

The Top Ten Misaligned Priorities in Struggling Churches

by Sam Rainer

Churches decline for two main reasons—both having to do with a shift in priorities. First, they lose passion for the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. Second, as a result, they no longer give God glory. When a church no longer pushes outward with the gospel, the people will no longer look upward to God's glory. A church lacking both an outward and upward perspective will inevitably move in the other two directions: inward and downward. Inward churches always decline.

Misaligned priorities happen over time, and they pile up on each other. What do they look like in a church?

Nostalgia is more prevalent than devotion. The church's history is discussed more than the Bible. The past is the hero, not Jesus. People are more upset when something is out of place in the heritage room than they are with knowing their neighbors are lost. Memories of the past bring more emotion than the mission of the present.

Polity is an end, not a means. People refer to the bylaws as if they should never change. In this environment, the church's governance dictates how the church ministers. Business meetings are often rancorous, and parliamentary procedures are used as leverage rather than a simple means of conducting business. Loyalty to the denomination is more important than the people's loyalty to each other. Pastoral tenures are short.

Traditions detach the church from community culture. The church rebels against looking like the community. In the worst cases, the church grows to resent the community rather than loving the neighborhood. These churches hang on to traditions that hinder the work of the gospel.

Debt becomes a drain on resources. There are good uses of borrowing. Sometimes a needed capital project would not happen without a modest level of debt. But if more than twenty percent of the budget is used for debt service, cash problems can become a problem. Debt-heavy churches often must defer facility maintenance in order to pay the bank.

Preferences override God's mission for the church. Internal hostility over preferences puts people at odds with each other. Rather than fighting a battle against the spiritual forces of darkness, the church becomes a battleground for pet programs, favorite songs, styles of worship, and approaches to ministry.

Generational power struggles exist. The older generation clings to power. The younger generation refuses to accept responsibility. Families are split as some leave for other churches. The church struggles to find multigenerational teams of volunteers. The older generation comes to one service while the younger generation attends another.

The church becomes a platform for leaders. When priorities are misaligned, success is more important than accountability. In extreme cases, the power structure hides sin issues among the leaders. Leaders care more about their own reputation than serving the church. They use the church to further their own endeavors in the community.

Comfort with the status quo outweighs a willingness to sacrifice. In this environment, apathy becomes a contaminant, polluting the mission of the church. Status quo churches act more like social clubs than kingdom outposts. Groups in the church are less about Bible study and prayer and more about friendship cliques in which outsiders are not welcome.

The people have an unhealthy fixation on the church's facilities. The congregation cares more about the building than they do about people in the community. For many, the building is the church. In severe cases, the church campus becomes an idol. More time is spent discussing the building than anything else.

Gossip is common, and evangelism is not. Gossip fosters an environment of distrust and suspicion. Gossip can create unnecessary conflict and tension between people. In these struggling churches, the unifying force of evangelism is not present.

Misaligned priorities happen over time, and the gradual shift causes the misalignment to go unnoticed. Rarely does improvement occur without intentional leadership. How

do you start realignment? Get the church moving outward. The Great Commission is the way to begin a great realignment.