

THE CHURCH RECOVERY GUIDE

A black flashlight is positioned in the upper right corner, angled downwards. Its lens is illuminated from within, casting a bright, circular beam of light that spreads outwards and downwards, illuminating the text below. The background is a dark blue gradient, transitioning from a darker shade at the top to a lighter, more vibrant blue at the bottom.

*How Your
Congregation
Can Adapt
and Thrive
after a Crisis*

Karl Vaters

IMPACT:
WHAT WE KNOW—
AND WHAT
WE DON'T KNOW

During my forty-plus years of pastoral ministry, I've been asked a lot of questions. Some are easy to answer, others leave me scratching my head.

I used to stress over the hard questions. Or give pat answers. Or take a stab at an answer and hope I was right. I don't do that anymore, since I learned the value of three wonderful words: I. Don't. Know.

I've been using those words a lot lately.

“Are we underreacting, overreacting, or properly reacting to this crisis?”

I don't know.

“When will things get back to normal?”

I don't know.

“What will the church look like going forward?”

I don't know.

WHY “I DON'T KNOW” MATTERS

Strong, decisive leadership matters—especially in a crisis. But more than anything else, people need one characteristic from their leaders when life takes a sideways turn: honesty. There is no more essential element to life, faith, and leadership than the mandate to tell the truth.

An honest “I don't know” is always better than false bravado. After a while, people will see through the false front. And when they do, they will lose trust.

It feels counterintuitive that admitting our ignorance will build trust. We think we'll lose people's trust if we don't have all the answers. The opposite is almost always true. Saying “I don't know” when you don't have an answer lets people know you're not faking it when you do have

an answer. People are more willing to trust leaders who are honest about their vulnerabilities than those who only show their strengths.

Plus, especially in times of crisis, fake or simplistic answers can hurt people. When people ask their pastor hard questions, the stakes are often very high. Their health or their faith might be hanging in the balance. This is not the time to spitball it.

If we really know the answer, we should give it. But if we don't, a fake or pat answer can send people down a bad path. It's less dangerous to be ignorant than wrong.

Besides, saying "I don't know" is not the same as saying "God doesn't know." We don't know everything God knows. We honor Him when we admit that. Some answers will never be learned this side of heaven. Why COVID-19? I don't know. No one does.

But there are some things we do know. Some things we've always known. The road ahead will be built on the foundation of these eternal truths.

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RECALIBRATE CHURCH

The church is not dying. It's in fine shape. Jesus said He'd build it, and He is. Relentlessly and beautifully. But individual congregations, denominations, and ideologies? Now that's another story.

While the church of Jesus around the world continues to move forward, chasing away the darkness with the light of Jesus, many local expressions of the church are watching their candles flicker in recent years. I believe the next decade or two will be critical for the Western church. The culture around us is experiencing a once-in-a-millennium shift right now—a recalibration of the way we think about everything from morality to sexuality, identity, and theology.

So what's the local church to do? We must hold two seemingly competing ideals in our hands at the same time.

Ideal #1: Stand strong on the unchanging principles of God's Word.

Ideal #2: Adapt our methods to a fast-changing world.

If we hope to do these two things well, local congregations must reinforce the following ten principles. And the sooner we get to work on them, the better. The current

crisis didn't cause the need to recalibrate the way we do church, but it is accelerating it.

1. Reestablish the biblical essentials

According to an article from the *Washington Post*, churches that stand firm on the biblical essentials are more likely to be thriving, while those that compromise on them are more likely to be dying.¹

We shouldn't need a newspaper article to tell us to stick to the essentials. While everything else can change, the essentials cannot. Any church that abandons biblical principles won't just fail to survive, it doesn't deserve to.

2. Emphasize discipleship and leadership training

The days of hiring a team of pastors to do all the ministry of the church is dying. Good riddance. Instead, churches that thrive are taking Ephesians 4:11–12 seriously by equipping God's people to do the work of ministry and raising up a team of ministers.

In the coming decades, the pastor's main task must shift from preaching and caregiving, to training lay leaders to do the ministry of the church. That has always been our calling anyway. Events on the ground are now forcing us to do it the biblical way.

For many, maybe most churches, this will be a long-term turnaround of attitudes and methods. Start now, or you may miss the boat.

3. Reduce your overhead

By all accounts, giving trends are down and will continue to fall. This was true even before the COVID-19 lockdowns caused many people to face unexpected cut-backs or layoffs from work. These recent losses are likely to

have deep, long-term implications for many years to come. Churches with top-heavy staffing, excessive mortgages, and high-maintenance bills will find themselves buried under their increasing weight in the coming decades.

If local congregations, denominations, and parachurch ministries hope to survive, they need to get to work on:

- Getting out of debt (including mortgage)
- Reducing the percentage of budget for paid staff
- Training and empowering volunteers to lead and serve

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- Sharing expenses with other churches and ministries
- Preparing ministers-in-training for the likelihood that they will be bivocational

Anything else that can reduce the financial burden of church maintenance is helpful. (We'll look more deeply into these financial issues in chapter 6.)

4. Rethink your building

Until very recently, if someone wanted to start a business, one of the first things they would do was find or build a store, office, warehouse, or other physical structure. Not anymore. Today, the rule is to avoid the encumbrance of a physical building for as long as possible. Churches need to do the same. If your church doesn't have a building, don't be in a hurry to buy one. Stay nimble as long as possible.

If you own a building—especially if you're one of the growing number of churches that own a too-big building for your shrinking congregation—be relentless about finding creative ways to utilize the space as often as possible.

For many of our churches, it's *use-it-or-lose-it* time. As in, use the building or lose the church—facility, people . . . *everything*.

5. Work with strategic partners

In many places, smaller churches are banding together—even across denominational lines—to share resources, think strategically, mend old wounds, and minister to their shared community. In addition, there is a small but growing network of parachurch organizations that are increasingly willing to come alongside local churches for little or no money to share everything from outreach ideas to administrative assistance, to graphic design and more.

Start by asking around on social media. You may be surprised what you'll find. Or start a network yourself. It's easier to do now than it's ever been.

6. Engage your community

Churches must stop being identified by the location of their building. And we can't replace it by being identified for our online presence. We must be recognized for the passion of our heart.

A church that's known as “the people who love kids” (or addicts, or single moms) has a much higher likelihood of thriving and surviving than the church that's known as “the old building on the corner of First and Main” or even

“the church with the cool, interactive website.”

7. *Emphasize Jesus over tradition (or denominations, or buildings, or politics, or . . .)*

Everything but Jesus and the Bible must be on the table. Ask yourself this question. “Would I be willing to give up (insert a preference here) if it meant doing a better job of reaching our community for Jesus?” If anything you’d put in that blank makes you pause (other than the biblical essentials), it’s an idol that must be abandoned.

For instance, several years ago I was preaching through 1 Timothy. When I came to the mandate to pray for “kings and all those in authority,” I offered a prayer that mentioned key people in those positions, including the voters, the mayor, the governor, and so on. I referred to the president and his family by name, asking God to give him wisdom, and to give them a peaceable home life. (No, I won’t tell you which president.) I also used the opportunity to encourage the congregation to be careful not to let political beliefs take a higher priority in their lives than our Christian witness.

One church member was so angry about this that he told me he would leave the church if I didn’t publicly re-

tract my prayer, condemn the president, and renounce my statement about how to reprioritize our political beliefs. I wouldn't, so he and his family left the church. I'm still saddened when I recall that incident, but our public Christian witness and the scriptural mandate, which includes the phrase "that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim. 2:1–2), was greater than the idol he had made out of his hatred for the president.

8. Restructure what needs to be restructured

Quit fighting to keep your favorite ministry, method, or tradition alive. If it's not part of the solution, it's part of the problem.

9. Make disciples, not just converts

Converts join a club. Disciples start a movement.

Converts follow traditions. Disciples follow Jesus.

Converts change their minds. Disciples change their lives. And other people's lives.

10. Figure out why your congregation should survive

If your church disappeared tomorrow, what would really be lost? Yes, that's a hard question. It might even feel cruel and uncaring. But it's not. It's essential. Any

congregation that can't readily answer why they should survive, won't.

START TODAY

It's been said that the best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago—the second best time is today. The same goes for these principles. If you've been doing them, strengthen them. If not, get started now, then be relentless at them. Not just this year, but every year.

The survival of your local church depends on it.

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