

CHURCH
REVITALIZATION
FROM THE INSIDE OUT



ROBERT D. STUART

The best word to describe Bob Stuart's book on church leadership is *edifying*. As an experienced pastor with a burden for shepherds and sheep, he writes to strengthen the church by strengthening its leaders. I know firsthand that he knows what he is talking about—God used him to help heal my home church after a terrible split! Bob speaks biblical and practical truth into many areas of leaders' lives. This book is not for the faint of heart; it is strong medicine written by a man of God to men of God who want to be what Christ wants them to be and to do what he wants them to do. I commend it highly to church leaders, their pastors, church planters, and believers who want to pray more intelligently for their leaders, who keep watch over their souls and will have to give an account to the Chief Shepherd.

—**Robert A. Peterson**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary

Poorly thought-out leadership changes, failures of succession plans (or no plans at all), and a lack of shepherding the flock through these things to locate Christ's mission and purpose—all these have left congregation after congregation wounded and weak. This book is replete with lessons, practical advice, and biblically grounded plans for leading a congregation into a new day of hope for congregations all across America. I commend it with prayers for revival and renewal in the church today.

—**Michael A. Milton**, Chancellor/CEO Elect, Reformed Theological Seminary

Pastor Stuart is winsome and practical, yet he pulls no punches as he instructs pastors, elders, and other church leaders to take the necessary steps in pulling their churches out of decline, by God's grace. This book provides for critical self-examination, humble piety, and inspired transformation.

—**Elliott S. W. Pinegar**, Former Pastor, First Presbyterian Church

Failed leadership is at the heart of church conflict—a difficult summation to hear, but one that must be believed and embraced if change is ever to occur. Failed leadership resulting in church conflict—and then

frequently the flight of the pastor, leaving the pulpit empty—has given rise to the need for a church doctor to examine the issues and prescribe healing to revitalize a hurting congregation. Bob Stuart is such a doctor—one who diagnoses the sickness in the church, exposes the practice of poor church leadership, and prescribes the cure. Leaders, pastors, and church planters are encouraged to read this book, which will help them become the leaders they were called to be.

—**David V. Edling**, Author, *Redeeming Church Conflicts*

Although pastors enter ministry with high expectations that they, like the apostles, will devote themselves to “prayer and to the ministry of the word,” they soon learn that there is more required of them. Something that they are often ill prepared for: leadership. And unless they learn to lead well, they will fail in ministry. And so will their churches.

As someone who has led a company, pastored a church, and trained future pastors, I have read a number of books on leadership. Not one of those books, however, has been as practical and as full of real-life examples as Bob Stuart’s. Purchase it, put it on your bedside table, read it in the morning to prepare to lead well, and review it at night to see where you went wrong.

—**Michael W. Honeycutt**, Senior Pastor, Westminster Presbyterian Church

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P U B L I S H I N G

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To my wife, Deena,
my soul mate, my encourager, and the love of my life

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Foreword

Several years ago I was on a ministry trip to one of those countries that required me to receive several “unusual” vaccinations before I could leave the United States. The flight was very long, and, once I arrived, my scheduled appointments began almost immediately. After three successive days of fulfilling numerous ministry commitments in several different cities, I was worn out and illness had overtaken me. I needed a doctor, but what I wanted was *my* doctor—the man who knew me best. I had an unsettling feeling that my worsening condition was different from the usual colds, food poisoning, or common forms of flu that can accompany foreign travel. I wanted a solid diagnosis and recovery plan, no matter how distasteful or restrictive, that not only would allow me to continue to function but would also restore me to full health and prevent an even worse long-term condition. I didn’t have any confidence in the quality of medical care I might receive in this distant land, so I did nothing but press on with my schedule. That was a mistake.

Many churches needing a “doctor” due to their congregations’ cultural ill health make the same mistake. The symptoms are there and are evident to almost everyone, but the risks involved in taking steps to confront the many elements of dysfunction too often delay an accurate diagnosis and the development of a meaningful recovery plan. The necessity to continue to function (to maintain a certain *status quo* of expectation), to meet the demands of those pursuing their own narrow agendas, and simply the *fear of man* and *fear of change* mean that nothing is done. And that is a mistake. I have seen too many churches wither and die because church leaders failed in one of their primary shepherding functions: leadership.

My friend Dr. Bob Stuart takes on the role of “doctor” in this book as he examines the symptoms, gives a needed diagnosis, and recommends

a recovery plan to move the unhealthy church to renewed vitality. This book is truly a diagnostic manual of both the common and uncommon illnesses that our churches face today. In it he unpacks, in a practical and meaningful manner, the symptoms of the ailing church and its major disease: “failed leadership.” But this is no ordinary book on church leadership. Just as I experienced during my trip, difficult choices need to be faced: whom to trust, what to do, and when to take corrective action. Drawing on the leadership experience from a lifetime of roles such as combat Marine officer, attorney, church planter, senior pastor, and intentional interim minister, Bob takes us on a very frank and often painful journey into the ailing church and its most degenerative disease. Heavily salted with illustrative stories from his own experiences of over thirty years as a pastor, with accounts of the failures and triumphs of leaders from church history, and with familiar biblical stories of the leaders of the early church, Bob’s book establishes the patterns of failed leadership and then prescribes the biblical cure.

You know the people who are at the heart of church conflicts, because they are the same in every church. But few leaders respond to these difficult sheep in a manner that actually changes the outcomes. This book practically and decisively points the way. This is no ordinary book on dealing with church conflicts and difficult people, however. Rather, with trust and hope in God’s sovereign leadership, Bob never forgets whose church it is that we are called to shepherd. We are continually pointed to the true Physician and to his plan for his church. You and your church have already faced—or will likely face—times of trial: conflict, confusion, ill health . . . even deadness. Preparing now for that season or recovering from it means confronting the need to draw from new perspectives about old problems. I encourage every pastor and every elder to read and study this exceedingly readable, entertaining, practical, and biblically faithful manual.

Ken Sande
Founder of Relational Wisdom 360 and Peacemaker Ministries
Author of *The Peacemaker*

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Robert A. Peterson, professor of systematic theology at Covenant Seminary, whose labor in editing this book was a godsend. He reshaped my thinking and exhorted me to persevere in the rewriting process.

Dave Edling, formerly of Peacemaker Ministries and coauthor with Tara Barthel of *Redeeming Church Conflicts: Turning Crisis into Compassion and Care*, who read the first draft, acknowledged the need for the book, and encouraged me to continue writing.

Rev. Elliott S. W. Pinegar, then pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Bad Axe, Michigan, who reviewed and edited some of the chapters. These insights and encouragement from a young pastor inspired me to persist in my revisions.

The dedicated pastors and leaders of Christ's church, who seek to glorify God in their ministries and desire to shepherd God's flock without much honor, recognition, or gratitude. I admire them for weathering the storms of ministry without complaint, and for doing so with a servant's heart.

INTRODUCTION

Ailing Churches

So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church. (1 Cor. 14:12)

THE LEADERSHIP FACTOR

There are many wonderful and dedicated leaders within the church who have been challenged by their calling, slighted by the culture, and fatigued by their service in their congregations. The church is at war, and leaders are encouraged to pick up the sword of the Spirit and do battle with the enemy. This book is not about a particular style of leadership; it is about encouraging leaders to stay faithful and avoid the pitfalls of poor leadership. Weak leaders produce weak churches, and weak churches are ineffective in reaching a dying culture with the gospel of Christ.

Although there are churches doing mighty things for the Lord, others are languishing in a culture that seeks to make them irrelevant. Those that struggle in reaching society with the gospel have probably fallen prey to a chronic ailment—poor leadership. There are many wonderful leaders in the church, but the plethora of church quarrels and the decline in church efficacy for spreading the gospel prove that there are sundry others that need retooling and revitalization. Leaders need to know the pitfalls of their calling in order to sharpen their skills as shepherds in the church.

Throughout the book, I use the word *elder* as the term for a leader in the church, but I have every intention of including Baptist deacons,

Episcopal vestrymen, Methodist council members, and the like. When I write *session*, I also mean *elder board or leadership council*. It doesn't matter what church leadership is called; though there are many extraordinary shepherds in the church, the major illness in most denominations is the same—weak or poor leadership. My hope is that this book will encourage the faithful, refresh the tired, and reinvigorate the struggling—all with the threefold goal to shepherd sheep, to spread the gospel, and to wage war against the forces of evil.

AILING CHURCHES

Statistics do not lie; and what they tell us about the church is that God's *ecclesia* is ailing and is urgently in need of treatment. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research claims that 59 percent of all Protestant churches average between 7 and 99 attendees, and 35 percent average between 100 and 499.¹ Size, however, doesn't matter when it comes to controversy, for the American Congregations Study of 2008 reported that, steadily from 2000 to 2008, approximately 75 percent of all churches had conflict within the previous five-year period over matters of money, worship, and leadership.² Conflict invariably leads to disgruntled people who either leave the church or withhold their giving, resulting in ineffective ministry and damaging church vibrancy.

Ed Stetzer claims that 80 percent of North American churches are stagnant or declining.³ Harry Reeder agrees and, in his book *From Embers to a Flame*,⁴ lists the factors of regression, such as falling attendance, a drop in giving, living in the past, reliance on dominant personalities, a mentality of maintenance in keeping the status quo, a bad reputation in the community, and the lack of gospel centrality.

1. "Fast Facts about American Religion," Hartford Institute for Religion Research, accessed November 18, 2015, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html, quoting the National Congregations Study done by Duke University.

2. David A. Roozen, *American Congregations 2008* (Hartford: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2009), 26, available online at http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/faithcommunitiestoday.org/files/American_Congregations_2008.pdf.

3. Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 10.

4. Harry L. Reeder III, *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 7.

The spiritual health of the local church is directly related to the spiritual health of her leaders. When the health of leaders improves, so too does the health of the church. Ailing churches, however, have a hard time recognizing their illness. Leaders have difficulty hearing that they lead dying or stagnant churches, for it is a reflection on their leadership. Good leaders, however, confront the facts, analyze the situation, and take action to revitalize their churches.

THE BALM OF GILEAD

Leaders should not be surprised that churches at various times will need revitalization, or that it begins with them. Throughout Scripture, leaders are warned by the Lord to take their calling seriously and to heal his church when it is sickly. The Lord, through the voice of Jeremiah the prophet, asked, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?” (Jer. 8:22). The physician whom God had in mind was a leader like Jeremiah who would speak truth—diagnosing the disease of the people, which is sin, and prognosticating the remedy, which is repentance and reconciliation with God and with men.

According to Jeremiah, the Israelites needed a doctor to professionally apply the healing balm of Gilead. The nation had been under siege by Nebuchadnezzar and had suffered for two years before falling to the Babylonian king. Evidently, no doctor or leader surfaced to apply the treatment and encourage repentance before God. The result was captivity, which was the Lord’s treatment plan of disciplining his people for their iniquities in order to draw them back to him.

Israel is portrayed as a person dying of a mortal disease because she sinned against God, provoking him to discipline the people he loves. Although Jeremiah had warned the Israelites of their sin and urged them to repent, they, along with their leaders, did not heed his advice and continued to go their own way. Jeremiah was God’s physician, sent to the house of Israel, but they refused his house call.

There is a balm in Gilead, for there has never been a deficiency of God’s grace or a lack of means of applying it! Of course, the head surgeon is God himself, who is ever ready to perform surgery to heal his people

and apply the balm of forgiveness to bring reconciliation to his wandering sheep. Yet the Lord prefers to send his resident doctors—that is, leaders in his church—to rule and shepherd “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

Good leaders are definitely needed to rule Christ’s church. Poor leaders cause congregational turmoil and foster the straying of sheep. Schism normally results, pastors resign or are asked to leave, and leaders become confused about what they should do. Rather than looking toward God for his healing balm, poor leaders tend to look inward, make decisions based on expediency, and discover they have a deeper problem than first realized. Convinced that they have their own homeopathic remedy, they apply temporary Band-Aids to deeper lesions—or, worse yet, they refuse to do anything, causing wounds to worsen. In fact, weak leaders don’t want a cure for their maladies; they merely want relief from the present conflicts. They view their own illness as just a cold that will pass in time when, in fact, they have double pneumonia that may be slowly killing their people. What a local church needs is the “balm of Gilead”—God’s medicine for a hurting congregation, which is found in strong and wise leaders who apply God’s wisdom to the needs of the church. The church is definitely ailing, and a major disease is poor leadership.

THE BOOK

As a diagnostic manual, this book lists the symptoms of poor leadership—such as bad decisions, the guise of uniformity, gossip, sacred cows, irreconcilable attitudes, fear of change, and lack of vision. To overcome the symptoms of failure, leaders will be encouraged to look toward and emulate the leadership style of Jesus, which will foster health in leadership and vitality in the congregation.

Leaders who demonstrate faith, forgiveness, frankness, and flexibility provide incentive for sheep to follow. Trusting God is the key to good leadership,⁵ but trust will not happen if leaders do not love the

5. “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit” (Jer. 17:7–8).

Lord; and love will not occur if leaders do not know the God of Scripture. The more we know God, the more we come to love him; and the more we love him, the more we will trust him. And the more we trust him, the easier it is to discover his will for the church.

Healthy Leadership

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)

LEADERS TAKE CHARGE

The greatest leader in all history was Jesus Christ. In less than four years of ministry, he inspired loyalty and devotion in little-known disciples who were willing to die for him. His followers spread his gospel throughout the Roman world in the face of danger and with little recompense. And now, two thousand years after he walked the earth, Christ has followers in every nation on it, numbering more than one billion, and the organization he founded—the church—remains a powerful force throughout it.

We see Christ in Joshua 5 demonstrating his “take charge” leadership style when he encounters Joshua, Moses’ handpicked replacement, whose name also means “God saves.” In this Christophany—an appearance of the Son of God—Christ appeared to Joshua as the captain of the Lord’s army. Joshua first saw a man whom he quickly questioned, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?” (Josh. 5:13). Curiously, the answer of this sword-carrying man was “No!” (No what? “No, I’m not for you!” or, “No, I’m not for those who hate you!”?) He said he had come as captain

of the Lord's army, which meant that Joshua was under his command. The question by leaders should never be whether God is on their side, but rather, "Are we on the side of the Lord?" It is the Lord who directs, and the duty of elders is to discern that direction according to God's Word.

This Man who confronted Joshua was the Son of God, the eternal Word, and the right hand of the Power of God. Joshua immediately understood and gave him divine honors by bowing before him in worship (Josh. 5:14). Since the Man accepted the worship, which a created and devoted angel would not have done, by instructing Joshua to take off his shoes (for he was standing on holy ground), we are assured that this captain of the Lord's army was Christ himself (Josh. 5:15).

Note that Christ had his sword drawn, which gave Joshua confidence to wage war with strength and energy. Christ's drawn sword denotes how ready he is to defend his people and to fight their enemies who seek to destroy and neutralize them. Healthy leaders recognize that the church is at war and will therefore prepare themselves for battle.

Joshua is our example of a great leader who accepted his calling and took charge to lead a nation into a land filled with enemies. The book of Joshua recounts the conquest of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. It opens with his commissioning by the Lord to be the leader of the Israelites. As the nation's leader, Joshua was exhorted to be strong and courageous, for the Lord was with him; and since God was his companion and cohort, no one could deter his objective of securing Israel's inheritance (Josh. 1:2–7).

The one requirement for success was Joshua's faithfulness to the law of Moses. Church leaders today have the same exhortation—to be strong in the Lord and courageous to fight the spiritual battles that cause disruption to the peace of the sheep. They are to remain loyal to their instruction manual, which is the Word of God, and to show enthusiasm in serving the people of God. Godly leadership in the local church is a virtuous and "noble task" (1 Tim. 3:1), and it leads to good standing within the congregation (see 1 Tim. 3:13). Like Joshua, church leaders may experience the pleasure of seeing Christ bear spiritual fruit in and through them. They will conquer obstacles, serve as instruments of reconciliation, and receive the blessings of others as they willingly and

eagerly minister to the sheep that have been placed under their care. Good leaders follow the example of Christ and, in so doing, will receive an “unfading crown of glory” from the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4).

PARITY OF LEADERSHIP

When men are set aside for the office of elder, all are equal in authority. There is no hierarchy within the body of elders, for all are called by the same Lord and led by the same Spirit. This does not mean, however, that all are equally gifted, for the Spirit determines the type of gift as well as the measure of that gift given to officers in the church (1 Cor. 12:11). Although they occupy the same office, elders are diverse in giftedness and leadership ability, for God raises up leaders among leaders. The twelve disciples of Jesus are examples of this. As apostles, the Twelve were equal in position and authority, but Peter, and eventually Paul, were considered leaders among them.

There is, however, a great temptation for leaders, for authority brings power, and power tends to corrupt. William Pitt, the British prime minister from 1766 to 1778, once said in a speech to the House of Lords in 1770, “Unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it.”¹ Lord Acton, the British historian and moralist, also opined on power in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887 in which he said, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”² To prevent corruption, church leaders are to recognize the parity of elders—all are equal in rule and ministry. No one is greater than another, although some may have greater leadership skills, as did Peter and Paul. When one seeks to exert influence over others negatively, a split in the elder board will surface, conflict will result, and the peace and unity of the church will be disrupted.

LEADERSHIP STYLES

Churches are in constant struggles, for the enemy prowls about looking for ways to neutralize them in promoting the gospel. Leadership

1. Quoted in *The Speeches of the Right Honourable the Earl of Chatham in the Houses of Lords and Commons*, new ed. (London: Aylott & Jones, 1848), 94.

2. John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, *Historical Essays & Studies*, ed. John Neville Figgis and Reginald Vere Laurence (London: Macmillan, 1907), 504.

is not easy, for churches are wounded from the battles. Healthy leaders, however, make healthy churches. There is a correlation between the health of a church body and the strength of godly leadership. Elders are to be taught and trained what it means to shepherd their flock. Good leaders will be patient, dedicated to the people, and humble in their interaction. Too commonly, however, men are nominated for office because they are known businessmen or friends of the pastor, or because they have substantial influence in the congregation. Some may attend leadership classes that mainly teach church doctrine and the rudimentary duties of elders. Doctrine is important, but churches are also encouraged to train leaders as shepherds who demonstrate love, care, and discipline.

There are three primary management styles seen in church elders: the “cattleman,” the “drover,” and the “shepherd.” Only the shepherd is a healthy style, while the other two represent corpulent and anorexic conditions, respectively. Cattlemen symbolize obesity because they over-indulge in their self-importance. They have a dominant managerial style that drives people to the place they want them to be. They make backroom decisions, think more in terms of the negative, and are critical when their goals and desires are not met. They set their own agendas, become the core elite on the elder board, and foolishly think that their decisions are best for the church, when in fact they are best for themselves or the pastor whom they blindly support.

Churches usually have cattlemen within their leadership board. I once had to confront a number of men at a church who had formed their own executive committee and ruled with an iron will. Since their talented pastor had been part of this group, they formed various ministries with separate boards on which they sat, made financial and ministry decisions that affected the congregation at large, and thought nothing about any conflict of interest. When confronted with the apparent conflict, they were incredulous that I would even mention it. I told them that their first calling was to shepherd the flock of their church. Being on other ministry boards was their choice; but when sitting as a church elder and representing the people, they had to abstain from any discussions and votes that would benefit another ministry of which

they were a board member, even when that ministry was intricately connected to the church. Voting money and resources from the tithes of the congregation, or allowing the services of the staff to benefit another organization that elders have an interest in, is assuredly a conflict of interest. This is a violation of a church leader's fiduciary responsibilities in overseeing the tithes and gifts to the church.

Drovers represent anorexia because they are slim in importance and do not understand what a healthy church body looks like. They have a distorted self-image and fail to see that their tendency to be supportive of the cattlemen affects their own spiritual growth, keeping them undernourished in true leadership principles. Drovers normally vote with cattlemen because of the perceived influence of these cattle barons. They therefore act as hirelings to the cattlemen because they move and tend the cattle for approval from the cattlemen, not realizing that sheep are not cattle and cannot be driven. They must be led! Drovers are the nice guys who hate confrontation. They are favorably looked upon by the congregation and are easily voted onto boards and committees. They are like reeds in the wind, however, and will bend to the side that they identify as most dominant and influential. They easily fall into the pattern of being "yes men" for the cattle barons and the pastor because they are thin in courage and they go along with the status quo.

A church that I was familiar with had more than thirty elders. I would categorize them into three groups—the progressives, the peacekeepers, and the Bible-centric group. The progressives, as cattle barons, were only a handful of men but wielded the most influence, in both power and money. The peacekeepers were the drovers and numbered about fourteen, which was about the same number in the Bible-centric group, also known as the shepherds. Although the peacekeepers would have biblical views more closely aligned with the Bible-centric group, they cast votes that supported the progressives, which allowed the progressives to mold the church into their image. The writing was on the wall, for decisions made by the progressives and supported by the peacekeepers were not in line with the general character of the congregation and eventually had a detrimental effect on parishioners' ability to understand the

direction of the church. The result was a scattering of the sheep, who drifted into other pastures where they found more of a Bible-centric ministry. Leaders who felt disenfranchised also left, seeking churches that were more in line with their philosophy of ministry.

Shepherds are the healthy third category of leadership and are servant-leaders who have the concern of the sheep in mind. They are pleasant and polite most of the time but are firm and steadfast when they have to be. They are seen where the sheep are found, are unobtrusive in their leadership style, and have the ability to motivate and empower others. People enjoy being with them, working for them, and supporting them in their ministerial calling. These leaders have the moral fortitude to act decisively, for they understand that their calling from Christ is to tend and care for their sheep. They use their experience to act wisely, to set proactive agendas, and to deal immediately with problematic issues.

An example of a shepherd-elder is a friend of mine who had a number of families under his oversight in a medium-sized church. One of his sheep, an employee of the church, was having problems with an assistant pastor. When she confronted the pastor with her concerns, tensions escalated. She was subsequently summoned to his office to meet with him and a member of the personnel committee who had a reputation for austerity and inflexibility. Needing an advocate, she asked this elder friend to attend the conference and give her support as her shepherd.

This he did. Although the meeting was unfruitful, with no issues being resolved, my friend stood in the gap, defended his sheep, and reprimanded the two men for the way they were treating a young woman. Sheep need help and intervention in times of need and discouragement. The shepherd-elder is called to provide this comfort and defense, if needed, against those who would seek to disturb God's flock.

Sheep are not to be driven; they are to be led! Making board decisions without legitimate concern for the sheep is like negotiating cattle deals in the back room of a saloon, then hiring cowhands (pastors and staff) to move the sheep in the direction of the vision (that is, a cattle drive). Such decisions eventually lead to conflict in the church because the sheep feel abandoned, run over, and not cared for. And then comes

the war between the cattlemen and the shepherds, for cattlemen dislike sheep crowding their pastures!

TROUBLE IN THE CHURCH

During the 1880s and 1890s, controversy in the West between American cattle ranchers and unwanted sheepmen led to the death of many a cattleman and shepherd. Range wars were fought over land, water rights, and the issue of sheep overgrazing grasslands. These range wars still occur in the church, for cattlemen and shepherds still vie for territory called “the congregation.” Leadership splits cause great controversy in the church, leading to discouragement and the eventual scattering of the sheep, who seek more peaceful pastures.

I have also found in some churches deflated leaders who were once excited about ministry, but who have become uninterested in their roles as overseers and shepherds of the people. These leaders experienced conflict, suffered innuendo and gossip, and were attacked for being uninvolved with or uncaring of the sheep. Although the assaults for the most part were unwarranted, constant harping tends to take its toll, and wisdom for governing the church suffers. If Scripture insists that the wise are strong and that wisdom and understanding build the house (Prov. 24:3–5), why then is God’s church mired in stagnancy and becoming more irrelevant in a post-Christian culture? The answer is poor leadership—the major illness in today’s church!

Not all leaders are poor and ineffective, but statistics over the past fifteen to twenty years demonstrate that American churches are either stagnant or in decline. Ed Stetzer, writing in 2003, stated that 80 percent of churches were trending downward.³ With the closing of between four thousand and seven thousand churches each year, the percent of decline has not decreased since his book was written, and may in fact have increased.⁴ Richard Krejcir states that every year 2.7 million people

3. Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 10.

4. Steve McSwain, “Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore,” *Huffington Post, Religion* (blog), October 14, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-mcswain/why-nobody-wants-to-go-to_b_4086016.html.

fall into inactivity, which translates to a church exodus. He found that people leave because of hurt, disillusionment, or neglect.⁵

Many reasons can be found for dead and dying churches, but much of the blame falls on leadership. The problem is magnified because of the blindness or unwillingness of some leaders to recognize the decline of their own church. Elders must ask themselves this question: “Do we believe that our church has plateaued and is now actually in decline?” An affirmative answer is the first step toward renewal and revitalization. Pride and an unteachable spirit blind us to the symptoms of decline. Healthy churches are vibrant, community oriented, and growing numerically and/or spiritually.

The second question that elders should ask themselves is this: “If we believe that our church is in decline, are we willing to make the necessary changes to reverse the trend?” *Change* is a fearful word, especially to leaders who are entrenched in traditionalism and the status quo. Without realizing that God is engineering change, leaders will not discover his will for their church and will so continue the slide into obscurity.

Some obstreperous elders in a church I once consulted with refused to accept the fact they were in decline, even though the symptoms were blatantly obvious. Blinded by their pride and obstinacy, they informed me that the church was perfect the way it was and therefore needed no changing. Such thoughts from leadership demonstrate foolishness and hardness of heart. Rejecting counsel, especially from unbiased consultants who are hired to express their opinions, is the way of fools (see Prov. 12:15). The abovementioned church is still “perfect”—perfectly deteriorating into irrelevancy. Leaders must ask themselves, “If our church ceased today, would the community care?” Another soul-searching query is, “If our church ceased to exist, what would it be remembered for?”

The third question that is proposed to elders who realize that their church must change naturally flows from the first two. “If we believe that change is needed, when are we willing to initiate change?” Strong leaders are not afraid of proper change, for they realize that God has

5. Richard J. Krejcir, “Statistics and Reasons for Church Decline,” The Francis A. Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development, last updated 2007, <http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=42346&columnid=4545>.

called them to be courageous and has promised to be with them in the transitions (Josh. 1:9). Refusal to change is a mark of poor leadership, for good leaders understand the needs of those within their flock and know that change may be required to provide the sheep with refreshing water and nourishing pastures.

Change is not the enemy, for change is an ongoing certainty. Wisdom dictates knowing what to change, when to change, and how to change. Fortitude garners the courage to make changes. Leaders are to remember that change is the essence of life, for God is the author of both life and change. They must therefore be willing to surrender what the church is today for what the church could become tomorrow.

The problem remains, however, that many leaders are unwilling to admit that their church needs revitalization. They want to hold on to the past, and therefore they make decisions that continue the church's ineffectiveness. A declining church is indicative of the great disease that is attacking the church today—poor leadership.

THE CURE FOR POOR LEADERSHIP

Church leaders normally take vows to uphold the Word of God, to receive and adopt their church's confessions of faith, to rule in accordance with their church government, to perform their duties faithfully as servants to the people, to set a worthy example as an officer of Christ, to submit to their brother officers in the Lord, and to strive for the purity, peace, unity, and edification of the church. Choosing men who will take their vows seriously and execute them with integrity is a cure for poor leadership. Training elders to be shepherds, therefore, is of utmost importance, for without it cattle barons will emerge with drovers quickly acquiescing to them.

Most pastors and elders say they are good leaders. Yet of the congregations surveyed by the National Congregations Study in 2006–07, 12 percent reported conflict arising from lay leadership, and a full 35 percent reported conflict centered around their clergy.⁶ Paul understood

6. "American Congregations at the Beginning of the 21st Century," National Congregations Study, Duke University, June 2009, http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSII_report_final.pdf.

the result of visionless leaders and warned the elders at Ephesus to watch out for themselves and for the flock entrusted to them by God (Acts 20:28). Though elected by the people, elders are actually selected by God to shepherd his sheep. Understanding this awesome responsibility should motivate leaders to become better shepherds.

The apostle John applauded a Christian named Gaius for modeling the gospel to brothers and strangers (3 John 1–6). In the same letter, however, he condemned Diotrephes, a selfish church leader who not only refused hospitality to itinerant missionaries but also slandered the apostles and opposed their teachings (3 John 9–10). Diotrephes is an example of a prideful leader who causes conflict in a church. His leadership style was that of a cattle baron who wanted nothing to do with true shepherds.

Overcoming toxic leadership starts with selecting godly men, training them in their calling, and reminding them that they are shepherds, not cattlemen or drovers. As shepherds of God’s flock, they will be held responsible for the care and protection of the sheep. Paul iterated that, after his departure, wolves would appear among the leaders to draw the sheep away from the truth, not sparing them or caring for their needs (Acts 20:29–30). Wolves acting as leaders are seriously detrimental to the spiritual health of the flock. A leader of a wolf pack insists that his views are right, teaches contrary to Scripture, and shows little concern for the well-being of the sheep!

Timothy Laniak of Gordon-Conwell Seminary in North Carolina took a one-year sabbatical to investigate shepherding in the Middle East. Upon his return, he wrote the book *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*. A common question that he asked the shepherds of Jordan, Israel, and the Sinai was, “What does it take to be a shepherd?” Some said, “You must grow up with it.” Others said, “You must learn by hanging around true shepherds.” The most striking and affecting answer came from a Jordanian Bedouin named Abu-Jamal: “You must first have a heart for it.”⁷ A leader with no heart for people is not a true shepherd.

7. Timothy S. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks: Rediscovering Biblical Leadership* (Matthews, NC: Shepherd Leader Publications, 2007), 29.

The apostle Peter agreed with this principle of having a shepherd's heart when, in his first epistle, he described what good leaders look like. He exhorted the elders to shepherd the flock of God voluntarily, purposefully, eagerly, lovingly, and in an exemplary manner (1 Peter 5:1–3). The first qualification for becoming an elder, therefore, is to aspire to the office (1 Tim. 3:1). An elder candidate wants to be an elder. He realizes that he serves voluntarily, which means that he must have the proper heart for service. If he doesn't like people and has trouble relating to others, then he doesn't truly aspire to being a shepherd. He may want to rule, but governance in Christ's church includes shepherding the flock.

Peter, as a brother elder, understood heart motivation. He remembered what Christ had told him after the resurrection. "If you love me, Simon, *feed my lambs*. If you love me Simon, *tend my sheep*. If you love me Simon, *feed my sheep*" (see John 21:15–17). Christ, in addressing his fallen disciple, used Peter's birth name, not his spiritual name. The Savior was reclaiming Peter from his previous denials of knowing Jesus, which he had committed in the weakness of his flesh. "Simon, if you really love me, then become the shepherd I have called you to be!" The heart of a shepherd is seen in Peter, for he loved Christ and was willing and able to feed and care for the people entrusted to him. He was not under compulsion to serve, because his heart was attuned to the heart of Christ.

Not only are elders (or pastors) to shepherd voluntarily, but they are to do so purposefully—that is, in accordance with the will of God (1 Peter 5:2). Shepherding, therefore, must be in line with the dictates of Scripture, which is God's will. Ignorance is no excuse for only poorly tending the sheep of Christ. As teachers will be held to a stricter accountability for what they teach (James 3:1), leaders will also give account for managing the church and shepherding the flock (Heb. 13:17). Paul, like Peter, connects the activity of shepherding with leadership. He clearly identified to the elders at Ephesus that shepherding was leadership, for he admonished them to be careful about their position as overseers of the people (Acts 20:28). Poor shepherds make poor leaders, and they will contend with God for feeding themselves at the expense of the flock, for not caring for the sick, and for not seeking the lost (Ezek. 34:2–5).

Good elders follow the dictates of Scripture and tend the flock according to the will of Christ.

Elders, according to Peter, are also to shepherd eagerly (1 Peter 5:2), not for financial gain or increased reputation. Shepherding is not a chore, for it is to be done enthusiastically. It is not for the faint of heart or for those who feel that serving God's people is merely a mundane task. Those who desire only to govern the church, and who have no heart for involving themselves in the lives of people, should not consider themselves called to pastoral work. But if elders love people, then they should be so filled with Jesus that their sheep see the Savior in them. These men who will shepherd earnestly will also rule well and, therefore, will be worthy of double honor (1 Tim. 5:17).

Governing well includes loving people in such a fashion that the office of elder is not denigrated. Leaders who love sheep do not flaunt their position as being superior to the very people whom they are called to shepherd. The decisions they make are hopefully judgments for the betterment of the people. Being dictatorial is not the calling of a servant-leader. When his disciples were squabbling over hierarchy in the kingdom, Jesus reminded them that unbelieving rulers lord their authority over the Gentiles. This is not to be the case for leaders in Christ's kingdom, for whoever desires to be great must first be a servant to others; and anyone wishing to be first among brothers must be a slave to others. The model is that of Christ, who came not to be served but rather to serve his followers and to give his life for them (Mark 10:35–45).

The final trait of an elder of God's people, according to Peter, is that of being an example to the flock (1 Peter 5:3). Leaders are to be model citizens, people to be emulated, and teachers to be admired. A bad reputation in the church or in the community disqualifies men from church leadership. Peter said that elders are to shepherd in an exemplary way, and a tarnished character precludes such service. Modeling virtue, courage, love, and care will cause the sheep to easily hear the voice of their shepherds and to follow their lead unhesitatingly.

Choosing and training godly leaders who are scripturally qualified is the cure for poor leadership. Since it is the congregation who nominate their leaders, the body of Christ must be taught what good, biblical

leadership looks like. Anyone who is nominated should be asked if he truly aspires to the office of elder or deacon. An important question proposed to a candidate should be, “Why do you want to be an officer in Christ’s church?” If his answer is vague and his desire to serve Christ is not enthusiastic, I would kindly ask him to decline the nomination and to prayerfully consider what it means to be a servant to the people of Christ’s church.

I cannot overly stress that a church officer is called to represent Christ as a shepherd to his people. Although he will serve on a board and make decisions with his fellow elders, he is encouraged to find the will of Christ and discuss this among his brothers. A board of elders should be led by the Spirit to discover God’s will for the local church. Decisions should have the best interests of the sheep in mind, as well as the spreading of the gospel to the local community.

THE SYMPTOMS OF POOR LEADERSHIP

There are many godly leaders in God’s church today. This book is a refresher course that commends them for avoiding the pitfalls of leadership. For others, this book will serve as a tool to train them in becoming shepherd leaders by encouraging them to adopt the leadership traits of Jesus and to avoid the nine pitfalls that are inherent in weak leaders. In the following chapters, I will review the leadership qualities of Jesus that will help to overcome the common faults of weak leaders. After looking at the symptoms of poor leadership, I will suggest treatments to eradicate them in order to help to conform our character to that of the captain of the Lord’s army. If the church of Christ is to grow in vitality, its leaders are to grow as Joshua did in courage, righteousness, wisdom, and perseverance.

LEADERS,

church revitalization starts with you!

The world desperately needs the ministry of a thriving church—but all too often the local church is stagnant and ineffective. An ailing church needs vibrant, healthy leadership! But what's the solution when leaders feel fatigued from their work, discouraged by church conflicts, and ill equipped for the demands of shepherding?

Church planter and professional interim pastor Robert D. Stuart challenges pastors and elders to take a frank look at the most common illness behind a stagnant church: weak or ineffective leadership. In this diagnostic manual, he lists some telltale symptoms of a poorly led church, such as fear of change, personal “sacred cows,” and superficial uniformity instead of true unity.

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“As someone who has led a company, pastored a church, and trained future pastors, I have read a number of books on leadership. Not one of those books, however, has been as practical and as full of real-life examples as Bob Stuart's.”

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“Bob Stuart . . . diagnoses the sickness in the church, exposes the practice of poor church leadership, and prescribes the cure. Leaders, pastors, and church planters are encouraged to read this book, which will help them become the leaders they were called to be.”

David V. Edling, Author, *Redeeming Church Conflicts*

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