

The Key Warning Sign Your Church is Dying

By

George Bullard

Executive Director

Columbia Metro Baptist Association

GeorgeBullard@ColumbiaMetro.org

The key warning sign your church is dying is that you are becoming an *overly churched culture congregation*.

Is this fatal? Is there anything you can do about it? It is not initially fatal. You can effectively address this situation.

Consider this. You have been away from home for a few days. When you return you see that your favorite plant, which requires regular watering, is in serious need of water and other attention. You water it. You provide it with a dose of plant food. You breathe on it. And you move it closer to a light source. Soon it is green and healthy again.

On a subsequent trip, you are gone several days too long. When you return this time, your plant is dead. Nothing will revive it. You have to start over again. But you do not decide this the first day back. You water it. You provide it with a dose of plant food. You breathe on it. And you move it closer to a light source. Nothing helps. It's dead.

The same thing happens with congregations. They need nurturing, attention, and to stay close to the eternal source of light. Like your favorite plant, sometimes they need to be turned around or moved to a different place because they are leaning over and not standing up straight. As they grow – while simultaneously getting root bound – they need to be repotted.

What is an *Overly Churched Culture Congregation*?

A Christ-centered, faith-based congregation becomes an *overly churched culture congregation* when the internal or gathered cultural patterns of the congregation – the way a congregation does things – become more important than the external or scattered patterns of the congregation. When the traditions of the congregation outweigh the transformation of the spiritual lives of people in its context, then it is an *overly churched culture congregation*.

Congregations do not become overly churched overnight. It sneaks up on them. They often do not realize it is happening until it is a major trait of the congregation. Congregations do not intentionally plan to become overly churched. It comes about naturally as the stability and safety of reliable traditions overtake the missional movement of the congregation.

In their book, *Future Church: Seven Laws of Real Church Growth* (Baker Books, 2020), Will Mancini and Cory Hartman would say it is when a congregation moves from the Upper Room to the Lower Room. In my own work I would say it is when Accountable Management is driving the journey of the congregation, Programmatic Emphases are navigating the journey, and Visionary Leadership and Relationship Experience are asleep in the back seat.

Statistically, it is when half or more of the active attendance in a congregation are *60-40-20 People*. They are at least 60 years old, they have attended a church, or churches, for at least 40 years, and they have attended their current church for at least 20 years.

When Does a Congregation Begin to Become an *Overly Churched Culture Congregation*?

Typically – unless there is an external intervention or internal crisis – a congregation can grow and develop with reasonable health for 18 or more years. After that time, the founding vision of the congregation wanes and the congregation becomes too comfortable with established churched cultural patterns. The wisest and most insightful congregations realize this and engage in a process to spiral forward to the next stage of life toward which God is pulling it.

However, the vast majority of congregations – some would say upwards of 80 percent – do not realize their churched culture is taking over as the main motive and movement of their congregation. Without intervention, these congregations will go through the following five stages. It may take a while – perhaps decades – but they will never be what they once were without intervention.

- Stage One is where the very early signs of being an *overly churched culture congregation* are hardly noticeable to all by the most astute observers. The majority of the congregation is in denial.
- Stage Two is where very early signs are noticeable, but people react with nostalgia, then disappointment, and finally anger.
- Stage Three is where major signs of an *overly churched culture congregation* are evident, and people panic about the need for short-term fixes but seldom find a long-term solution. At this stage is when a congregation is fully an *overly churched culture congregation*.
- Stage Four is where despair sets in because there is no fix or magical solution. They now realize they do not have the resources to turnaround their situation.
- Stage Five is where the congregation accepts death rather than accepting an outside solution offered to them.

Next: What is the way forward for an *overly churched culture congregation*?