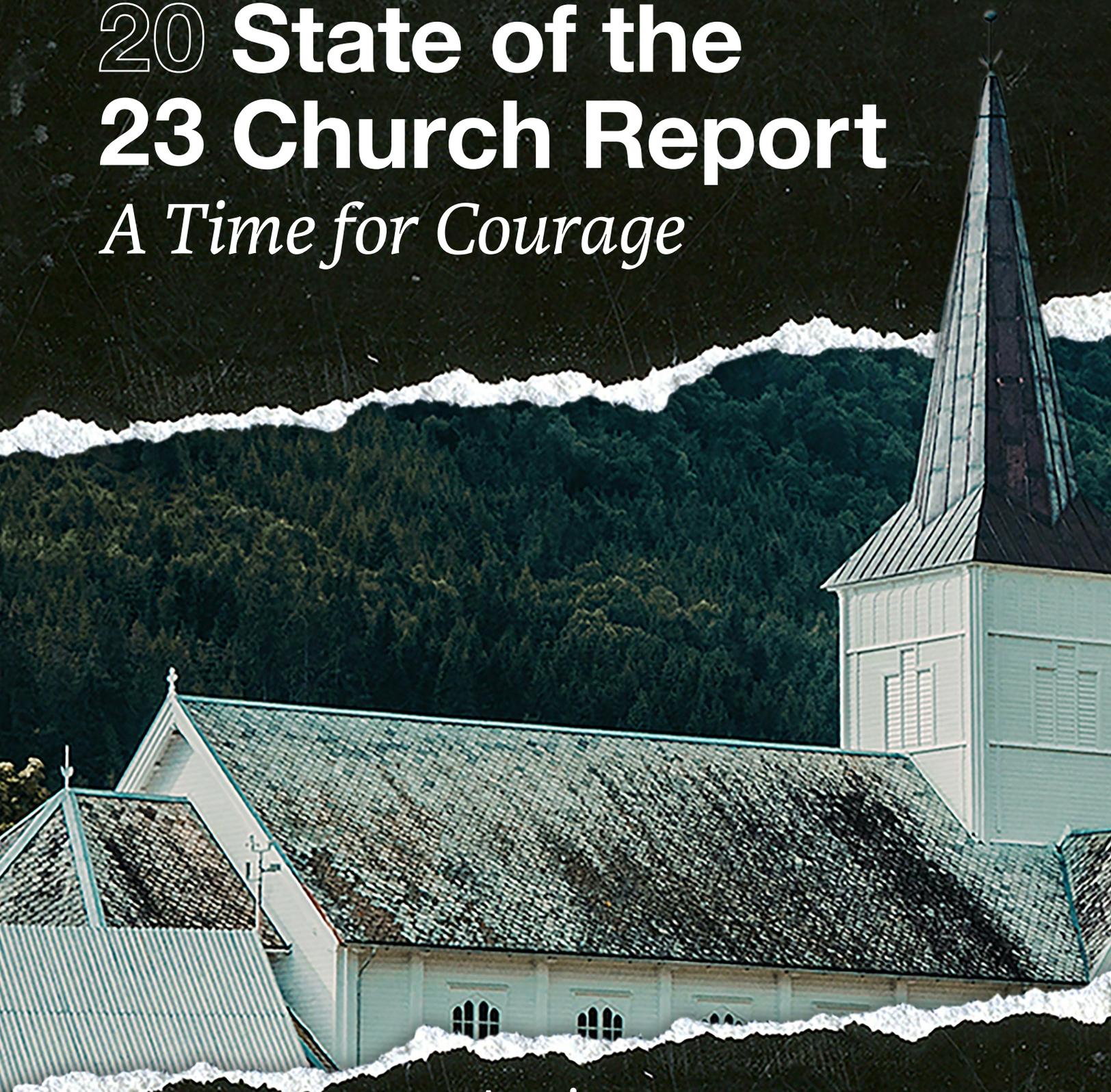


20 State of the 23 Church Report

A Time for Courage



American
Pastors Network



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INTRODUCTION

Last year, at about this time, we produced our first *State of the Church Report*. It is our attempt at the AMERICAN PASTORS NETWORK to examine the landscape of the evangelical churches across our nation and gain some insights on the attitudes and trends that seem to be common among congregations. As I have re-read last year's report, the two words that seemed to capture the church in America was "rejoicing and confused." Pastors and parishioners alike were so thankful to be out of the COVID craziness and starting to get back to "regular order." There was this simmering joy starting to occur. However, many churches had been changed by disruptions of the previous few years and so what had been "normal" was no where in sight. This left many churches confused and trying to determine where they needed to go.

This year has its own challenges. It has been a full year or more since the pandemic ruled our thinking and planning, yet we see a possible threat again of a COVID 2.0 and the going back to mandates and fear that crippled us. We enter 2024 with yet another heated political season and a daily reminder of the national division which plagues us. The world is in turmoil with wars, weather events and wealth threatening crises around every corner and little relief in sight. Pastors and Church leaders must prepare to respond and try to anticipate how to position their flocks to handle the pressures, but even more so, be a Gospel influence throughout these unsettling days. With all of this and more standing in front of us, we have concluded that the greatest need in the church today is a revival of COURAGE. Courage is virtue

that is necessary to live out a dynamic and faith filled life for Christ. Courage is needed to speak boldly when everyone else is speaking a different message. Courage is necessary to confront some of the attitudes that have afflicted many believers today. Courage must resurface in the church again if we are to reclaim our place as an alternative to the cultural confusion we see on a daily basis. We thoroughly believe it is time for courage to re-emerge throughout evangelical Christianity. It has been tamped down for numerous reasons, both by external pressures and internal fears. To reclaim the courage needed to navigate the choppy waters ahead, we must acknowledge what stands before us and then refocus our eyes on the Lord of the Church, the greatest example of courage, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our courage will not be man-made or motivated by some marketing scheme. No, it will come from our confidence that when we do what Christ called the church to do and be, His power will flow through it and we again will "turn the world upside down" like our founding fathers, the Apostles. It was courage that established the way of Christ and the Apostles and it will be courage that re-establishes His work in 2024 and beyond.

Our intent is very simply to present factually, anecdotally, and prophetically what we are seeing from our limited yet broad purview and translate it into useful information to sharpen your ministry potential. With courage we want to present truthful assessment and then lay out the suggestions and solutions that hopefully will inspire courageous action on your part as church leaders.



GENERAL ATTITUDE IN THE CHURCH IN 2023

OLDER SAINTS ARE FED UP

I know that one of the common traits of being a senior citizen is complaining. They complain about their kids not calling or visiting. They complain about the aches and pains they are experiencing. They complain about not being able to hear like they used to. In the context of church life, historically, seniors have whined about how things are shifting too fast and they love saying “we never did it that way before” when resisting change. Nevertheless, what we are seeing now in the ranks of the AARP segment of the church is different. For the past decade or more, older believers have been asked to be patient and adapt to the coming changes in the church. As younger leaders did away with Sunday School, hymns and prayer meetings, older saints waited for equal replacements and more so, fruitfulness.

However, they have watched the churches that they gave their lives to and wealth towards become less effective and less spiritually dynamic. They observe a church that is void of genuine intercession and has performance based worship and sermonettes at best any given Sunday. Plus, they feel more and more overlooked and under loved. One elder statesman shared that he helped start his church 50 years ago and when he stopped attending for over a month, he received no call from anyone. When his absence extended to three months, the pastor made no attempt to find out what happened. I could repeat this story over and over. Yet, when the church launches a new capital campaign they look to these seniors to fund the future with no real hope that they will be a part of that future. These older saints are not happy and they are beginning to leave their long time fellowship and find a church that will care for them and honor them in their final days.

YOUNGER SAINTS ARE APATHETIC

Fueling the senior saint’s ire is seeing the younger generation less and less excited or committed to the church. Sunday morning attendance is optional and lackluster at best. They do not make spiritual concerns and church efforts a priority. Many young families are more passionate about involvement in soccer and hockey traveling teams than in making sure their children are getting a firm spiritual foundation. One Christian author noted that apathy manifests itself in five ways: passivity; familiarity; mediocrity; boredom and disconnection. Passivity is the opposite of taking initiative or being assertive about faith. Familiarity speaks of not being in awe of the things of God and hungering for more. Mediocrity means that you give “just enough” to get by and nothing more. Mediocrity is related to the fact that we are trying to do everything and we have little margin. Boredom is a generational issue and is now used as an excuse why not to remain committed to anything. And finally, disconnection is the final outcome of apathy, where we feel no loyalty to anyone or anything and live a very self-centered life. All of this evidence of apathy is surfacing throughout the younger generation of the church and only genuine spiritual revival will turn it around.

PASTORS ARE TIRED AND AFRAID

Most Shepherds are still in recovery mode from 2021-22, even though many pastors were given “sabbaticals” and extended times off to regroup. But time off is not going to refresh and renew today’s ministers. Most pastors we have spoken with are tired and not from the lack of sleep or rest. They are emotionally exhausted.

They are spiritually exhausted. They are relationally exhausted. And compounding their exhaustion is loneliness that has afflicted many in ministry. Combined with being tired is that most pastors are gripped with fear. The fear of man has been a crippling issue in ministry since the time of Paul, but it has reached a whole new level with the division felt throughout the church. All of the issues plaguing society like racial tensions, political dispositions, gender confusion and sexual orientation have made ministry very complex. But also, there is a “new sanctification” that has crept into the church. This new view on Christian conduct and standards for holiness has opened the door for vices and virtues being blurred. Today, alcohol usage and social drinking is a norm among believers. Some churches are hosting Bible studies at pubs and taverns under the title of “Brews and Bible.” Permissive viewing habits of TV shows or movies has caused conflicts among families when kids are exposed to programs violating more strict values. All of these tensions are dropping in the lap of pastors and they are asked to demonstrate the wisdom of Solomon to keep peace and mature followers.

“*they feel more and more overlooked and under loved.*”

PERSECUTION IS ON THE RISE

Being a believer in Christ is no longer a valued or beloved claim in our country and the disdain towards people of faith is on the increase. Even though the media and even some Christians either deny, downplay, overlook or justify the anger towards believers the reality of this growing persecution is evident to all. Just ask Christian bakers, florists and photographers who have had to bankrupt themselves defending accusations from same-sex couples trying to force them to provide services for their wedding celebrations. You could ask the praying coach, Joe Kennedy, who lost his position because of his outward expression of dependency on the Lord and he can speak of the reality of modern day persecution. Fortunately, he prevailed in the courts and was back on the gridiron but then resigned because of the continued persecution and mistreatment from the school. Christian colleges are in the crosshairs of accreditation agencies with two historical schools shutting their doors this year from overreaching expectations. And then there is the rise of vandalism and arson at Christian pregnancy centers and churches with little to no arrests or prosecutions. You can count on being attacked if you dare align yourself with being pro-life, pro-family, pro-birth gender, pro-parent, pro-prayer or pro-Bible. None of this is a surprise, seeing that Jesus declared, “the world hates me, and therefore will hate you!” But pastors and churches must begin to warn and train today’s believers on how to handle this persecution and to be honest, the lack of spiritual maturity does not bode well for the future.

EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY IN AMERICA LESS AND LESS RESPECTED AND EVEN LESS IMPACTFUL

The church has been on decline for decades. Even though there are more churches today than ever before, and the emergence of the mega-church gives an appearance of being large and vibrant, it’s just not true. Every major church growth researcher in the country speaks of more losses and few gains throughout the church in America. A study by Pew Research found that the number of Americans who identified as Christian was 64%

in 2020, with 30% of the US population being classed as “religiously unaffiliated.” Since the 1990s, large numbers of Americans have left Christianity to join the growing ranks of US adults who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or ‘nothing in particular,’” Pew wrote. “This accelerating trend is reshaping the US religious landscape.” In 1972, 92% of Americans said they were Christian, Pew reported, but by 2070 that number will drop to below 50% – and the number of “religiously unaffiliated” Americans – or ‘nones’ will probably outnumber those adhering to Christianity. About a quarter of the young adults who dropped out of church said they disagreed with their church’s stance on political and social issues. And the pandemic cannot be blamed for this slide. Things like authenticity, hypocrisy, relevancy and genuine life-change has been mounting for a while. And culturally, Christianity is not seen as being “different” than the rest of society. Where once being a Christian meant that you separated yourself from the vices of the day, that gap has just about disappeared. The problem is that if the Church has become like the world, it has nothing to offer the world! This is a far cry from what the first century church was like and the revolutionary impact it had upon the world. It was that “cause-driven” attitude that attracted the lost and motivated the saved. Neither is happening today.

One of these attitudes could be crippling to any church, but from our observations, many, if not most of them can be found in the Body of Christ today. These are monumental obstacles to overcome. It will take courage to actually admit that you and your church are being affected by them. Yet by doing so, you can get to the heart of the issues the church is struggling with. Please note these are attitudes. They are the feelings flowing through the veins of churchgoers. There are still trends and actions that must be addressed.

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COMMON TRENDS IN CHURCHES

01 Biblical Illiteracy throughout the church and especially noticeable in youth and young adults. The lack of serious, ordered learning in the church is coming home to roost. To lessen the amount of time at church and to make discipleship “accessible” we lightened the Biblical learning expectation in most churches in the past decade. In addition, the pulpit has not been seen as a chief Bible teaching platform, but approaching preaching as a self-help, felt-need responder each week. In his new book, Primer on Biblical Literacy, Dr. Corey Marsh, lays out the why, what and how the church has grown up a generation of believers who know little about the sacred Scriptures. Basic Bible stories have been ignored or assumed. Bible study skills have been minimized, leaving

02 Continued insistence to perform songs in worship that are not designed for congregational singing. One of the reasons that we gather together on a Sunday is to lift our collective voices in praise and adoration to our great God. Interestingly enough, when asked by many believers who had to succumb to watching church online during the pandemic, missing singing together was one of the most mentioned voids of that experience. Nevertheless, if you take a deep look at most church worship experiences you discover that most of the people are not singing. When I visit a congregation, I usually sit near the front and sometime during the second song, I will look back and will see that most of the congregation are not singing. Why is this the case? The diagnosis is fairly simple. First, most of the songs that are selected are not written to be sung by a congregation. They are soloist songs. What happens is that a worship leader is listening to KLOVE or another Christian contemporary radio station and they hear a song that they really like. They download it on to their phone and start incessantly listening to it for weeks, until they can just about perfectly

Christians unsure how to actually discover God’s truth for themselves. On any given Sunday 80-90% of attenders walk into worship without a copy of God’s Word and hardly ever engage in active listening and learning. This failure is most felt throughout the younger generation. Somewhere in our thinking, we were told that Bible memorization and repetitive teaching of the grand story of the Bible was boring and would demotivate young people. The fact is, we have left these young adults void of the Biblical knowledge and foundation for faith needed for future growth and faithfulness. This must be addressed and a course change made immediately and without fear of rejection.

mimic the original artist. They then introduce it to the worship team and it shows up the following Sunday. The problem is that the melody and rhythm of the song is not designed to be sung by a crowd of mostly unmusical worshippers! The beat and pitch go up and down the scales and because the church is just seeing the words and not the actual music, they are lost after the first stanza. So, they shut down and just watch the concert on stage. Worship leaders are wailing away on stage and fantasizing about the start of their own concert ministry. I know that sounds very sarcastic, yet we need to address this issue confrontationally because week after week God’s people walk away dissatisfied by their church experience and feeling cheated by the worship. The other reason this is occurring is due to the fact that worship leaders are “frustrated performers” and not true worship pastors. Leading worship is a form of shepherding the flock. There is teaching, guiding, encouraging and training the Saints to enter into the presence of God and direct their affection and awe towards Him. This is no small task and it takes patience and intentionality.

I wish I could say this is an isolated situation, yet I visit enough churches annually to know how widespread this issue is. Worship leader, listen to me, if the people you stand before and lead are not singing, that is on you and you need to fix the problem. Select known and congregationally designed songs. When you introduce a new song, teach it and allow your people to master it before introducing a plethora of additional new music. Predictability and comfort with song selection has a lot to do with worship response. And one last thing,

03 Looming financial downturn. During COVID there seemed to be a lot of extra money floating around the church. The fact is, there was! Giving for the most part was up during 2020 and part of 2021. People did not go out to eat, weren’t driving, or going on vacation and some received extra money from the government to sit at home. That discretionary money found its way into the church coffers. Well, your people are back driving and going on vacation, eating out, attending movies and sporting events and the government spicket has dried up. And by the way, have you heard of the word “inflation?” It is real and almost every household in America is paying on average \$7500 more for stuff than last year. With all that said, your members’ wallets are looking lean and if history tells us anything we

04 Renewed short term missionary activity by churches. After a few years of being unable to travel, many churches have renewed their commitment to missions and have relaunched their short term mission efforts. This is an overall good thing. Exposing your people to other countries, cultures and spiritual needs can only ignite how your people appreciate their church, their country and cause them to pray differently. Whenever there is a layoff of activity or an interruption of a regular ministry initiative, when returning is a great time to re-establish what you do, why you do it and who is to be involved. Obviously, work type trips are the most common of ventures, along with children’s and youth support type efforts.

sing hymns and not just as an offering to keep the old people quiet. Study hymns and learn why they were written and what role they played in the theological formation of the church. Select your songs from some of the new hymns that have been written in recent years by the likes of Keith and Kristen Getty, City Alight, Matt Boswell, Matt Papa and others who are intentionally writing songs packed with Biblical truth intended for congregations to sing.

know that the first thing that gets cut back is giving to charities, especially the church. Sadly, as I have spoken to pastors about financial management in the church, few saw the financial blessing of 2020 as a time to save and store away like Joseph did in Egypt. Instead, many invested in more technology to support the growing internet presence (which by the way is drying up as people long to get back to in person gatherings) and failed to see that the surplus they experienced was from less programming. Programming is happening again and budgets are stretched. I am predicting a major financial downturn in the next 6-8 months and will probably be tied into the presidential elections. All we can suggest is to get your financial house in order!

Yet the greatest need in most mission outposts is the training and equipping of local leaders. Churches should now look to developing strategic plans to increase their focus on coming alongside national leaders and missionaries and provide ministry and theological training. Painting buildings, construction of dormitories or running a vacation Bible school can be a help, but the long lasting mission activities is building up future leaders to sustain and continue the work once you leave.

05 Feminization of the clergy and church leadership. This is probably the most shocking discovery this past year -- the increase in the number of churches elevating women into pastoral and eldership roles. Just for clarification, for centuries God has gifted and prepared many women to make an impact in the church. As a matter of fact, going against Jewish tradition, it was the Disciples of the Lord Jesus who included women when discussing the next steps of ministry development shortly after the ascension of Christ in Acts 1. Throughout Biblical history we find God using women to expand the reach of the gospel and significantly assist in the establishing of the church. We dare say that women are vital to the Body of Christ today. However, the Scriptures are clear that women are limited from holding the role of pastor or elder. I know some may differ, but I believe I could provide a clear defense of women holding the role of a deacon, or if you desire, to call them a deaconess. However, pastor and elder are clearly off limits. With all of that said, recently, many evangelical churches have abandoned those limits and have swung the door wide open for women to hold pastoral roles and be granted the title, as well as opening up the eldership role to women. Some churches do not call their ruling body “elders,” so they do not feel in violation, yet the semantics does not matter, they have authority over the flock. What has been even more troubling is that churches, which I would have considered fundamental

06 A panic to re-establish the importance of in-person gathering without acknowledging the COVID mistakes. This is again an observation and not an accusation, but something worth considering, especially in light of the recent rumblings in the government for a possible COVID 2.0 sequel. It is without question that the early days of COVID caught everyone by surprise. None of us were around during the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic or the Black Plague that wiped out most of England. So, it is without saying that many of us responded the

and orthodox theologically, have been falling to the way side on this issue. This past year, I had the opportunity to dialogue with a church about a possible pastoral position. I had a number of concerns I needed to address with the “headhunter” that the church had retained. I voiced my concerns and he dealt with them handily. And then he said to me, “I have a concern I want to address with you.” Not sure what that meant, he proceeded to ask me, “Listen, I see from your ministry history you have been with a number of conservative churches. Are you ok with women pastors and elders?” I was taken back. Nowhere on their website or in their doctrinal statements did they indicate this. I even checked their sermons online and no women were preaching. I replied, “Yeah, that would be a problem.” Within ten seconds he finished the conversation and said that was a deal breaker and I have not heard back from them. I was taken back. And I just wondered if the church actually understands this issue or if they have taken the pragmatic, “loving” approach to the subject. One last issue to consider. It is my observation that once the exclusive gender roles in leadership are breached in a church, then next step is opening the door to acceptance and affirming of homosexuality and the blurring of the lines of transgender issues. Churches must do the work of theologically understanding why this has been a long held position and how it will affect other related household order teachings.

“best that we could” and as we look back we realize that we made a myriad of mistakes. With that said, the question is, have pastors ever had a full reckoning of those days and discussion with their congregations about all that was learned but also the mistakes made? Mandating masking, social distancing, pressure to get vaccinated and other elements of those days needs to be addressed. Churches have been pushing to get everyone back in church, yet some are wondering why, if told that sitting at home and watching online

was no big deal and it was the “same” as being in the sanctuary! I know we said some dumb things back in 2020, but if you have learned that it was not right to insist on certain programmatic changes, then you need to acknowledge the mistake. Additionally, pastors need to have a conversation with their church about what they would do again and what they will not submit to in the future. The government telling churches to shut their doors was an abuse of their authority and unbiblical in many ways. I say this because as of the fall of 2023, the Biden administration is beginning to indicate that a “new variant” of COVID is showing itself again and that pandemic protocols

07 Unwillingness for pastors to work together. I am not sure when this changed or maybe I was just bent this way, but I find it less and less likely that pastors are willing to relate to and do ministry with other pastors. Back in the day, theological positions kept pastors from fellowship and uniting in ministry, yet today most theological positions are vanilla and basic and there are not the same chasms of differences. There seems to be a fertile field of ecumenical activities through various congregations but for the most part pastors are lone rangers and not likely to carve out time for networking with other ministers nor to plan joint ventures with other fellowships. When I started in ministry, joint Good Friday services and Easter Sunrise services were normal calendar events for cooperative ministry. Youth groups planned winter retreats together. There were even annual prayer events for the benefit of your city or country. That is happening less and less. I go back to the Biblical narrative and know that one of the hallmarks of Paul’s ministry was the complex but clear evidence of churches networking together for missional advancement. In the city where I live there are 700 churches. There are 256 Southern Baptist churches. There are ample opportunities for congregations to link arms and find ways to make an impact in the community together,

may follow. If pastors don’t have a heartfelt talk with their people now, then the tension and division that they had with those who were for lockdowns and those opposed, will resurface and this time it could be devastating to their church. One other caution... if pastors tell their people that masking has been proven not helpful and vaxxing will not be needed to attend church in the future, this will cause great pain in some people. Being truthful and preparing before the crisis begins is always better than waiting till everything breaks loose and pastors find themselves having to fight the media fear mongering.

yet it hardly happens. And attempts to do so are met with resistance and suspicion. The Apostle Paul told Timothy to “pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. There are many who call on the Lord from a pure heart in other churches. They just do some things differently. Working together provides a picture of unity and oneness and bolsters the gospel message of reconciliation. Historically speaking, there has never been a revival without the united, unusual, concerted prayer of God’s people and believing churches. It is when the churches in a region unite to pray that God begins to work.

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08 Growth of home schooling, Christian school attendance and the rise of the “Mama Bears.” Another byproduct of the COVID experience was the awakening of parents regarding their children’s education. I believe it took less than two weeks of eavesdropping on their kids’ virtual classroom, and parents were alerted to the aberrant subject matter their kids were subjected to. Parents flooded school board meetings and began demanding accountability of curriculum and turned the light on school indoctrination and lack of education. Wokeism met, what we now call “Mama Bears,” and the outcome was not pretty. When school boards dug in their heels and ignored parents’ rightful demands, parents abandoned the public school and either went to Christian schools or home schooling. All of this is no small issue and a church can either respond properly or miss a tremendous opportunity to strengthen the homes God has entrusted to them. First, parents need to be encouraged to take responsibility for their children’s discipleship and training, not just education. Education that is not influenced by a Biblical worldview will still end up with a morally bankrupt child later on. Secondly,

parents need to be equipped to deal with school boards and city councils. Parents should be helped to speak powerfully and respectfully on the moral issues that need to be confronted. Thirdly, understand that the children and youth ministry of your church will be adversely affected with an overwhelming infusion of Christian school kids. Many times, students from the Christian school do not see or feel the need for church and efforts will need to be made to respond to these changes. Finally, pastors and church leaders need to reach out to elected officials and make their church’s positions and values known. As a matter of fact, they might be open to meeting with you knowing that some of the church’s parents are on the war path. Years ago, the school district where I lived introduced a transgender book to five year olds. When I caught wind of the issue, I reached out to the superintendent of the school and asked to meet with him. He did not fully understand why people would be upset. Pastors have the opportunity as “community leaders” to share a different perspective with school officials and should do so whenever possible.

09 Mental Health crisis among pastors. This is one of those trends that you wish you could pass over and avoid, but the statistics are sad and must be addressed. In the last number of years, we have been sounding the alarm that something was happening within the clergy ranks concerning depression, anxiety, debilitating fear, marriage breakdown and even a rise of clergy suicide. If you really understand the emotional and spiritual strain pastors are under plus the absence of many of the support mechanisms needed to sustain a healthy lifestyle, you know exactly why pastors are struggling. Recently George Barna provided these results from a survey he conducted. In the past seven years pastors reported:

- Their spiritual well-being dropped from 37% to 14%.
- Their physical well-being fell from 24% to 9%.
- Their mental and emotional health plummeted from 39% to 11%.
- Their overall quality of life dipped from 42% to 18%.
- The level of respect they felt from the community tanked from 22% to 10%.
- Their level of “true friends” dropped in half going from 34% to 17%

All of that to say that the overall condition of pastors is sliding fast. Pastors need to be honest about their mental health and no longer carry the “superman” complex. Most pastors admit to “denying their humanity,” which means that they believe they are different than anyone else and can take a lot more pressure and pain. Most pastors are stricken by grief but don’t know it. The fact is, pastors must intentionally and consistently practice personal soul care and without question make sure their spouse and family are getting proper care as well.

10 Loss of sanctification boundaries driven by unbiblical ideas about liberty. We are seeing a decade long attack on the standards and restrictions that once were commonplace in the church. I mentioned earlier in this paper that what used to be taboo and off limits in Christian conduct is now normalized and celebrated. At the core of this change is the idea of Christian Liberty and the so called freedom we have in Christ. For example, young couples move in together before they are married and nobody even raises a question. This laxness is throughout the church and it is somewhat self-inflicted by the lack of teaching of

what it means to be a disciple and the expectations of following the Messiah. Christ did liberate us from sin and slavery in the domain of darkness as Paul proclaimed in Colossians 1. However, that liberation did not mean that we were free to dive back into the cesspool of behavior that Jesus died to redeem us out of. In Paul’s words, “may it never be!” Instead, we must return to looking at our allegiance and devotion to Christ as a means to being His bondsman and coming under His Lordship and aligning with His desires for holiness. The world might be offended by our faith, but they must see that our faith means something!

SO WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The following solutions are our meager attempt to provide some practical responses to the obstacles and potholes that the Evangelical church has fallen into. We recognize that each church and its leaders are dealing with unique and specific challenges within their scope of ministry. Nevertheless, these suggestions are a great starting point to consider as you begin to infuse courage back into the hearts of your people and rebuild their confidence in the plans and purposes of the church of Jesus Christ.

01 Make a commitment to serious, ordered learning as an expectation throughout the Body. I cut my teeth in ministry as a minister of Christian education, which meant I was in charge of classes and training throughout the church. An important part of that task was finding the right curriculum. I was constantly reviewing all the different publishing companies' offerings. One of the keys when evaluating was to study the "scope and sequence" chart. Publishers would lay out a multiple year plan of the material covered and the learning objectives. This was my introduction to the idea of "ordered learning." I could see the progression that could be made in a student's life. I could envision how "precept upon precept" would be poured into the heart and mind of each disciple. Somewhere along the line we got away from that kind of planning when it comes to Biblical discipleship. We avoid any kind of rigidity in regard to content expectations. Yet to properly establish believers there is a path that must be taken. There are certain things that need to be considered and learned before moving on to the next subject. We need to admit that as the Scriptures outline, there are babes in Christ that need milk and then there are maturing adults who can and must chew up the meat of the Word. This idea of systematic, orderly, integrated progressive learning is just about extinct in most churches and we are

advocating for a re-establishing of this didactic. One of the real problems that occurs in church is the eclectic nature of subject matter and content. There is so much material available that finding the most appropriate will take work. Also, most curriculum today is not "church-centric" but written from an individualistic, para-church mindset. The third factor that you must deal with is that most material is broad theologically and will not define doctrinal positions that your church may hold. Case in point, you will be hard pressed to find material with a defined eschatological position. Also, you will find more and more material expressing egalitarian views in regard to women in ministry. The most important thing that you must decide is, whatever you choose to do to bolster up your Biblical discipleship, you give it enough time to actually take hold. Too many pastors jump ship on the plan prior to it really bringing forth the reproduction that you need to see. There will be resistance at every turn. Leaders and teachers do not like to be told what they must teach or that they must use a uniform curriculum. Congregants do not like limited options. A new fad in Bible-land will be marketed and everyone will want to try it. Yet as I have told pastors over the years, give it time. Ordered learning in the church is like "Novocain" – stick it in, give it time and it will work!

02 Intentional engagement with other churches/pastors to do meaningful ministry. For your sake and for the impact of your community, make a list of local pastors in your area and start reaching out to them. Hear their story. Learn to ask them thoughtful questions. Show interest in their ministry. Then sometime into the conversation ask them this question – "What can we do together that we can't do alone that will significantly affect the spiritual climate in our region?" Open up the conversation and see where it goes. About two years ago, I invited three pastors that I had met along the way to have breakfast together and get to know each other. They did not know each other and really did not have much in common. I posed the above question and to be honest there was quiet at the table for what seemed like an eternity. Then one said, "I have been thinking about that but not sure where to start." We had a number of follow up breakfasts and then decided to launch a monthly gathering for

03 A thorough evaluation of the worship and music ministry of the church with one simple measurement – are people actually engaging in worship? Talk about needing courage! But it is time that pastors insert themselves into the worship ministry of the church again. One of the roadblocks is that most of us are not musical. Our claim to fame musically is that we can turn on a radio. Nevertheless, we are not talking about running a rehearsal. There needs to be some clear guidance on what should be accomplished through the singing and worship elements of the gathering of the Body. Pastors need to look carefully at song selection. Not just the words but actually listening to the music. No more assuming it is the right music. You need

prayer, encouragement and to have someone share something that would enrich us as ministers. During one meeting I played an old YouTube video by J. Edwin Orr, the Church historian, on revival in America. His main point was that there was no revival without the gathering of different churches in concerted prayer. We looked at each other and committed to stage a night of prayer for all our churches. Where will this go? I am not sure, but we are further down the road to seeing the churches work together and are attempting to make a collaborative effort for Kingdom advancement. Every minister of God needs to carve out in their schedule, and even officially in their job description, the task of networking with other pastors for community impact. By the way, the type of networking needed is local and in close proximity with each other. Many churches belong to denominations or larger fellowships that meet once a year for an annual conference.

to hear it for yourself. There needs to be assistance given to the worship leaders on how to lead, teach and equip the people. Remember that often the worship leader's preference is to "perform" and not to "pastor or produce" in others. Finally, turn around and look at the congregation and see if they are singing. If they stand in silence, then exhort and encourage them to sing. Worship is not just the chief end of God's people. There is also a healing factor to worship, a convicting element to worship, and a community building factor to worship. When a church is worshipping well and fully engaged it has so many incredibly important benefits for the church's health and growth!

“*One of the real problems that occurs in church is the eclectic nature of subject matter and content.*”

04 Prepare the congregation for the oncoming political season and the rise of persecution of Christians and our values. I had a pastor once tell a parishioner, when asked why they never prayed for upcoming elections, he replied – “I would rather have a tooth pulled!” That speaks loudly that his church was not being served or shepherded properly. We are not suggesting you should become a political activist, but we are called to give guidance and help our flock think through the issues of the day with a Biblical worldview. As we enter 2024, we already know we are heading into very turbulent waters politically. You would do yourself and your church a favor to address this issue sooner than later. What I mean is that it might be wise to do a message or two on “How to Choose a President”

05 “Smell like sheep” should be the mantra of all clergy and leaders in a congregation. Here is a great thing to remember – “Courage is contagious....so cough on some people!” It sounds cute, but the fact is that one of the reasons that our people have lost their edge is that they do not get around you and other leaders enough to get “infected” with your concerns, passions and burning interests. More is “caught than taught” - which tells me I need to be around my flock relationally and personally. Again, here is an observation I have made over the past few years visiting churches. More and more pastors “hide out” in a Green Room prior to the service time and emerge once the service begins. When they are finished they slip out the side door and head back to the Green Room. There is little to no interaction with the sheep. It was my belief, and

06 Pastors need to seriously look at the “FOUR J’S” as part of their preaching calendar – Joseph, Jonah, Jude and 1 John. I know that you probably have developed your preaching calendar for 2024, but can I suggest a few possible topics to consider? As I look at the coming year and some of the things that we are facing, I have

before any party selects their specific candidate. Spare yourself having to deal with personality or congregant preferences. Focus on policies and overarching character of candidates in general. As I have said many times, “only once did I ever vote and not feel as if I was voting for the lesser of two evils!” All I am saying is that you need to get out in front of this issue and use it to teach your people how to think and not emote! A part of this civic training is also discussing how Christians are perceived and will be treated in the coming days. It is clear that our values will not be appreciated and we are guaranteed to be “cancelled” on many fronts. Our values will be a big part of the political discourse this time around and so prepare your people for the persecution that is coming!

to be honest, it was how the men I was mentored by conducted themselves, that whenever the church was gathered, “I was working the room.” I was meeting people; I was introducing new people to long time members; I was praying spontaneously for people; “I was kissing babies” like I was running for mayor! It was my way to connect with people, make myself available and demonstrate I really cared. It also made me human and accessible. Now, it is exhausting, but the pay off is worth it. I knew my people and they knew me and were interested in what was in my heart. Now that I am a guest speaker in churches I try to do the same thing. I walk up and down the aisles prior to the service beginning and greet people. I connect with them prior to telling them what they need to do. I have found them to be more receptive. We are called to shepherd and not just speak and preach.

identified four Biblical themes or books that I would preach on or at least consider being taught in some way. The first is a study on the life of JOSEPH. The central message of Joseph’s life is how to rise above the injustice that he experienced and in the end be used by God. Through his life is woven lessons on

forgiveness, family dysfunction, how to work in a hostile environment, betrayal and God’s sovereignty. All of these themes are finding their way into life in 2024. Another Old Testament character I would consider preaching on is JONAH. Jonah is the reluctant prophet who is unwilling to speak the message that God has instructed him to deliver. Instead of obeying, he has all kinds of excuses and runs from God; even willing to endanger others in the process. In reality, revival occurs not just in Nineveh but also in Jonah’s life. Today’s church needs to learn to speak up and not run from the assignment God has given us. Finally, there are two New Testament books that are relevant for today -- JUDE and 1 JOHN. Jude deals with apostasy in the church and the deceitfulness of compromise.

07 Take a stand on issues of liberty and preferences and build a case for holy living for the sake of immature believers and public testimony. Again, here is where courage will be needed. It is time for the church to reclaim the moral clarity needed in regard to issues of liberty. With the rampant nature of addiction and so many Christians struggling with life dominating sins, we need the church to start taking serious its commitment to protect and serve the weaker brothers and sisters in our fellowship. Pastors need to call God’s people to old standards of holiness, especially in light of causing others to stumble and to be sensitive towards immature believers that they relate to. Let me give this illustration. I know that 20-25 years ago believers were engaged in social drinking. The difference is that before partaking there was an attitude of deference towards other Christians. I can remember a number of times believers asked other

08 Discuss a Biblical approach to counseling and mental health issues and find referral support that fits your convictions. One of the things that you will discover, if you preach through 1 John, is that Gnostic philosophies have burrowed their way into the heart of the modern Christian counseling movement.

Topics like homosexuality and licentiousness are addressed. In addition, the listener will be faced with choosing faith and facts of the Scriptures over feelings and relational acceptance. 1 John is the gospel for the Church. Some 50 years after the resurrection, the last Apostle standing writes a church of third and fourth generation believers on how to know for sure you are a Christ-follower. I also believe that a closer look at Gnosticism and its modern manifestation would be extremely helpful for this generation. All in all, any of these series of messages will offset what may be attacking the soul of the church and will serve as a reminder of the relevance and effectiveness of God’s Word to deal with present day issues.

believers where they stood and if it would offend them if they drank alcohol. Any hesitation would be a signal to the partaker to choose NOT to for the sake of the other. That kind of sensitivity has been lost. People participate in what used to be seen as gray issues without concern for others. Also, there used to be a concern for confusion in regard to testimony. Again, as illustration, when I was a teenager, I once asked my dad why he and mom did not drink. He said, “You know Mr. Sinkovich up the street? He has a problem with drinking and we have been trying to help him understand Christianity. If we drink in front of him, it will confuse him at this point. So, for the sake of him coming to Christ, we choose not to drink.” I will never forget that answer my dad gave me. His priority was crystal clear. People coming to faith in Christ was more important than any liberty he may have. We need that to permeate the Church again.

The compartmentalization of mind, soul, spirit and the physical element of life is exactly the tactic of Gnostics, to render the power of God to resolve man’s dilemma useless and to get God’s people looking elsewhere for help other than the Bible, God’s Spirit and the Church. With that said, I do believe that God’s

people and even pastors will need at times skilled and trained counselors to interact with and help resolve some deeper, on-going struggles. Finding qualified counselors who are also committed to using God's Word and His resources to solve life's issues is a challenge. Nevertheless, every church needs to find these people and have them available for referral ministry. There is only so much any pastor can handle with the level of complexity of issues coming at us today. My gut tells me that even some of the mental health issues pastors are experiencing are due to the overwhelming counseling load they are dealing

with and the convoluted and complicated problems they are faced with. Every pastor needs to develop a relationship with a competent Biblical counselor. One other thought - here is where networking with other pastors could benefit everyone involved. It is unlikely that one church would need or could afford a counselor to refer their more serious concerns to. However, if 4-5 churches worked together and contributed to the costs, then they could share and have available a solid Biblical counselor who could block out a day or two a week to their churches.

CONCLUSION

There are probably other good ideas that will surface as 2024 unfolds but we believe that these are a great launching point to get the church moving in a healthy direction. Remember what our overall focus is for this coming ministry year – COURAGE. It needs to be reclaimed by God's servants and intravenously shared to every believer throughout the church. You see, courage will be needed to raise godly kids. Courage will be needed to retain your ethics at work when they ask you to violate a law. Courage will be needed to speak up against those who will disregard the life of the unborn or want to encourage gender mutilation of young people. Courage will be needed to pray boldly, worship purely and obey God's Word consistently. Courage is the virtue for today. And if anywhere on earth that courage should be taught and promoted with moral clarity it is in the church. Our prayer is that the church of the Lord Jesus will rise to the challenge and set out to live and lead with courage in 2024.

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American Pastors Network



For further research and assistance check out www.americanpastors.net and avail yourself of various church-related resources. In addition, check out the vast archived programs from both Stand in the Gap Today radio and TV. For pastors, our PASTOR2PASTOR videos provide on-going training and solutions.