

The Resurrection of National Denominations

Part Two: Solutions

A Travel Free Learning Article

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In previous articles I talked about the coming death of national denominations, and suggested an assessment for the resurrection of national denominations. It is insufficient to point out the problem, provide an assessment and typologies, without also offering solutions to the opportunities and challenges. The purpose of this article is to initiate a dialogue around solutions for plateaued and declining national denominations. No one right solution exists. Different pathways for transformation are needed for national denominations who are at various starting places.

The resurrection of national denominations requires various phases of effort. These are Readiness, Preparation, Journey, and Sustaining. The following is a brief overview of each of these phases. Obviously more depth is required to understand the full process for the transformation, even resurrection, of national denominations.

Transformation Readiness

It is not possible for national denominations to simply decide one day to start a transformation process. Readiness factors must be present. For a national denomination to be ready for transformation there must be present factors of urgency, spirituality, leadership, strategy, and resources.

Urgency is a sense the national denomination is not reaching its full kingdom potential. It is not really dissatisfaction with the journey of the national denomination; although that emotion or perspective is present. It is more a sense that the mission and ethos of the national denominations calls for it to achieve greater effectiveness than it is realizing. A passion is present within the leadership and followership of the denomination that it has great ministry yet to do. It cannot allow that ministry to go undone.

Spirituality is the sense God is up to something in this national denomination. While not fully clear about a vision or sense of spiritual direction for the next decade or so of the national denomination, there is discernment that God is calling this national denomination forward. God has a key role for this national denomination in the constellation of denominations. If this specific national denomination does not respond then God will have to raise up another.

Leadership means the denomination has elected, appointed, and employed leadership who see the future. They also have the capacities necessary to lead this national denomination forward. They have the passion and sense of divine purpose to not just maintain the past gains of the national denomination, and build three tabernacles to worship God and glory in the past, but have the desire for leading the new vision God is challenging this national denomination to fulfill.

Strategy has two foci. First, the national denomination has an approach to strategy that must be balanced between two great efforts. One effort is to engage in those ministries that flow out of the core values of the denomination that expend more resources than they generate. The other effort is to renew or restore the core resources of the denomination so the really great things the denomination loves to do can continue for many decades. Without this balance the national denomination will incrementally die.

Second, the national denomination is aware of strategic efforts it is willing to take that fit its ethos and will transform the denomination. Many national denominations either do not know what to do, or reject the most effective strategies because they do not fit the cultural values or ethos of the national denomination.

It is possible for a denomination to be so limited in what it is willing to do that it is unwilling to do those things necessary to transform.

Resources must be available or can be acquired that will empower the transformation of the national denomination. These resources are financial, personnel, and knowledge-based assets. At times resources that are present must be reallocated or reprioritized. At other times they represent new capacities that must be acquired. Without resources that can be focused on transformation the national denomination's resurrection efforts are likely to fail.

Transformation Preparation

At least three significant actions are necessary to prepare a national denomination for a transformation journey. There are assessment, people of passion identification, and diminishing the controlling aspects of management and culture.

Assessment involves addressing the ten assessment factors—and others—identified in the part one article of this series on the resurrection of national denominations. It also involves working on the five readiness factors identified above to determine where readiness exists, and where readiness needs to be developed.

People of passion identification is the discovery and recruitment of people in various dimensions of the denomination from congregations, local and regional denominational organizations, and national denominational organizations who have positive spiritual passion about the future of the denomination towards which God is leading it. A representative group of these people should guide the transformation process.

Diminishing the controlling aspects of management and culture is absolutely necessary to initiate before a national denomination can move forward. Various aspects of structure and culture control a national denomination when captivating vision is not present. National denominations need to be willing to ask the question, "What are the things that control us and keep us from moving forward?" The controlling aspects are not necessarily negative things. They are simply controlling.

Transformation Journey

Following preparation national denominations can then embark on a transformation journey. The reality is that the transformation journey probably starts on its own as readiness and preparation are addressed. Based on their assessment—often with the assistance of an outside third party—a national denomination chooses one of the five pathways for transformation: Revision, Revitalization, Renewal, Reinvention, or Resurrection.

Revision focuses on casting and becoming captivated by a new vision for the national denomination. Many other factors are present, positive, and strong, but the denomination is unfocused, unclear, and/or unmotivated regarding vision. Programs, ministries, and missional actions may be providing some dimension of vitality and vibrancy. If it is truly only a revision transformation that is needed, this journey can become fully empowering within six to 18 months.

Revitalization involves retooling the programs, ministries, and missional activities of the denomination for a new generation in a new century. It is a ready, shoot, aim approach as the national denomination focuses on new or renewed actions that renew the core and extend the ministry, experiments with new approaches for emerging generations as well as legacy generations, and then aims its efforts in the areas of new discernment about the future of the national denomination. Out of these efforts new vision begins to emerge that can be cast and embraced by the national denomination. This journey requires 18 to 36 months to reach its full impact.

Renewal is the most difficult journey because of the desire to take new forward action when the reality is that renewal of relationships throughout the national denomination is the first major season of this

transformation journey. It has three seasons of effort. The first is renewal of relationship with God, one another, and understandings of the core values and ethos of the denomination. Second, is retooling the programs, ministries, and activities. Third, is casting and becoming captivated by vision. This process is also the longest. It takes three to five years to complete. It is also the process on which national denominations are likely to give up because they do not have the delayed gratification to give this process time to work. Therefore, national denominations may go through this journey multiple times before it is sufficiently impactful.

Reinvention requires a clean page. National denominations must be willing to redesign themselves from the center outwards. Nothing strategically or structurally can be considered sacred. Only a core or centered understanding of the pure mission of the national denomination is sacred. It should be considered that no national agencies or institutions will automatically exist in the new national denomination. The strategy and structure must be developed quickly once the journey starts. The journey should take 18 to 36 months to reach empowerment and become the formal strategy and structure of the reinvented national denomination.

Resurrection occurs after death. For a national denomination to experience resurrection it must be willing to die. As it dies it turns to its congregations, and local and regional denominational organizations to put in place any national structure that might be needed to continue the movement of heritage and hope of this denomination. Any national denominational assets are held in trust temporarily by a vehicle established for this purpose. This transformation journey must be done quickly. Six to 18 months is probably the time frame for this journey.

Sustaining Transformation

For the transformation of national denominations to be sustaining it cannot be viewed as a quick fix, but rather a long-term solution. Even so, national denominations who are more than 22 to 27 years old must realize they will need to revision their journey at least every decade.

Therefore, the first step in sustaining transformation is to hardwire into the culture and documents of the national denomination that a transformation process will be engaged in every decade. Second, is make the mantra of all decisions and efforts of the national denominations the question, "How will this help us fulfill our vision?" Use this to evaluate the effectiveness of all efforts, the value of any new proposed initiative, to restructure boards and staff, and to allocate precious financial resources.

Third, is to build a broad-based leadership development process that identifies, increases the capacity of, and raises up into leadership roles the next generation of leaders. Fourth, is to develop a broad-base of funding streams that provide the regular financial resources to fulfill the mission and vision of the national denomination. Fifth, is to always keep the balance in efforts and resource commitments between activities that renew the core and activities that extend the mission.

Guarantees?

There are none. I cannot guarantee that any of these transformation pathways will definitely result in the resurrection of your national denomination. I can only guarantee that without transformation your national denomination will die. It is just a matter of when.

Services?

I do not just write and talk about the death, transformation, and resurrection of national denominations. It is part of my personal mission. Therefore, telephone conversations, face-to-face dialogue, and one to three year processes of transformation that I coach are available to you for the asking. Feel free to contact me at GBullard@TheColumbiaPartnership.org or at 803.622.0923.

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.