



Extreme Congregational Makeover

Radical Transformation

A Travel Free Learning Manuscript

By
George Bullard
Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership
Voice: 803.622.0923, E-mail: GBullard@TheColumbiaPartnership.org
Web Site: www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org

Introduction

Hazelwood Church needed radical transformation. In one sense, the radical transformation needed to start with upgrading their facilities. Most of their building space was more than 100 years old. As is typical of older buildings, their restrooms were the size of a postage stamp and had no hot water running to them. Handicapped access to gain entrance to the buildings was practically nonexistent. The inside of the buildings had multiple levels, steep stairs, and no elevator.

In another sense, the radical transformation of Hazelwood needed to begin with reinventing the congregation by starting with a clean sheet of paper and writing a new ministry plan involving vision, missional formation, missional engagement, and lean management systems that are empowering. Its programs, ministries, and activities were fine for the 1950s and perhaps as recently as the 1970s, but way out of date for the current decade.

The programmatic emphases and controlling management of Hazelwood sought to maintain the patterns of the past. Heritage was more important than hope. What was on the calendar was more important than what was in the heart, soul, mind, and strength of disciples. The number of programs and the busy-ness they produced kept Hazelwood from dealing with missional formation issues. The number of committee meetings and the participants in meetings lessened the number of people available for leading missional formation and missional engagement.

Hazelwood was participating in the Spiritual Strategic Journey *[see glossary at end]* process to project their future. They were at the point in the process where three scenarios were being developed as a first attempt to craft the future story of the congregation. One scenario was to reposition the congregation with programs, processes, and facilities that would attract newer, younger people to the congregation.

The convener of this scenario made an unusual suggestion to her writing group. It was that they watch a television segment of the show *Extreme Home Makeover*, and take notes on the show's implications for the programs, processes, and facilities needed by Hazelwood.

What a great idea to jump start the scenario writing process!

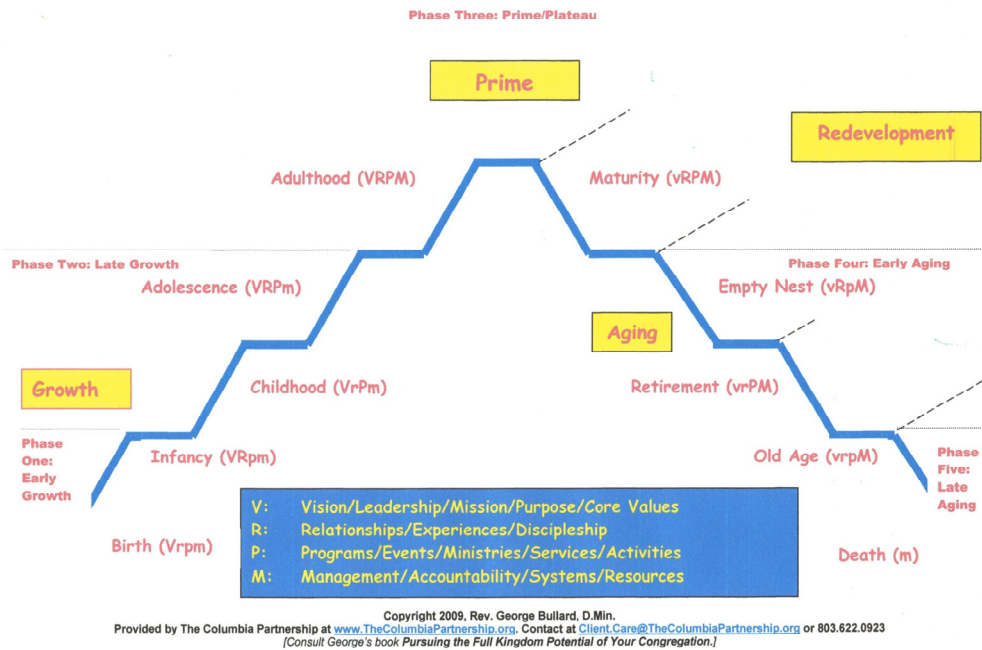
Many congregations need an *Extreme Congregational Makeover* *[see glossary at end]*. They just do not realize it. Or, they sort of realize it, but are in denial. Or, they realize it and are unwilling to engage in the transition and change necessary for radical transformation. Or, they realize it and cannot figure out what they ought to do and often feel suggestions made to them are not the right things to do. Or, they realize it and do not understand why the strategies of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s will not work for them now. Or, they would rather die than make the necessary transitions and changes.

Part One

Who Are the Candidates for an *Extreme Congregational Makeover*?

One way to look at this is through the frame of the congregational life cycle. The aging side of a congregation's life cycle has five stages. These are Maturity, Empty Nest, Retirement, Old Age, and Death. It is estimated that upwards to 80 percent of all North American congregations are on the aging side of the congregational life cycle. As such, they are in need of transformation to a new partial life cycle if they are to have a vital and vibrant future.

The Life Cycle and Stages of Congregational Development



The strategies for transforming congregations to empower them for the next stage of their life and ministry are different for each stage on the aging side of the life cycle. The depth of transition and change needed at each stage differs in intensity and the length of time it takes to experience transformation.

There are three intensities of transition and change. The first is continuous with the past, the second is discontinuous with the past, and the third is radical in regard to the past. In the Maturity stage only transition and change that is continuous with the past is needed. A greater intensity could be too disruptive. During Empty Nest either continuous or discontinuous transition and change is needed, dependent on how long a congregation has been in this stage.

Congregations spinning through Retirement either need discontinuous or radical transition and change. Again the variable is how long they have been in this stage. One or two spins through Retirement can probably be handled by discontinuous methodology. However, after that radical transformation methods are mandatory. Many of these congregations are candidates for an *Extreme Congregational Makeover*.

The Old Age and Death stages always require radical transformation. Old Age requires it because of the inability of these congregations to transform without doing something radical. And, how much more radical can you get than death? Death stage congregations are definitely candidates for an *Extreme Congregational Makeover*.

Part Two

What Constitutes the Need for an *Extreme Congregational Makeover*?

Radical transformation calls for transition and change actions that can be characterized as *Extreme Congregational Makeover* [ECM]. The following are some of the characteristics that exist when a congregation needs to engage in ECM. Not all may exist in every congregation, and some other factors may also exist that are not listed here. Congregations do not have to have all these characteristics to need an ECM.

1. **No Vision:** When management has been the driving factor in the congregation for at least a decade it means the congregation has not been led by a positive, proactive vision for at least that length of time. It may have a vision statement, but no true empowering vision. Or, it may have a vision statement, but does not align its actions to intentionally fulfill or live into the vision.
2. **Significant Numerical Decline:** They have often been plateaued and/or declining for at least a decade, yet they are at points still trying to act like they were their former size. A loss of 20 percent or more in a decade is significant. Being plateaued for at least five to seven years following a period of decline is significant. Declining for seven to nine years in a row is a sign of the need for a makeover.
3. **Failed Transformation Attempts:** They have made multiple attempts to transform on their own and it has not worked, or has been aborted before it had a chance to work. Some congregations try every new program offered to them that claims transformation as an output. These congregations embrace those programs whether or not they are ready to make the necessary transitions and changes. These efforts often fail. The congregation was not ready and efforts were not sufficiently radical or extreme.
4. **Survival-Focused:** The actions of the congregation are more survival-focused than kingdom or missional focused. They have a low risk factor and high fear of loss factor. They are in spiritual despair praying for God's intervention, but wanting to suggest to God what that ought to be. An insufficient percentage of the congregation is actually involved in an earnest prayer and discernment process about the future.
5. **Diminishing and Unbalanced Financial Resources:** They are experiencing a diminishing of financial resources to address their transformation, and upwards to 80 percent of their budget is designated for personnel and facilities costs. That leaves little for the real work of the congregation through discipleship development, programs, ministries, activities, and missional engagement beyond the congregation.
6. **Resistance to Transition and Change:** Even though they are aware of some of the transition and change actions they need to take to transform, they are unable to make both the decision to do so and to effectively engage in the transition and change actions. The resistance to transition and change is too great. The desire for security, stability, and sameness is too high.
7. **Low Expectations:** The expectations of what it means to be a member of or connected with these congregations are low or few. Growth as a Christian disciple is not necessarily a high priority. These congregations dare not expect too much of people or they might leave. People are expected to attend, make financial contributions, and fit in. It is no longer expected that people will be forming and engaging missionally, except to participate in the formation and engagement projects that are typically part of this congregation's annual emphasis.
8. **Long Tenure and Older Average Age:** The average tenure of membership or regular attendance is more than 20 years. The typical member has been a professing Christian for at least 40 years. The average age of active congregational participants is more than 60. These people are known as 60-40-20 people. This means that newly connected people are primarily

those who come from other congregations, there are not many children growing up in Christian faith in the congregation and few, if any, new adult converts to Christianity.

9. **Community Context:** The congregation is increasingly irrelevant to the people in its community context. It both has trouble connecting with the people in its context, and may lack a deep desire to do so. They may do ministry to the people in the context, but not ministry with the people in the context. Some congregations may have authentic ministries in the context, but do not expect this to result in new people connecting with the congregation.
10. **Cultural Worship:** Worship is more a weekly Christian culture experience than a true encounter with God. The worship style has not significantly changed for years and represents the style still desired by the longer-tenured, older members. If a new worship service of a different style reaching a difference audience is started, it is difficult for it and the people who attend to be embraced by the longer-tenured members of the congregation.
11. **Dysfunctional Congregations Systems and Repeated Conflict:** The congregation is a repeat offender in terms of conflict. It may have a pattern of repeated unhealthy conflict every three to five years. As such, it comes across as dysfunctional, and in some cases toxic. The congregation never developed the capacity to address healthy conflict in its midst, so it fell into a pattern of unhealthy conflict.
12. **Controlling Managers:** One to three people within the congregation control the actions of the congregation, and very little happens they do not approve. At times these people hold formal governance positions in the congregation, and at times not. They are respected and/or feared by a large number of active people in the congregation. Management is present and obvious more than is leadership.
13. **Crumbling Facilities:** The church buildings are in need of significant repair. The congregation is not able to keep up with the repair and replacement needs. Thus, parts of its facilities are crumbling around it. Some parts may even have been abandoned. Years earlier the congregation built larger buildings than they have needed in the long-term. Definitely these were larger buildings than they could afford to maintain. Classrooms that were once actively used are now focused on storage or rented to outside groups.

Questions for Dialogue

- How many of these 13 characteristics are currently present in your congregation?
- What other characteristics need to be added?
- Which of these characteristics need modification to fit the uniqueness of your situation?
- How would you answer the question, “what is the evidence that our congregation needs radical transformation?”
- What actions does your congregation need to take to address its current situation?

Part Three

What is Involved in an *Extreme Congregational Makeover*?

The following are some of the actions that may be involved in an *Extreme Congregational Makeover*:

1. **Prayer and Discernment:** ECM at its core is a spiritual transformation process. It is where congregations let go of the past and move forward to a future that is not yet clear. It is in the response to the command of the Triune God similar to that given to Abram as recorded in Genesis 12:1ff where it says, "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the Land which I will show you;'" [NASB].

It is must be a God-led transformation. The congregation must continually ask God for guidance. As with the Hebrew people following the Exodus, we must ask God for a cloud by day and a fire by night to guide us. As with Gideon, we must ask for a sign. Doing this involves a spirit characteristic of 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus," [NASB].

Intentional practices of prayer and discernment should characterize the entire ECM movement. All active congregational participants should be invited to engage in prayer and discernment. Something like the 100 Days of Discernment [*see glossary at end*] with dialogue and prayer triplets might be a great launch.

2. **Outside Intervention:** Congregations in need of an extreme makeover typically cannot bring themselves to make the radical transitions and changes necessary to have a successful ECM. They hold on to the past and its practices too deeply to let them go. They have significant spiritual life passages from which they cannot get release because they have made them culturally mandatory. Therefore, they must give authority to compel transitions and to mandate necessary changes to an outside interventionist who also understands and appreciates their heritage and their hope for the future.
3. **Stopping and Starting:** Congregations must stop doing things that do not add value to the future of the congregation, and start doing things that will add value to the future. It will be easier to start new things that add value than to stop old things no longer adding value. Not everything has to go, but those things taking precious resources that need to be focused on future efforts must be re-evaluated. The statement, "we've never done it that way before", is a powerful and true statement for many congregations. It should not be taken lightly, yet it must be overcome.
4. **Passion:** Congregations must have deep and abiding passion about a future journey of ministry. They must believe in themselves, in the power of the Triune God, and in the *Missio Dei* or the mission of God for their congregation. People passionate about missional formation and engagement for a future journey will be very important in an extreme makeover. People who have formal positions in the congregational programs and management structures must be willing to yield to people of passion so the congregation can transition and change.
5. **Visionary Leadership:** Congregations must be willing to transfer leadership to people captivated by a vision for the future of the congregation and passionate about living into that vision with intentional actions. In doing so they must be willing to require management systems and people to be accountable to visionary leadership, and not the reverse. In some ECM situations the people who currently hold the key management positions in the congregation must be willing to step aside for one to three years. This can certainly be a tough challenge.
6. **Transitional Governance:** Congregations must be willing to empower a morphing of their governance systems, structures, and documents in line with a newly emerging congregational journey. It may be necessary to set aside for one to three years the formal governance

procedures and operate with transitional governance patterns. Without doing this, the legalism of things like constitutions and bylaws, and other governance documents, can control the radical transformation and kill it.

7. **Newly Designed Worship:** It is likely that retooling the current worship service will not be sufficiently radical for ECM. A new worship service needs to be designed around the worship needed for the future vitality and vibrancy of the congregation. It must attract and speak into the spiritual needs of the next generation of leaders and followers in the congregation. It may be possible to maintain a second worship service for longer-tenured and older members who desire a worship service more in line with the heritage and tradition of the congregation.
8. **Disciplemaking Processes:** Many congregations who need ECM are blinded by a perspective that says the congregation needs the right programs. When the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s come back, they will be ready. 21st century congregations must have a disciplemaking approach that focuses on the process of maturing people as followers of the Triune God and as missional people. Programs have some of the right content for this, but typically focus on output rather than impact, or program success rather than discipleship development. Discipleship relationships will be key rather than programmatic emphases.
9. **Measuring the Journey:** While engaging in ECM, it is also a great time to reconceptualize the way success is measured. It might even be a time to not only measure success, but add to that a measurement of significance and surrender. In practical terms it means not only measuring output, but adding to that impact, capacity building, and sustainability. [For many these are new terms to apply to measuring the journey of a congregation, and are addressed in other writings. One of these other writings is George Bullard's book *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation*.] What we know for sure is that the typical annual report requested by denominational structures is not measuring the journey these congregations must embrace.
10. **Closing and Restarting:** In some cases, the best way to experience ECM is to close the congregation, and totally start over to plant a new congregation, with a new name, a new vision, new leadership, but perhaps using the old space. Likely there will need to be a six month period when the congregation does not hold public worship, but is discerning, designing, and developing the foundation for the new congregation.

This can naturally happen when a congregation dies. It should also happen when some congregations have been in the Old Age stage of the congregational life cycle too long to resurrect without a death. Talk about radical! Talk about extreme! Yet it could be the best thing some congregations can do.

Questions for Dialogue

- How many of these 10 actions would your congregation be willing to take?
- What other actions need to be added?
- Which of these actions need modification to fit the uniqueness of your situation?
- How would you answer the question, "what is the evidence that our congregation will engage in radical transformation?"
- Where should you begin? Which one of these actions should your address first?

Part Four

What is the Process for an *Extreme Congregational Makeover*?

Radical transformation is a process. It is a journey. It must be highly intentional. It must have high expectations. It must be customized for each congregation. It must be locally owned by each congregation. It must be an open-ended process and not an ECM in a box.

If you are looking for a tightly defined prescriptive process for *Extreme Congregation Makeover*, you are going to have to look elsewhere. You will not find it here. I believe that such a thing does not exist. Every congregation is unique. Its situation is unique. Its collection of active participants is unique.

Even if you consider one highly empowering part of the assessment presented in this manuscript—the congregation life cycle—it will still not be a prescription for radical transformation. Not only do some of the particulars differ if the life cycle stage of a congregation is late Retirement, Old Age, or Death, but each congregation will act and react differently.

However, it is possible to provide a framework within which unique ECM may take place. The following are the five seasons for a process framework. This is a general presentation. More details will follow in later editions of this manuscript.

The five seasons are:

1. Pre-Season
2. Spiritual Transition Season
3. Strategic Change Season
4. Transformational Journey Season
5. Post-Season

1. Pre-Season—Assessment and Readiness Phase: At least five actions will be part of a successful assessment and readiness phase.

First, is to declare *A Year of Jubilee* in the congregation. This is where the congregation chooses to take a year off from engaging in many of its traditional or customary programs, ministries, and activities to focus on ECM. Let's call it a sabbatical year. Radical transformation is not something that can be layered on top of everything else a congregation is doing. It must be a replacement for all except essential worship, discipleship, fellowship, and missional engagement.

Second, is to allow an outside third part to conduct an assessment of the congregation. One method of doing this is to conduct a Congregational Assessment and Learning Experience [\[see glossary at end\]](#). Congregations needing an ECM do not see themselves clearly. They are myopic. They are captivated by the culture of their congregation. They are limited to their personal experiences in churches, and if the last 20 years of more has been in their current church who needs ECM, they may have difficulty seeing innovative approaches that fit their context. Therefore, it is essential to obtain an outside perspective on reality before engaging in any radical transformation process.

Third, is to form an Enduring Visionary Leadership Community [EVLC] [\[see glossary at end\]](#) and engage them in a transformational leadership journey. This community is made up of People of Pastoral Leadership, People of Passion, and People of Position which will total a minimum of 21 people or 21 percent of the number of adults present for worship on a typical weekend, whichever is greater. This community will act as navigators for the overall ECM for the rest of the congregation. If this EVLC can successfully collaborate on the future of the congregation, it is likely the congregation will follow.

Fourth, is to determine how the congregation will submit itself for accountability to someone from outside the congregation. Will this be an intentional interim pastor if the congregation is currently without a pastor,

a denominational or parachurch staff person who is trusted and skilled in this area, or a strategic leadership coach from a consulting or coaching group, or from a parachurch organization? Whoever it is, they must be willing to make a one to three year commitment to the congregation, and the congregation to them. That relationship may go through various phases.

Fifth, is to diminish the controlling factors and increase the empowering factors within the congregation. Move from an emphasis on management and programs to an emphasis on vision and relationships. Make a list of the management processes and programmatic emphases that control more than they empower the congregation. Balance the things that extend the ministry of the congregation with those things that renew the core of the congregation. Move from what is wrong to what is right; from what is bad to what is good; from what is hateful to what is loving.

2. Spiritual Transition Season: Transition of relationships with the Triune God, one another, and the contact in which the congregation seeks to serve is the essential core of this season. Spiritual transition must come before strategic change. At least three actions will be part of a successful spiritual transition phase.

First, is to engage in 100 Days of Discernment involving dialogue and prayer triplets. This is where the as many people as possible in the active congregation form prayer triplets who meet ten times over 100 days using a manual or guidebook for direction and focus as they talk and pray about the past, present, and future of the congregation. These triplets can take the place of other classes and small groups in the congregation during the year of sabbatical.

Second, is to engage the entire active congregation in a transformational learning journey. Led by the EVLC, the congregation engages in teaching/learning experiences to prepare themselves for radical transformation. These teaching/learning experiences can take the place of other classes and small groups in the congregation during the year of sabbatical.

Third, is to deeply investigate various choices for the future of the congregation. Should this congregation close, merge, or relocate? Should this congregation nest other congregations within its facilities, start new congregations, or start new worship services intended to reach people who do not currently attend? These are a couple of the questions congregations need to pursue during this season. Staying the same or only making a few modifications is not longer a choice. Something really radical must take place for this congregation to be vital and vibrant ten years from now.

3. Strategic Change Season: Once relationships have transited, it is now time to talk about changing things. A great transition season should create a sense of urgency to change things, and a trust for one another that will positively value the changes. At least three actions will be part of a successful strategic change phase.

First, is to determine the three best choices for the future of this congregation. These choices were discussed during the previous phase. Then develop three scenarios for the future of the congregation; one around each of the choices.

Second, is to present these three choices to the entire congregation for their reaction and feedback. This presentation should be both in written and dramatic/multi-media form. This approach allows the congregation to experience three distinctive and perhaps desirable futures. One or more may be choices the congregation had considered years earlier and the rejected. Now the time to seriously consider them as come.

Third, is to craft a future story for the congregation based on one of the three scenarios and the feedback from the congregation. It is very likely that one of the three scenarios will rise to the top as being the one the congregation most feels in the leadership of God for the next stage of its life. The changes called for should be so radical that they will cause the congregation to act in very different ways than it has in the past. Acting too much like the past may cause the congregation to snap back to its old ways rather than spring forward to new ways.

4. Transformational Journey Season: In reality this phase begins happening informally during the previous seasons. People feel empowered to transition, change, and transform in areas that do not require formal church or board action. At least three actions will be part of a successful transformational journey phase.

First, is to start living into the future story of the congregation. Figuring out what ECM means for your congregation, making the choices, and developing the future story is not the journey. Living into the future story is the journey. It is action not talk that makes the difference. It is moving forward realizing the future is only forward, and allowing God to speak anew to you as your journey forward that will be the essence of an ECM.

Second, simultaneously develop a future story fulfillment map that outlines the steps to be taken for up to the next three to five years. Former, linear ways of futuring may have required such an operational plan to be developed before any movement forward. In ECM the idea of building the airplane while you are flying it fits. It is a ready, shoot, aim approach. Getting the congregation moving in a new direction is more important during this phase than talking about too many specifics too soon.

Third, restructure the management systems of the congregation to fit the new journey. Make them as lean as possible. Involve just enough people in organizational administration as needed, but no more. Save as many people resources as possible for ministry rather than management. Craft a management structure that empowers the future story rather than makes the future story bend to the management structure. Expand around the edges of any denominationally mandated structure for governance.

5. Post-Season—Forming a New Culture: Just when you thought you were finished, you are not. However, that is not bad news. It is good news. If your ECM has developed into a worthy Spiritual Strategic Journey, then it is worthwhile to develop the capacity to continue the journey rather than to have it lose momentum within 18 to 36 months. To sustain your gains do the following three things:

First, celebrate the progress being made in the journey every 120 days. Do this publicly within the congregation and not in a committee or board meeting. Keep casting the new vision and holding up the future story as the driving force of the congregation and your navigation guide for the journey.

Second, refocus the future story to keep it aligned with God's leadership. As frequently as every 120 days parts of the future story may show progress. Rather than thinking you are going to complete that portion of the future story, update it to keep it as a challenge in front of you. A future story is intended to be a dynamic document as God leads us to new places where we have never before traveled.

Third, hardwire into the cultural life of the congregation that every 120 day celebrations and updating of the story will take place. This is absolutely essential to sustain the gains of the congregation for up to seven to nine years, at which time a totally new story may be needed. Look not just for new outputs, impacts, and capacities to move forward. Look also for the gift of sustainability of the gains you have made through your ECM.

Questions for Dialogue

- If you are ready for an Extreme Congregational Makeover, what do you think ought to be your first step?
- What are your questions about these five seasons of an ECM? What else do you need to know before you are ready to move forward?
- One of the first crises may be giving over authority to someone outside the congregation. How do you feel about this? How would you approach it to gain acceptance within your congregation?
- How would you answer the question, "does our congregation want deeply enough to be vital and vibrant once again that we have enough spiritual passion to engage in radical transformation?"
- What will be some of the greatest challenges you will face as your go through an ECM?

Glossary

100 Days of Discernment: A 100 day process where the active participants in a congregation divide into triplets by a predetermined criteria and meet with one another 10 times over 100 days to dialogue about the congregation's past, present, and future, to seek to build a deep relationship with one another, and to pray for a clear sense of God's leadership for the next stage of the congregation's life.

Congregational Assessment and Learning Experience: A CALE is a one weekend experience from Friday afternoon through Monday morning. Its purpose is to engage a congregation in an assessment and learning experience they can use to address high priority strategic issues. This is an open and exploratory process where congregational leaders identify three high priority strategic issues to focus on during the weekend. Based on these issues the process is customized for the congregation.

Enduring Visionary Leadership Community: This is the navigating community for a congregation's Spiritual Strategic Journey. It is generally composed of the pastor and staff, plus people perceived to have positive and deep passion for the future of the congregation under God's leadership, and people who hold formal positions of leadership within the congregation. The size of the community can vary, but the general rule is that it is 21 percent of the average number of adults who attend weekly worship at the congregation.

Extreme Congregational Makeover: This is a one to three year process that involves radical transformation and is focused on congregations in the life cycle stages of late Retirement, Old Age, and at Death. It involves five seasons of activity. It is focused on congregation who desire to be vital and vibrant ten years from now, as compare to the current malaise they are experiencing.

Spiritual Strategic Journey: A Spiritual Strategic Journey process seeks to empower a congregational journey that is both spiritual and strategic in nature, and moves them in the direction of their full kingdom potential. They are pulled forward by God's future story of ministry for them as a congregation on mission. The goal is to live into their future story of ministry as a congregational movement.

Important Things to Know



George Bullard is a Ministry Colleague and the Strategic Coordinator with The Columbia Partnership. He is also executive director [General Secretary] of the North American Baptist Fellowship of the Baptist World Alliance. He is the author of *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation* and *Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict*, both published by Chalice Press of St. Louis. With Chalice Press he is the Senior Editor for the TCP Leadership Series which now includes 25 books.

The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. *Travel Free Learning* is a sharing knowledge emphasis of TCP. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.

Subscribe to the Travel Free Learning Articles: Text "TCP" to 22828