

Would You Recognize Inward Drift in Your Church?

All organizations tend to lose their focus and forget their original purposes over time. I call this almost imperceptible movement “inward drift.” The attitude becomes one of protecting the way we’ve always done it rather than looking back to the original purposes and reasons for existence. Numbers of stagecoach businesses failed, for example, because they thought their primary purpose was to make stagecoaches rather than to provide reasonable and rapid transportation.

The primary dangers with inward drift are twofold. First and foremost, the organization can forget the very reason it was created. Second, the drift is often imperceptible. Many organizations don’t realize there is a problem until it’s too late.

When Inward Drift Comes to Church

Local congregations are not immune from inward drift. To the contrary, **the vast majority of churches in North America are likely in crisis because of the negative impact of inward drift.**

Some of the labeling of congregations is unfortunate. Particularly, when we speak of “traditional churches” or “contemporary churches,” we rarely come to consensus on a clear definition. My son, Sam Rainer, popularized the term “established churches,” a term I prefer to use today. An established church is simply a church that has been in existence for a few years and is thus susceptible to inward drift. Indeed most any church three years or older will likely begin to experience some of the symptoms of inward drift.

When an organization such as a for-profit business begins to experience inward drift, it will change or die within relative short order. The marketplace will not buy its goods or services if the company doesn’t address the needs and the hearts of the consumers.

An established church, however, can exist for years and even decades with inward drift. The church may not be making disciples. It may not be reaching the community and the nations with the gospel. But it continues to exist more as a religious social club than a true New Testament church. Its members and constituents are willing to fund the congregation since it meets their perceived needs and desires.

Signs of Inward Drift in Established Churches

The signs of inward drift in an established church are clear even though the members don’t often recognize them:

1. Most of the ministries and programs are focused on meeting the desires and needs of the members.
2. The budget of the congregation is directed primarily at funding the projects and even comforts of the members.

3. Conflict in the congregation is not uncommon since members are more concerned about getting their perceived needs and desires met.
4. There is little to no focus on evangelism, reaching out to the community, and getting the gospel to the nations.
5. Leadership is weak and reticent to address the problems, because that leadership emphasis could disrupt the status quo.

Addressing the Issue of Inward Drift in the Church

I recently drove through my hometown. I lived in the same house and the same town for my first eighteen years of life. But it had been more than a decade since I visited the town. I was shocked. Businesses on the main street were closed. Some were boarded. Many of the homes I knew and loved had deteriorated greatly. The major industries had exited and left large vacant buildings. It was almost a ghost town.

Someone who had never left the town, though, told me that things were really going well there. They were serious when they said it had not changed much since I left. For me, the change was stark and shocking. For him, it was slow and imperceptible. When we fail to see the deterioration that is taking place, we will not see the need to make changes to reverse the course.

Such is the crisis in many of our established churches today. And it is that imperceptible inward drift that often makes it so difficult to lead a congregation toward healthy change. In a future post, I will address some of the possible steps to lead an established church toward change without destroying it in the process. I hope you will join me then.

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