

FIRST PERSON: Too many churches are spiritless; here are some solutions

I am not sure which church it was that finally led me to call this type of church “spiritless.”

Was it the one that would seat 400 and looked like a huge, evangelistic crusade tent that had been turned into a cement-block building with two dozen people scattered around the auditorium for worship?

Could it have been the one with half a dozen people huddled in one corner of the fellowship hall, paying a retired pastor to come preach for them each Sunday? They refused many offers for other active churches to use their sanctuary because they were not their kind of people.

Perhaps it was the church that 50 years ago went from a thriving church to a remnant church when ministerial infidelity was exposed, and men with guns went looking for the pastor. A group of two dozen people held on to the facility. They kept the church open by allowing a non-English language church to pay rent to worship there.

All I know is that their name is Legion, for there are many – except they are spiritless. And yet the people who are part of these churches are people of worth created in the image of God to live and to love.

What is a spiritless church?

A spiritless church is a remnant group of members who are so spiritually myopic that they cannot see the new thing God might do in or through them. There are possibilities in their community context and some ministry value in their church

buildings.

They have a co-dependency with their church friends and a love for traditions and their church buildings. Their annual goal is to survive one more year.

If they were struck by God's "triple-D" – the direct, divine, dramatic intervention of God – they would not recognize it. Remember, they are spiritless.

They will not take the risk to do something new because it might further weaken them.

Approach them about merging with another church, and they might consider it if the church merging with them will come to their location and allow the existing leaders to still control the church.

Ask them about another church meeting in their building. They might respond, "If they work around the worship schedule of our church, we will consider it."

Selling their buildings or closing is totally out of the question for these churches. If the buildings were significantly damaged by fire, wind or rain, they might consider it. Or if there were a breakdown of major systems like heating, water or electricity, they might change their minds.

Spiritless churches have forgotten how to reach new people. Evangelism to them is reactivating inactive members, not reaching lost people as new Christians.

Capable, innovative lay leaders have long ago moved on from these churches. The leadership capacities of remaining leaders are often mediocre at best.

In some counties or metropolitan areas, spiritless churches may be 20% or more of all churches.

Solutions?

First, love the people of these churches. Get to know them. Affirm them. Listen to their personal stories and the history of their churches. Pray with them and for them. Develop a deep trust relationship.

Second, invite people from other churches in the area to get to know them. Offer to provide leaders for special events at these churches. Pray with them and for them. Be family to them, which should be a characteristic of an association of churches.

Third, support the pastors of these churches. Be intentional about including these pastors in fellowship, inspiration and learning experiences within the association. Especially provide learning experiences on choices available to spiritless churches.

Fourth, include the pastor and lay leaders from these churches in gatherings that involve the pastors and lay leaders of other spiritless churches who may be struggling with some of the same challenges. Share at these gatherings stories of spiritless churches that have transformed.

Fifth, when a spiritless church is between pastors, engage them in a conversation about an intentional interim pastor who is trained and experienced in helping spiritless churches consider their choices at this stage of life.

Sixth, you may consider something more radical that will be covered in a future column about missions fields in our midst as an alternative to replanting these churches.

EDITOR'S NOTE – This story was written by George Bullard and originally published by The Baptist Paper.