

Back from the Brink

A LEADERSHIP SPECIAL REPORT

The statistic is quoted often: 85 percent of churches in the United States have plateaued or declining attendance. That's approximately 340,000 churches. In other words, 340,000 churches need a turnaround.

How can they do it? And what skills are required?

That's what we wanted to know. So we invited churches that have witnessed a turnaround in attendance, finances, purpose, and/or spirit to participate. From the hundreds that responded, we chose 31 churches to study in depth. We then surveyed their pastors, lay leaders, and a sampling of members—761 respondents in all. We asked how it happened. And most important, *If their churches could be renewed, can mine?*

In this section, you'll read the accounts of five churches that exemplify "turnaround."

↳ **Connect with the Disconnected:**

Parkview Community Church in Glen Ellyn, Illinois.

↳ **Look Outward:** Overlook Presbyterian Church in Mobile, Alabama.

↳ **No More Pastor-Driven Church:** Calvary Bible Church in Rutland, Vermont.

↳ **From Survivalist to Serving Spirit:** Calvary Baptist Church in Ball Ground, Georgia

↳ **Rebuilding Relationships:** Britton Bethel Baptist in Britton, Michigan.

But first, the results of our survey.

Survey Results: Five Factors in Successful Turnarounds

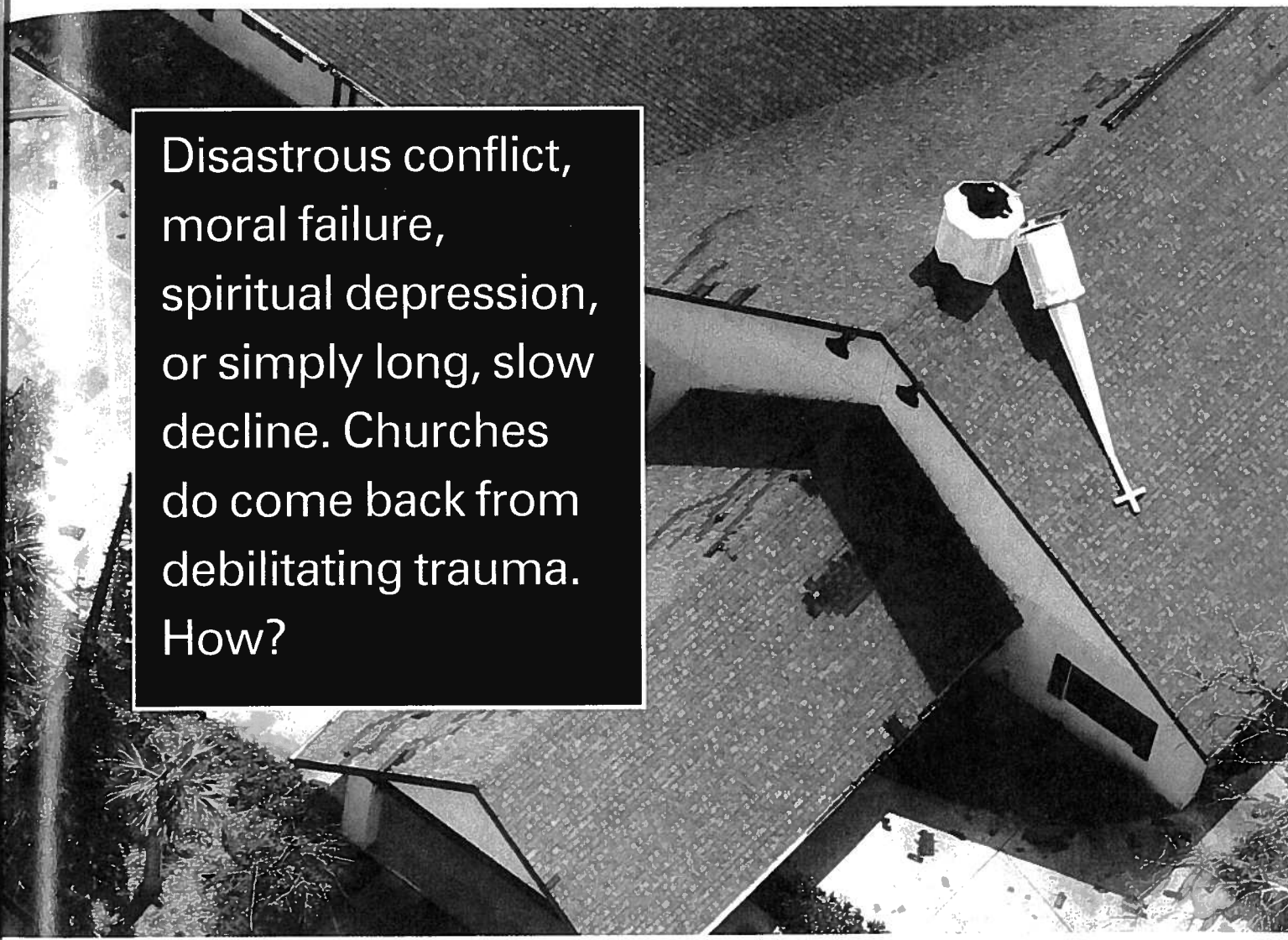
Some turnarounds are dramatic: the fighting that divided a congregation and spoiled their reputation ends, and the church is suddenly alive and growing.

Some turnarounds are subtle: after decades of stagnant attendance and lackluster ministry, a pastor leads the people to find renewed purpose, and the winds of the Spirit move again.

All turnarounds are significant: the gospel is advanced by healthy churches. Yet even the more evangelistic denominations, focused on church planting, are battling inertia. Lyle Schaller's turn-of-the-millennium prediction is coming true: a few notable large churches are growing larger, but most churches, and almost all the smaller churches, are growing smaller.

In this environment, the successful rejuvenation of an existing congregation is newsworthy. Most of the pastors in the limelight these days are urban and suburban church founders who have shattered the paradigms. Fewer of the celebrated pastors have systematically reengineered plodding, low-energy congregations into healthy, resilient ministries. But such accomplishment, often quietly done and unnoticed because it takes a while, is worthy of celebration.

And study. Here's what we found:



Disastrous conflict,
moral failure,
spiritual depression,
or simply long, slow
decline. Churches
do come back from
debilitating trauma.
How?

1. Turnaround leaders distinguish between obvious symptoms and underlying problems.

What's the problem? How big is this problem? It depends on whom you ask.

When Daryl Webster accepted the call to an El Dorado Hills, California, church eight years ago, his concern was "How do I get everyone on the same page?" The church had a history of growth spurts and splits. To him the problem was obvious: in a rapidly growing community, this church was in decline because it was a battling congregation with a bad reputation. But among the parishioners, there was no clear agreement about a cause or a solution.

For many turnaround leaders, the first step is helping the congregation admit there is a problem. But don't be surprised if pastor and

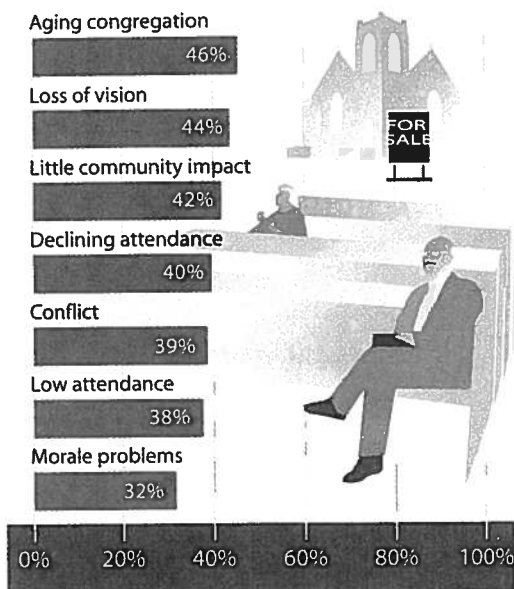
parishioner have different views on the cause.

In our survey, respondents overall said, "aging congregation," "loss of vision," "loss of meaningful impact on the community," and "attendance" problems were the main evidences that turnaround was required. The "problems" graphic depicts the combined responses, but tallied separately, pastors and parishioners focused on difference issues.

Pastors were more likely to cite the foundational causes, naming "loss of vision" as the top problem (65%), but among parishioners "loss of vision" was tied for second place (39%) along with "plateaued or declining attendance." Parishioners thought "aging congregation" was the leading problem (50%).

Pastors cited "low morale, apathy, or spiritual depression" as the second leading

Problems Requiring a Turnaround



(multiple responses allowed)

problem (62% compared to 26% of parishioners). In general, parishioners focused on the symptoms rather than the causes.

2. Turnaround leaders pay careful attention to team building and timing, not just to vision.

Almost everyone surveyed agreed there was a tipping point when it became evident to most everyone in the congregation that a problem existed and change was needed. About 75 percent of respondents could identify a particular situation that fueled their desire for revitalization. But it was less likely that the whole congregation shared a single "aha!" moment.

Four in ten respondents said the problem "became apparent gradually." Three in ten said the problem was "clearly evident for a long time." One in ten said they had a "sudden realization there was a problem." For the pastor painfully aware of the church's "ugly baby," the issue is how quickly and how widely to make the discussion public. In about one-third of churches (36%), identification of the problem was a public process. In half (52%) the problem was discussed only privately among leaders prior to public announcement of turnaround plans.

Our conclusion here is people come on

board—recognizing both problems and solutions—at their own speed, and they shouldn't be rushed.

There is danger in pointing out the problem to masses of people who haven't realized there is a problem, unless there soon follows discussion of courses of action. Point out the problem too soon, and the pastor risks losing existing momentum needed to fuel new initiatives. Take the problem public too late, and the congregation will feel left out of the process, and likely balk.

In retrospect, almost all respondents said, they would advise more communication in the process. "You can't communicate enough *why* you're doing things," Webster said. "And it's more than just from the pulpit: one on one, small groups, committee settings, any forum where people feel free to ask questions and to process."

"Talk about it until they're sick of it," another pastor said. "Then everybody's ready to do something about it."

3. Spiritual initiatives are vital.

After a pastor's moral failure, Woodfield (Ohio) Free Methodist called on Sheryl Allen to help the church heal. Her denomination developed a revitalization strategy, which she and her husband began implementing in 2001. After continued trouble and exodus of members, Allen called the leaders to prayer. Her request that they read Neil Anderson's *Freedom in Christ* was met with passive resistance. She felt no support.

Allen considered leaving, until a stern lecture from her superintendent: "You've done the hard work. Think of yourself as a church planter and move ahead." So she called the whole church to fasting and prayer, and following Anderson's instructions, prayerwalked the grounds and anointed them with oil.

"That was a breakthrough. We saw many people come to the Lord, and soon I had a new leadership team in place and equipped."

Our survey supports Pastor Allen's action, with 75 percent of churches reporting "spiritual initiatives" as important to addressing the problems. "Education of the congregation," "changes in worship style," "new mission statements," and a variety of new ministries were cited by more than half of all respondents, but it was the spiritual initiatives that excited most people.

One member of Curwensville (Pa.) Christian Church recalled a special service. "George (Cannon, the pastor) emphasized the need for internal healing by forgiving past hurts and praying for each other. One Sunday he had a small wooden cross at the front of the church. We wrote what was hurting us on small pieces of paper and tacked them to the cross. It was a very liberating service."

4. God is at work, and turnaround leaders continually point that out.

We call this "the fingerprints principle." God is at work, but the key is to help the people recognize "God's fingerprints."

Webster introduced his congregation to the concept while teaching Henry Blackaby's study *Experiencing God*. In his first year at the church that became Cornerstone Christian in El Dorado Hills, California, 85 percent of the members took the 13-week course. Blackaby's mantra, "Find where God is working and join him there," became the church's as well.

Webster recalls, "I had seniors say to me, 'Pastor, this is the first time I've ever thought of this stuff.' The people who would normally be the greatest barriers to change said, 'As long as we believe it's from God, we'll try it.'"

Webster pointed out God's fingerprints to the congregation. "I didn't talk about a turnaround per se; I talked about fulfilling God's plan for us as a church."

In our survey, pastors reported God's fingerprints in the providential arrival of skilled leaders, unexpected financial gifts, the quiet awakening of a congregation to the needs of the community. One respondent said lightning struck the building and burned half of it down. That, they took, as the hand of God.

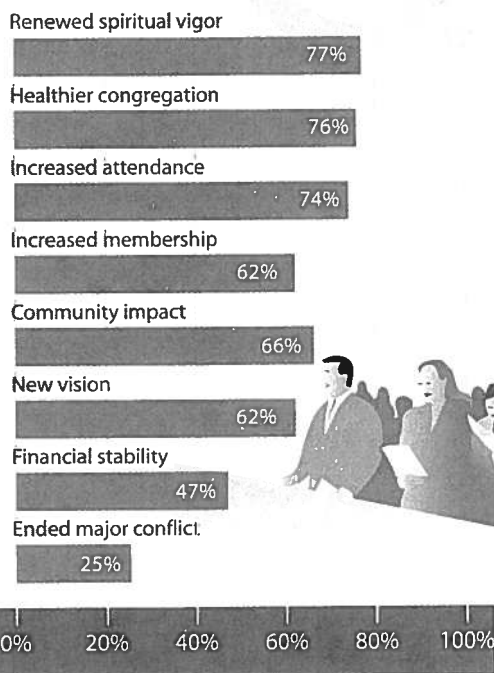
In all, 72 percent of pastors said unplanned circumstances played a role in the turnaround, 52 percent calling them positive.

5. Turnaround attempts work, often better than expected.

Approaching this survey, we anticipated hearing disagreements over the nature of the problems and conflict over proposals to fix them. The reports entrenched resistance were far fewer than expected.

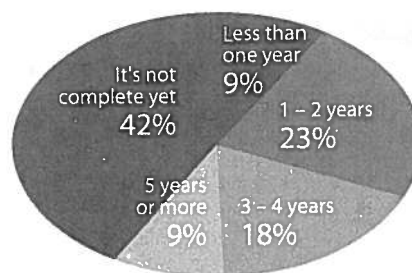
We asked, "What was the attitude of average church members about the problem?" "Anxiety," "confusion," and "low morale" were the top three responses, but by fewer

Outcomes of a Turnaround



(multiple responses allowed)

Turnaround was Completed in...



than one-third of respondents. Only 4 percent of pastors reported resistance when turnaround initiatives were announced. Support ranging from "slow growing" to "enthusiastic" was reported by 96 percent of pastors. And church members agreed. Parishioners were on board "once the initiatives were fully

explained" (26%) or "after the changes began having positive impact" (also 26%).

In all, 95 percent of church members reported the congregation as a whole was supportive soon after plans were implemented. Perhaps this is an overly positive recollection of success, or maybe it reflects that desperation is good motivation. In either case, eventually, almost everybody got on board.

Pastors reported the greatest resistance came in hammering out the plans with the board (42%), and only 9 percent said they experienced a loss of members in the process. Where there was resistance, it was from a few. An interesting note: lay leaders were more likely to report resistance than either pastors or parishioners (64%), so the lesson may be to listen, at least a little, when the board repeats what "they" said.

Pastors may be comforted to know that parishioners gave pastors high marks. While 81 percent of pastors confessed they made missteps along the way—often in terms of communication and the pace of the change—only 25 percent of parishioners thought their pastor had misstepped.

The good news is that turnaround initiatives took effect almost immediately, with noticeable results in less than one year, according to 43 percent of pastors. And 62 percent said the results were better than they hoped. Pastors reported new vision (85%) and vigor and health in even greater numbers (92% each). That's great news.

—Eric Reed

Connect with the Disconnected

Parkview Community Church Glen Ellyn, Illinois

As Ray Kollbocker arrived for the June 1996 congregational meeting, he didn't know how the vote that night would turn out.

He had been pastor of Parkview Community Church for a year and a half. The church had struggled over the years, and when the previous pastor had resigned, some members considered closing down the church completely, but a prayerful core had insisted that God had work yet to do there. Yet even believing that God wanted them to continue, it was easy for the members to feel inadequate.

"The folks couldn't help comparing themselves to other churches in the area—and we couldn't measure up," Ray said. "It was like an adolescent with a bad self-image."

After Ray arrived attendance began inching upward toward 150, and hope was rekindled. But the vote was going to stretch the people way beyond their comfort zone.

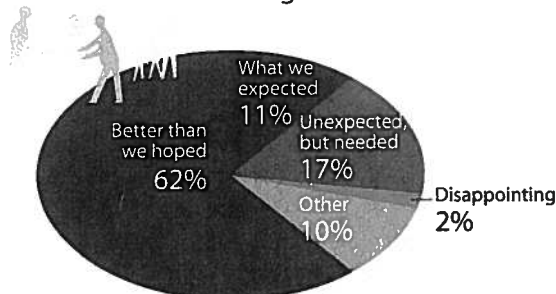
A month before, Ray and the deacons had asked the congregation to pray about calling Steve Tomlinson as full-time associate pastor, starting September 1. Steve, an employee of Amtrak, was an active and well-liked member of the church who had just completed his seminary training. He would bring energy and expertise to the pastoral care and educational ministries of the church. No one questioned Steve's ability or fit for the position. The issue was the church's financial readiness to add a second staff member. With a history of financial struggles, the church's expenses at the time of the congregational meeting exceeded giving by almost \$11,000.

Now the congregation was being asked to add a major expense to a budget they were already failing to meet. Could a church of less than 200 support two full-time pastors? Was it faith or foolishness to make a decision that assumes future growth? After studying the books *Fresh Wind*, *Fresh Fire* and *Experiencing God*, the congregation tried to discern what a response of faith looks like.

The congregation discussed the proposal, weighed the implications, and voted by paper ballot. The proposal passed 49-1.

Afterward, amid the congratulations and

Results of the Changes were...



conversation, Loren Davis, the church's most senior member, came up to Ray and Steve. "I want you to know I support you guys, but because of our finances, I couldn't vote yes on this—but I'm glad everyone else did."

Looking back, that congregational decision was a turning point in the church. Despite summer usually being a season of financial doldrums, Parkview's giving increased to the point that by September, the budget deficit had been made up—and almost the entire amount needed to pay Steve's salary for the rest of the year had been raised. The congregation celebrated that as "a God thing."

"It was a huge step of faith for all of us," said Steve, "but God honored the faith that decision represented."

That summer another development was also seen, in retrospect, as a God thing.

The church's roof needed repair and some college students were hired to reshingle it. When Ray noticed the guys taking a break, sitting on the roof smoking cigars, he sat with them and got acquainted. He discovered they attended a local Christian college and that they were all musicians—Jason played drums, Josh guitar, and Jon the bass.

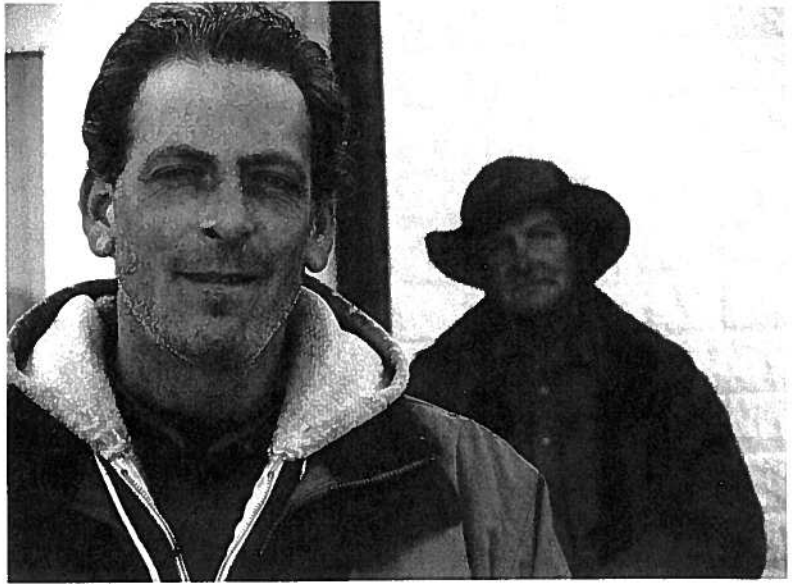
"Hey, would you be interested in helping lead worship for us sometime?" Ray asked. The guys looked at each other, shrugged, and said, "Sure."

That fall, "the J boys" joined the Parkview worship team. Amazingly, the first Sunday they played, 80 other college students crowded into Parkview—and continued to come in the months that followed. Ray, in a coat and tie, preached a series from the Song of Solomon, while three guys in tattered jeans played for worship. The combination transformed the atmosphere. Parkview's worship services had always been thoughtful and creative, but the infusion of the college crowd added a contagious energy.

"I love Parkview because it needed us and let us make a contribution," said Jon Lidbeck, who later confessed he'd been playing the bass only a few weeks when Ray issued the invitation. But Jon learned quickly, and the unlikely J boys threesome was quickly embraced by both young and old.

Then the congregation took an even bigger step in acceptance and outreach.

For several years the congregation had hosted a free Thanksgiving dinner for the



community. Folks from homeless shelters, assisted living facilities, and elsewhere would come for traditional turkey dinner and friendly conversation. In 1998, one of those table conversations took a dramatic turn.

Patrick Murnane, who'd recently begun attending Parkview, was at a table with some homeless men, including two in their 50s, Joseph and Dominick, and a younger man, Scott, who wore a bandanna, pirate-style, on his head and who was slightly intoxicated.

Patrick tried to keep a conversation going, asking questions like, "Where did you go to high school?" and "What was your first job?" Small talk—non-threatening. At least Patrick thought so.

Suddenly, Scott slammed his fist on the table and shouted, "What gives you the right to ask us these questions? You may think you're better than me, but you're not!" He stood up and left.

"Thanks," Joseph told Patrick, "Because of you, somebody's gonna get hurt tonight."

Patrick was stunned and sought out Scott to apologize. As he thought about it, Patrick realized Scott had a point. Providing a Thanksgiving meal was nice, but it wasn't enough. Patrick asked one of the other homeless men, "Would you like to come back to church next Sunday?"

"Sure," the man said.

With that, a ministry began. Under Patrick's leadership, Parkview began offering transportation from the homeless shelter to church and making sure the guests had a

*HOME AT LAST:
A suburban church's
ministry with the
homeless gives them
a place in the church
family.*

Develop a community focus:

The churches we surveyed were often myopic, at first. Then they began looking outside their walls. Soon they saw spiritually disconnected people everywhere. Often the pastor or small groups of leaders served as catalysts.

warm meal before returning to their "domiciles." It grew from one to two to seven to more than 30 who are at church every week.

It's not a ministry *to* the homeless; it's a ministry *with* the homeless. There's a difference. At Parkview, the "Compassion Ministry" guests are integrated into the life of the church. Some work on the parking crew, assisting worshippers to a parking place; others come early to make coffee. Almost all take a part in an adult Sunday school class.

"There's nothing like studying the Bible with people who live on the street," said associate pastor Brian Chapman, who leads the Compassion Ministry and teaches one of the Bible classes. "It's unpredictable, but the questions and insights from such a diverse group make the discussion really lively."

It gives Parkview an unusual ambiance. With duffel bags on the floor, somebody dozing in the corner, and clusters of men and women smoking outside, it can be a startling first impression for visitors. But it communicates something powerful about the church's commitment to reach spiritually disconnected people.

"You don't have to dress a certain way to fit in here," said Ray. "You can come in tattered clothes. Or dress like an executive. We don't give a rip where you're from."

After her marriage broke up, Evelyn was looking for a church for her two children, even if their father wouldn't be with them. At some churches she felt a pressure to "have it all together."

"For a while I attended a church with 'happy shiny people' until I just could not keep up the act anymore," she said. "The first time I came to Parkview, I noticed the building was old and worn. Then I noticed that the person sitting next to me was obviously homeless. I realized this is a place where broken people are welcome, and I've been here ever since." Two years later, Evelyn was baptized.

"This is a place where you can be real," Kollbocker said, "where you can laugh or hurt or cry—a place where it's natural to turn to God."

Parkview learned that spiritually disconnected people are everywhere. It was reinvigorated by exercising faith and by helping the disconnected connect with God and the church.

—Marshall Shelley

Look Outward (and Upward)

Overlook Presbyterian Church Mobile, Alabama

The first couple in this small church's shelter ministry was named Joseph and Mary. "No, their son was not named Jesus," Pastor Doug Resler said, chuckling, "but it did serve as a confirmation to our congregation that we were doing the right thing."

And for Overlook Presbyterian Church in Mobile, Alabama, joining the new homeless care network was just another giant step in their about-face. Three years ago, a declining, aging, inwardly focused body unable to connect with its changing neighborhood seemed more destined for relocation or closure.

Resler asked the elders at a retreat several months into his pastorate, "Where do you see this church in ten years?"

"With a For Sale sign out front" was a common reply.

"There was much talk of relocation," Resler said. The surrounding community was changing from white to black to Hispanic. And while some of the mostly older, white church members still live in the immediate area, few seemed aware of the extent of the demographic shift, and fewer still knew how to respond.

"The church had almost no children—other than mine—when we arrived," Resler said, "and one high schooler and two middle schoolers in my first year. People were saying, 'We're not effective; our church is dying here.'"

But the downcast members of Overlook were willing to make changes.

Following a long pastorate that concluded in 1996, the church had called a younger pastor, Resler's immediate predecessor. Over five years, the church attempted several ministries with the hope of renewal, but none seemed to work. Attendance declined. Even so, when the young pastor left to plant another congregation, the older membership was willing to try again. They called 29-year-old Resler and his wife, fresh from seminary. Resler interviewed with two churches more in keeping with his East Coast education, but after meeting the leaders at Overlook, his wife declared, "That's the one." She sensed a willingness to try something, a desire for a future.

"She was right," Resler agreed.

Still, willingness is only a starting place, and as they considered the options, optimism was tempered by fear. Resler's response: build trust, and tackle a few significant projects in the first year.

"They had a building expansion that had been on the books five years while they quietly debated relocation. I said, 'Let's do it or forget it.'" So they did it, adding office and meeting space to their small round, 1970s-modern sanctuary.

At the same time, they explored the church's reason for existing. Resler attended a conference that brought together the foundational beliefs of his denomination, The Presbyterian Church USA, with the principles of *The Purpose Driven Church*. "Our Book of Order outlines the great ends of the church, those reasons for which we exist. They are compatible with Rick Warren's purposes, and so our session began to realign the church according to the purposes. The result is that members of the congregation are taking leadership. The session has shifted from a permission-giving body to an empowering body. We are now answerable to the purpose," Resler explained. "Everything is measured against the purpose."

In this, Resler is following a philosophical track laid by Michael Carey, pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Satellite Beach, Florida. The "purposes" have been laid on the points of the cross in the PCUSA logo, rather than a baseball diamond, a culturally acceptable interpretation for these mainliners who have no desire to become a megachurch.

"Carey said it took about five to seven years for his church to transition, and we appear to be on the same track," Resler said.

The leadership team began addressing the church's most obvious problems.

First, a faltering children's program. The mid-week children's education ministry prescribed by the denomination was labor intensive and attracted few kids, almost none from the area. Over an eight-month period, the leaders developed their own. God's Squad now draws 25 to 30 elementary-age children each week, with half of them coming from the nearby community, a significant adjustment in the church's approach toward its black and Hispanic neighbors.

Next, some members wanted to develop a



contemporary service. *Where are we going to get the musicians?* Resler wondered. "Soon God brought us a keyboard player, and her husband is a drummer, and they are excellent." The worship team developed a monthly contemporary service, and attendance grew, tripling from the low of 60 at the time Resler arrived to more than 180.

As he often does, Resler told the congregation as they watched the unexpected arrival of new leadership, "God is on the loose!" a phrase he has adopted to describe the inexplicable events in this congregation's revival.

"The turnaround came at a critical time," Resler said. "Overlook could have continued the spiral downward for some years—it's hard to kill small churches—but this was the time when the church could be turned."

The aged congregation was just desperate enough, it seems, and God was ready to act on their behalf.

"The dynamic between pastor and congregation has been so good—we have been able to trust each other and to work through some difficult issues—and as that happened we have just seen this ministry develop," Resler concluded.

Their trust was tested in their biggest undertaking to date: taking in homeless families.

Resler had participated in the Interfaith Hospitality Network (I.H.N.) while attending seminary in New Jersey. Bands of 13 churches agree to house homeless couples and their children on church property, each church taking one week every three months, while the

OBJECT LESSONS:
A weekday ministry for kids opens this congregation's eyes to the needs—and the variety—of children in their changing neighborhood.

Start small, but start:

Some leaders say tackle no major changes in the first year of ministry, especially in a turnaround situation. A better approach, as shown by these pastors, is tackle one significant project that can be successfully completed. That builds trust between the congregation and pastor, and readies everyone to take on bigger challenges.

families obtain jobs and secure their own homes. In Mobile, another pastor approached Resler.

"When you get 12 other churches to participate, we'll join you," he responded.

The congregation was less enthusiastic.

After several weeks of grumbling and unrest, Resler took the matter head on—in the pulpit: "I told the stories of two children, one homeless and hungry, with no place to go, because a nearby church refused to open its doors. The other child I described found shelter and a warm bed and his life was changed dramatically.

"It was a pivotal moment. The Spirit was present. I could see it on their faces. The next week, I heard from many people how that sermon had changed their minds. I heard from Lillian, my dear octogenarian and barometer, that she was now for it."

But the board was not.

"At the next meeting, the session had a lot of reservations. They were making excuses why we couldn't have these people on our property. For the first time, I was frustrated with them. I told them, 'When I go before God at the end of my life, I don't want to admit that I had the opportunity to do something for children dying in the streets, to provide them a safe place to sleep, and didn't.'

"That, of course, ended all debate. Their decision was unanimous. Who's going to vote to let children die? I'm not proud of that, but I think God was in it."

His congregation agrees. "We are reaching out to the community surrounding us," the clerk of the session wrote. "We are attempting to cross ethnic and economic lines."

An elder of 37 years said, "We knew we needed to change quickly."

And in a city set in its ways, it's beginning to work. Like his lay leaders, Resler points to support of the homeless ministry as the church's most significant act of faith.

"I.H.N. requires 30 to 40 volunteers from our church to pull it off on a regular basis. When I go to our bulletin board to sign up, all the slots are filled!" Resler said.

"Now, if you ask people where they see themselves in ten years, you get a variety of answers, hopeful answers. People are talking about their dreams for this church."

—Eric Reed

No More Pastor-Driven Church

**Calvary Bible Church
Rutland, Vermont**

When David Lind and his wife returned to their home state of Vermont in 1991, it seemed like the family's dream had come true.

Lind joined the staff of Calvary Bible Church in Rutland, serving as co-pastor with the man who had founded the church. Six years later the founding pastor retired, and Lind became the sole pastor, and became aware of a dichotomy within his congregation.

"We had two churches within one church," Lind explained. "One church grew up under the founding pastor's philosophy of ministry, where the pastor does the ministry and takes care of everything, and the other church grew up under my philosophy, where the people are trained to be leaders and do the work. The church was being pulled in two directions, and I didn't know what to do.

"I had read *The Purpose Driven Church* by Rick Warren, and cried when I read it. It was a powerful thing for me. Rather than being pastor-centered, I was purpose-centered. I realized I could not lead both churches at the same time."

Lind reached a crisis point in 1999, as the burden of caring for a church of 350 by himself caught up with him.

"I crashed and burned," he said. "I finally told the church, 'I need to take some time off. I don't know if I'm coming back, but I need to regroup.'" The dream had become a nightmare.

During the next six weeks, a broken Lind cried a lot and spent time shoring up his marriage. Meanwhile, the elders begged Lind to return to the church. He considered other ministry options. "But God would not open a door for us," Lind said. "He wouldn't release us, so we came back."

On his return, Lind gave the elders a choice: Either develop a ministry with heavy lay involvement, in which the pastor equips the members for service, or go the old way without him.

"They said, 'We're with you, pastor,'" Lind recalled. "At least in theory they were."

Lind initiated a "Team 2000" Bible study to

write a new purpose statement for Calvary. At first, there were widely varying views on the purpose of the church. But over the course of several months, Lind was pleased that the Team 2000—without reading Warren's book—came up with the same five purposes.

The next step was helping the congregation take ownership of those purposes. That's when the change got difficult.

"When people realized the pastor wasn't going to do it all, they started to grumble," Lind recalled.

Part of the problem was that Calvary didn't seem to need fixing. "We weren't in decline," Lind said. "Calvary was the largest church in the area. But the church was still looking at me to do everything, and I couldn't."

When Lind returned after his six-week sabbatical, Calvary had four elders, all presumably on board with the new direction. But as the changes proved difficult, three of those elders left. "That led to personal attacks on my leadership style and a second exodus," Lind recalled. "We struggled financially." Attendance dipped to 150.

Lind preached the parishioner-equipped philosophy from the pulpit and in small groups and leadership training. It was an uphill struggle. "I thought that the people would quickly embrace these biblical concepts," Lind said. "I was naive."

But he stayed with it, and slowly Calvary started to embrace the new approach. The transformation over the last six years, according to Lind, has been remarkable.

"This is a totally different church," he says. "The change in philosophy was the key issue for us. We have emphasized finding seekers, and a year ago we had 50 people come to know Christ in a six-month period, but I led only a couple of those to Christ. The rest were the result of moms, dads, Sunday school teachers, and co-workers who had caught the vision of sharing Christ."

In addition, giving is over budget and attendance has returned to its pre-crisis high.

"Our new challenge is training more leaders and starting small groups," Lind said.

"Our church has also launched a lot of people to do ministry in other parts of the country. We've become Kingdom-focused."

—Angie Ward



From Survivalist to Serving Spirit

Calvary Baptist Church Ball Ground, Georgia

On Jeff Hill's first Sunday as pastor of Calvary Baptist in Ball Ground, Georgia, fourteen people were present, and five of them were Jeff and his family.

The church was 32 years old and had plenty of land, but recent years had been tough. The previous pastor had been asked to resign, and attendance had plummeted.

"The people were in total defense mode," said Jeff. "They were just trying to keep the doors open."

After three years at the Independent Baptist church, Jeff realized something had to change. In December 2000, he stood before the church and said, "If we keep going like we're going, this church isn't going to survive. We need to start doing things the right way." The forty people there that Sunday all agreed to do whatever it took to revitalize the ministry.

"In all honesty, the real problem was me," said Jeff. "I had a negative spirit. I was legalistic and hard-headed—we had dress codes and other stuff that really doesn't matter. But that's sort of where we were as a church, too. That negative spirit was killing our church. I needed to become a human being. We needed to experience grace and fill the church with it. I started preaching the Bible with fresh eyes, for what it was—trying not to shade it with

WINNER ON THE GROUND: Church grounds become ball ground as this congregation welcomes the middle school football team to use its property for practice.

God's fingerprints:

They're all over successful turnarounds. In addition to renewed vision, community outreach, and a quest for excellence, these churches reported God's active involvement in their regeneration—and they celebrate it!

the brand of theology I'd been accustomed to. Fortunately the church allowed us to do that."

Jeff sought help from other pastors: Billy Britt at Hebron Baptist Church in Dacula, Georgia, and Jeff Appling at the Grove Level Baptist Church in Maysville. They helped with practical ideas for building up people and moving the church in the right direction.

2001 was designated "The Year of Discovery," and the first steps were identified: facility, Sunday school, and finances.

The facility. "We had a dark walnut-paneled sanctuary, with grass-green carpet and pumpkin-colored pew pads. The light fixtures were the old style that directed the light straight up. At night it was so dark you could hardly read your Bible.

"At first, we were just going to paint the paneling a lighter shade. But the paneling couldn't hold paint. It looked so bad we had to pull it all down. Then one of our older members on the work crew accidentally tore down one of the 30-year-old light fixtures, and no replacements were available—so we had to get all new lights." The remodeled sanctuary brightened the whole atmosphere. The church paid off the \$28,000 expense that year, a major victory for a church with an annual budget of \$60,000. The enthusiasm was contagious.

This not only gave the church reason to celebrate, it prompted new hope that God had a future for them. They saw a marked increase in the number of visitors who came back a second time, and many stayed. Attendance went from 65 to 150 in a matter of months.

Sunday school. "Other churches start with small groups, but our church *was* a small group," said Jeff. "So we redid the Sunday school, for both children and adults." This meant changing curriculum and training teachers. The lecture format gave way to building relationships with students, and then building the students' relationship with God.

"We also restructured the age groups," said Jeff. "Instead of a separate senior adults class—which tended to make the seniors feel isolated and cut off, we integrated all the adults with a topical format."

Finances. "Our church had done business out of a spiral notebook for 35 years. We had to improve our accounting practices. We upgraded our system from a single person doing a ledger to a three-person administrative team using software and making regular reports."

Midway through 2001 the church met to dream together about what God might want the church to do. The ideas flowed: a senior citizen home, a radio station, a public swimming pool, a fitness center.

"It dawned on us that none of this is beyond what can happen here," said Jeff. "And that was a dramatic change in morale from what it had been a year earlier." The survival mentality was giving way to dreaming.

A spiritual initiative was also key. Jeff read John Maxwell's *Partners in Prayer* and shared it with a deacon. The two of them began meeting every week to pray together. Then they helped form other sets of prayer partners.

Last year Jeff asked all the prayer partners to pray that God would open a door for the church to serve the community in a way the community would appreciate. A few weeks later, Jeff got a call from an administrator at a nearby middle school: "Pastor, I notice that you all have some grassy areas on your property, and we don't have a field at our school for the football team to practice. Would you talk to your leaders about letting us use some of your ground for football practice?"

"No," Jeff said. "We don't need a meeting. You all just come on and use it."

"You don't need a meeting?"

"No, this is an answer to prayer!"

Indeed, when Jeff announced it in church the next Sunday, the members stood and applauded. They volunteered to cut the grass and serve ice water and Gatorade to participants and spectators a couple nights a week.

In the months since, five families have come to Calvary as a result of the contact with the church through football practice.

What's the key to this turnaround? Many things, but Jeff says a trip to repair the office copier was a defining moment: "We kept buying the cheapest copy paper we could find. But I was making a trip a month to the copier repair shop. A pastor friend called me as I was driving. 'I'm ready to throw this machine in the river!' I said. He told me, 'You need to stop buying that cheap copy paper. It makes your copier break down, and besides, what kind of testimony is it when you hand out bulletins on the cheapest paper you can buy?'"

"A light went on. I knew he was right. We aren't huge, but you don't need a big church to do ministry the way it should be done. That changed the way I approach ministry. We now

try for excellence in everything we do. Bulletins. Sanctuary lighting. Teaching. The best we can do.

"Somebody asked me the other day why our church is growing now. I said, 'We stopped buying cheap copy paper.' "

—Marshall Shelley

Rebuilding Relationships

**Britton Bethel Baptist
Britton, Michigan**

Some turnarounds are more felt than measured. That's true at Britton Bethel Baptist. When Bob Wright came to the rural Michigan community in 1995 to lead the struggling congregation of 40, he began by asking them, "What do you like about your church?" He was disturbed by the silence.

Finally one woman spoke up, "I don't really know if there is anything we like about our church." The church had been two years without a pastor. "They had lost all enthusiasm for ministry. They were discouraged and beaten down," Wright said. What encouraged him was their humility and willingness to try new ideas.

It was clear to everyone that change was needed, but it was Wright who understood the changes needed to begin on a deeper level than new programs or facilities. "We didn't have strategy meetings at first. I could tell they needed to heal. One leader told me, 'We need a pastor who can teach us how to love.'"

Wright's family tried to model for the church how to love one another, face conflicts, and process anger appropriately.

The church noticed.

One member told us, "Our pastor and his family have been a great example to us of Christian living."

At an early leadership retreat, Wright led a discussion of how to implement basic relationship skills in the congregation. They discussed how to be kind to each other, not react in anger, and care for others. "It was weird for them," said Wright. "They hadn't experienced these things in the past."

Wright also made connecting the church with the community a priority. "The church had a reputation of being standoffish. We



didn't get involved in things. It was an us-verses-them mentality." Wright challenged this attitude, not with words, but by becoming very active with the local schools.

"In a small town everything revolves around the schools," said one church member. Pastor Wright saw this as the opportune place for the church to engage the community.

When the church's former building, now used as lower income apartments, was discovered to be in disrepair, Wright motivated the congregation to act. "Even though the building was no longer owned by the church, we felt some responsibility to do something. After all, it used to be our church," he said.

A crew from the church stripped and cleaned the entire building. News spread quickly. This congregation was learning not only how to love one another, but also demonstrating love for others as well.

The church has since opened a community care center and launched children's ministries. New, young families are joining, ending an exodus to churches with established youth programs. What pleases Wright most is the church's "really enthusiastic attitude toward growth."

"It took a while to gain their trust, but I think they've discovered that ministry can be fun again. They just needed to be loved again."

—Skye Jethani

RESTORATION PROJECT:
Relationships and reputations are repaired as this small church demonstrates great concern for its rural community.