

## Churches change

by Tim Moore

Churches change about every seven years.

That's what a long-term pastor told me 30 years ago while I was in seminary. Rick was a visiting fellow on campus as part of his third sabbatical. For 21 years he had served his congregation and was using the sabbatical to prepare for another seven years.

As we talked in a common room in the dorm, he explained how he had pastored three different churches in the past two decades and was getting ready to pastor his fourth church – all from the same address. The conversations we had over the handful of weeks he was on campus were truly a part of my seminary education. My ministry serving as a long-term pastor mirrored Rick's experience. I served at least three churches in the nearly 20 years I served Sardis Baptist Church.

People die, move, have babies. The babies grow into children, then into teenagers. Others join the church by conviction, or to get away from an unhealthy congregation, or to raise their kids in church. Then, some stop coming because they got mad, or busy, or their health declined. Multiply all of these transitions year upon year upon year and before long you have a different congregation.

The changes may not happen in exactly seven years, but it's not a bad estimate. Larger congregations will feel these ebbs and flows less frequently, smaller churches more quickly. Urban and suburban churches, where people repeatedly move from one job to another, will feel these changes more regularly, and rural churches with a more stable population less so.

When you add staff transitions in the mix – ministerial and support staff – the vibe, or feeling, or attitude, of a church can significantly be altered in a handful of years.

From time to time churches and pastors should assess where they are and who they are. Many times the leadership structures and the volunteers that serve them are the last things to change, so they may not be the best at evaluating the rate of change in your church.

Who are your programs and ministries serving? Break down the hours that your ministers and staff work each week or month. Who is doing what? What needs do your staff and volunteers serve well and what is being left unserved?

Have your shut-ins doubled in the last five years? Or declined? Is your youth group 50 percent bigger than it was five years ago, or half of what it was? How has a new neighborhood built two miles from your church building affected attendance? Outreach? How might the influx of immigrants in your community open up ministry opportunities?

Congregations that have a clear identity can pass along their spiritual DNA to each “church” as they change every seven or so years. Congregations that do not intentionally plan and carry out their ministries, that do not know why they do what they do, run the risk of forgetting who they are.

And pastors must periodically assess if they are called to serve the new church their congregation is becoming. The combination of how a church changes with the natural process of aging means that pastors must intermittently re-invent themselves – which can be challenging. But we are a resurrection people, are we not?

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

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