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Turnaround Stories in an Urban Setting

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Turnaround Churches/Urban Setting

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(I. A.) Biblical Terms

Scripture provides helpful language for those who wish to talk about “turnaround churches”. Helpful language is language which carries real meaning. The language utilized in Scripture reflects the real change which is only possible by God’s power. Changes in how the church is marketed or changes in church programming or changes in church architecture may produce some appearance of someone’s version of success, but the turnarounds or transformations which manifest the kingdom of God are those changes produced by God. Paul’s letter to the church at Rome clearly states that real change happens when God operates through changed minds...changed convictions. (Romans 12:1,2) The Bible uses the word repentance (*metanoia* in the Greek) for this change of mind.

Another term used which may help to inform the church concerning the content of a change of mind is the word for “to turn or convert” (usually some form of *epistrephain* in the Greek). The church must always be turning toward God (Acts 9:35; 11:2; 15:19; 26:20; I Pet. 2:25), and must always turn away from the world of idols (I Thess. 1:9), vain or useless things (Acts 14:15) and the power of Satan (Acts 26:18), who is the father of lies. Only as churches repent and turn from the seductive allure of the world’s tools and treasures, and embrace God’s mission “to reconcile all things...in the heavens and on earth to God” (Col. 1:20) will there be “turnarounds” indicative of the Kingdom and produced by God’s Spirit.

(I. B.) Standards of Evaluation

Turnaround churches are so designated typically because they have at some time teetered on the brink of a crisis only to have recovered their balance and moved to a state of stability if not success. The crisis, almost always, is defined as a crisis of size. Therefore, the turnaround could only be that of increased numbers. How disastrous and un-biblical is this line of reasoning?! As theologian George Hunsberger has written, “The crisis of size should therefore be recognized as a signal that we are facing a more pressing crisis, a crisis of shape.” (p. 334, The Church Between Gospel & Culture) The Church of the New Testament is designated as the “Body of Christ”; she is a Spirit driven organism adequately supplied (I Cor. 12:1-31; Rom. 12:3-8; Eph. 4:4-16) for maturation into the shape of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13-15).

Angels and prophets may have proclaimed or announced the coming of the Messiah, but fulfillment was when God took on flesh and dwelt among us, incarnate, embodied. In the same way, it is important for the church to preach and proclaim the gospel of God’s kingdom come in Jesus, but the real good news must be God’s kingdom rule on display through the life of fellowship in the Church. The signs ought to include: the victory of love over selfishness, the victory of hope over despair, the victory of peace over violence, the victory of family over alienation, the victory of sufficiency over poverty and the victory of contentment over want.

Paul’s goals for the church in Rome and for the churches in most places to which he wrote are catalogued in Romans 12:9-21. Nowhere in this list (or any other list found in the N.T.) are numerical goals set. The witness of Scripture (if it matters - and it should) is that God’s mission is not described numerically, and is not dependent on large numbers. Surely this is the lesson taught by Gideon’s army of 32,000 being reduced to 300!

Ironically, the N.T. word “salvation” has its roots in the idea of health and wholeness. While our cultures’ health industry is fixated on the disease of obesity, our churches continue to pursue the unhealthy practice of adding those who seek religion and the security of heaven, but who resist the discipleship of Jesus...radical self-denial, cross-bearing and following (Mt. 16:24). A turnaround church is one which matures in the direction of the fullness of Christ.

(I. C.) Convictions vs. Techniques

Turnaround churches which begin to bear the marks of Christ will pursue truthful convictions rather than “practical” techniques of church growth and marketing. (Here might be the place to purge our preachers’ libraries of Barna and Maxwell, take an adult dose of Street and Kenneson’s Selling Out the Church and prayerfully consider the Sermon On the Mount and Paul’s letters to the churches of Ephesus and Colossae.) All truthful convictions are located in Christ (Col. 2:1-3). Convictions are not the beliefs we speak; convictions are the beliefs we practice.

Every church has a story or stories. These stories are the result of practices over time. These practices are the natural consequences of the actual convictions held by the church. Only God’s spirit of truth prayerfully sought can open a church’s eyes for discerning accurately her stories and practices back to the convictions which produced them. This is the process alluded to by Jesus as it is recorded in Matthew 7:13-17. Nowhere does Paul offer churches a tool belt full of techniques; instead he prays twice for the Ephesians to know those truths which produce kingdom of God convictions (Eph. 1:15-22; 3:14-21) and he encourages the church at Philippi to be one in having the mind of Christ, which he defines in terms of emptying, humbling and obeying (Phil. 2:1-11).

Turnaround churches in urban settings are those churches shaped by the conviction that we are called outside the city gate, the place of the dispossessed, to bear the reproach which fell on Jesus . . . to learn obedience through suffering in a world full of suffering (Heb. 5:8; 13:12-14).

(II. A.) A Brief History

If Englewood Christian Church is a turnaround church, it is important to understand the turnaround within a particular history and in a particular place. Englewood had her beginning as a neighborhood church on the outskirts of the growing city of Indianapolis in 1895. The church building remains on Rural Street. Located a mere one hundred yards north of the Old National Road (now U.S. Hwy. 40), Englewood was well-positioned for numerical growth. Within fifty years, the thirty-six charter members would outgrow their rented hall and their wooden church structure and become a congregation of hundreds occupying their impressive brick church building. As the growing city surrounded Englewood, the church’s influence and stature grew as well. She became one of the largest Christian churches in America, and one of the largest churches of any tradition in Indiana.

Morning worship attendance climbed to over one thousand by the early seventies, but numerous changes were gathering momentum signaling a precipitous fall. Within twenty years, attendance would drop to two hundred and fifty. Power and prestige had given way to struggle and grasping for an identity. Attendance has continued to shrink to the present number of about two hundred. Nothing in this telling of Englewood’s history resembles the typical definition of turnaround, but as was stated earlier there are other ways to evaluate churches.

Throughout her years, Englewood has taken on the form of either her religious environment or her cultural environment. Until the late fifties, the church looked in form like any other church in Indianapolis with certain “Christian Church” differences, and people held the same views as most of their neighbors. This would explain how some could be Englewood church members, Masonic lodge members and Ku Klux Klan members simultaneously. From the late fifties through the early seventies, the church was about growth in size . . . bigger attendance and expanding facility. However, both the religious and neighborhood environments began to change. The neighborhood became more visibly “urban”. Lack of one-mindedness concerning convictions began to be manifest.

Roles and composition of leadership began to change. These dynamics started both an exodus in numbers and a search for identity in congregational life.

(II. B.) ADAPTING TO A PLACE

By the mid-seventies the urban landscape of Indianapolis was changing rapidly. Churches began to notice the threat of being located in older urbanized neighborhoods and many considered relocation to newer suburban neighborhoods. For instance, the large East 49th Street Christian Church became the even larger East 91st Street Christian Church in the mid-seventies, and the large East 38th Street Christian Church became the even larger Post Road Christian Church in the mid-eighties.

The neighborhood around Englewood Christian Church, being close to the downtown area, was deteriorating visibly in the seventies and eighties, but the church leadership made a conscious decision to remain. However, the church's theological identity was not prepared for the challenges of the neighborhood's rapid changes. As the church attempted to cope with financial and numerical freefall, some chased after various forms of spiritual renewal while others looked for ways to address the needs of the urban poor. Both pursuits came from consciously sincere people, but both groups failed to seriously consider the destructive aspects of their activities.

The close of the eighties found the church wounded by a split in pastoral leadership related to a charismatic expression of the spiritual renewal movement, which had been rejected by the elders. The church was also growing progressively discontented by the lack of visible results from food, clothing and furniture pantries for the neighborhood poor.

The early nineties was a time filled with activities and new programs, but the result was weariness, disillusionment and more searching for identity. The only sure identity was that Englewood was an inner-city church in a neighborhood only growing worse.

(II. C.) Multiple Congregations in One

Significant changes began to take place in the mid-nineties. These changes were the result of attempts at honest assessments of the congregation. Perhaps the most revealing finding was the extent to which the church had been fragmented. Englewood was not one "body", it was many.

Old Englewood was still in existence as a traditional Christian Church. Also, there remained the "Glory Days" church fondly remembering the era of explosive numerical growth. There was a handful of members still under the influence of the spiritual renewal theology, and there was a younger crowd influenced by popular evangelical culture. Add to these an underground group of radical discipleship folks and you have the complicated composition of a church celebrating her centennial anniversary.

How could so many different elements begin a process of change? Was there a theology which could bring an expression of the essential unity found in Christ? The church needed to talk. But how?

(III. A.) Sunday Night Discussion

No part of the church's program was specifically designed for extended dialogue. Sunday morning was about worship; Sunday school was about education. Ministry team meetings were about various expressions of Englewood's ministry and mission. Sunday night church meeting had been about many things over the years, and seemed to be the most adaptable opportunity for sorting out congregational differences.

Three convictions guided this process: (1) The church must pursue one-mindedness (I Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:3; Philip. 1:27; 2:2; I Pet. 3:8) (2) Assembly is for the purpose of edification (I Cor. 14:26). (3) Godly discernment must take place in the assembly (I Cor. 14:26-33). Sunday night discussion was the arena where these convictions were practiced.

Adults who are not involved in teaching youth or children have gathered for the last six or seven years in a circle in a large room of the church building. The format is minimally directed discussion concerning church life. Specific topics have included the nature of Scripture, God's mission for the church, a year-long consideration of Ephesians 4 and most recently, the tension between the kingdom of God and U.S. citizenship.

The process of learning to speak together, though, has been messy, painful and costly. Some preferred leaving to working out differences. Some disagreements served only to polarize members further. However, the unity which does exist is real and valued highly because it is costly. The honesty and frankness from Sunday night discussion has begun to find its way into all Englewood discussions. The turn has begun!

(III. B) Englewood Community Development Corporation

When members of a church begin to honestly talk with one another, conversation becomes contagious and life together becomes intentional. Issues like housing, employment, childcare, household finance, food and education (to name a few) come to the forefront and the nominal practices of religion fade into the background. However, most churches are ill prepared for these issues in their conversations or practices. As Englewood recognized her ineffectiveness in responding to the families who came in the midst of crisis, and recognized her lack of capacity to address the issues named above, a plan was proposed to build capacity in the areas of concern for Englewood families. The plan eventually took the form of a separate 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation named Englewood Community Development Corporation.

After eight years as a church-driven but separate legal entity ECDC operates: a lawn care service which among other customers includes the City of Indianapolis for whom we mow 17 city parks, a bookkeeping service whose clients include for-profit and not-for-profit businesses, a bookstore with on-line ordering capability, a PC repair service and most recently, the beginning of a commercial cleaning service. Yet far and away ECDC's largest enterprise has been in the area of housing.

Through the agency of advocacy and consulting, acquisition and rehab, limited partnerships with financial institutions, pooling of personal financial resources, sweat equity by church families and a host of other vehicles, ECDC has assisted over twenty-five households to become residents of the church neighborhood. Many of these have become first-time homeowners. Those assisted range from the elderly to young newlyweds, from the healthy to the handicapped, from those who are upper middle-class to the economically disadvantaged and from life-long city residents to a Guatemalan preacher.

What has emerged from all of this activity has been a community of faith imperfectly but intentionally bearing the transformative gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a community church immersed in the real stuff of life. What better placement could there be for the leaven of God's kingdom come on earth.

(III. C) “Body-Friendly” Theology and Language

If Englewood was to be transformed by God, her mind had to be renewed. Thoughts require language for transportation. Words like “church” and “community”, though helpful, are overworked. The adoption of the biblical image of the church as “the Body of Christ” became important for two reasons. First, a distinction was made between the church as an institution or an organization and the church as a living organism. This distinction required this fragmented congregation to identify the natural ways of real love which actually holds a “body” together (Eph. 4:16). Members began to look for ways to deepen relationships with one another, instead of looking for superficial, quick and useless organizational fixes. Second, “Body of Christ” language reminded us that God continued to be incarnate through the Spirit indwelt church. God's wisdom was embodied in the church as a witness to the principalities and powers of this world (Eph. 3:10,11).

Many at Englewood have started to see God's mission differently as their way of speaking about the church has changed. If the Body of Christ lives in contrast to the rest of the world (an idea impressively advocated by Gerhard Lohfink in Jesus and Community) then her witness extends beyond individual salvation to the redemption of all things in Christ (Col. 1:19,20). Therefore, living and proclaiming the good news of God's reign in Christ meant church involvement in every area of life. Englewood now has to ask herself, “Do we embody the life God intends for our neighborhood?” This question, as one might expect, is humbling as well as challenging.

These kinds of convictions have created a culture of aggressive and broad mission among this still relatively small band of Christians. Yet, perhaps never before has Englewood had such a significant voice in our neighborhood. The church's resources and counsel is sought by city officials, business and banking leaders, educators, law enforcement, neighborhood organizations and other churches. Many factors have helped produce these opportunities for witness, but no factor could be more important than the hard work done in developing a theology as the Body of Christ in a local setting.

(III. D.) Asset-Based vs. Need-Based

Another conviction essential to Englewood's presumed turnaround was the sufficiency of God's supply for all of life and witness. Promises of Scripture in this regard (II Cor. 9:8; Eph. 3:20; Phil. 4:19; II Pet. 1:11) were made to the churches, not to individuals. If the church has been blessed with “every spiritual blessing...in Christ” (Eph. 1:3), what possible additional thing could she need?

One should not underestimate the revolutionary effects of this thought. If the above scriptures are to be trusted, then every congregation is already sufficiently supplied with what it needs to be God's witness in its particular place. Thus, an urban location is an asset; a large decaying facility is an asset, all church members, weak and strong, old and young, educated and uneducated are assets. Most churches spend all of their energy trying to find resources instead of identifying and liberating those they already possess; this leads to endless whining and begging to the God who has already supplied rather than thanking God and celebrating His abundant grace toward them. People of real faith are

contented people in every circumstance. A careful exposition of I Corinthians 12 is very encouraging in this regard.

Englewood began to value the enormous resources she already possessed. Improvements in our facilities went beyond surviving with minimum maintenance and nostalgic aesthetics. The question became, “How do we develop these properties and this facility to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ here and in other places?”

The most significant question was, “What shape does God want us to have given the giftedness of people with whom He has blessed us?” This question has gone far in advancing the oft spoken but little practiced concept of “the priesthood of all believers.” Long range planning must be held in tension with the constantly emerging gifts of God’s people as assets.

(IV.) Conclusion

Englewood’s turnaround has been one of shape not size. If comfort, ease and order are your goals, stay off Englewood’s path. The last eight or nine years have been painful, tumultuous and messy. They have required from many in the congregation the suspension of most, if not all, of their personal aspirations and agendas (which has made real Jesus’ requirement of self-denial in Matthew 16:24). Many families have risked their own homes so that other brothers and sisters could own one (thus making real the early church practice recorded in Acts 4:32-37).

This intensity of fellowship has been attractive to some, but it has been repugnant to many. Englewood has lost many dearly loved former members. We have seen many families come to investigate membership only to decide the price was too high or the theology too odd. The pursuit of radical biblical discipleship and ecclesiology has even led to the occasional accusation of cult.

However, the difficulty of these years pale in the face of the joy and contentment of belonging to the family of God at Englewood Christian Church. They are a family of ex-convicts, ex-addicts, ex-abusers, ex-materialists, ex-egomaniacs, etc., etc., etc. The turnaround has only begun!

***”For here we do not have a lasting city,
but we are seeking the city which is to come”
Hebrews 13:14
www.englewoodcc.com***