

*The following is a true history of the events and circumstances in a local church. The names of places and people have been changed. The events are recorded with accuracy and integrity. The purpose of this study is to facilitate dialogue and understanding of the change process and the place of values in attempting change. It is written in the first person, the church being the speaker, the author of this text.*

**Premise # 1 – Facts alone will never change values.**

**Premise # 2 – Values drive behavior.**

I am Dogwood Baptist Church. I was established in the twentieth century (1937) in a suburban city in the SE United States. We, the members and I, are part of a large evangelical denomination and have demonstrated intense loyalty in that relationship. I died as a result of a tragic, but very common illness, which I will describe in this document. Most of the members of this body refuse to acknowledge the fact that we are dead. Not dying, but stone cold DEAD. Oh yes, there is a delay, a period between death and burial. But, rest assured, we are dead. Listen as I tell you my story. If you have an ear, listen and learn. You may have this tragic illness. Are you sure you are living?

We just came through the Great Depression. You know, the big one. I think I see a glimmer of hope on the horizon. We are near a major university. People are moving into our area. There is economic and numerical growth. This is good and bodes well for us.

Our first two pastors have a combined tenure of nine years. Then, the patriarch arrives on the scene. He shepherds us for twenty-one years, years filled with growth, spiritual and numerical, and much blessing. Our denomination launched a focus on numerical growth during this time. In retrospect, we did grow numerically, but I am afraid we missed many other critical aspects of true maturation and effectiveness. That is most clearly evident now, fifty years later. Peter Senge mentions this phenomenon in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, on Page 63:

“Cause and effect are not closely related in time and space... By ‘effects,’ I mean, the obvious symptoms that indicate that there are problems.... By ‘cause,’ I mean the interaction of the underlying system that is most responsible for generating the symptoms, and which, if recognized, could lead to changes producing lasting improvement. Why is this a problem? Because most of us assume they *are*— most of us assume, most of the time, that cause and effect *are* close in time and space.”

I will bring you back to this point. For now, this is called Mission, Purpose<sup>1</sup>. We completely lost sight of this and invested all of our energies in preserving status quo, growing numerically. More is better, biggest is best. (Are you familiar with this syndrome? I thought so.) Well, we lost the battle right here, way back around 1970. Only now do I see how devastating that loss is.

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<sup>1</sup> *Developing A Vision For Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* by Aubrey Malphurs. (Second Addition). This book is very helpful in understanding and defining Mission and Vision for ministry.



There was a series of shepherds through the decades of the 70's to the turn of the century. I think for our purposes here, a quasi-autopsy, a summary of these tenures will reveal just how accurate Mr. Senge's principle is. I will remove the longest and shortest tenure of our shepherds, ten in number. This produces the following statistics.

<u>Decade</u>	<u>Average Pastoral Tenure</u>
1970 to 1980	4.7 years
1980 to 1990	3.9 years
1990 to 2000	2.5 years

So? What does this prove? Well, George Barna's research on "Pastoral Tenure and Effectiveness in Ministry" indicates that the most fruitful and effective years of pastoral ministry are years five through fourteen. In thirty years we never had a single shepherd who enjoyed the "wonder years," those fruitful times of reaping the fruit of faithful disciple-making and growing saints to obey all that Jesus commanded. By the way, our current shepherd has been with us for three years. He is about ready to leave, perhaps in the next 60 days. His immediate predecessor has been blamed for causing our demise. Before you accept that as accurate, remember the principle of cause and effect, time and space. Under that shepherd, many of our people left. Something about 'crassmatics' or something like that.

That was quite a battle. People showed up for that meeting that had not attended in three or four years. They said they were members. Well, I didn't remember most of them. As I recall, they came once or twice, everyone raised their hands, and we called them "members." Then they were gone for years. Seems strange that you would allow a person who has made no effort to so much as darken your door in years to make major critical leadership decisions about your future.

Jesus said His body was about community, fellowship, belonging, and sharing life in common.<sup>2</sup> He said we are to be accountable in community to one another. (How can you hold me accountable if you never see me?) Well, that is what happened. It was ugly. There were charges and counter charges. Each camp blamed the other. Here is how that infamous night ended. The shepherd left. Scores of people went with him. They started another church. Seems like bad DNA to me. What kind of offspring will that kind of parent have?

Here we are, 2002. Several years ago our current shepherd presented a wonderful action plan. It included that mission and purpose we spoke of earlier. They say "a picture is worth a thousand words." Well, he even gave us a picture. There was a clear path, sequential steps for achieving the process of renewal and becoming a healthy, thriving assembly once again. We sure cut him off at the knees.

There was some initial enthusiasm, mostly just fluff though. In about six weeks we slid right back into status quo. Our people are old. Somebody dies every week. Funerals, funerals. Has anyone ever considered how we are going to survive if everybody is dead? No matter what our shepherd says, we just do what we have always done. We also get what we have always gotten – more funerals and shrinking resources. Fewer financial resources. Less community impact. Less vitality in our worship. Didn't Jesus say something about obeying your Leaders?

Recently we sold a single-family dwelling we owned. We took the equity and paid off our mortgage. We even had \$20K left over. Do you know what we did with that money? Did we establish a global missions endeavor, adopt a country and make a difference? Nope! Did we carefully analyze our community, identify strategies to reach the people and implement our plan? Nope!

We did what every cadaver does. We bought a new suit in which we will be buried. We bought new carpet for the sanctuary that seats 1,000 and into which we crowd 100 every Sunday. More people left when we did that. About that Mission & Purpose... Well, ours is survival. Jesus said the way to live is to die — to die to self and our personal agenda, to adopt His agenda and obey all that He has commanded. When you ask our people what our purpose is,

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<sup>2</sup> *Life Together - A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Chapter 2 on Community is valuable in understanding the essence of biblical community.

you get forty different answers. I think we are riding off in forty directions at once. At the rate we are dying, in 3 or 4 years, they may be having that funeral for us! But hey, at least we have a new suit.

### **Observations on Values: A Dialogue**

- What common factors do you find operating in this scenario?
- Is this church typical of many in America today? In what ways?
- Do you comprehend the “cause & effect” issue Senge posits?
- What part do documents, constitutions, by-laws, etc. play in the decline of churches?
- What would you identify as the single preeminent value in this congregation?
- What single factor must be changed if a body such as this is to thrive, be renewed?
- Do you pastor an assembly with similar values? Do you believe you are God’s change-agent for that place?
- What are you willing to do to obey all that Jesus has commanded and lead God’s people in that path?

### **The Laws of *The Fifth Discipline*<sup>3</sup>**

The following principles are offered as a basis for true open and candid dialogue. Dialogue is different from discussion. Everyone must be engaged. Everyone must set aside personal agendas. Everyone must put the health and future of the organization above their own preferences and priorities. That is why it is called discipline. Enjoy the process.

1. Today's problems come from yesterday's “solutions.”
2. The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back.
3. Behavior grows better before it grows worse.
4. The easy way out usually leads back in.
5. The cure can be worse than the disease.
6. Faster is slower.
7. Cause and effect are not closely related in time and space.
8. Small changes can produce big results, but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious.
9. You can have your cake and eat it too, but not at once.
10. Dividing an elephant in half does not produce two small elephants.
11. There is no blame.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Fifth Discipline - The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization* by Peter Senge. Pages 57-67. An examination of these principles, open dialogue, and the application of the fruits of that dialogue to ministry structures may prevent your assembly from becoming the next Dogwood Baptist. A clear understanding of where you have been and how you got there is a very helpful tool in guiding you to the place you need to be.