

# **The Coming Death of National Denominations**

*A Travel Free Learning Article*

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By

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Many national denominational organizations in North America are dying. For most it is a slow death. The causes and signs of their demise are obvious, but few are choosing to make wise decisions to morph into 21<sup>st</sup> century denominations. Too many are choosing to recommit to old patterns or suicidal patterns of denominational life. Their pain is insufficient to motivate them to take action. They may be in denial. Their desire to thrive and reach their full kingdom potential lacks the passion necessary to motivate them toward transformational actions. They may be depressed.

As we enter the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is appropriate to look at the current state of national denominations. How are they doing? What are the characteristics of national denominations who are thriving? What are the characteristics of national denominations who are dying; perhaps a little bit at a time?

## **A Personal Journey on Denominational Transformation**

I have worked for or consulted with denominational organizations for 35 years. Twenty years ago I began to write and speak on the future of denominations. I am a denominationalist. I believe in denominations. I love denominations. However, I am fully convinced they must transform to be relevant to the movement of congregations. I predicted in the 1990s that the relevance of denominations to the movement of congregation could be substantially lost by 2050 without transformation.

Numerous others have been sounding alarm bells. I am far from being alone in this effort. Some have overstated the issue. Others have understated it. I am somewhere in there with my statements.

The death of national denominations is not imminent; it is not coming in the next five to ten years. However, if current trends continue some national denominations could reach subsistence level within 25 years, and could die within 40 years. Is that all right with you? Will you be OK if your national denomination dies?

The death of national denominational structures does not necessarily mean the death of any particular denomination movement, nor its local or regional expressions. These latter expressions may thrive in some locations. New forms of national denominational structures may emerge. But, there is no guarantee that it will in your denominational family.

Some denominations will merge with other denominations to sustain a viable existence. These will likely be mergers out of weakness that will continue the decline of these denominations, rather than mergers out of strength that form a basis for a new movement forward. I predict that when two or more denominations merge out of weakness that within a decade or so the merged denomination will be no larger than the larger of the two denominations at the time of merger.

But, what if your national denomination wants to thrive rather than die. What must it do? To begin to answer this questions let's first assess the situation. Here is a beginning list of things national denominations are failing to do or succeeding in doing to drag themselves down and lead to their eventual death, or a subsistence level of life. What would you add to this list?

## **Denominations are Dying Because of Their Failure to do the Following Things.**

**First**, they are failing to renew themselves, and sustain vitality and vibrancy, by being catalysts for the starting a number of new congregations each year equal to at least three percent of the number of congregations affiliated with it at the beginning of the year. Without a high priority focus on new congregations, national denominations are missing at least the following five factors.

1. Sufficient numerical growth in affiliated congregations and adherents to offset the loss of congregations and adherents through congregations who are dying, declining, or dis-affiliating.
2. Increased vitality and vibrancy throughout the denomination that comes through the excitement surrounding new congregations and the challenge they offer to existing congregations to be more intentional about their ministry.
3. Creation of Christ-centered faith communities relevant to the generations born after July 20, 1969 when humankind first set foot on the moon.
4. Multi-ethnic and multi-cultural diversity that although it ought to happen within existing congregations, more often happens through the founding of congregations that either focus on a different ethnic or cultural identity, or begin as multi-cultural congregations.
5. Renewal, even expansion, of the congregational movement and ethos of this denomination. If 60-90 percent of congregations in a denomination are plateaued and declining, then eventually that denomination will no longer exist. If the mission and fruit of that denomination is making a worthwhile contribution to the work of God's kingdom, then it is worth renewing it through new congregations.

**Second**, they are failing to help their leading edge of faithful, effective, and innovative congregations to soar and fully express their spiritual gifts, strengths, and skills. These congregations are generally 10 to 15 percent of the total number of congregations affiliated with the denomination, but may account —along with new congregations— for at least 50 percent of the new adherents in the denominations. They are not necessarily the largest congregations, but the combination of being faithful, effective, and innovative often leads to grow and size greater than the average congregation. In reality, they are congregations who are crystal clear about their mission, purpose, values, and vision, and are on a journey towards their full kingdom potential in the setting or among the people groups in which they do ministry.

Denominations assume these congregations do not need or want their help rather than realizing they want high quality peer learning experiences than the vast majority of denominations are offering. They would love to help their denomination soar, and they yearn for their denomination to understand and celebrate their situation.

**Third**, they are failing to help only those congregations who are ready and eager to transform to go through transformation processes. Instead they are trying to help any plateaued and declining congregation who asks for help regardless of their capacity to benefit from the assistance or their readiness for transformation. Further, they define transformation as a healthy, faithful congregation rather than one that is also effective and innovative in fulfilling their mission and vision and thus becoming more vital and vibrant. Thus, they have lowered their expectations of congregations. Faithfulness has become a euphemism for mediocrity.

Many denominational efforts at congregational transformation are built around a rescuer mentality that seeks to help congregations to be restored to a healthy status; whether or not the congregation wants to be restored.

**Fourth**, perhaps worse than ineffective service to congregations is the diminishing of an emphasis on serving congregations, or helping to create and sustain more vital and vibrant congregations. Over the past several decades numerous denominations have decreased their efforts through staff, budget, and

resource materials that focus on church planting, church growth, and church transformation. Some national denominations have one office or department that seeks to handle all three of these emphases.

Denominations are forgetting that congregations are their basic building block and why they exist in the first place. It is extremely important to remember that congregations created the denomination, and denominations did not create the congregation. Choose this day who you will serve. Real denominations serve congregations.

From another perspective, national denominations are trying to serve congregations through old concepts that assume national denominations do for congregations what congregations cannot do for themselves. This is a gapology approach that no longer works. The number of things congregations are dependent on their denomination to do are less and less.

**Fifth**, they are failing to jettison their institutions from core denominational financial support and ownership through trustees appointed or elected by the national denomination. Over the past five decades many, if not most, colleges/universities, seminaries/divinity schools, benevolent institutions, and other institutional entities have developed multiple funding streams and are no longer dependent on the national denominational budget for their survival and vitality. Those institutions to which the denomination gave roots, or adopted along the way, now need to be given wings. Then adult-to-adult partnerships can be developed that are mutually beneficial.

Wise national denominations are withdrawing core operational funding and creating partnerships with their institutions in strategic areas of need for the denomination, and funding those on a renewable project basis. Institutions that cannot survive without funding from the national denomination for core operations may not need to exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Institutions we seek to control so they will maintain conforming values with those of the national denominational board and staff may at some point lose their creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship qualities. By the way, whether or not these institutions remain organically and legally tied to the national denomination does not hinder their ability to become irrelevant to the movement of congregations and their leaders.

### **Denominations are Dying Because of Their Success in Doing the Following Things.**

**First**, many national denominations are demanding or hoping for loyalty rather than earning loyalty. Congregations who respond to the call for more loyalty tend not to be the growing, vital, and vibrant congregations with the denomination, but rather are plateaued, declining, and passive congregations. Dying denominations are successful in reinforcing the myth that congregations exist to serve the denomination. Vital and vibrant congregations do not buy into that lie.

**Second**, many national denominations are professionalizing, formalizing, and centralizing their clergy education, credentialing, and support systems in an attempt to achieve a purer and more effective collection of clergy leaders. This approach certainly provides more control while also creating more dependency among the clergy leaders, but it does not necessarily produce purer or more effective clergy leaders. It may also result in a lack of a sufficient collection or “farm system” of new clergy leaders, as persons called into clergy ministry seek out denominational families with a more open and flexible system for credentialing.

**Third**, some national denominations have become experts at dividing and driving away congregations and adherents by badly addressing explosive moral and theological issues. The big moral ones these days focus around sex—homosexuality, adultery, promiscuity, and pedophilia. When national denominations combine with sex the issues around clergy ordination and discipline—or lack thereof—it creates an “ensmallment” [rather than enlargement] movement within the denomination.

One of the big theological ones these days is the foreknowledge of God. Another is Calvinism, given that we have reaching the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Calvinism. 2017 will bring the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the Wittenburg door. I wonder what that will bring?

**Fourth**, many national denominations believe that restructuring themselves or re-tasking national agencies is the same thing as renewing the spiritual, strategic direction of the national denomination. No consistent evidence exists that restructuring national denominations alone leads to the renewal of these denominations. Restructuring actually is a step in preparing for another restructuring within five to ten years. Restructuring fits in the same category as rearranging the chairs on the Titanic.

**Fifth**, many national denominations continually reallocate their core funding stream receipts from congregations rather than looking for innovative ways to increase the generosity of adherents and congregations. They have a basic funding stream or two that they have had for multiple decades rather than an innovative plan involving at least 12 funding streams. The reallocation is in response to a decreased buying power of the funds coming from congregations, and like restructuring leads to the next reallocation.

## Words of Summary

Denominations who are thriving are engaging in the following activities. First, they are planting a number of new congregations each year equal to at least three percent of the number of congregations they had at the beginning of the year. Second, they have figured out how to come alongside their faithful, effective, and innovative congregations and help them soar to the next dimension of ministry. Third, they do triage with congregation who say they want to transform and pick the ones who have the best readiness and help them to transform. They are doing this with at least three percent of their congregations each year. Fourth, they have figured out how to support their dying, subsistence, and long-term declining denominations without allowing them to consume an inordinate amount of their denominational staff time, passion, and finances.

Denominations who are experiencing a steady decline and slowly dying are engaging in the following activities. First, they are focusing on the legislative processes of their denomination to micro-manage their policies and positions on various issues. The big one right now is the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy. Second, they are regularly restructuring their denomination in response to economic crises and the lack of support for a three-tired, competing denominational system. Third, they are entangled with what to do with their auxiliary and affiliated organization such as colleges, seminars, retirement homes, children's homes, etc. Fourth, they focus too deeply on ecumenical activities and organizations assuming that unity of Christian organizations leads to more vital ministry rather than realizing it leads to more mediocre ministry.

Further, they are not planting many churches, not helping their faithful, effective, and innovative churches to move forward, trying to transform congregations who are not willing to do what is necessary to be transformed, and spending more than have of their staff field time trying to find the answer for ministry among small, dying, and subsistence level congregations. Finally, they have alienated a larger percentage of the generations born after July 20, 1969 when humankind first walked on the moon, so these people are going to churches of other denominations, or nondenominational churches.

## The Solution: Creating Real Denominations

I call denominations that really get it about continuing to thrive, *real* denominations. *Real* denominations have seven practices of greatness. These focus around congregations, their leaders, and support services by denominations. The seven practices of greatness are,

- Real denominations serve congregations.
- Real denominations develop leaders.
- Real denominations focus on kingdom potential.
- Real denominations deepen relationships.
- Real denominations broker resources.
- Real denominations are captivated by vision.
- Real denominations have empowering management.

### **Important Things to Know**

George Bullard is a Ministry Partner with The Columbia Partnership. He is also General Secretary [executive director] of the North American Baptist Fellowship of the Baptist World Alliance. 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 leadership development emphasis. For more information about products and services check out the web site at [www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org](http://www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org), send an e-mail to [Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org](mailto:Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org), or call 803.622.0923.