

FOR THE

KINGDOM'S SAKE

Discovering God's Preferred Future for Your Church



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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction: A Legacy of Generosity..... | 4 |
| How to Use This Resource..... | 6 |
| CHAPTER 1 • Biblical Foundations for Transitions..... | 8 |
| Alan Dodson, South Region | |
| CHAPTER 2 • The Potential for Kingdom Impact..... | 16 |
| Rick Howerton, South Central Region | |
| CHAPTER 3 • Emotional Barriers..... | 24 |
| Larry Purcell, West Region | |
| CHAPTER 4 • Options for Future Kingdom Impact..... | 36 |
| Alan Witham, Central Region and Group Leader | |
| CHAPTER 5 • Turning Stumbling Blocks into Stepping Stones..... | 43 |
| Rob Patterson, North Central Region | |
| APPENDIX 1 Case Studies..... | 54 |
| APPENDIX 2 Legal Issues..... | 62 |
| Paul Badgett, East Region | |
| ENDNOTES | 67 |

A Legacy of Generosity

“I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” - Philippians 1:3-6

What will be your legacy? When you're gone, what will people remember? What will they say? Will they have memories of how you sacrificially served God for the sake of the gospel?

When the Apostle Paul remembered the Philippian believers, he thought of their generosity. He cherished how they sent Epaphroditus to minister to him in a Roman prison. He marveled at the generous offering they collected to meet his needs.

In the Kentucky Baptist Convention, we have lots of churches that are struggling - struggling to grow and struggling to pay the bills. You may be one of those churches. Because of the severity of your situation, you are pondering these questions. What will be the legacy of our church? What will people remember about our church? What will they say?

God may be leading you to be remembered for an act of extreme generosity like the Philippian church and like other KBC churches. God may be offering you the opportunity to become a legacy church - a church that paves the way for future discipleship, evangelism, and kingdom growth through future-minded generosity.

In this resource, the Regional Consultants and I have produced a guide to assist you if you are asking these questions. We will help you know if you should become a legacy church, and we will walk you through the entire process.

As always, we also offer our personal assistance. If I can be of service in any way, don't hesitate to contact me at steve.rice@kybaptist.org or at (502) 489-3434.

Stephen C. Rice, Team Leader
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Kentucky Baptist Convention

How to Use This Resource

This resource was created for the purpose of aiding churches in discovering God's preferred future. The goal is to educate as well as inspire church members to make significant and difficult decisions based on God's kingdom agenda.

How to Use This Resource:

1. The leader should read the entire book prior to the first group gathering. This will give the leader an overall understanding of the content.
2. The leader should be aware of the optional videos that are available. These videos can be found at *www.kybaptist.org/kingdomssake*. The goal of each of the videos is to inspire and/or educate. Each leader should use them as he or she sees fit while taking into consideration the makeup of the group they are leading.
3. At the first gathering or group meeting, ask group members to agree to the following expectations:
 - Attend each group meeting.
 - Come with an open mind, seeking God's preferred future for your church.
 - Read the assigned short chapter prior to arriving at each meeting.
 - Choose not to be argumentative during the discussion time.
 - Pray daily for God to unearth His preferred future for your church.
4. Assign one chapter to be read before each meeting.
5. Follow the format below for each group meeting:
 - Open with prayer, asking God to speak to the group through the Holy Spirit during your meeting.

- Ask attendees what statement caught their attention and why. Discuss these statements for no longer than 10 minutes.
- Ask the discussion questions at the end of each chapter, allowing the group to interact as they share their responses.
- After discussing all of the questions, ask the group to share what they learned, how they feel they should pray, and the most significant takeaway from their time together.
- Pray, asking God to reveal His preferred future for your church by the end of this study.

To get the most out of this resource, you'll want to keep the following facts in mind as facilitator:

1. This is an opportunity for individuals and churches to recognize their present situation and realize the future potential.
2. The topics you're discussing will evoke honest and sincere emotions. Allow people to be emotionally honest, but do your best to be sure emotions don't distract the group from discussing what God may have in store for your church.
3. Don't talk too much. As the facilitator of the group, your responsibility is to simply ask the questions, allowing the group to have a conversation. If your group engages in the conversation, you should talk less than 30 percent of the time.
4. Don't allow the overly talkative person to take control of the conversation. You want to hear from as many people in the group as possible. When necessary, inviting others to contribute to the conversation by asking a question or some other prompt. Don't feel like you always have to fill the silence.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR TRANSITIONS

When a church arrives at a crossroads of considering options about its future, the members will likely struggle to determine which of many paths is the right one for them. Several of those paths will be explored in the following chapters of this resource. Before any of those options are considered, the church in question needs to be reminded of what the Bible says about the nature of the church and other issues surrounding the decision to be made.

The Foundation, Ownership, and Future of the Church

If you were to conduct a simple survey asking random people, “What is a church?”, most would likely respond by describing a building. Even many committed Christians reveal their misunderstanding when they speak of the church as a place to go and meet. A church is not a building, budget, or program. From its inception to the fulfillment of its mission, the Church was, is, and shall be composed of people. These people form a body of believers.

In English translations of the New Testament, the term church first appears in Matthew 16:18. Following that introduction, it appears another 113 times. In the Greek, it is *ekklesia*, a compound word. The term *kaleo* (to call) is prefixed by *ek* (out). So, the word literally means “called out ones.” It is important to note that from the first use of the term in Matthew 16 to the final use in Revelation 22 - the last chapter of the Bible - *ekklesia* always refers to people. It never refers to a building or anything other than a called out, assembled group of people.

Prior to its use in the New Testament, *ekklesia* was used in other contexts. For instance, *ekklesia tou demou*, the meeting of citizens in

ancient Athens, occurred when the Athenians were called together to make decisions as citizens about important matters of the city. Jesus, however, elevated the term when He used it to describe those called out to be His people, His Church. In other words, whereas the Athenians assembled as a group of citizens with only geography as their commonality, Jesus asks more of us. His is a higher calling. To understand this more fully, let's revisit the narrative of Matthew 16:13-20.

Jesus and His disciples came to Caesarea Philippi. The Lord's choice of that location for this conversation is not accidental. Caesarea Philippi is in the extreme northern tip of modern Israel near the borders of Lebanon and Syria. Going there required considerable effort. It was about a 30-mile journey from the shores of Galilee - their location prior to coming to Caesarea Philippi.

The location is a breathtakingly beautiful area, backdropped by a massive rock outcropping from which flows a picturesque spring that supplies a fourth of the Jordan's water supply. In front of the massive rock, the ancient Greeks had built a temple to the false god Pan. Visitors to the temple of Pan worshipped and conducted sacrifices. An area immediately behind the temple opens into an enormous cave. The cave was referred to as the "Gates of Hades."

At this location, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" (v. 13). They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (v. 14). He shifted from what they were hearing to what they personally believed by asking, "But who do you say that I am?" (v. 15).

Jesus' question gave Simon the opportunity to confess his faith. He said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). Based on that confession, Simon received his new name - Peter. Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also

say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (vv. 17-18).

Simon confessed that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, a revelation he received from God. Jesus then renamed him Peter. In the Greek New Testament, the word for Peter is *Petros*. It means a moveable stone, or pebble. Now it becomes clear why Jesus chose Caesarea Philippi for this conversation. There in the ruins of the ancient Temple of Pan, Jesus likely picked up a small stone - a *petros*. You can imagine Him presenting the stone to Simon as He gave him the new name. Peter, like a small rock, would be tough, rugged, and durable, but very moveable. He would be a strong leader, but he would be shifted and prone to mistakes. He would be a *petros*. Regardless of Peter’s best qualities, Jesus knew that we needed a firmer foundation.

Then, you can imagine Jesus sweeping His hand in the foreground of that large rock outcropping as He says, “On this rock I will build My church.” When He spoke of the rock upon which He would build His Church, He used a variation of the name He gave Simon. This rock would not be a small, moveable *petros*. It, like the massive wall of stone at Caesarea Philippi, would be a *petra*! It would be immovable.

From this passage we learn, contrary to the opinion of some, the Church would not be built upon Peter. Peter knew this. Describing the Church in his first letter, Peter wrote, “You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture,

*‘Behold, I lay in Zion
A chief cornerstone, elect, precious,
And he who believes on Him will by no means be put to
shame’*” (1 Pet. 2:5-6).

Peter's point is this: we (the Church) are living stones built upon the cornerstone (Jesus). He is the petra.

Not only do we learn upon Whom the Church is built from the conversation at Caesarea Philippi, but we also learn to Whom the Church belongs. Jesus said, "I will build My church." This is a clear claim of ownership. Jesus used the possessive personal pronoun my. The Church belongs to Jesus.

Because the Church is built upon and belongs to Jesus, it has a sure future. Jesus said the "Gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Again, you can imagine Jesus pointing toward the opening to the cave at Caesarea Philippi. Obviously, He was referring to something much more than the mouth of that literal cave. He meant that all the hellish system of Satan and his minions, as powerful as it is, could not overthrow His Church. The inability of Hell's gates to stop the advancement of the Church is evidence to us that the Church will never die. But what do we mean by "church"?

A Universal Church that Manifests Itself Locally

"The concept of 'Church' (in Matt. 16) contains the seeds of both the universal Church and local churches."¹ Christ's universal Church is an organism of professing believers making up the body of Christ. It is not limited to a geographical designation or denominational affiliation as is a local church. Everyone, living or dead, who has expressed his or her faith in Jesus Christ, is a member of the universal Church, Christ's body, of which He is the head. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes the universal Church this way: "*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all*" (Eph. 4:4-6).

The *Baptist Faith & Message* describes the universal Church as "the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages,

believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.”² This great Church will not meet until the consummation of all things. John prophetically describes it in Revelation as “*a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues*” (Rev. 7:9). It is this universal Church that can claim Jesus’ promise of invincibility. His Church will be active and relevant until He returns.

This great, universal Church expresses itself in local manifestations or congregations. Again drawing from the *Baptist Faith & Message*, “A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.”³ Thus, the work Christ entrusted to His Church is carried out through local bodies.

However, time has proven that the promise of posterity in Matthew 16 only applies to the universal Church. If this were not the case, every church that has been launched since Pentecost would be alive today, or Jesus’ promise would have been faulty. Look no further than the churches of Asia Minor for evidence. These churches are addressed in Revelation 2-3. It is noteworthy that none of them exist today. Local churches can and do cease to exist.

Biblical Principles for the Journey Ahead

If you are part of a church that is facing what may now seem to be unfavorable options for its future, there is good news for you. The remainder of this resource will guide you through biblical, God-honoring possibilities. For now, let’s consider some basic biblical principles to help open your heart to those.

A Time for Everything

Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Solomon rightly observed: “*To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven*” (Eccl. 3:1). From that basis, Solomon poetically describes the different seasons and facets to life on earth. The ebb and flow of beginnings and endings of events, lives, and activities are presented as stark realities. You can be very sure that God, in His sovereignty, closely guards the life cycle of one of His most important institutions - the church. In His plan, there is a time for churches to be planted, a time for them to grow, and, for some of them, a time to invest themselves in a new hope.

God Does New Things

The prophet Isaiah delivered a beautiful message of hope to the Israelites in Babylon. “*Behold, I will do a new thing, Now it shall spring forth; Shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness And rivers in the desert*” (Isa. 43:19). These Jews were mired in the desperate circumstances of captivity and exile. God wanted their hearts to grasp the hope of the new work He wanted to do. If they allowed their thinking to be stuck in discouragement, they would never go forward to the new thing God had for them. So, through Isaiah, He asks them, “Shall you not know it?” He wanted them to let go of the old things, including their hurts and disappointments, and take hold of the new thing He would do through them. God asks the same question today. Will you stay in step with His Spirit? When He leads into something new, will you follow Him?”

God Breathes Life

“*Thus says the LORD GOD to these bones: ‘Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live’*” (Ezek. 37:5). Parched and bleached by the sun, the brittle bones scattered across the valley presented a vision that summoned two words to the prophet’s mind - death and discouragement. The only thing more discouraging than

the vision itself was that it represented the desperate condition of Israel.

In the vision, God did what only He could do. As Ezekiel preached, the bones came together, were wrapped by muscle and skin, and those corpses were resuscitated. The dry bones lived! Likewise, Israel was revived and restored. Perhaps through replanting, merging, legacy gifting, or another path detailed in this resource, God wants to bring back a strong work of His Church in your community through the provisions He's already invested in your church.

It's His Church

As a church begins the journey of making substantive decisions about its future, there is no biblical principle more important to remember than the truth that Christ is the head and proprietor of His Church. As we've already seen at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus said, "I will build **My** (emphasis added) church." The Apostle Paul explained in Ephesians 5:23 that "*Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body.*" Further, to the Colossians, Paul wrote that Jesus "*is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence*" (Col. 1:18). Here Scripture is saying that God gave the Church the King of the universe to rule her. All members of His Church would do well to remember this in each decision they make about the church.

As you process the remaining chapters of this resource, do so with an open heart seeking no more and no less than to discern His will about His Church. The local church of which you are a member is one part of His universal Church ... His kingdom. As kingdom citizens, may our prayer ever be:

*"Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven"* (Matt. 6:10).

OPTIONAL: To view For the Kingdom's Sake testimonials go to www.kybaptist.org/kingdomssake.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What circumstances might lead you to believe your church is at what this chapter refers to as a crossroad?
2. How would you answer the question: What is a church?
3. How do you think the fact that Jesus has called your church to something greater than simply a group of people will affect any decision you make about the future?
4. Why do you think it is important to remember that the Church is built not on Peter, but on Jesus?
5. Describe the difference between the local church and the universal Church. Why is this distinction important to the decisions you may make about the future of your church?
6. Scripture tells us that while God has always been, He also does new things. How does this attribute of God's character bring you comfort?
7. How will you pray over the future of your church over the next several weeks?

THE POTENTIAL FOR KINGDOM IMPACT

Nehemiah was blindsided when he was exposed to the truth - there is a remnant of Israelites in Jerusalem who are, “*in great distress and reproach*” (Neh. 1:3a). The great city of his ancestors and his people, the people of God, is in ruins. In fact, Scripture states that, “*The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire.*” (Neh. 1:3b). No longer is this once great city bringing glory to God. What was once the shining light on the hill is now scarcely a flickering candle.

But the story is not over. God redeems all things! It *will* be the glorious shining light on the hill again. The potential for kingdom impact remains within Nehemiah’s reach! Just as with Nehemiah, there is hope for a dying church, but only if something new is birthed. And that newness is going to include a new vision, a new mindset, new sacrifices, a new paradigm, and a willingness to set aside ingrained mindsets to invite God to do something new.

The potential for kingdom impact is within the dying church’s reach! Life can and will come from dry bones. How can we be so sure? Because, not only does God redeem all things, He remembers the dreams He planted in the hearts of His pioneers.

At some point in history, a group of believers became aware of the need for a church in your community. In obedience and faithfulness, they took those first steps toward planting your church. These pioneers dreamed a dream. The dream of those who were the church and eventually completed the building was to bring the transforming power of the cross to the people in their community. The building they built represented a body of believers who came together to worship Him and honor His name. God made it possible for the

church building to exist. The building was and is God's building, built for His purposes to reach a people in a given community - and it's still standing so it can be used do just that.

For whatever reason, your church is no longer what it once was. Like the elderly wife showing the effects of the winds of time and the currents of change, this bride of Christ has become something less than what she was meant to be. But God is willing to redeem all things for His purposes. And even the gates of Hell cannot thwart His redemptive work.

If the present congregation will make room for God's redemptive power, once again there will be the bold songs of the saints resonating through the sanctuary and into the streets. The laughter of children in a classroom learning God's Word will be heard. Young men and women will walk the aisle declaring their call to ministry and missions. The baptistry will be the sacred space utilized often. The pulpit will be the place where truth is taught courageously and, in so doing, the church will be a conscience for the community. The church building will be known as a place of hope and help and will be considered so essential to the county in which it exists that without it, the community will not be the same. But most importantly, the Holy Spirit will have a place and time to empower the masses, the people of God, to take the gospel to the world.

For this to become reality, the congregation must avail itself to God's desire to do something new. Remember, "new" can be jarring and comprehensive. "New" is exciting but includes new leadership, new vision, and new paradigms.

A New Church Gets New Life

Accompanying anything new is a great sense of anticipation. When you read of God creating the heavens and the earth, doesn't your heart come to life with anticipation and aren't you exhilarated? Isn't

there a sense of wonder and a passion for what will come of what now is? Imagine being Adam and Eve. God speaks you into being and you open your eyes to see the newest of new, God's created earth with all its plant life, animals, and a sun and moon that light up the heavens. New is the birthplace of anticipation.

After 40 days on the boat, imagine Noah stepping onto dry land with a new-found smile on his face and a rekindled sense of expectancy. Noah was ready to go to work not just because he had a job to do, but also because he was stepping into a new world of potential.

New is the great motivator for those who believe and new is the great inspiration for those who have not yet believed. Many of those who have not made a decision to follow Christ are hesitant to visit an established or long-standing church. It may feel tired to them. It may seem like just a part of the landscape. For these often irrational reasons, they conclude that nothing new and exciting is happening there. They think that the established, long standing church is business-as-usual and the business they believe is taking place there has nothing for them or is irrelevant.

It's not unlike the new restaurant that opens. The same people who haven't been to any of the established restaurants or out to eat at all for years get excited and make plans to try out the new place in town. And why wouldn't they, it's new!

So it is with a new or re-envisioned church. People who may have never considered showing up at a church service to hear the gospel will come if invited. The newness is a draw as it is often believed that new includes a new flavor of church life, a flavor that just may be exactly the taste they've been looking for.

New opens the door for an entire generation to consider Jesus.

A New Church Will Require New Leadership

John Maxwell, one of today's experts in the area of leadership, said "Everything rises and falls on leadership." While this may be a bit of an overstatement, it is true that new leadership brings a new and fresh vision.

Vision is a mental image of the final outcome. New leadership envisions what God is going to do and motivates a people to join them in accomplishing what God has planted in their hearts. Vision is the most potent power in any church as it reveals the potential before the goal has been reached.

In a re-envisioned church, this vision almost always includes reaching the next generation with the gospel. Because of this, the re-envisioned church's potential moves toward becoming a reality. Why? The new leadership brings more relevant methods with them to accomplish the vision, a new team of energetic servants to join them in the mission, and a passion so intense that it spills over on every willing soul.

New leadership expects God to take them far beyond where they themselves can go. They dream dreams so outrageous that only faith can make those dreams a reality. New leadership, with the freedom to run unhindered and uninhibited into the work, is the first necessity to seeing the kingdom impact that God longs for all churches to attain.

A New Paradigm Will Be Established

In time, the new leadership will establish a new paradigm. A new paradigm is the key to building a biblically functioning church that reaches people in the present culture and incites people to action. And once that paradigm is firmly in place, the kingdom impact is not only evident, it may just be unstoppable.

A new paradigm is basically a new approach to reaching the community and beyond for Christ. It creates a new mindset which opens the door for more effective practices. A new paradigm stretches the present congregation and brings about spiritual growth in their lives. A new paradigm opens the door for a transformation of the worship experience and births worship so passionate, relevant, and exhilarating to the present generation that unbelievers see God at work and want to experience Him. A new paradigm incites creativity in those leading the various ministries of the church and culturally sensitive ministry is birthed and practiced.

Joshua Howerton took over The Bridge Church, a Southern Baptist Church in Spring Hill, Tennessee, when the church was under one hundred people. Not so long before that, the church planter who started the church had considered dissolving the church. The load was heavy and the numbers up and down. It seemed the church was never going to be what she needed to be in the community where she existed.

Pastor Joshua, a twenty-five year old youth pastor, walked in with a passion for the gospel, a vision for the church, and a new paradigm that would have kingdom impact beyond anything ever dreamed.

In seven short years, The Bridge grew from a small congregation to over 1800 in attendance most weekends. On Easter Sunday of 2017, 3300 people attended the church and 210 people started a relationship with Jesus Christ.

New leadership with a new paradigm is often the catalyst to see unfathomable kingdom impact.

About Kingdom Impact

One of the most important goals of every church is to impact God's kingdom. That is, to establish the kingdom of God in the location

where the church exists and to establish the kingdom of God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the hearts of every unbeliever. When this is the goal, the gospel becomes the primary conversation piece and Jesus becomes the centerpiece of every conversation and gathering. When His name is proclaimed and His redemptive power made known, there is great kingdom impact.

How does a church know when she's having a kingdom impact? Unbelievers are becoming believers; spiritually immature disciples are becoming spiritually mature disciples; and the church is growing, not only spiritually, but numerically. When the people of God are kingdom focused, there will be kingdom impact.

There are dying churches throughout Kentucky and the world who find themselves with a passion to make a kingdom impact. If you're in one of these churches, please know that you needn't give up hope. By simply being willing to allow God to have what is rightfully His, the church building you currently meet in, you can see the light of Jesus shining brightly in your community once again. And the kingdom impact just might be **OUTRAGEOUS!**

As you consider the future of your church, here are a few steps for coming to the right conclusion and becoming difference-makers in the kingdom:

- Take an honest evaluation of your church's decline, finances, and future.
- Prayerfully consider making the present building available to a church or church planter.
- Graciously, and without strings attached, turn the building over to a church or church planter—an individual with a passion to carry on the dream your church fathers once dreamed.
- Prayerfully consider being part of the new congregation.
- Celebrate the past without clinging to its ideals and practices.

- Pray daily for the new work taking place in the building that was once yours.
- Continue to tithe and go beyond the tithe so that the church can continue to flourish and make the gospel known.
- If God calls you to be part of the new church, take on appropriate roles in the new church.
- Be the biggest cheerleaders of the new pastor, staff, elders, and deacons.

Sometimes a church will feel as though she's in the same place Nehemiah found himself. When that church is exposed to the truth, they are a remnant "in great distress and reproach." When you find yourself here, kingdom impact opportunities are on the horizon. Just as God redeemed Nehemiah's heart by rebuilding something through him, it's very possible that God may redeem your trouble and shame by making a great gift to God's kingdom - the church building where you presently meet. And, in so doing, you may have the greatest kingdom impact you have ever known!

OPTIONAL: To view For the Kingdom's Sake testimonials go to www.kybaptist.org/kingdomssake.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What do you think your church's pioneers dreamed your church would become? Be specific.
2. How would you describe your church in its current state? Is it a shining light on a hill or more like a flickering candle? Explain.
3. Considering the dream of the church's pioneers, in your opinion is the church experiencing that dream? If so, how? If not, why?

4. Why do you think people want to be part of something new?
5. How would you describe your church's present vision? Is that vision becoming a reality? Why or why not?
6. How would you describe the kingdom impact your church is presently having?
7. What do you think your church's pioneers would say to the present congregation if they had the opportunity?
8. If making your present building available to new leadership and a new way of thinking about church would make it possible for many more people to hear and respond to the gospel, would you be willing to do that? Why or why not?

EMOTIONAL BARRIERS

The People Business

A disproportionate number of books and leadership experts examine the emotional journeys that members of long-standing churches experience during times of change, merger, or closure. While many books have been written on transitions or leading a church revitalization, few give much energy to the people themselves. Instead, the bulk of what has been written on the subject of mergers or closures addresses the processes and steps to lead change during difficult seasons - the impersonal part. Equally important during these transitions is the impact on people, both leaders and followers. The net effect is that an over-emphasis on process neglects perhaps the most important part of the equation: people. Significant decisions like these ask us not only to be aware of emotional barriers, but to account for them as we navigate God's will and direction for the future of our church buildings and ministry.

If you're reading this book, you are considering a merger or closure or some other decision with enormous implications for your church members and community. This is a good and healthy conversation to lead within the leadership. As stated above, this is rightfully a season of high emotions. As you begin, here are a few critical questions to be considered when exploring the emotional cost of a legacy merger or closure.

- Issues of loss emerge from the emotions associated with grief and grieving. How will you engage these very natural issues?
- Is a legacy merger or closure more than a building or program? In what ways can you be sensitive to the loss experienced by members of the congregation?

- In what ways must the shepherd of the sheep respond to the hurts of the sheep without failing to acknowledge the demands of change, yet continuing to take steps toward a merger or legacy closure?

Senior adults often get upset during these times of change and feel the church has been taken from them at a time when they need it most. Strong emotional connections or attachments to memories, objects, and even buildings are not uncommon. It's likely that we all develop such attachments over the course of our lives. A certain song makes us recall an event of the past. A scent or fragrance takes us back to a specific time or season of life. We drive by a place and recall childhood memories that are past but remain. It's true that these attachments can be out of balance, but it's also true that they can give us community, belonging, and groundedness. This is important only in that they should not be taken lightly but addressed as a part of any major transition. So, how do we move beyond such cultural ties? How do we turn loose of the past to grasp a new and better future?

The Cycle of Life

The life cycle of a person has been charted by researchers as moving from birth, toddler, adolescence, younger adult, middle adult, senior adult, and then to death. This same paradigm can also be seen in organizations, including churches.

It may be helpful to gain a better understanding of the life cycle of a church. The evolution and growth of a church, like any organization, can be charted. Robert Dale, in *To Dream Again*, shows the life cycle of a church as beginning with a dream or vision, then beliefs and values, before goals, structures, and then effective ministry. A church's progress toward effective ministry and disciple-making becomes more and more exciting as the Lord unfolds His desires for this body of believers. When a church or organization loses its focus

and departs from its original dream or vision, however, the church can experience diminishing relevance.

The path to marginalized relevance includes nostalgia, lack of clarity, polarization, and, lastly, dropout or death. A church's initial decline is earmarked by too much reflection and yearning for the good old days. Giving in to the temptation to spend vital energy looking back begins the process toward decline and is often accompanied with needlessly questioning God, which contributes to a lack of clarity and vision, and placing unnecessary blame on church leadership. The sum of this is polarization - the "us versus them" mentality. Polarization leads to the kind of conflict that accelerates the process to the death of a church.

The point here is not to discuss how we arrived to this process, but where do we go from here. Not all merges or closures end in polarization and conflict, of course. But it is likely true that these difficult conversations are necessitated by a lack of focus, diminished ministry, and the disorientation that results from this confluence of circumstances. Why? Valuable time can be wasted in finding answers that, when you get right down to it, do not change our reality. It's crucial to keep in mind that God still has a plan and we have to be open to unconventional - and even hard - solutions.

We need to understand a few issues related to the cycle of life. It is inevitable, and it is unstoppable. We can perhaps slow death, but we cannot stop it.

The Inevitability of Change

It's true that you can't stop change, but you can certainly use these seasons to revisit and renew the vision the Lord has for His church. Before you begin something new, you must end something old. We tend to think of change only as the event, but there is a world of psychology behind the actual decision. For instance, we may say that

we're going to begin a new diet that will transform our eating habits. The announcement, or decision, is the easy part. This decision, depending on the diet, will likely usher in an entirely new way of life that affects shopping, schedules, and how we feel. True transition occurs when we accept a new reality.

Diets are hard because they require a new way of thinking about eating and living. A church defining a new vision or dream can at first be excited because each member has a vision of what that looks like. It gets difficult, though, when we find out what we originally had in mind did not happen exactly as we had hoped. This is usually because the context of our circumstances has changed so drastically that what we had envisioned no longer works. Technology and transportation have forever changed the landscape of rural, suburban, and urban life. Where once a vibrant community surrounded a church, the pressures of globalism have shifted focus. Jobs have moved to other regions and the highways have passed many communities throughout Kentucky. The shift in North America today is toward urbanization and away from the rural regions. Maybe you have noticed that once thriving farm communities have seen decreases in population. As a result, when our children become adults they feel there is no other choice but to relocate for work. Consistent with these realities, the programs and methods that once worked in growing a healthy church are no longer working. The message remains unchanged, the truths of Scripture still just as relevant, but these pressures require us to evaluate our methods for reaching the next generation. These are hard conclusions to come to. In fact, it's quite normal to resist these conclusions until we're left with few options for making decisions.

Churches cannot stay vibrant and alive by holding onto the way churches were 30 or 50 years ago. As we age, it's wise to adapt to new ways of living life and thriving. Obviously, we watch sports more than we play them. We still exercise, but maybe we walk

instead of run. Transition speaks to how we psychologically come to terms with or adapt and adjust to living new ways. It's normal to pass through a season of grieving as we leave stages of life behind. The stages of grief and loss may be similar for all, but the speed of adjusting to changes varies with each person. What we need to avoid is lingering in the stage of loss and grief.

Grief as Motivation

Grief has been mapped to demonstrate stages a person passes through when faced with loss. It's paramount to remember that when we refer to churches or organizations, we are referring to people. Perhaps this is even more true when you consider the church as the body of Christ. The church is not a building or program or structure. The local church is made up of redeemed people who have covenanted together for the Lord's purposes in a specific place. Since a church is made up of people, it will suffer losses and experience the stages of grief. This is a natural process from which we are not exempted because we are the redeemed of the Lord.

A brief introduction to the stages of grief begins with denial. H. Norman Wright, author and counselor stated, "Denial serves as emotional anesthesia and as a defense mechanism." Wright goes further to explain that, "the survivor isn't totally overwhelmed by the loss. Denial allows [us] to gradually comprehend the loss, which makes it more bearable."⁴ Due to a fear of loss, many people choose to deny the reality of a closure or the need to merge. When the members are too few to pay the bills, do ministry, or carry out missions, fear takes control.

After denial is a period of bargaining. We tend to bargain with God during this stage often characterized by a sense of desperation. The next stage of grief is anger. Anger can be identified within the cycle of grief in blame or by shame, either yourself or others. This anger stage is significant because it's usually the time when people disassociate

from the church or at least stop attending. The next stage of grief is identified as depression. Bear in mind that this isn't necessarily a clinically diagnosed depression. Rather, depression in this context is defined as anger turned inward. At this point, members become closed off to the facts and are often weighed with emotional pain and anxiety.

GRIEF PROCESSES

- Denial
- Bargaining
- Anger
- Depression
- Acceptance

We tend to contextualize grief and loss within the loss of a loved one, an unexpected and traumatic health report, or personal tragedy. But these stages also apply to people groups like your congregation as members project themselves into the future and lament what may be forever lost in the past. We can get stuck in any of these stages of grief, but it is particularly damaging when we get stuck in anger and depression. Be mindful to prayerfully monitor individuals in your community throughout this process. Acceptance is the last stage of grief. The Scriptures indicate that grieving is acceptable for believers, but believers are not to grieve as those who have no hope (see 1 Thess. 4:13b). Acceptance in this case is far from a passive position. Conversely, when you arrive in acceptance you have arrived at the place for moving forward, fully trusting God to guide you toward something new and different - something that maybe you couldn't have even contemplated if not for the stages we've described here.

Moving Forward

“The grief process is slow, and it needs to be this way, even though most people probably want to rush it along. It will take longer than

anyone has patience for. Time seems to stand still, especially at night; but the slowness of grief's passage is a necessary thing.”⁵

“Through grief we may experience God in a new way that changes our life. As Job said, *‘My ears had heard of you before, but now my eyes have seen you’* (Job 42:5, NCV).”⁶

So what are these tasks that are necessary to heal from grief?

- **First**, you need to accept the reality. This may seem obvious, but emotionally accepting reality can be a tremendous challenge.
- **Second**, you need to express all your emotions. Talking with trusted advisors, journaling, and being open with friends are ways for accomplishing this. Keeping the emotions “bottled up” inside can be detrimental to the process.
- **Third**, you need to sort through and identify your memories and find a place to store them. This task allows you to establish a vital and rich memory for what has been lost.
- **Fourth**, prayerfully establish your identity in the wake of this loss. Reworking your sense of identity is a critical aspect of your grief journey.
- **Finally**, the grief detour requires that you begin to reinvest in your life in a way that is consistent with your reshaped sense of identity - determining your own personal interests and desires at this point in your life.

Consider how you might make use of the tasks above as you counsel those in grief and walk with them through this journey. Sometimes you can explain it outright while other times it's just a matter of identifying the tasks on our part. What questions can you think of to bring out this information?⁷

Ecclesiastes 1:15 reads, *“What is crooked cannot be made straight, And what is lacking cannot be numbered.”* The writer of Ecclesiastes

presents an argument that may seem futile, but is man's attempt to make sense of life. Humankind is made in the image of God and thus seeks more than just life. Times of conflict and disorientation help us realize we are not in control of our lives. We may know the Lord as Savior yet still have a limited view of God's plans. The above verse is a constant reminder that God is the sovereign Creator, and we must trust Him especially in times of uncertainty. Life hands each of us unexpected events that challenge us in our comfort zones. We think we have life figured out and suddenly the unexpected phone call or medical exam challenges our world. The church is the body of Christ, but churches are not immune from change. Few church members ever suspected that their church would face the need to close, relocate, or merge with another congregation.

The pastor leading a merger or legacy closure will experience resistance from those who have deep roots, and thus may experience the deepest sense of loss. The pastor(s) and church leaders involved in a legacy closure or merger should seek to discover or even recover the stories of those who are grieving. These stories provide opportunity for greater healing for those who have the deepest roots and therefore the most to lose. Stories allow all who participate in a legacy closure or merger to build community. The bond between newer members and older members is essential. Paul captures this in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8: *"We were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us."*

The Apostle had built a kinship that is evident throughout this 1 Thessalonians 2, expressed by terms as *brothers, nursing mother,* and *father*. Christian community must be a bond built in Christ and expressed by loving one another. Patience with the grieving is a critical aspect of the future success of the new church. The aging members of the congregation are experiencing issues related to the

death of close friends, distance from immediate family, declining health, and more. Leaders must be sensitive to these developmental issues. Many of the older adults have poured heart and soul into a church building and programs, and they have become comfortable. Patience is most critical to assist the aged in seeing that the issue of legacy is a way they continue to live and impact future generations with the gospel. Again referring to the passage in 1 Thessalonians, it would be wise to adopt this same posture when overcoming the emotional barriers that you'll face in this decision.

Below are a few pointers to help leaders assist members better manage issues related to grief and the emotional barriers to change when considering a legacy closure or merger:

- Celebrating the past: Be sensitive to the church's history of significant moments and leaders. Develop a service to celebrate the past with special guest speakers significant to the history of the church. Involve members in testimonies, and produce a historical document for members.
- Provide sufficient time for grieving by moving deliberately but sensitively to those most impacted by the decision to either merge or close. Go to the Sunday School or small group meetings of senior adults and others who are more emotionally impacted. Listen to their concerns, grieve with them, and pray with them.
- Review the steps with leaders and communicate well with those feeling the loss. Make sure you involve persons at all levels in communicating the steps to be taken and the challenges to be faced.
- Help the members who are giving up the most to reframe the loss as also an opportunity to build a future for a newer generation, just as previous generations sought opportunity to reach those who are now giving up so much.

- As a part of the celebration over the weeks prior to the merger or legacy closure, ask members to share stories from past experiences at the church during regular worship services.
- Most importantly, spend much time in prayer such as 40 days of prayer, special times of prayer during weekly worship, cottage prayer meetings in the homes of members, prayer vigils at the church, etc.

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OPTIONAL: To view For the Kingdom's Sake testimonials go to www.kybaptist.org/kingdomssake.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Chapter 3 describes the various stages of grief. Which stage of grieving best describes where you are at this point in time?
2. Describe how you have handled loss in the past. How do you think these experiences can help you during this season?
3. How does the inevitability of change contribute to how you handle a decision with such long-term consequences?
4. How do shifts from regionalism to globalism, populations moving away from rural settings, and the results of these shifts affect how you approach your church's future?
5. How can your church adapt to new environments, cultural changes, and new ways of living and thriving?
6. Describe your journey along the path of grief. Have you lingered in any of the stages: denial, bargaining, anger, depression, acceptance?

7. How has God satisfied His promise of hope to you in this process of discussing the future of your church?
8. Healthily navigating grief depends a great deal on identity, according to experts. How do you think having a secure identity in Christ contributes to these decisions?

OPTIONS FOR FUTURE KINGDOM IMPACT

All churches need to prayerfully consider this question on a continual basis: “What is God’s plan for our future?” The clear biblical mandate for a congregation of 6 people or 600 is to follow God’s plan for their church given their context and current reality. Some churches seeking God’s answer to this question are healthy; others are struggling and perhaps finding it difficult to discern the answer. The following gives a series of options for both healthy churches wanting to broaden their kingdom impact and for struggling churches who have mistakenly concluded that their capacity for kingdom impact is a thing of the past.

The Church Merger

A church merger occurs when two or more churches determine that God’s plan for their future involves forming one new congregation out of what was previously two distinct and separate congregations. The conviction that should drive the consideration of the journey toward a church merger would include the belief that this is God’s plan and that the two distinct churches are compatible for a healthy merger. Another important conviction in this scenario is the merging congregations create greater potential for kingdom effectiveness and impact.

What transpires in a successful merger is often what occurs in a healthy courtship that leads to marriage. The merger discussion usually begins with two or more key leaders. Usually the two pastors or interim pastors of the respective churches meet for initial discussions. In these early discussions, they begin to explore issues of compatibility and discerning God’s leadership.

Portland Avenue Baptist Church merged with New Breed Church (a church plant) in Louisville, Kentucky. In this situation, Portland Avenue had attempted revitalization for several years without measurable or noticeable results. Just prior to the merger, Portland Avenue was praying through two options. The first option was dissolving the church and shepherding the congregation into other faithful local churches with a passion for the west end of Louisville where Portland Avenue was located. The second option was pursuing a merger with another like-minded body of believers. The leaders of the church, led by Pastor Michael Matala, entered into a season of prayer in which they asked God to reveal a direction given their options.

Through God's grace and direction, they decided to pursue a merger. After meeting several times with Pastor T.C. Taylor of New Breed Church, Matala came back to his congregation and shared details about his conversations with this like-minded, theologically solid pastor whose church had a similar vision to Portland Avenue for their community. Pastor Matala used the opportunity to encourage the leaders to be open-minded in considering a merge. He and others in their church community spent time praying about this option before sharing it with the larger church body. During the meeting with his congregation, Pastor Matala articulated both the current state of the church and the options at their disposal. He stressed that despite what appearances might suggest, he had a strong sense that God wasn't done working with them yet. The merger represented a way to maximize what ministry potential remained.

Portland Avenue sold their building and merged with New Breed Church who at the time was meeting in a school. The newly-merged church continued meeting in the school believing that location was best for its strategy to reach the community. New Breed now meets in another location at the Portland Promise Center.

Using the Portland Avenue Baptist Church as a case study, consider the questions below as you enter into a possible season of transition:

What are core issues are motivating us to consider a merger?

What commonalities are we would look for in a merger scenario? This includes theology, leadership structure, methodology, and polity.

The following are possible merger scenarios:

Legacy Church

A church chooses to become a legacy church when it determines that God's plan for their future involves giving their building and property to another congregation for continued kingdom growth and impact. The term *legacy* implies that the struggling church's impact does not cease when the church no longer meets under its current name with the current group of people. The church leaves a legacy that continues far beyond the closing of the church and the beginning of the new. Churches, like people, move through a life cycle from birth to death. Hebrews 11:4 says of Abel, "*He being dead still speaks.*" Churches, like Abel, can leave a lasting legacy that will impact generations to come by giving over their property and facilities for continued kingdom use. Even in the closing of a church and giving it to another, a lasting legacy can remain.

When congregations choose to become a legacy church in this way, those members who remain have personal decisions to prayerfully consider, namely, "What is God's plan for me regarding my future church involvement?" For some, the pain of remaining in the current facility with another church meeting there is too great, so they choose to transfer membership. Others may grieve the transition but choose to remain, seeing firsthand the joy of God raising something new in that setting.

Bob Childers was a trustee at Hall Street Baptist Church in Owensboro. After considering a merger, this church chose instead to become a legacy church and donate its facility and property to Life Community Church in the same city. Faced with a decision, Bob chose to join a church other than Life Community when the property transitioned. Even though Bob decided to move his membership, he was open about how he saw God's presence in the people of Life Community and in the ministry that continued as a result of the decision. Before the decision to become a legacy church, Hall Street was having trouble just paying the utility bills. In the new arrangement, not only are the bills no longer a problem but the congregation is thriving as a gospel presence in the community. That continued gospel impact is being conducted by the ministry of Life Community Church, a church thankful and blessed by the legacy gift of Hall Street Baptist Church.

Restart

When a church believes it is God's plan for them to become a legacy church, they may choose to give their property and facilities to a church planting core group, newly planted church, or another church or association of churches wishing to see a new church planted in the area. Many newly planted churches meet in rented facilities for an extended period of time before being able to purchase property and build a building. If the location and church facility is a good match for their current vision and strategy, this option can be a great blessing to a newly planted church.

Multi-site

A church may choose to start a second campus (or place to worship, serve, and reach people) when they determine that God's plan for their future involves growing by reaching people through a site other than their existing church campus. At the same time, another church may feel led to become a legacy church and choose to donate their

property and facilities to that church desiring to start a second or third campus. What a blessing it is to see God working in both congregations to reveal His plan and to see the two respective churches come to affirm His plan in this way.

Multi-use

Apart from the three traditional options of legacy, restart, and multi-site is multi-use of space. A church may determine that God's plan for its future involves choosing to invite and allow another autonomous congregation to use its church facilities for its respective church services and ministries.

Often the dual use of space is utilized by two churches at different times. For example, one church may worship at 9:30 AM on Sunday while the other may worship at 11:00 AM using the same location for worship. In other instances, the dual use of space may involve use of different areas of the church building or campus at the same time.

Multi-use of space can be a great opportunity to reach people of another ethnicity in a changing community. Churches that reach primarily one group of people may choose to share their facilities with another church seeking to reach a different people group in ways they have not been able to as a congregation. Central Avenue Baptist Church in Elizabethtown shares its church facility with Faith in Christ Church, a Hispanic congregation. They meet in the same building at similar times.

Sale of Property and Donation to Kingdom Work

A church may determine that God's plan for their congregation is to sell its property and give the proceeds to an effective kingdom cause or ministry. This option is usually chosen when the church has attempted to weigh the other options mentioned above only to realize that these options are not viable given the church campus

location or condition. The church may realize it is in a geographical location that is not appealing to a church planting team or another congregation for its future use as restart or multi-site campus. The condition of the church building may be such that it would be difficult to start something new.

In this scenario, we recommend the proceeds be given to any of the following: the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention to continue to provide a gospel witness to the nations through SBC missionaries; the Kentucky Baptist Convention for the support of any number of gospel-centered ministries; an effective local association for the furtherance of gospel-centered ministries.

Along with your congregation, prayerfully consider which of these options may be God's plan for you.

OPTIONAL: To view For the Kingdom's Sake testimonials go to www.kybaptist.org/kingdomssake.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What are the signs your church is struggling?
2. List the primary, or core, issues that led to the discussion of options for your church's future.
3. What are the positive results of a healthy church merger?
4. Based on your experience and knowledge of your church, what does a like-minded church that may be a merger option look like to you? Think in terms of theology, leadership, and methodology.
5. Which of the options mentioned in this chapter would be best suited for your situation and context? Discuss the pros and cons.

6. How can your church's legacy as a kingdom-impact church be perpetuated in any of the scenarios (merger, legacy church, restart, multi-site, multi-use, sale) included in this chapter?
7. In what ways would you see yourself being involved in continued church and kingdom work if your church chose one of the options mentioned in this chapter?
8. What would be a good next step to explore one or more of these options?

TURNING STUMBLING BLOCKS INTO STEPPING STONES

Many mergers fail both in the corporate and the church world because of the complexities involved. However, compelling stories of successful mergers, replants, or legacy churches are inspiring an ever-increasing number of churches to courageously take the risk for the sake of significant kingdom growth. Each new story of success or failure adds to a growing base of experiential knowledge, empowering churches to transform the most common stumbling blocks into stepping stones on this path toward revitalization and lasting legacy.

Here are 10 of the most common stumbling blocks identified through our team's interviews and field research.

LACK OF KINGDOM-FOCUSED PRAYER

Not surprisingly, virtually every single interviewee cited prayer as a critical component in a successful merger, but these were not rote, religious responses. Careful listening reveals that they were describing strategic, kingdom-focused prayer that intentionally brings together leaders, key groups, and members across both congregations. A long-time member of Hall Street Baptist Church, referenced in the preceding chapter, proactively supported the legacy gifting of Hall Street's facilities to Life Community Church knowing that the transition would result in the loss of her job as custodian. "Fervent prayer," she says tearfully, "was how God reminded me that is not about me. It is about what is best for God's church."

HESITANT LEADERSHIP

At the heart of every success story we encountered there was a pastor, interim pastor, or key lay leader who was willing to personally

pay the price of helping the joining or legacy church come to terms with some hard realities. Pastor Ken Gazaway led Immanuel Baptist Temple through the merger process with Grace Point Church knowing that a successful merger would leave him without a ministry position. Interim Pastor and retired Army Command Sergeant Major Harold Smith's willingness to lovingly confront a couple of pessimistic church members who had stubbornly stood in the way of change for years was critical in helping Tell City Baptist redefine legacy in terms of changed lives, equipped leaders, and continuing community impact. This new perspective opened the door for a successful replant as Crossroads Tell City, a thriving campus of Hawesville Baptist Church.

Courageous yet humble leadership that avoids the paralysis of hesitance is critical in helping declining churches take such challenging steps of faith. There were moments when the Israelites preferred returning to oppressive slavery to embracing the challenges of transitioning to God's promised future. When leaders allow fears of an uncertain future to overwhelm faith, the people of God tend to idealize and run back to what's familiar - even a familiarity proven to be hopeless.

DELAYING OBEDIENCE

Church Consultant Thomas Bandy argues that too many struggling churches "delay raising the question too long ... so that by the time they raise the question their options are limited."⁸ Our team of regional consultants are aware of many well-intentioned Kentucky Baptist churches that have delayed even considering options such as mergers to the point that deteriorating facilities are now more of a liability than an asset. The greater danger is that "the reputation of the church declines as its capacity to do good in the community decreases."⁹

One of the surprising insights from our interviews is that this point of critical mass seems to come much earlier than most leaders imagine. Bandy argues, “The more faithful a church is, the sooner they ask the question, ‘Should we change?’”¹⁰

MOTIVES OTHER THAN MISSION

A church motivated more by preserving the past than a vision of doing whatever it takes to reach their current local community, is unlikely to make the changes necessary to experience a fresh movement of God’s Spirit. In their book, *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work*, Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird contend that “most church mergers that fail are motivated more by survival concerns than by vision. Successful mergers are vehicles of change, not preservers of the status quo.”¹¹

An honest and prayerful process is vital. Established congregations can easily fall prey to impure motives such as preserving personal preferences through the possible financial gains of a merger. It becomes simply another way of delaying authentic change. Meanwhile, younger church plants can become enamored with the idea of getting a place to call home for perhaps no more than the costs of a remodel. Although there will likely be much talk about greater impact, a merger of churches primarily motivated, even subconsciously, by potential financial benefits is unlikely to result in greater community impact - if the merger survives at all.

Therefore, Thomas Bandy urges, “always vote for a vision ... never vote for a merger. The term ‘merger’ perpetuates looking back in time. Merger is just one step toward a larger, bolder”¹² vision to grow God’s mission in the community and beyond.

QUICK ASSUMPTIONS

A common factor cited in failed mergers is making assumptions and rushing to decisions without taking the time to adequately clarify the

realities of both congregations. T.C. Taylor, Lead Pastor at New Breed Church, urges churches to ask the tough questions up front, stating: “Don’t fall so in love with the idea that you are not objective and able to think critically about things and willing to say, ‘This is just a place we are not willing to bend, so this just won’t work.’ If you do not do that up front, it is going to become a problem at some point and will be hard on the church.”

Donnie Gullion, Pastor of Grace Community Church, affirms, “The futures of two churches are at stake. We can probably do more damage by going too fast than by investing the appropriate time up front.” After an earlier failed merger attempt, Gullion developed questionnaires for the pastor and leaders of Yorktown Baptist that helped facilitate effective communication.

In his article, “Seven Deal-Breaking Questions When Considering a Church Merger,” Jim Fuller argues, “Some leaders explore a church merger as if they are in a courtship; they end up dragging out the discussions for months, only to hit upon key issues far down the line that derail” the process.¹³ He provides 28 questions for pastors and key leaders to ask early in the process. Chapter 12 of Tomberlin and Bird’s book, *Better Together*, is dedicated to 25 issues churches should address through thoughtful conversation to determine the feasibility of a successful merger.¹⁴

COMPROMISING CHURCH CULTURE

As churches are diligently working through these tough questions of compatibility, they must resist the temptation to minimize differences in church cultures. Beyond doctrine, there are many key issues such as philosophy of ministry, worship styles, leadership structures, views on social issues, and other defining values that must be carefully evaluated. When churches minimize these cultural differences, the post-merger attrition rate grows exponentially because members

from both congregations can feel disconnected from the resulting mediocrity of attempting to merge clashing cultures.

In his article, “What We Learned from a Failed Church Merger,” Pastor Bill Ingram describes how Journey of Faith and New Joy Churches minimized their cultural differences specifically in the area of worship styles. The joining church, New Joy, assumed that Journey of Faith would compromise their culture, but the attempts of achieving a “balanced” enough approach to worship proved impossible.¹⁵ It’s wise to maintain a single church culture as opposed to compromising in this area. To this, Tony Morgan, Founder and Lead Strategist for the Unstuck Group, writes, “Many churches go into a merger idealistically thinking that they will merge their cultures. This very rarely works out. While it is possible to build on the strengths and adopt best practices from both churches, one culture will and should overtake the other if it is truly going to become a church.”¹⁶

As Hall Street Baptist and Life Community Church were exploring a merger, it became clear that the differences were too significant for a merger to happen. Therefore, Hall Street shifted to thinking in terms of legacy gifting their facilities to a church plant with a culture better suited to reaching the changing local community. New Breed Church and Portland Avenue Baptist made the decision to embrace New Breed’s culture early in the process which defused potential culture clashes. When asked about the significant differences in the church culture when Tell City Baptist became Crossroads Tell City, senior saint Goldie Smith responded, “It’s not about us. It is about reaching people. This is my church and I’m happy.”

COMMUNITY DISCONNECT

In simple terms, if the resulting merged or replanted church still does not reflect the demographic diversity of the community, then very little has likely been gained. Therefore, two established churches considering a merger must prayerfully and strategically research the

community demographics. A church plant praying about entering an existing church facility must likewise honestly evaluate whether they are equipped to effectively reach the surrounding community. Is the vision of reaching this specific community compelling enough to make changes to their own current identity?

Kenny Rager, Pastor of Life Community Church which received the legacy gift of Hall Street Baptist's facilities, emphasizes, "The building is great, but the community is even greater. We must be out there to win people to Jesus. If you are receiving a property, you are also receiving people that you are required by the Great Commission to reach."

Even though we know how important it is to know your community, it still bears reiterating. Lynn Acres Baptist Church came to recognize that they simply were not equipped to effectively reach their surrounding community that had drastically changed after various refugee populations moved into the area over the course of a few years. "We realized that something drastically different had to happen in order to reach these people groups, some of which have very limited English skills," stated Pastor Donnie Gullion. After much prayer, they began proactively seeking another Baptist church led to reach the same region to join them in this missional effort. As a result, Lynn Acres and Yorktown Baptist Churches each dissolved to become Grace Community Baptist Church for the sake of reaching a changing demographic. Ultimately, the facility of Lynn Acres became the site for Refuge Louisville. The mission of Refuge is, "We are a nonprofit intra-church organization who empowers local churches to embrace refugees as their neighbors with the love of Christ." It's easy to see how God worked through the obedience of these two congregations.

Pastor Michael Matala effectively led Portland Avenue Baptist Church in bridging a community disconnect by leading a basically

homogeneous white church to merge with a multi-ethnic church plant, New Breed Church. Portland Avenue submitted to New Breed's culture out of a desire to reach the local community. Their commitment to this vision resulted in the selling of their existing facilities to join New Breed in meeting in a local school because they believed it best positioned them for community impact. Demonstrating humility and a gospel-first mentality, Michael became the part-time Discipleship Pastor of the merged church family.

SURVIVING SACRED COWS

In most cases both churches will bring some wonderful strengths and fruitful ministries with them. The challenge is differentiating between “signature ministries” which can be foundational to future strategies and “sacred cows” which will only create disunity and divert resources to unfruitful programs.¹⁷

Leading people to deal with sacred cows demands empathy and patience because responses are oftentimes more emotional than logical. Deep emotional ties develop when we see God work through a particular program to impact the lives of loved ones. Without realizing it, many church members have emotionally sanctified in their hearts a tool God used. Obviously, what we truly value is how God worked through that tool and not the tool itself. However, such emotional ties or the emotion of pouring oneself into a particular ministry for many years can make it difficult to hear and obey when God is calling us to join Him in something new.

An unwillingness to slaughter sacred cows or to release and share control over how signature ministries will be carried out breeds distrust, competition for resources, and disunity. Therefore, as churches are refocusing on how to most effectively reach the community, there must be a willingness to stop doing anything about which they can no longer clearly communicate a clear purpose that results in life change.

LACK OF CLARITY

Lack of clarity equals confusion. Confusion breeds unnecessary conflict. Our interviews revealed three key areas of potential confusion.

Clarity is needed in regard to what model is actually being considered. (For a quick review of the models, turn back to chapter 4.) In his article, “What We Learned from a Failed Church Merger,” Bill Ingram cites the failure to clearly define the relationship up front as the primary cause of failure. He writes, “Many if not all of the problems we experienced could have been avoided, if this had been done correctly ... The differences in the leadership’s point of view were enormous and impossible to overcome!”¹⁸ Because the two churches had different ideas about what type of partnership they were entering into, the merged churches parted ways again just a few years later.

Clarity regarding people resources is equally important. Believing that God provides exactly the right people with the right gifts to fulfill His purpose for the local church in its unique context, great intentionality is required to effectively integrate leaders from both churches. Failure to clarify roles quickly can lead to frustration and sow seeds of bitterness or distrust. Obviously, there are even more complex issues to prayerfully resolve when both churches have pastors and other staff members.

Confusion about processes is another common stumbling block. Tomberlin and Bird observe, “Many church mergers get off to a bad start because of a failure to integrate operations and systems quickly. The first three months are critical ... New signs, systems, and procedures must be in place and functioning as soon as possible, preferably the following week.”¹⁹

INEFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

The importance of investing significant time to ask hard questions, seeking to clearly understand the reality of each church, and confirming compatibility of the pastors and cultures has already been emphasized. Equally important are strategies for effectively communicating with both congregations throughout the process. Some examples of effective communication surfacing from our interviews include but are not limited to:

- Regular meetings between pastors
- Engaging smaller leadership groups such as deacons, Sunday School leaders, or other ministry leaders
- Separate and combined town hall conversations
- Combined church picnics
- Email and regular US mail reports
- Feasibility studies
- Leadership gatherings of various types.

Barry Fields, Pastor of Hawesville Baptist Church, communicates the importance of empathizing with the emotional process for the joining congregation and communicating at their pace. Hawesville made themselves available to help and serve Tell City Baptist without any strings attached as Tell City worked through their own process. Jason Hunsucker of Antioch Church encourages leaders to continue with this same empathetic communication well into the post-merger phase.

Oftentimes so much effort is exerted in implementing the change that leaders fail to communicate precisely when God's people are struggling the most. The vision of greater kingdom impact must continually be communicated to help people push through the challenges of transition, to grieve losses in a healthy manner, to celebrate wins, and to embrace God's vision for a better future.

NEXT STEPS

The Church Consulting and Revitalization Team of the Kentucky Baptist Convention is committed to developing, adapting, and improving resources to help you transform any and every one of these potential stumbling blocks into stepping stones in leading your local church from where you are to the church God has called you to be.

OPTIONAL: To view For the Kingdom's Sake testimonials go to www.kybaptist.org/kingdomssake.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. As you have prayed about the future of your church, what do you sense God revealing to you?
2. How does the realization that any decision made should be made with what's best of God's church in mind affect how you feel about the future?
3. What are best ways for confronting hesitant leadership?
4. How can motivations for preserving the past become an obstacle to the future God has for your church?
5. What are your "non-negotiable" points for merging? These are the issues you address before beginning any conversation about a merger. Think about education models, theological positions, location, and church leadership.
6. How will you delineate between personal preference and obedience to God's leading in this decision?
7. What are the signature ministries of your church? That is, those ministries that are foundational to future success. What

are the sacred cows that have been kept alive due to a small number of members?

8. How can you make a stepping stone out of the lack of clarity “stumbling block”?

APPENDIX 1: CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1

Crossroads Tell City: A Story of Continued Legacy

Barry Fields had served as pastor of Hawesville Baptist Church in Hancock County for five years. He had a heart for both Kentucky and Indiana. His church drew people from three Kentucky counties and two Indiana counties. Barry became aware of a struggling church just across the river in Tell City, called Tell Street Baptist Church. This church was one of the only Southern Baptist churches in Perry County (Indiana), and they were down to 12 people attending on Sundays. The church was without a pastor and Harold Smith, a retired Command Sergeant Major, was the interim pastor.

The Lord began to lay this struggling church and the need to get the gospel to the people of Perry County on pastor Barry's heart. One day Pastor Fields felt led to go to the church and offer his help. When he found no one at the church, he left a note on the door offering his help and the help of the Hawesville Baptist Church. That note and the accompanying offer of assistance ultimately led to Tell City Baptist Church becoming a second campus for Hawesville Baptist, now called Crossroads Tell City.

The journey that began with a note on a door continued as Pastor Barry and the congregation at Hawesville Baptist felt compelled to cross the river and assist the congregation in Tell City. They helped with Bible studies and conducted joint worship services and fellowship times. For a year they spent time together building trust and credibility.

Because Hawesville Baptist was in the middle of a \$1.5 million building project at the time, extra funds were not abundant to do

this work. And yet the church was faced with this dilemma, *Do we do nothing and watch a church close its doors and lose its gospel presence? Or do we find a way to help this congregation?*

What led Hawesville Baptist Church to consider this? When asked, Pastor Fields says, “The gospel does not have boundaries. The state line is not a boundary. A river is not a boundary. This is the only Southern Baptist Church in a county with 19,000 people. We felt an obligation to go and share the gospel with those who had not heard.”

Barry made this recommendation both to the Hawesville and Tell City congregations as a way to introduce this idea and get initial buy-in. He found that the Lord knitted their hearts together to do ministry. The very people who bought into the initial vision remain the strongest supporters today. This early step to build consensus was crucial to long-term success. The church now averages 70 and on a good Sunday they have 80 people in worship. Tell City Crossroads has grown to become one of the larger protestant churches in Perry County.

When asked how Hawesville Baptist came to the conclusion this was the right thing to do, Pastor Fields has this to say: “I believe God has a heart for Perry County just as He has a heart for Hancock County. Hawesville Baptist Church has people attending from five different counties - Daviess, Breckenridge, and Hancock in Kentucky and Spencer and Perry in Indiana. I will answer to the Lord on the day of judgment. The Lord dropped this into our hands and entrusted us with this. The gospel is a matter of stewardship, and we were entrusted with this responsibility.”

Pastor Fields is quick to point out that this merge couldn't have happened without God's blessing. God brought together several different factors to make this happen. Funding assistance from the Kentucky Baptist Convention was integral. Additionally, people from

the Hawesville congregation willing to make frequent and regular trips to Tell City and minister every week created an environment for a successful merger and effective ministry. Below are a few questions Pastor Barry Fields and those involved wrestled with through the process of making a decision.

What were the first thoughts of the Hawesville Baptist congregation?

There was a financial concern with the church just having built a \$1.5 million Family Life Center and entering into additional financing. In addition to the financial piece there was also the challenge of volunteers, prompting them to ask, “Will we be stretched too thin?” In the end, they realized the answer to this question had no bearing on what they felt called to do. The deacon leadership and staff were on board. They were faced with two alternatives: the church in Tell City closes its doors or Hawesville crosses the river to help them.

What did you do to help your leaders see this vision?

The leaders at Hawesville wisely concluded that how certain questions were framed could make all the difference. Properly framing the questions helps people gain clarity and understanding. In this case, the decision was framed in a way that asked those affected to consider future generations. They put it this way: “What would you be willing to give up if it meant that your children and grandchildren were worshipping the Lord a generation after you are gone?” Pastor Barry responded, “When we framed it in terms of impacting the next generation, it was a game changer.”

What obstacles did you face?

Fields says, “Every church you go into has a different culture. Understanding that culture and determining how you can keep people on board is important. We spent a lot of time listening to the congregation

here at Tell City and hearing them out. We wanted to ensure that they were being heard.” According to our interviews, the primary obstacles all associated with the relational component. The people who were in the Tell City congregation had to give up a lot. Even though they agreed and knew it was the best decision for moving forward, it still wasn’t easy for them. The challenge for the people at Hawesville was how to build relationships with people outside of the Bible belt.

Hawesville Baptist addressed this reality by sending a core group of approximately 15 people to serve at the Tell City Church. This action included a praise team that served at both churches. Barry Fields and the leaders trusted God to put it in the hearts of several to be a part of this core group and He did. Of course, some already lived in Tell City.

Visitors and members at Crossroads all agree, “We feel the love when we come here.” Crossroads Tell City has a very welcoming spirit. The fact that we have loved people like Christ loves us, has created an openness in that community. So much so that openness about struggles, challenges, and hang-ups has become a part of the culture.

What did you do to help the two congregations integrate?

The leaders planned and held as many joint meetings as they could. Not only did they encourage leaders at Hawesville to be a part of the Tell City services, they also canvassed a two-mile radius that included several thousand homes in Perry County. Basically, they did everything they could to bring people together.

Hawesville Baptist Church is now one church in two locations, but they felt the need to change the name of the Tell City campus to Crossroads Church Tell City. This decision was made, at least in part, because Indiana is known as the “Crossroads of America.”

Moreover, Hawesville Baptist “crossed” the river to join Tell City and the church property actually sits at a literal crossroads. Although there were several reasons for the name change, the decision was an intentional effort both to establish a newness and preserve existing culture.

They first considered the idea in July of 2014. They had their first service as Crossroads Tell City in September of 2015. It took about 14 months. The church that once struggled to have 12 in attendance now has 70 to 80 people each Sunday. The church gives 10 percent of its undesignated offerings to missions through the Cooperative Program. God is being glorified and His Kingdom is being advanced as the Crossroads Tell City church continues to have an impact for the gospel.

Case Study 2

Grace Community Church: An Example of Church Merger

Lynn Acres and Yorktown Baptist Church were two struggling churches in South Louisville that merged in 2005. Both congregations agreed that the decision would allow the churches to accomplish more together than they were doing or could ever do as stand-alone congregations.

The changing community around Lynn Acres Baptist Church was the catalyst that led the congregation to consider a church merger. Since the 1980s a nearby apartment complex had been the main housing placement area for many refugees finding their way to the Louisville area. Accordingly, the families renting the apartments were increasingly newly-settled refugees. Naturally, maturing families of these refugees began buying and renting houses in the vicinity of Lynn Acres which contributed to a rapidly changing demographic. As anyone would conclude, the community around Lynn Acres Baptist Church transformed in terms of culture, values, and even language. Leaders at the church wrestled with the dilemma. “How can we successfully minister to the people here when we don’t even know their language?”

Yorktown Baptist, another church in the area, was also declining.

The Lynn Acres congregation entered into an earnest and prayerful process to determine if merger was the right thing for them to do for advancing the kingdom of God within their new and still-changing context. They met with their long-range planning committee over a period of months. They prayed. They put together plans and ideas for what a merger would look like until they finally felt God had affirmed the decision to pursue a merger. After many tweaks and finely tuning the plan to merge, they slowly shared the concept with the broader church body first in small prayer groups, then larger

Sunday night gatherings, and ultimately with the entire congregation. They concluded this was a good way for allowing feedback in small circles while building consensus at the same time. Communication was highly intentional all along, with key leaders and stakeholders remaining apprised of new developments. When the merger committee was given the church's blessing, it began seeking potential merger congregations, careful to communicate every step and piece of news to the congregation.

The potential for a merger had already been introduced a few years prior during a casual meeting between the pastors of Lynn Acres and Yorktown Baptist churches. Initial conversations between leadership of the two bodies led both to conclude that a merger provided both a way to pool resources as well as an opportunity to work together toward a common goal. "We always thought it would be a good witness to the community to see churches coming together," former Yorktown Baptist Church Pastor Robb said.

The two churches first spent time worshipping together on Sundays following Easter of 2005. Early on it was evident that the two congregations were a good fit. There was a good sense of family and fellowship from the start. It didn't hurt that the two churches were just over two miles apart, which engendered a sense of community.

The new church, Grace Community Baptist Church, had its charter service in October of that same year when both churches officially disbanded and the new church was formed. Pastors Aaron Robb and Donnie Gullion each took on the role of co-pastor and a new constitution and bylaws was drawn up for the newly formed congregation.

As you consider such a decision it will be helpful to note that Lynn Acres voted on three decisions throughout the entire process: (1) to open a study of merging churches; (2) to pursue a merge; (3) to merge. It's also helpful to note that the leaders gave various reports

while considering and making the decision, each report given with clarity and plenty of time for follow-up questions.

Co-Pastor Donnie Gullion shared that God taught him a lot of lessons along the journey:

- 1) People have to understand the kingdom benefit of making hard decisions like a church merger. It's not about us. It's about Jesus.
- 2) Congregations need to think methodically through the process. Every detail must be accounted for.
- 3) Flexibility is needed to make appropriate and needed adjustments. Always keep in mind the primary objective.
- 4) Humility and patience are essential throughout the whole process. Personal feelings, to a large extent, must be left out of the decision.
- 5) Both churches in a merger need to be relatively healthy and able to process and accept change.
- 6) A church that is in turmoil or is territorial is a "red flag" for moving forward. If a church is dysfunctional, it is not a good candidate for merger.
- 7) Celebrate markers of success. Even small achievements are important to note and celebrate.
- 8) When you see people from each church give up something they have cherished for something greater in the kingdom, that is a great thing!

Grace Community Baptist Church is now a congregation with two main goals: to reach people who do not belong to any church and to help existing members serve Christ to the best of their ability.

APPENDIX 2: LEGAL ISSUES

What needs to be done legally?

When a church considers becoming a legacy church, or considers a church merger, it is imperative that it secure the services of a good attorney. It would never be the intention of this resource to put forth any kind of legal advice. The intention here is to offer questions and provide statements that need to be considered when a church enters, or is considering entering, into a legacy/merger agreement with another congregation.

To begin, here is a list of questions to be considered, some on the front end and others at points along the process. These important questions were composed by Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird and can be found in their book *Better Together*:

- Who has the legal authority to approve the merger and what happens if some of the members of the church aren't on board with what's going on?
- Who owns what and how does the lead church know what it's receiving?
- Who needs to be told what and when? Is there a certain order of events that should be followed?
- What rights do the people have who funded purchases of the land, facilities, and other assets of the joining church?
- What are the obligations of board members of the lead church and joining church?
- How should moral obligations be handled (such as promises to a church secretary or other staff members)?
- Does the joining church need title insurance?²⁰

Below are additional recommendations for any church entering into a legacy/merger discussion:

- The lead church should have a title search completed for all properties belonging to the legacy/merging church.
- A court search is also recommended. This action brings to light any existing legal actions directed to or associated with the joining congregation.
- The lead church should determine the joining church's type of legal entity. For instance, is the joining church a corporation or unincorporated? This should be determined early in the relationship.
- If the joining church is a corporation, then all corporate records should be updated with minutes and government filings that are current before proceeding.
- You will, of course, need God's Word on hand along with copies of all church Constitutions and Bylaws.

What are the merger options?

According to Tomberlin and Bird's *Better Together* the following options are available:

Articles of Merger

Articles of Merger follow a **Plan of Merger**. A Plan of Merger is a legal document and is typically passed by the trustees of both the lead and joining churches. The *Plan of Merger* establishes the conditions and the terms of the proposed merger. After its approval, the next step is to draft the **Articles of Merger**.

According to John P. Joseph, **Articles of Merger** go beyond the Plan of Merger to provide specific details of the merger. Details include but are not limited to the vote required and the effective date of the merger. In a merger, the lead church assumes all the assets and

liabilities of the joining entity. According to Joseph, the lead church should consult state laws and legal counsel in developing the Articles of Merger.”²¹

Asset Purchase

Because a merger is often difficult, the best approach is a simple asset purchase. As a part of this approach, an Articles of Dissolution should be filed. In an asset purchase scenario, the financial obligations of the joining church may be - and usually are - satisfied. Regardless, it's important to note that the lead church does not necessarily acquire the obligations of the joining congregation. Again, legal counsel will be crucial in walking all parties through the process. This is particularly true since there **may** be tax consequences for the seller of assets.

Donation of Assets

Different from purchase of assets, this option comes into play when the assets of the joining church are donated to the lead church. In this case, the lead church accepts the donation of assets in the same way they would any other donation. However, this option does require a formal dissolution of the joining church.

Note, it is acceptable with the IRS for one nonprofit organization to donate its assets to another nonprofit. Again, do not forget to seek legal counsel in this matter.

What about corporate dissolution?

Often in legacy and merger situations the joining church opts to dissolve. While it's true that this decision can make for a “cleaner” process, there are some steps for both parties to keep in mind.

Step 1: Review state law. Churches will want to consult legal counsel, but dissolution almost always begins with a recommen-

dation, in writing, to the church body from the trustees. After the recommendation, the church votes in accordance to its constitution and bylaws but also in accordance with Kentucky state laws.

Step 2: Notify church creditors. The joining church must be prepared to pay all outstanding debts prior to dissolution.

Step 3: Notify the IRS that the church is undergoing a liquidation. This will enable the IRS to close the organizations account.

Step 4: Distribute all remaining assets of the joining church to the lead church. Kate Huey, an expert on church dissolution and merger, always reminds churches that they are required to meet many of the same obligations as other organizations that are tax-exempt under I.R.C., 501 (c)(3).

Step 5: Prepare the official dissolution document -referred to as the Certificate of Dissolution. The Certificate of Dissolution would include the name of the church, the names and addresses of the officers of the church, and the date of the dissolution. The articles may have to be signed by the chairman of the trustees. And again, legal counsel will bring clarity to this step in dissolution.

Step 6: File the articles of dissolution with the Secretary of State's office of the state of Kentucky. It may be required that the church publish a notification of dissolution publicly. The attorney will help the church navigate this process.

What are the post liabilities?

Post liabilities for the leadership

Unless there is some kind of personal guarantee to assume a church liability in place, typically there are no post liabilities for the leadership. It's already been stated but bears repeating, it is very important

to make sure that the joining church has good legal advice in the beginning and that all debts of the joining church have been paid prior to dissolution. If liabilities have not been satisfied at the time of dissolution, the leadership could be held responsible for the debt.

Post liabilities for the church

Legal expert Kate Huey makes it clear to those churches with whom she consults to ensure that insurance policies are permanently maintained in a safe location. It is possible that the church could be held accountable for injuries occurred at the church prior to dissolution.

What about the IRS regulations?

In addition to satisfying state laws in these cases, there are also expectations and requirements with the IRS. Attorney Thomas Rose stresses the mandate to work closely with a certified public accountant. On the matter, Rose counsels, “The smaller struggling church (joining church) must ... retain the services of a certified public accountant to prepare and file the Internal Revenue Service forms which are required to terminate its exemption from Federal income tax under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986.”²²

Conclusion

The topic of merger/legacy has a lot of twists and turns and should not be attempted without the presence of legal and accountant counsel. A good source for churches entering into any discussion associated with dissolution, merge, or any other action addressed here is the Christian Law Association. To contact this group a church can write to Christian Law Association, P.O. Box 4010; Seminole, FL 33775-4010; call 888-252-1969 or visit the website at www.christianlaw.org.

It would also be wise to purchase a copy of Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird’s book, *Better Together*, paying particular attention to chapter 7.

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