. Without a systematized way to do that, decline is inevitable.

The truth is, most people go through a very similar journey when engaging with our churches. The question isn't whether people experience Community Member Journey when they participate in our churches. The question is, will we make it easier for them to take their next step?

Technology can help you bridge the gap if you're willing to dive in.

Here's the journey most people take in our communities when they engage with our churches—including some specific ways you can use technology to help people take these important steps.

- **Awareness.** People in this stage have never stepped foot in your church. They may have a vague idea about who you are, but they never think about you unless someone else brings you up. Primarily, they're thinking about themselves, trying to be good spouses, parents, employees, etc.

You're trying to help them consider attending your church by making yourself easier to find online and engaging them through social ads.

- **Attendance.** These people have attended your church, but it's far from a habit yet. They may attend once a quarter—or a couple of times a year. They're still trying to decide whether they want to make your church or any other church a part of their regular routine.

Help them understand the value of regular participation in your church by sharing stories (through email, social media, and your website) of your church in action. Testimonies of how God is at work through people in your church are particularly valuable at this time.

- **Participation.** At this point, people attend your church regularly. They're “trying on your

church” to see if you fit. They’re considering a long-term commitment through membership, recurring giving, etc.

By far, your best move with people in this stage is offering them an app. [An app](#) will make regular giving easier and provide your church with an instant way to communicate through actionable notifications.

- **Service.** These people attend your church regularly and want to serve in some capacity, but they don’t know where they fit. You’re helping them discover their gifting and use it in ministry at your church and in your broader community.

On your mobile app, give people in this stage an easy way to sign up for different service opportunities. Make sure you provide enough information where people understand the skills needed and the time commitment they’re making.

- **Advocacy.** Already regular attenders who give and serve at your church, these people want to tell others about your church. You need to give them the tools to do so.

Make it easy for them to share information from your mobile app and provide “sharable” content via social media. Always ask yourself, “How can someone share this content?” when you create anything.

- **Leadership.** Involved in leading ministry efforts at your church, these people are disciple-makers. Provide as many on-the-go tools as you can (like a Bible, sermon content, and training) through your mobile app.

Declining churches tend to have people in them who are “stuck” in their discipleship journey with your church. Technology can be a great way to help people take their next step.

Pushpay has a variety of resources designed to help you use tech to nurture people on this journey. Check them out at [Pushpay.com/resources](https://pushpay.com/resources).

Particularly take a look at the free resource, [Content Marketing for Churches](#).



Invest in Younger Leaders

One of the most prominent common characteristics of declining churches is the average age of attendees tends to be climbing. Part of the reason behind the decline is the church can no longer replace those who die and can't attend regularly because of health reasons with younger people. Your church can't grow unless you can reverse this trend.

Start by specifically reaching out to young families. It's far from easy though. If most of the people in your church are older, it will be difficult (but not impossible) to engage younger leaders.

Anglican archbishop William Temple once said, "The church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members." Older churches that want to engage young people need to keep that in mind. If your sermon topics, music, and programming are all primarily designed to engage the older congregation you already have, you can't expect to engage young families.

Spend some time in prayer, asking God to show you how to serve your community's young families. Consider ministries that could benefit young families and can lean on the experience and resources your congregation already has (like time, if many of your members are retired). Take a look at your church's music and sermon topics and ask yourself if they minister to young families as they do to the seniors already in your church.

But, of course, you can't stop with just attracting young families. You need to get young leaders involved in your church. That starts with giving young leaders opportunities to lead. Make it a point to get to know all the new people who join your church. As you do, try to find out what talents and gifts they bring to the church. Look for opportunities to put those gifts to use.

Young leaders—particularly the strong ones—tend to replicate themselves. They replicate themselves because they're typically discipling new leaders, but they also tend to attract other young leaders to your ministry. When young families see that you're giving young people opportunities to lead, they'll notice and want to be a part of what you're doing.

But, of course, here's the catch. It's not even enough to involve young leaders in the ministry of your church. If you want to turn around the decline and make your church the kind of place where young leaders want to be, you must give them ownership over the decision-making process of the church.

That's usually much harder. It's one thing to let a young leader teach a Sunday School class. It's an entirely other matter to invite them to sit on your board. But the first won't really matter until you do the second.

To really make decisions with young families in mind, you need the wisdom of young families. You need to lean on their input.

You can come up with a ton of excuses not to give young leaders an ownership over decision-making in your church. You can say they're too young and too immature. Or you can take the risk.

You'll be glad you did.



Be Transparent about Giving

People don't trust charities. According to a [2015 article in The Stanford Social Innovation Review](#), people think nonprofits are self-interested do-gooders who simply aren't competent enough to use their money effectively.

You may be more than a typical charity, but your church likely has a similar reputation among the unchurched in your community. They likely respect your mission, but they're not sure that you provide the best place to invest their money for maximum good in the community.

If you're going to turn your church's decline around, you'll need to show them something different. The people who give to your church consistently will not only believe in your mission but will have confidence that you're using their funds effectively.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

That starts with communication. People need to know where their money is going. When they're giving to your church, they aren't just giving to help you meet a generic budget. They're giving to extend the ministry of your church.

To you, it may be intuitive that when your church feeds people through your food pantry, it's the gifts of your congregation that makes that happen. But most people will not make this connection. You'll need to make it for them.

As often as possible, explain that your church's ministry happens because of what people give. It needs to be more than something you share once a quarter in a business meeting. It must be integrated into everything you do—from how you engage your congregation at the pulpit to the communication you send out weekly. That means you don't talk about a youth camp or outreach to the homeless or a revival meeting without *explicitly* reminding your givers that it happens because of their contributions.

Create (and share) your annual report

Another way to drive this message home is through an end-of-year giving report. Nonprofits have been doing this for years because their givers turned over so quickly. They could rarely assume

that people would give to their current level year after year. Because many churches taught the ethic of regular, proportional giving, they could expect giving to continue regardless of how they communicate.

Although you may still teach proportional giving, you may not be able to depend upon it like you once could, particularly as your congregation ages and long-time contributors pass away. An annual report will help your congregation see firsthand how their giving is being used.

A good church annual report should have the following:

- A short note of gratitude from your pastor and other leaders
- A compelling description of your church's vision and unique mission
- A breakdown of your church's giving and spending
- Stories of the people your church has impacted through its ministry
- Plenty of metrics that demonstrate what has happened through your ministry (baptisms, people served, worship attendance, small group attendance, etc.)
- A record of everything your church has done digitally (website visits, social shares, sermons viewed, etc.)

Despite the long list above, try to keep your report short, clear, and compelling. Don't be afraid to enlist the support of professional writers and designers to complete this. Of course, look first to people in your church who can do this, but hire someone if you must.



Go All in on Your Neighborhood

If your church is declining, it's likely that one of the reasons—if not the primary reason—is that you no longer connect with the surrounding neighborhood. You likely once did. Maybe you can point to a time in the past, maybe the near past, when the people in your church had similar backgrounds as those in the surrounding neighborhood. But it's probably no longer the case. Most churches can't thrive for long without regularly reaching people who live nearby.

So if you're enduring a season of decline, *go all in on your neighborhood*. If you must, reinvent yourself. Let your community know that you care about them, that you will serve them with abandon. Become a neighborhood church by strengthening your relationship with those who reside near your church.

Here are a few ways to do that:

- **Look for opportunities to serve in your community.** Every community has volunteer needs, often many of them. Look for opportunities that match your church's unique background and experiences, then jump in. Your best bet is to go deep in one particular area of your community rather than spread yourself thin by trying to do too much.
- **Partner with your local public schools.** Your nearby public schools likely have lots of needs. Sit down with a principal and brainstorm opportunities for your church to give and serve. Start small, but make sure you serve well. You'll not only make an impression on children (and teens, if you're working with a high school), but serving schools is also a terrific way to build relationships with families, teachers, and administrators.
- **Get connected with other nearby churches.** Most likely, you're not alone in your community. Connect with other churches who are trying to reach your neighborhood. If there is a neighborhood ministerial association, join it. If there's not, start one.

You're not competing against other churches in your community—but together, you'll have lots more momentum to go toward impacting your neighbors.

- **Get involved in neighborhood issues.** Become an advocate for your neighborhood throughout your city. Go to community events (school board meetings, city council meetings, etc.) and advocate for the people in your community. Focus particularly on the most vulnerable in your community, those who likely have no one else speaking out for them. When you do this, you show the community that *you're for them*. That'll send a powerful message.
- **Make local demographics a key metric.** You probably measure lots of activities in your church, from attendance to baptisms to giving. Those are all great numbers to keep an eye on. But ultimately, you want to see God use your church to impact your neighborhood and the world for good. Instead of just measuring what goes on inside your church, measure what goes on outside as well.

Your church will care about what you measure. Find some key metrics in your community that need to change (drug overdoses, teen pregnancy, illiteracy). Set a goal of where you want your community to be in a year, five years, or ten years. Then, do what you can to help. If you're trying to lower addictions, start a recovery ministry. Want to decrease illiteracy? Start an adult tutoring program.

Whatever you do, become indispensable to your neighborhood. Instead of becoming a drain on your neighborhood resources, make it better. Genuine love attracts people to your ministry.

At The End of The Day

Whether your church is experiencing a recent lull in attendance or you haven't seen many newcomers in your last five Easter services, reversing decline is possible for any church, at any stage. The recommendations listed above are founded on some of the universal pillars of church growth and sustainability. So with a little more effort in the right areas, any church in decline can experience a turnaround.

So remain prayerful and optimistic. God's not done with your church yet.

Learn more ways you can engage
with your community

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