

The Resurrection of National Denominations

Part One: Assessment

A Travel Free Learning Article

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In a previous article I talked about the coming death of national denominations. From the Christian perspective, following death there is a resurrection. Might there be a resurrection of national denominations at some point? Possibly. Do national denominations have to die for there to be a resurrection? Probably. Do all national denominations need a resurrection? Not necessarily.

Not all national denominations have lost their way. They are thriving. A few national denominations who had once lost their way are now thriving. They transformed. National denominations who have currently lost their way need to transform in one of five ways depending on an assessment of their starting point.

National denominations who have lost their way may need Revision, Revitalization, Renewal, Reinvention, or Resurrection. To understand which transformation pathway your national denomination may need, begin with a clear assessment of your current situation.

Ten Assessment Factors

Ten factors, as a beginning point for dialogue, may provide an assessment for your national denomination. Many more factors could be suggested. The metrics in these ten are subjective based on my 50 years of experiencing denominations as an observer, 30 years as a denominational staff person, and consulting and coaching with more than 300 denominational organizations in 50 different denominations. Each factor looks at ten year trends in the life and ministry of a national denomination.

The first, and most crucial factor, is that of vision. All five of these pathways assume a national denomination is not currently captivated by an empowering vision of their spiritual strategic direction that is producing vitality and vibrancy throughout the denomination.

Second, is a commitment and successful track record of starting new congregations. Third, are the financial trends of contributions from congregations, individuals, and various other funding streams. Fourth, is the membership or number of adherents to denominational churches.

Fifth is the change in number of affiliated churches over the past ten years. Sixth, is the new clergy under 40 years of age ordained into ministry in the denomination. Seventh, is the percentage of growing churches.

Eight, is the percentage of churches under 25 years of age. Ninth, is the nature and experience of national denominational gatherings whether they occur annually or every two to four years. Ten, is the intensity of conflict in the national denomination.

Five Pathways for Transformation

Where a national denomination is assessed on these ten factors can vary significantly according to the culture of the denomination, the perspective of the people doing the assessment, and the timing of the assessment. Also, no national denomination is likely to fit neatly into a single pathway of transformation, but there is probably one that is most like each national denomination. I invite you to think through these factors related to your denomination.

Revision: A denomination ripe for a Revision transformation pathway has likely lost vision, focus, and direction during the past five or so years. It has many good traits and may even be in a crescendo of the quality of the programs, ministries, and missional activities experienced any time in the past 25 years. It is starting each year new congregations at a rate of up to two percent of the number of currently affiliated congregations. Its financial receipts at the national level are at least keeping up with inflation.

It has plateaued nationally in the number of members or adherents in its affiliated churches, in the total number of affiliated congregations, and in the number of new, ordained clergy under 40 years old. At least a fourth of its affiliated congregations are growing, and at least a fourth are 25 or fewer years old. [Note: Some congregations fit both categories.] Its national gatherings are good although the delegates may be in denial about the impending decline of the national denomination, and there is only a low and typical intensity of conflict surrounding various issues.

Revitalization: A denomination needing a Revitalization transformation pathway has lacked vision for at least five to ten years. It is starting a number of new congregations each year at the rate of 1.5 percent or less of the number of existing congregations, and is thus plateaued or declining in the number of affiliated congregations. Its annual financial receipts are flat and not keeping up with the rate of inflation. Over the past decade it has experienced up to a three percent decrease in number of members or adherents in its affiliated churches and in the number of new, ordained clergy under 40 years old.

Less than 25 percent of its affiliated congregations are growing. The rest are plateaued or declining in attendance and other vital signs of participation. Less than 25 percent of its affiliated congregations are 25 or fewer years old. Its national gatherings have a tone of nostalgia about the past, plus some disappointment about the present, and anger at leaders. Conflict is beginning to be expressed at a mid-intensity.

Renewal: A denomination needing a Renewal transformation pathway has lacked vision for more than a decade, and has tried several fixes to restore past glory. None have worked for more than one to three years, and each round has caused them to become weaker. It is starting a number of new congregations each year at the rate of one percent or less of the number of existing congregations, which means the net number of affiliated congregations is in steady decline. Its annual financial receipts are down up to 10 percent in regard to the rate of inflation over the last decade.

It has experienced a net loss of up to seven percent in total adherents in its congregations, number of affiliated congregations, and number of new ordained clergy under the age of 40. Less than 20 percent of its affiliated congregations are growing in attendance and other vital signs of participation. As well, less than 20 percent of its affiliated congregations are 25 or fewer years old. National gatherings focus on the constant need to restructure something major in the denomination to see if it will work better. Legislative processes and resolutions focus on getting the national church to take a stand of issues that are likely to divide the national denomination. Conflict is a repeating pattern for the denomination.

Reinvention: A denomination needing a Reinvention transformation pathway has lacked vision for 20 to 25 years, perhaps more. It has attempted restructuring multiple times, but often this is more an accommodation to decline than a repositioning for more effective ministry. It is starting a number of new congregations each year at the rate of one-half of one percent or less of the number of existing congregations, which means the number of affiliated congregations is in significant decline. Its annual financial receipts are down up to 20 percent in regard to the rate of inflation over the last decade.

It has experienced a net loss of up to 15 percent in total adherents in its congregations, number of affiliated congregations, and number of new ordained clergy under the age of 40. Less than 15 percent of its affiliated congregations are growing in attendance and other vital signs of participation. As well, less than 15 percent of its affiliated congregations are 25 or fewer years old. National gatherings focus on the constant need to be faithful to the denomination because while continually getting smaller and weaker, the current understanding of the denominational ethos is important within the denominational family. Dealing with issues surrounding regular downsizing, and dialogue about merging with one or more other

denominations are a regular part of the legislative process. Depression actions characterize the expression of conflict.

Resurrection: A denomination needing a Resurrection transformation pathway has few strong, positive cultural stories about the last time they were captivated by vision. It has run on the “being faithful” pathway for so long it believes that is the vision. It is starting few new congregations; maybe none intentionally. Perhaps the majority of these are started by accident through church splits, or by claiming churches that affiliate with the denomination as new congregations—even if they were actually started decades ago. Its annual financial receipts are down more than 20 percent in regard to the rate of inflation over the last decade.

During the past decade or so it has experienced a net loss of more than 15 percent in total adherents in its congregations, number of affiliated congregations, and number of new ordained clergy under the age of 40. Less than ten percent of its affiliated congregations are growing in attendance and other vital signs of participation. As well, less than ten percent of its affiliated congregations are 25 or fewer years old. National gatherings focus on an acceptance that they are a much smaller denomination than they once were, and wondering how many more years they will exist. Clergy hope it will exist until they retire; as does denominational staff. Attendance is declining as fewer churches can afford to send their delegates. Many, if not all, of the various institutions started by these denominations have been closed, sold, or given their freedom so they might survive.

Questions

Which one of these five pathways best fits your national denomination? What ranges or metrics would you change to make one of these fit your denomination better? What additional factors occur to you that ought to be added to the list of ten I have used as a jumping off place? What other comments would you add? I would welcome your comments to me at GBullard@TheColumbiaPartnership.org.

Answers

“OK, George. You have given us the assessment. What are the answers?” I would like for you to ponder the assessment for a while before we move on to the solution.

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, send an e-mail to Client_Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.