

FUTURE FORWARD

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multigenerational church

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PODCAST Listen as Lee Kricher shares with Dr. Steve Greene how his dying church found new life in reaching younger generations. [Download at CPNSHOWS.COM](http://CPNSHOWS.COM)

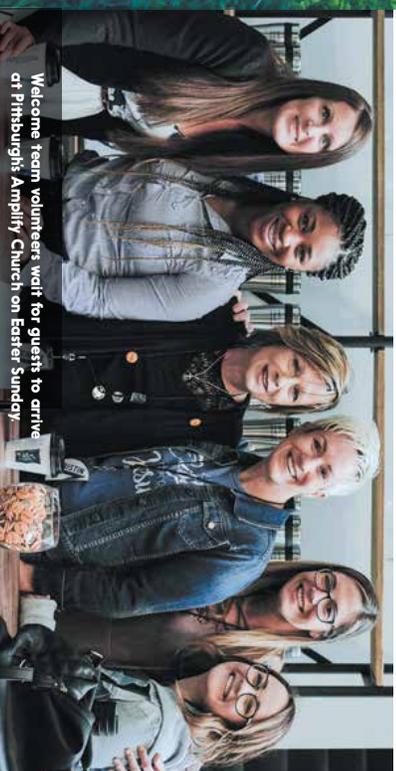
BY LEE KRICHER

When a church clings to the way things are, it will soon experience decline—even death. Several years ago, I met a pastor of a charismatic church that now no longer exists. At the time, his church was in decline and had about a dozen members. After talking with him, I soon understood at least one rather unusual reason his church was dying.

He told me he would take his dog with him to church Sundays. The dog would lie down in front of the podium and frequently bark during the service. The regular attendees got used to having the pastor's beloved pet in church, but a visitor mentioned to him that the barking dog was a distraction.

“My dog is my best friend, and if it is between you and my dog, the dog stays,” the pastor replied, proud of his refusal to compromise.

Most churches have their share of barking dogs—church programs, ministries and practices that distract members and visitors from the church's core vision



Welcome team volunteers wait for guests to arrive at Pittsburgh's Amplify Church on Easter Sunday.

and mission. It is common for members to assume that programs, ministries and practices that were effective in the past should continue indefinitely.

In his book *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, Thom S. Rainer writes about churches he studied that have ceased to exist.

“The most pervasive and common thread of our autopsies was that the deceased churches lived for a long time with the past as hero. They held on more tightly with each progressive year. They often clung to things of the past with desperation and fear. And when any internal or external force tried to change the past, they responded with anger and resolution: ‘We will die before we change.’ And they did.”

The people that Thom Rainer studied are not heroes who refused to compromise the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ. They were people in love with the past who refused to change their approach to church in a rapidly changing world. As Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, said, “If the rate of change on the outside exceeds the rate of change on the inside, the end is near.” That is true for any business. It is also true for any church. »

Committing to the Next Generation

I describe what I call a Future Forward Church as a church with a deep commitment to fully engage the next generation. By definition, a Future Forward Church is a multigenerational church. In 2003, Amplify Church was not a Future Forward Church. It was an aging, dying congregation. We had experienced several years of declining attendance, and the average age of our church attendees was well over 50—more than 15 years older than the average age of the community in which we were located. We were not fulfilling our church’s vision to lead as many people as possible into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

Prayer was not the issue. We had many sincere people who were praying, “God, bring young people back to our church.” Unfortunately, there was an unspoken additional sentence to those prayers: “God, bring young people back to our church—without us needing to change.” As the senior pastor, I knew we had to pray, and I knew we had to change.

We did not have to change our core beliefs and values. They were not the problem. The problem was that our approach to church was stuck in the past. Our programs, ministries and practices were perfectly designed to reach the people we were reaching. While preserving our core beliefs and values, we had to find a way to make the kind of changes to our programs, ministries and practices that were needed to reach the people we were not reaching, including the next generation.

Discerning Nonessentials

I had the privilege of working 13 years in two corporate firms known for their change leadership expertise. I came to understand a core truth about change leadership that is described well by Jim Collins and Jerry I. Porras in their book, *Built to Last*.

Contrary to popular wisdom, the proper first response to a changing world is not to ask, “How should we change?” but rather to ask, “What do we stand for, and why do we exist?” This should never change. But then feel free to change everything else.

The writer of Hebrews writes about laying aside distractions: “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Heb. 12:1b, NIV). We can certainly understand how sinful things can be a distraction. Sin entangles us and keeps us from running the race God

has marked out for us. But discerning when good things have become distractions is far more difficult.

In 2003, Amplify Church was filled with barking dogs. Our church leadership team decided to put everything on the table—everything but our core beliefs and the three things we deemed essential to achieving our vision—our weekend services, small groups and children/youth ministry. We decided to eliminate any barking dogs that we felt were

either major or minor distractions from these three essentials. We also stopped introducing new programs, ministries and practices not directly tied to our vision. We became convinced that effectively fulfilling our vision was as dependent on what we choose not to do as on what we chose to do.

Eliminating Barking Dogs

We evaluated the impact of various longstanding church programs and ministries in light of their contribution to our church vision. As a result, we asked the people who ran the food bank located in our church and the people who ran the drug rehab program that was meeting in our chapel to relocate to other churches. We also closed the K-12 Christian school that was housed in our church. These were good programs and ministries, but the decisions we made to end them opened up much-needed space for our children’s and youth ministry.

We evaluated the impact of various longstanding church practices. To reduce the sense of formality of the church, we ended the unwritten dress code that had been a part of our congregation since its inception. To reduce hierarchy, we eliminated reserved parking spaces for staff and removed the large, throne-like chair on the platform where the senior pastor sat during the service. To reduce perceived partisanship, we stopped distributing voter guides that sent a clear message to any visitor—“You do not belong in this church unless you vote Republican.”

We also evaluated our charismatic practices. Our church had been established in the late 1970s during the charismatic movement, and those roots were still evident in several of our practices. We felt called to leverage our church’s legacy of Spirit-filled worship by embracing, updating and elevating the worship experience in our weekend services. At the same time, we felt we had to set aside some past practices.

One of the practices we ended was the presence of an open microphone in the sanctuary during weekend

“We felt called to leverage our church’s legacy of Spirit-filled worship by embracing, updating and elevating the worship experience.”



Young adults now have more visible roles at Amplify Church.

services. Anyone in the church could walk up to this microphone during the service to share a testimony or word of encouragement whenever the individual felt moved to do so. This was sometimes encouraging and sometimes confusing. The open microphone was meaningful for some people who thought its presence was proof that we were open to the spontaneous work of the Holy Spirit. For many others, though, this practice was a primary reason why they did not invite guests to our church.

We also ended “individual displays of worship.” While the congregation was singing, it was not unusual for individuals to leave their seats and express their worship while standing in an aisle or in the front of the church. They sometimes waved streamers, banners or flags as part of their worship. I never questioned their sincerity, but I knew visitors would be looking at these individuals instead of focusing on the meaning of the words of the songs being sung. We instituted a new practice. People could sing, clap or lift their hands as expressions of worship, but we asked them to remain at their seats. We retired the streamers, banners and flags from service. Our new practice regarding worship was “Join in without standing out.”

One of the biggest barking dogs we eliminated was the name of our church—Pittsburgh East Full Gospel Church. In 2003, we changed our name to Pittsburgh East Community Church because we felt it would help us to be more externally focused and better achieve our vision. Later, when we added campuses that were not in the eastern suburbs of the city, we adopted the name Amplify Church, which was not specific to any particular location. We knew our vision, not our church name, defined us.

One of our barking dogs at the time was that the only people in visible leadership during weekend services were in their 50s and older. Young adults and young parents are not likely to be drawn to a weekend service where the vast majority of people in visible leadership are significantly older than they are. As a result, we implemented the 75% rule. This rule is that 75% of all of the people in visible leadership during any given weekend service must be the average age of or younger than the community we serve. The 75% rule required us to identify a lot of young people who could speak effectively, lead worship, play instruments and give the announcements.

Seeing the Outcome of Our Choices

Sad to say, about a third of the people who were attending our church left within the first two years of this transition.

To my knowledge, they all went to other churches in the area. I did not view those who left or who criticized our changes as bad people or selfish “change resisters”; they just didn’t personally resonate with our new direction.

Thankfully, most current members stayed—and new people started to attend. Within two years, the average weekend attendance more than doubled to 400. Within five years, our average weekend attendance exceeded 600. And 15 years after embarking on our journey, the average weekend attendance at Amplify Church is approximately 2,000. Even more significantly, the average age of those attending is just under 35. For the first time in many years, every generation is well-represented.

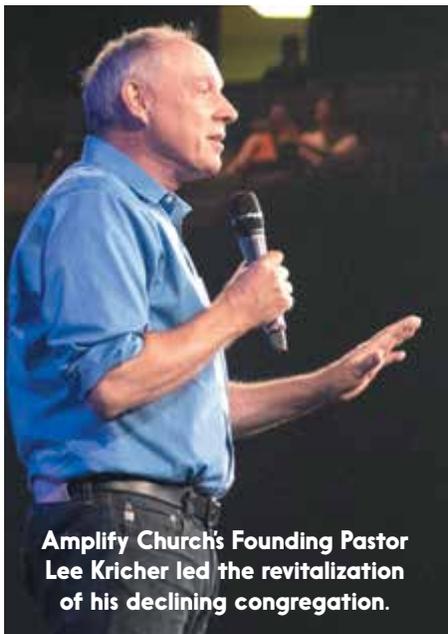
Eleanor Evans is one of the original members who stayed. Eleanor was in her mid-80s when the church started to change. She stayed and prayed that the changes would make a real difference in our ability to reach the next generation. She even gave special offerings toward the transformation of the children’s areas.

After a few years, I had one of my many conversations with Eleanor. I assumed she had warmed up to the changes we made to the adult service. I asked if our new approach to church had grown on her. She said, “No. I liked things the way they were.” Somewhat taken aback, I asked her, “Why do you keep coming and praying and giving?” She said, “Because now my children and my

grandchildren will come to church with me. And I look around every week at the children and grandchildren of others who are filling our church. They are coming to know the same Jesus who changed my life. That means everything to me.”

Eleanor Evans is one of my heroes. She came to understand that being part of a church focused on sharing the life-changing gospel in a way that relates to every generation is more important than being part of a church that holds onto past programs, ministries and practices. Her willingness to let go of our church’s beloved “barking dogs” was an example to others and helped pave the way for our transformation from an aging, dying congregation into a multigenerational church that fully engages the next generation. ■

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Amplify Church's Founding Pastor Lee Kricher led the revitalization of his declining congregation.

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