

Six Reasons Churches Experience the Doldrums

by Thom S. Rainer

The doldrums rarely arrive with a crash. They slip in quietly. Attendance holds. Giving is steady. Conflict is minimal. On the surface, the church looks fine. But underneath, something feels off—less joy, less urgency, less expectancy. Leaders sense it in meetings. Members feel it in worship. The church isn't declining, but it isn't advancing either. These seasons are confusing because they lack obvious villains. No scandal. No crisis. Just a slow loss of momentum and spark. Below are six common reasons churches find themselves in the doldrums.

1. Mission Drift Without Mission Denial

Most churches in the doldrums have not rejected their mission. They still affirm it. They can recite it. It appears on the website, in printed materials, and sometimes even in sermons. On paper, the mission is intact. In practice, however, it has slowly lost its influence.

Mission drift without mission denial happens when the mission no longer functions as a filter for decisions. Meetings focus on logistics, preferences, and legacy programs rather than purpose. Ministries continue because stopping them feels uncomfortable, not because they clearly advance disciple-making. Over time, energy leaks. People stay busy but grow weary. Activity increases while impact declines.

This kind of drift is subtle, which makes it dangerous. Nothing feels urgent enough to change. The church is not moving backward, but it is no longer moving forward with clarity.

Momentum begins to return when leaders consistently bring the mission back to the center. Not as a slogan, but as a question: Does this move us toward what God has called us to do?

2. Comfort Has Replaced Expectancy

Comfort often feels like health. The church calendar is predictable. Worship services are steady. Leaders know what to expect most Sundays, and that reliability can be reassuring. But over time, comfort begins to crowd out expectancy. The quiet belief that God is going to do something new, something stretching, slowly fades.

Prayer becomes routine rather than urgent. Planning replaces dependence. Faith shrinks to what feels controllable. The church no longer prepares for surprise, and risk begins to feel irresponsible rather than faithful. People attend consistently, but anticipation is missing.

Expectancy does not disappear overnight. It erodes as the church grows accustomed to stability. Without intentional renewal, comfort settles in like fog.

Expectancy returns when leaders model it first. They pray boldly, name God-sized hopes, and celebrate even small signs of transformation. Churches move out of the doldrums when they stop asking, Will this work? and begin asking, What might God do next?

3. Leadership Is Managing More Than Shepherding

Every church needs management. Budgets must balance. Facilities must be maintained. Systems must function. But when leadership energy is consumed almost entirely by management, something essential is lost. The church becomes efficient, yet relationally thin.

Leaders spend more time solving problems than shepherding people. Meetings multiply. Email replaces conversation. Decisions are made, but hearts are rarely explored. Over time, members begin to feel organized rather than cared for.

This shift often happens unintentionally. The pressures of growth, compliance, and complexity push leaders toward tasks and away from touch. Shepherding feels inefficient in comparison, yet it is where trust and spiritual vitality are formed.

4. Too Many Ministries, Too Little Focus

Most churches do not drift into the doldrums because they lack activity. They drift because they have too much of it.

Over time, ministries accumulate. Each one began with good intentions and genuine fruit. Few are ever evaluated. Even fewer are intentionally concluded. The result is a crowded calendar and a tired congregation.

Leaders feel pressure to maintain everything. Volunteers feel stretched thin. Energy is divided across too many good things, leaving little strength for the best things. When everything is a priority, nothing feels essential.

This lack of focus slowly drains momentum. The church stays busy but loses clarity.

Focus returns when leaders exercise the courage to simplify. Healthy churches regularly ask which ministries are truly advancing the mission and which have simply survived on sentiment. Doing fewer things well restores energy, effectiveness, and a renewed sense of purpose.

5. Unresolved Loss or Change

Every church experiences loss. A beloved pastor leaves. A ministry ends. A season of growth fades. Culture shifts faster than the congregation expected. These moments leave marks, whether they are acknowledged or not.

Problems arise when loss is managed administratively but never processed emotionally. The church moves forward on paper, yet many hearts remain behind. Conversations about the future feel risky because the past still hurts. Resistance to change is often less about stubbornness and more about unresolved grief.

When loss goes unnamed, it lingers. It shapes attitudes, dampens trust, and quietly drains energy. The church appears stable, but momentum stalls beneath the surface.

Wise leaders create space to honor what was, grieve what was lost, and thank God for faithfulness in previous seasons. When loss is acknowledged and redeemed, the church regains freedom to move forward. Healing clears the path for hope and renewed vitality.

6. Few New Stories of Life Change

Nothing fuels a church's vitality like visible transformation. When stories of changed lives become rare, the church's energy slowly turns inward. Baptisms decline. Testimonies fade. Conversations shift from mission to maintenance. People may still attend faithfully, but hope begins to erode. Without fresh evidence of God's work, many quietly assume the best days are in the past.

This absence of stories is often a symptom, not the disease. It signals a loss of focus on disciple-making and personal transformation. Churches do not lose momentum because God has stopped working, but because they have stopped noticing and naming His work.

Renewal begins when leaders refocus on helping people take clear next steps of obedience and faith. Just as important, they tell those stories often. When lives are changing, faith is stirred. And when the church remembers why it exists, the doldrums begin to lift.