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Recommended Citation

Thayer, Jane, "Reviving a Dying Church: The Role of Leadership" (2023). *Faculty Publications*. 4536.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/4536>

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REVIVING A DYING CHURCH: THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

Jane Thayer

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In 2014, Bill McClendon, Vice President for Church Growth in the Washington Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, was called by the Chesapeake Conference to pastor the Baltimore First Church with the goal of saving it from impending death. In the three and a half years McClendon pastored that church, membership increased by 70 baptisms, eight rebaptisms, and 28 professions of faith. Additionally, with transfers of membership, weekly Sabbath attendance grew from around 70 to around 290. (L. Tuazon, personal communication, January 6, 2022)

How did this church beat the odds and survive? How did Pastor McClendon and his leadership team revive a dying church? Why did their strategies work? A case study was conducted to answer just these questions. To study the church turnaround from different perspectives, phone and in-person interviews of pastors, leaders, and parishioners were conducted; additional information was obtained from a visit to the church and a member survey (see appendix) returned by 46 parishioners who had witnessed the church's revival.

The Larger Context of Church Growth and Leadership

In 2020, the approximately 6,000 Adventist congregations in the North American Division (NAD) averaged 2.66 accessions, annually (David Trim, personal communication, January 11, 2022). David Beckworth and S. Joseph Kidder (2010) found that NAD Adventist churches were not maintaining the ratio of members to population growth.

This trend was also true in other denominations. Using a national database of over 200,000 American churches, David T. Olson (2008) examined church attendance—a factor closely

related to membership—and discovered that from 2000 to 2005, “in no single state did church attendance keep up with population growth” (p. 37).

Leadership expert Peter G. Northouse (2007) defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3). He said leadership is “not a trait or characteristic that resides in the leader . . . Process implies that a leader affects and is affected by followers” (p. 3). In organizations, there are two major kinds of power: position power and personal power. “Personal power is the influence capacity a leader derives from being seen by followers as likable and knowledgeable” (Northouse, 2007, p. 7). Of the four major approaches to leadership identified by Northouse (2007), the style approach (p. 69) with its consideration of both task behaviors and relationship behaviors best explains the findings of this study.

From 2003 to 2007, Kidder (2011) and his research team studied 23 purposefully selected Adventist churches in the NAD to look for the major factors that influenced church growth. Basing their survey questions and interview protocols on Natural Church Development (Schwarz, 1996, 2003), a church assessment system, they discovered that church growth in the NAD was strongly related to a four major factors: 1) effective and empowering leadership; 2) passionate and authentic spirituality; 3) committed and active laity; and 4) God-exalting worship (Kidder, 2011, p. 13). These churches have leaders “who genuinely want their congregation to grow and are willing to pay its cost” (p. 13). The leaders love evangelism and have a faith-based optimism (pp. 13–14).

History and Setting of the Baltimore First Church

Baltimore First Church was founded in 1888. The congregation moved to different locations, and finally purchased a church on St. Johns Lane in Ellicott City, a suburb of Baltimore, in 1989. This rapidly growing suburb is comprised of diverse ethnic groups, and

within a 25-mile radius, many known Adventists and former Adventists live. However, by 2014, only 70 members were attending on a regular basis. In 2016, the church changed its name to Ellicott City Church.

Background of Bill McClendon

Bill McClendon became an Adventist at age 21 after attending an evangelistic series in Tulsa, OK. When he lost his job because of Sabbath observance, he started a successful tech company. He married Shirlene Meister in 1985. Over the 15 years he was part of an Adventist church in Tulsa, he observed that the church's membership did not increase; people jointed the church, but most did not stay. When conference officials were made aware of McClendon's concern at this problem, they suggested that he plant a church. He did. In the 10 years that McClendon was pastor of the new Tulsa Christian Fellowship Church, it grew to about 900 members. He then left the pastorate to work as an administrator in the Oklahoma Conference. Later, he moved to the Washington Conference where he served as vice president for church growth until 2014. He then moved to Baltimore and pastored the Ellicott City Church about three and a half years (2014 to 2018). Currently, he is vice president for administration and evangelism director of the North Pacific Union Conference.

Getting Started

Going from a conference administrative position to a pastor is not a career path's typical trajectory. When McClendon received the call to move to Ellicott City Church, he talked it over with his wife Shirlene, and they prayed about it. Accepting this call would also mean moving from the West Coast to the East Coast. However, the appeal of being able to watch God do something amazing was overwhelming. And so, they said yes. As part of their agreement to pastor a dying church, McClendon asked the conference to provide two salaries, one for him and

one for Shirlene. In the past she had worked full time without pay; he wanted her work legitimized.

Somewhere in South Dakota on their way to Baltimore, McClendon got a call from Ellicott City Church's head elder. The elder expressed his desire to have a church business meeting to determine if the church wanted the McClendons to come.

"That ship has left." McClendon told him. "We are on our way. We are not going to have a meeting to decide this." After they arrived, another church leader pulled McClendon aside and told him, "The only reason you are here is that the conference put a gun to our heads." Indeed, the conference "parachuted him in there," as one conference official put it.

The McClendons arrived in Ellicott City on a Wednesday. On Thursday, McClendon was given a tour of the church facilities. He noticed the parking lot was full of potholes and surrounded with weeds; the building itself needed maintenance and updating, inside and out. He saw a church that looked like it was dying. McClendon went home and cried.

"What are we going to do?" Shirlene asked.

"Well, we're here. We are going to stay," McClendon replied.

That Friday night, before the congregation had even heard him preach, McClendon and Shirlene invited the church board to have dinner together at the church. McClendon asked the board members to tell him what they wanted the church to be. They wanted the church to grow, they wanted young people. McClendon responded, "That's exactly what God wants, and that's what I want. So, let's go for it." They prayed together and made a commitment to hold an evangelistic meeting in three months. That night, as McClendon put it, "the church turned around."

A short time later, McClendon and the leadership team (formerly called the church board) held an in-house weekend retreat. The leaders cast their vision for the church and individually decided whether they were willing to be part of this vision.

“We signed on to this, spiritually as well as practically,” said Jackie Gonzalez-Feezer, a leadership team member.

At this retreat, McClendon also implemented a weekly prayer call (i.e., a group phone call) for leaders. The call lasted about 30 minutes and was comprised of a short devotional preceded prayers. According to Gonzalez-Feezer, “That began our spiritual journey.”

Transforming a Congregation

“Bill didn’t just add attendance; he led a spiritual movement. He had the people praying,” said Gary Gibbs, then director of ministries in the Chesapeake Conference. Prayer began with the leadership team but soon expanded into the congregation. Congregational prayer phone calls were set up for 6:30 a.m. and 9:00 p.m. daily. Annually, the leadership team would vote on a new prayer initiative for the year. That initiative would be printed on cards and given to the church family, who were invited to join the leadership team in praying. The church prayed for such things as the evangelistic series, for a stronger youth group, for everyone to grow spiritually, and to help others grow spiritually.

Life groups were started. They met once a week and focused on prayer and Bible reading. The purpose of the Bible reading was to ask, “What is God saying to me?” The entire congregation was expected to be reading daily from the Bible by following the texts printed on a bookmark handed out quarterly.

For people coming into the church by baptism or profession of faith, a “lifeguard” was assigned to mentor and keep track of them. Details about their health, relationships, and attendance were entered into a database each week. If a person missed church three times, they

would receive a handwritten card from their lifeguard. Each Sabbath, a printout was made and given to McClendon with information provided by the lifeguards. This information made it possible for McClendon to know the pulse of the congregation at all times.

When the McClendons were leaving the Ellicott City Church to return to the Northwest, McClendon was asked for what he hoped to be remembered. “Prayer,” he responded.

Commenting on the prayers of the pastor, Joy Reber, one of the Ellicott City Church organists and pianists, shared that at the beginning of the worship service, McClendon would stand up to pray. She commented, “You could hear him calling for the presence of God to be among us. It was just so powerful; it was hard not to be moved by that every week.” It was clear to the members that McClendon’s relationship with God was his number one priority.

The Trifecta—McClendon’s Leadership Guide for Church Growth

McClendon explains his theory on church growth this way:

Churches don’t do naturally, organically what they are supposed to do. I hear pastors all the time say, “My church doesn’t want to do that.” Well, that’s why you are there. If the church wanted to do that, we wouldn’t need you there. Is it about leadership? Absolutely. I call it the “trifecta.” It’s really about vision, it is about passion, and it is about faith.

Vision

McClendon believes that God wants to grow churches if people will clear the environment so God can work. He explains his vision in this way:

People ask me, “What do I need to do to grow my church?” I have found there is not a secret bullet. There is not a pill that you take, and you begin to grow. Church growth is about doing a lot of things well. There are a lot of knobs that have to be tweaked. But probably not very much. There is very little difference between what a growing church does, and a declining church does. What I believe makes the difference is not *what* but *why*. *Why* do we have Fellowship Lunch? *Why* do we worship? *Why* do we have small groups? We are trying to win people for the kingdom. When you do something, but you don’t know why you do it, you lose that edge.

Passion

The passion of McClendon’s trifecta finds expression in commitment and consistent hard work and is focused on the mission of the church. McClendon and Shirlene worked from the

church all week. “They were there almost 24/7. People started to realize ‘This guy is for real,’” said Jack Johns, a Sabbath school teacher at Ellicott City Church.

Gonzalez-Feezer concurs:

[Bill] didn’t say, “Hey, this is what it looks like to be a servant leader, and that’s what I am.” He didn’t tell people about motivation—he showed them. People responded to it. It was kinda like there was this feeling in the air that something good was happening, and you wanted to be a part of it. There was just this electricity when Bill was around.

McClendon’s passion for commitment and work demanded a lot from the congregation. “He didn’t tolerate slackers,” said Reber. “He would definitely tell you that this isn’t right, and you needed to do it differently.” It was widely known that he expected people to work on every project until it was as “perfect as we can make it.”

Gonzalez-Feezer, adds, “He was great with structure and organization. You have no idea how many times I would have to re-do things for him. It was like, ‘No, this just isn’t quite what I’m wanting.’”

Jerry Chase, the Earliteen Sabbath school teacher and church outreach leader, also recognized McClendon’s penchant for perfection and how it affected those who worked on ministries:

Bill was very protective of what happened. If there was some groaning sometimes, it was because he managed things a bit too much for some people’s taste. But he would also give people space. If there is one thing that describes Bill’s ministry, it was his intentionality. He was intentional about everything he did. He had an idea of the kind of church he wanted our church to be, and he modeled that. He preached about it.

Reber sums up McClendon’s leadership style: “He was authoritative and yet shepherd-like.”

Faith

McClendon believed that God was going to do something great at Ellicott City Church. Reber said that that faith was contagious:

When I look back on it, it was a time when it was exciting to get up and go to church every week. I looked forward to it in a way I had never done before. It was exciting. What is going to happen this week? . . . What is God going to do? It was really special.

McClendon told me, “People ask me all the time, ‘Are there miracles in your church?’

Yes, yes. If there aren’t miracles in your church, God probably isn’t doing much, or you are missing them.”

Changing the Physical Facilities

The earliest, and perhaps most convincing, evidence of the McClendons’ commitment to hard work and to the Ellicott City Church was the changes made to the physical facilities. The sanctuary section sits far back from the street with a county-owned, grass-filled drainage basin and the parking lot in front of the building. The long Sabbath School wing juts out one side along the basin.

“The outside of the church was a disaster. The parking lot looked horrible,” said Johns. Weeds surrounded the parking lot, which was filled with cracks and potholes. The first Sunday morning after the McClendons arrived, McClendon rallied some of the church leaders to help him clean out the weeds. A short time later, the parking lot was repaved.

Other changes and additions began almost immediately. “He transformed the whole former elementary school gym into a fellowship hall. It had always been empty. He bought round tables to encourage conversation. Intentionality is key,” Luiz Rivera, a welcome ministry volunteer, said. McClendon bought cushioned chairs to replace metal folding chairs. Acoustic panels were placed high on one wall, making it possible to hold programs in the previously unused space.

The kitchen, which had been the size of a home kitchen, was transformed into a commercial-sized kitchen with professional equipment. Large groups could then be served.

The church has an especially large foyer. McClendon hired a decorator to update the area. Debbie Rivera, associate pastor, heard McClendon say many times, “When we invite guests into our home, we do everything we can financially, and with time, and physically to make our home the most beautiful as possible. And we need to do the same thing with God’s house.”

McClendon made a tool room. “Anytime you want a tool, we have it,” said L. Rivera. “[Bill] was preparing the church to be clean, to be fixed. Anything you see, he bought.” It was common knowledge that no defective ceiling tile could survive the pastor’s eagle eye. The men’s bathroom, which had been in a run-down condition upon McClendon’s arrival, was totally remodeled.

McClendon set up a prayer room with cushioned furniture and large white boards for writing prayer requests. Turning the wing of the former school into the Sabbath school division gave a major boost to children’s ministry and to adult Sabbath school classes. The children’s rooms were painted pastel colors, colorful decorations were placed on the walls, and child-sized chairs and equipment for videos were purchased.

In the early days when the church was struggling to stay afloat, a concerned person said to Gibbs, then director of ministries in the Chesapeake Conference, who was visiting Ellicott City Church, “The pastor is spending money. Lots of money. And he uses his own money, too.”

“Bill is responsible, and God will bless him,” Gibbs responded. Gibbs admitted that for people who are nervous about change, someone like McClendon will always make them nervous. “It can be a frightening ride.”

Not only finances, but also constant changes create anxiety in those who prefer stability. But McClendon was driven by his focus on the mission. He evaluated everything based on how it contributed to that mission. When he saw a discrepancy between the original name of the church, Baltimore First Church, and the location of the church, Ellicott City, the name was

changed to Ellicott City Church. “He did get pushback on the name change,” said Chase. “But Bill said, ‘How do you minister to *this* community if your name is Baltimore?’” (Baltimore is 15 to 20 minutes away from the church.)

The Welcome Center

People attending Ellicott City Church were met with a sincere warm and friendly welcome, which began in the parking lot where they were offered to be taken by golf cart to the front door of the church. “The golf carts became something we were known for,” said David Carr, a church elder. “People wanted the experience of riding in a golf cart.” McClendon saw the golf carts as a means of getting acquainted with visitors. The drivers talked with the people riding in their carts. At the front door, the drivers introduced the visitors to a greeter, who took them to the welcome desk and introduced them to a member who then took them on a tour of the church and showed them where lunch would be served. All people associated with the carts and welcome center were carefully selected and trained. L. Rivera explained that the spirit behind the welcome, “is love. It’s in our DNA. The welcome center is [about] love.”

However, having a welcome center cannot accomplish much without people to welcome. Successfully finding people to welcome explains the growth of Ellicott City Church. This search began with evangelism.

Evangelism

McClendon’s concept of evangelism and the typical concept of evangelism differ dramatically:

Evangelism is everything we do. What we think of as evangelism is really the whole process. It’s reaching people who don’t know Christ, introducing them [to him], and then helping them with those logical steps to become a part of God’s church, to become a disciple, to become whatever God is leading them [to do].

The Ellicott City Church members understood this process. Under McClendon’s leadership, the church made a commitment to have two evangelistic series each year, but some

years there were more. McClendon said that his evangelistic series were typical Adventist series built on Revelation and Christ-centered. “I love preaching an evangelistic series. I’m not a good evangelist. But God helped us,” he said. The meetings were held in the church. Chase describes them: “They were not super; they were like generic evangelistic meetings. Everything Bill did was done well. They were polished, but they weren’t glitzy.”

The first evangelistic series, held just three months after the McClendons arrived, brought three people into the church. For the Ellicott City Church, which had had no baptisms the previous two years, this was huge. Yet by the time the McClendons left, 30 to 35 people were being baptized a year!

The frequency of evangelistic series was exhausting; each series was five nights a week for 6 to 8 weeks. But when people started being baptized, “it just lit a fire under everybody. There wasn’t anything we couldn’t do in the power of God, moving forward,” said Johns.

For McClendon evangelism and discipling were a single, continuous process:

We committed to making disciples and not just members. This is a big one for me. In all my years of pastoring, we could have baptized more than we have. We had 30 baptisms last year [2017]; we could have baptized 50. But we are committed to making disciples, so we tend not to baptize right after evangelism. We let them come to church and begin to grow.

Children’s Ministry

Surprisingly, members ranked evangelism as the second most important contributor to church growth. First place went to children’s ministry. McClendon used children’s ministry strategically. His wife Shirlene was in charge of it—and she was good. “She is highly organized, highly child focused. She has a real passion—I mean a real passion—for the spiritual growth of children,” said D. Rivera.

“The Children’s Ministry was a huge driver in the health and the growth of the church,” Chase agreed.

McClendon saw the potential of children's ministry, encouraged it, and started putting money there. D. Rivera explained: "When the second pastor who came after Bill saw how much money was being given to children's ministry, he was shocked. He said, 'No church ever gives this amount of money [to children's ministry].'" D. Rivera adds that McClendon was always emphasizing the need to put money where their priorities were, and he preached it frequently and consistently from the front. "Our children, our children. We're putting our money in our children," he repeated. The budget required that the children's ministry get this money to be able to create and to design spiritual activities and events for children, parents, and families.

One Sabbath a month, Kidzfest was held. Kidzfest began with breakfast and lasted until 5 o'clock in the evening. McClendon always scheduled evangelistic series and Vacation Bible Schools to end on a Kidzfest Sabbath. "It was very intentional to put in place programming so that people would want to be at church all day," said Carr. Parents and grandparents would come to see their children and stay all day. Adventurers and Pathfinders filled another Sabbath each month.

"Our intent was to provide programming all day long. We found that new believers don't know what to do on Sabbath," said McClendon. In addition to Kidzfest, one day a month the church did some kind of outreach; another Sabbath, they would do something family-friendly, like go for a walk. There was always a Bible study after Sabbath lunch and the prayer ministry going on. A few small groups would meet. Two Sabbath afternoons a month, Shirlene held Bible study classes for children. All-day Sabbath programming was used as a tool of discipling. "We never had a deacon lock the building on Sabbath," said McClendon.

Conclusion

A close look at the Ellicott City Church reveals that there is no mystery why the church grew so rapidly between 2014 and 2018. The church had a pastor and a congregation who were

“willing to pay the cost” (Kidder, 2011, p. 36). A powerful tool for understanding how Bill McClendon led the congregation is Northouse’s style approach, which evaluates both task and relationship behaviors. McClendon ranked high in both, becoming an effective leader by finding a way to “balance the two” (Northouse, 2007, p. 78).

Being able to influence a group of people toward a common goal is the very definition of a leader (Northouse, 2007, p. 3). McClendon’s task behaviors gave the congregation its first evidence that he was committed to the church and was serious about the church’s mission. No cleanup or maintenance job was too humble for him to tackle. He and his wife worked long hours at the church, not from a home office.

McClendon loved evangelism, which he interpreted to include discipleship. Kidder (2011, pp. 13-14) found the pastor’s “love of evangelism” to be highly correlated with church growth.

McClendon’s skill with relationship-building became evident the night he and his wife invited all the church leaders to share a meal (before he had preached a sermon) and listened to their hopes for the church. He anticipated visitors’ needs and carefully selected and trained parishioners to interact with them and provide a helpful welcome. He understood the value of starting the Sabbath fellowship lunch immediately after the sermon so that people would be more inclined to stay and dine. Seeing the fellowship lunch as a time for relationship building, he spent most of the meal talking with visitors, new members, and leaders.

However, the relationship which may have given him the most personal power (Northouse, 2007, p. 7) was his own relationship with God. His public prayers, his faith that “God was going to do something,” his example and encouragement for the leaders and the entire congregation to pray, to read the Bible, and to participate in a small group created a “spiritual

movement.” All these tasks and relationships, relentlessly focused on mission by leaders willing to pay the cost, explain why the leadership was able to grow the church.

Appendix: Member Survey

Characteristics and behaviors of the pastor

To what extent did these characteristics and behaviors of the pastor contribute to the growth of the church?

- his sermons
- his vision for what the church could be
- seeking the vision of church leaders
- demanding commitment from leaders
- making changes quickly
- working alongside others
- no tolerance for sloppy work
- commitment to the ECC
- intentionality for all ministries
- “people” skills
- personality
- relationship with God

Ministries and Activities

To what extent did these ministries and activities contribute to the growth of the church?

- golf car ministry
- trained greeters,
- check-in system,
- gift bags,
- cards sent to missing members,
- frequent evangelistic series,
- Kidzfest,
- re-introduction of Adventurers and Pathfinders,
- devoting a wing of the church to kids,
- Life Groups,
- Life Guards,
- change of church name,
- repairing and updating the church building,
- starting Sabbath dinners immediately after the sermon,
- using Sabbath dinners to interact with guests,
- prayer conference calls twice a day,
- keeping the church open with activities all day Sabbath

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