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Mergers with Larger Churches Revive Dying Ones

Declining and dying congregations have found a new way to fill their pews – church mergers. Congregations across the country that are dwindling in numbers are contacting larger, healthier, and oftentimes younger churches for help.

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Declining and dying congregations have found a new way to fill their pews – church mergers.

While the practice itself may not be new, more churches today have taken on a newer and more successful approach.

In recent years, congregations across the country that are dwindling in numbers have been contacting larger, healthier, and oftentimes younger (in terms of attendees) churches for help. A lot of times those calls result in "acquisitions" in which the struggling church adopts the identity of the larger and functions as an extension campus.

Mergers in the 1950s often involved declining churches on both ends and just did not work, whereas now they involve at least one healthy church.

Warren Bird, research director at Leadership Network, sees huge potential in the new mergers, or what he calls "declining restarts."

"They become new campuses of another church and it's very exciting [to see] the outreach, the conversions, the renewed passion for discipleship ... It's a growing thing," said Bird, who studied mergers for the newly released book *A Multi-Site Church Road Trip*.

In the book, he details the consolidation of a growing church in Manhasset, N.Y., and a church of about 34 people just 20 minutes away. Shelter Rock Church's pastor, Steve Tomlinson, received a call for help from a pastoral acquaintance whose church was experiencing major decline. After an affirming vote from both congregations, the struggling church became Shelter Rock Church, Syosset campus and changes were drastic.

The church building was remodeled and Shelter Rock's teaching staff and musicians began leading the acquired church. As a result, attendance grew and even former members returned to the now vibrant congregation.

It's been four years now since the merger and Shelter Rock has been receiving calls from other churches with declining membership.

"I think a lot of churches are looking for a way to get a fresh start on reaching their communities," Tomlinson told Bird.

While mergers typically result in higher weekly attendance, veterans of mergers are not likely to frame their success in terms of numbers, according to Bird. Instead, they ask such questions as "Is the result a healthier environment for growth?" or "Are we moving a greater percentage of people into service capacity?"

More churches are considering the merger option as U.S. congregations grow older and smaller.

In 2008, less than half of American congregations – from old line and evangelical Protestantism, to Catholic, Orthodox and other world religions – reported growth in the past five years of 2 percent or more, according to the Faith Communities Today 2008 survey. Three years earlier, 58 percent said they experienced growth in worship attendance.

Also, only 35 percent of congregations said they were spiritually vital and alive in 2008 compared to 42 percent in 2005.

"Declining churches and, in some cases, dying churches are saying 'we love Jesus [but] we can't reach the neighborhood,' Bird said. "[C]hurch mergers – in this new sense of completely restarting one of them – may hold significant potential for the future health and expansion of the American church."

Lillian Kwon
Christian Post Reporter

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