

A Word from our General Presbyter

Ed Thompson

Toward the Better Country is one of the best books I've read in the last few years. Written by L. Gail Irwin, it flows out of her experience as a pastor and things she learned during a sabbatical, as well as more than 30 interviews with pastors and various church leaders from eight denominations. It was not an easy journey. She had served as the pastor of a Presbyterian Church for 11 years before she was asked to resign. The church closed about a year after she left.

A phrase she repeats several times throughout the book is "You are not alone, your church's decline is not your fault, and your church is not a 'failure.'" (pg. 6) The reality is lots of churches close every year. She mentions that research shows that churches typically have a lifespan of 80 years. I had never heard that before, but I have no reason to doubt it's true.

The book helps churches to look at themselves honestly and encourages them to imagine the future in light of the resurrection. Here's how she puts it: "My intention is not just to help churches close with dignity, but to help them be resurrected as part of the universal church, in new forms that address people's continuing spiritual longings, our hunger for justice and peace, and our culture's need for places of social engagement." (pg. 4)

I was prepared not to like this book. I hate it when churches close. It breaks my heart. I feel like a failure. I wonder what we could have done differently. This book looks at closing churches from a different – and I think helpful – perspective.

One of the themes or images she relies on in the book is "failure to thrive." She spends three chapters looking at how lay leaders, pastors, and regional pastors can discern this. She got the idea when her father was under hospice care. One of his nurses used that term to describe his situation. He was losing weight, and nothing they tried seemed to make any difference. He kept going downhill. It struck her that that was what was happening at her church. They kept losing members, and nothing they tried seemed to make any difference. It was like they were always falling behind. People would join, and in the good years, they were able to maintain their membership. But there were always deaths. People would move away to be closer to their children, or they'd move to warmer climates. They could never seem to get ahead. It never felt like they were thriving.

I'm not sure Irwin gives enough credit to her church or other churches for some of the creative ministries they tried. They were making a difference in the lives of people both inside and outside the church. They were growing in faith. They were having fun. I might be tempted to call that thriving.

However I get the image of being on a treadmill. I also can't argue that sometimes congregations become "vulture churches" in that they look at new members based on what they can do and what they can give to the church. Sometimes, these congregations become "vampire churches" in that they suck the blood and life out of their members. Rather than being life-giving and a source of hope, joy, and peace, they wear their members down and wear them out.

Overall, the book left me with a sense of hope. Closing a church doesn't mean the presbytery, pastor, or members have failed. Rather than beating ourselves up, maybe we should be thinking about the legacy we can leave behind. Rather than being held hostage by an aging building, maybe we can find ways to worship in other spaces while still continuing ministries that have a positive impact on our community.

If you've ever thought of your congregation as being a "vampire church" or "vulture church," if the term "failure to thrive" seems to describe what your church is going through, if you've ever considered what the legacy of your church might be, then you might want to take a look at this book.