



The **Effective**  
**Church** Group >>>>>>

# **Fatal Mistakes to Avoid**

## **18 Fatal Church Mistakes**

At The Effective Church Group, we look for trends rather than isolated events. So when we see fatal mistakes happening over and over again, we make note of it and try to evaluate it in light of one priority: Does it enhance or hinder the Great Commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .” (Matthew 28:19), and the Great Commandment, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34).

Over our more than thirty years of consulting with more than forty denominations has allowed us to see some common tactical mistakes made by church leaders. Usually these mistakes are hallmarks of declining congregations. So if your church is declining, and you are doing any of the following, it will be in your best interest to change your tactics.

This e-booklet contains a list of these fatal trends we see being made by churches. If you’ve made any of these, don’t panic there is time to correct them and begin growing your church again. And keep in mind – everyone makes mistakes. Making mistakes often leads to new innovations. However, if we can avoid common mistakes others have made, we’re ahead of the game. That’s why we created this workbook: In the hopes that you can avoid these common mistakes.

## Fatal Mistakes Churches Make

### Failure Number One: Undervaluing the Great Commission and Great Commandment

We're convinced that the greatest need of the church today is to rediscover and implement these two concerns, which form the central legacy left by our Lord and are confirmed throughout both Testaments. We've watched literally thousands of congregations and have worked in hundreds, and one truth stands out: The culturally relevant and biblically sound congregations are the most likely to reach the most people with the gospel.

Unfortunately, most churches begin to lose their passion for these two concerns in as early as the first five years of life. The average U.S. congregation today is riddled with conflict and oppression from a handful of controllers. In addition, congregations worry more about whether or not everyone knows each other than whether or not they carry out the two great concerns of our Lord. Most of the 360,000 churches in the U.S. seldom evidence love for one another and for the stranger. What pastors hear the most from their people is "But pastor, before we go after more new members, shouldn't we take better care of our members?" One only has to look at how most churches spend their money and what most congregations expect of their pastors to know that most churches do not follow our Lord's wishes. No wonder 85 percent of U.S. congregations are either on a plateau or dying.

### Failure Number Two: Not Developing Biblical Leadership

Ask most of the 85 percent of the plateaued or dying congregations to name their spiritual giants, and see the response. They will often tell you about their faithful leaders who have led them over the years. But when asked what they mean by "faithful," they clearly mean attending church and taking care of the congregation's institutional needs. They define *leadership* as going to meetings and running the church. If you look at the roster of leaders and the expectations for them, they clearly are to spend the majority of their time "at church" with other church people. Seldom do you see leaders assigned to reach the unchurched. Is this really what our Lord had in mind?

We've found two reasons for this failure to develop biblical leaders. First, most of our ineffective congregations are designed and led by a democratic process. Instead of choosing their leaders through prayer and discernment based on people's character and demonstrated faith, they hold a popularity vote in which some people lose and some people win to pick their leaders. You don't find any form of democratic process in any of the New Testament congregations or writings.

Second, because of the democratic process, 80–85 percent of our congregations rarely set requirements for leadership. Anyone who can garner enough votes through any method possible, including intimidation, can be a leader.

As a result, over the years, the level of commitment among most of our leaders has produced very few spiritual giants. I can hear some of you weeping as I write. You know what we're saying is true. It's time our churches set some requirements for leadership. Everyone should be

welcome in our congregations just as they are, but to become a leader is another matter. The higher we raise the leadership bar, the more spiritual giants our congregations will have.

What are the *positive* requirements for leadership that we're seeing? To be a thither, a member or leader of a small group, a leader of a ministry that requires a team whose members (and leader) are accountable to one another, as well as to attend monthly leadership training, to participate in daily devotion and prayer, and to attend one or more leadership training events each year. Amazingly, requiring any combination of three or more of the above usually excludes the troublemakers from any form of leadership. This frees up the congregation to move forward into newer and more relevant ministries.

What requirements do you set for those who are leading the church?

For more information on making disciples see *Disciple Making Leaders* in the Church Growth Toolkit. If you're ready to join the community of members who have already taken advantage of our Church Growth Toolkit, you can join here: <http://bit.ly/GrowthTools>.

### **Failure Number Three: Allowing Sunday School to Determine Worship Times**

For most of the last two hundred years, Sunday school has provided the backbone for many congregations. For most of those years, it produced some deeply spiritual lay people. But over the last thirty years, Sunday school has simply not produced the depth of leadership it once did. In many thriving congregations, even many new Southern Baptist churches, a weekday teaching opportunity led by one of the more gifted teachers or small groups of one kind or another are replacing Sunday school. Bill Easum first talked about this in his book *Dancing With Dinosaurs* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

However, in spite of the dwindling number of people who attend, as well as the lack of fruit that Sunday school seems to be producing in most places, congregations still allow Sunday school to set the worship schedule. This is most evident when traditional churches attempt to become "two track" congregations and begin what they call a "contemporary" worship service. Instead of putting the new service at the prime time of 11:00 or 9:30 a.m., they put it at 8:00 or 8:30 because the normal time for Sunday school in the U.S. is 9:30. The "sacred cow" of Sunday school, which seldom more than one-third of the worshipers attend, determines the schedule. When the early worship service designed to reach the unchurched doesn't work, the establishment says, "See, I told you it wouldn't work," and the project gets scrapped. When will we learn? If you want to reach the unchurched with a different form of worship, don't schedule it at a time that is too early for even your most faithful crowd to attend. This is just another example of how shallow our pool of spiritual leaders is today.

### **Mistake Number Four: Focusing on the Bad and Ignoring the Good**

We're convinced that most churches can have ten miracles and one bad thing happen in their church, but when the members get together they will only talk about the one bad thing. They spend all of their time passing a new policy to ensure that the one bad thing will never happen

again, instead of celebrating the ten miracles of God. What you should do is focus on the positive things that are happening.

And remember, “They” never exist. When someone tells you “everyone” is upset and “they” are threatening to leave if something doesn't change, just remember you are probably looking at “they.”

Bill Easum remembers a time he walked into a staff meeting and everyone was buzzing. When he asked why, the staff said everyone was upset with him. So he asked the staff to write out the names of the people they had heard from and have the secretary count up the names. The total of names came to three. They had all been hearing from the same three people. “They” meant three people not most of the congregation.

### **Mistake Number Five: Failure to Combine Evangelism and Social Justice Into the Fabric of the Church.**

The entire debate between traditional and emergent churches stems from this failure. Any form of reductionism truncates the gospel. To say one is more important than the other is to discredit the words of Jesus found in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Social justice and evangelism are simply two sides of the same coin. One without the other is vain, stupid, and downright useless.

[The Dream Center in Los Angeles](#) is one of the best examples I know of embedding social justice into the fabric of the church. The pastor, Matthew Barnett, used to be Assembly of God and is now a Four Square Gospel pastor, which means personal evangelism is high on his priority list. However, every week hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of food and medical supplies is sent out by the church and its hundreds of volunteers from all over the world.

### **Mistake Number Six: Making a Long String of Announcements at the Beginning of The Worship Service.**

Making a long string of announcements at the beginning of worship service is one of the most damaging things a church can do to worship. It's like tuning into the beginning of a sitcom only to find all of the commercials loaded up front before anything else happens. Surely you have noticed that most of the good TV programs begin with a short segment designed to catch your attention and then go to a commercial. Today, young adults will start surfing the TV if a program begins with commercials. The same is true with worship – young adults tune out the moment you begin worship with announcements. Instead, begin worship with a rousing piece of music that says “Something great is going to happen here today.” If you have to do announcements, don't lead off with them. Please.

### **Mistake Number Seven: Not Acknowledging the Importance of the Automobile.**

Most churches do not monitor their parking nor do they take it into account when they expand. They forget it's not 1950. In 1950 people were fortunate to have one car and those who didn't

walked or took the bus to church. Today, few people walk to church, fewer ride the bus, and many families come to church in two or three cars. You would do well to have someone in the parking lot at least four times in a row during the quarter monitoring the number of parking spaces open at the peak hour.

Next time you drive by a mall on a normal day notice how many empty parking spaces there are. Then drive by the Friday after Thanksgiving or the day before Christmas. Is there an empty parking space to be found? Businesses plan their parking lot to accommodate those two days. Isn't the message of the gospel more important than selling wares?

### **Mistake Number Eight: Renting Facilities to Outside Groups When the Church Should Be Using These Facilities to Do Ministry in the Name Of Jesus Christ.**

Churches should their facilities for ministry instead of renting them out. The most common mistake is the preschool or day care that pays rent to a church. All this does is take up space that could be used by the church and encourage churches to rely on rent rather than tithing. It is debilitating to rely on rent to survive. If you are renting space out, find ways to stop. It might have worked in the 1950s but it doesn't today.

### **Mistake Number Nine: Putting Most of the Focus On the Members to the Exclusion of the Least, Last, and Lost.**

Our examination of hundreds of job descriptions for pastors, staff, and laity reveals that nine out of ten require pastors to spend more than 90 percent of their time working within the membership and seldom even mention evangelism. Church leaders seem more concerned with taking care of the members, including reactivating inactives, than with reaching the unchurched or pre-Christian. This inward focus robs a church of its spiritual power because God's church exists for people who it has not yet reached with the gospel.

Laity, you must resist making your pastor spend all of his or her time on you. You must free up your pastor to spend time with the unchurched.

### **Mistake Number Ten: Planning for a Summer Slump.**

Nine out of ten dying or plateaued churches we've consulted with shut down their choir and reduce their schedules in the summer even though summer is a major time for reaching new people moving into the area. Often they even change the times of worship and never mention it to the public. Such actions send a negative signal to everyone. If something is not important enough to our Christian development to keep open in the summer, perhaps it's not really that important the rest of the year. Shutting down in the summer translates into diminished commitment of time, energy, and money, makes it harder to start up in the fall, and does not provide summer visitors a complete experience.

Churches that make disciples are twelve-month a year churches. They plan for a summer hump by: 1) having the adult choirs sing or bands play all summer; 2) not combining or changing worship hours; 3) in some areas adding worship services during the summer, such as an

outdoor service; 4) extending Vacation Bible School to different locations throughout the summer and; 5) providing summer camps and ministries for children and youth.

### **Mistake Number Eleven: Failure to Appreciate the 80% Rule of Space.**

Anytime anything is more than 80% full, growth becomes more difficult. In the West 70% is a better figure since people are used to more space. In the Northeast 85% works. It takes 24 inches per person for worship and most architects use 18 inches in determining seating capacity; it takes 35 sq. ft. per child for first grade and under, and 20 sq. ft. per person over the first grade. Keep detailed records on every area of the life of the church and look for ways to increase the capacity before reaching the 80% mark. The primary areas to track are worship, parking, Sunday school, nursery, and hallways.

### **Mistake Number Twelve: Failure to Start an Indigenous Service.**

Indigenous means that the gospel is shared in the language, culture, and technology of the people you are trying to reach. It is rare to see a vital, growing church with only one worship service. Just adding a service usually results in an increase of 20 percent or more participants. Making this service indigenous to the area often results in this service being the largest service within three to five years. If the same time, energy, and money are spent on the indigenous service as are spent on the original service, it is usually the largest service within three years.

If you have only one service or if the largest service is over 80 percent full, or if all of your present services are traditional, begin a new indigenous service on Sunday morning between the hours of 9:30 and 10:30 (it will not hurt Sunday School).

Our experience has taught us that starting a contemporary service at a peak hour is one of the fastest ways to grow a church.

For Information on how to start an indigenous service see *How To Start a New Service* in the Church Growth Toolkit. If you're ready to join the community of members who have already taken advantage of our Church Growth Toolkit, you can join here: <http://bit.ly/GrowthTools>.

### **Mistake Number Thirteen: Failure to Provide Enough Staff.**

A primary reason churches fail to grow beyond 100 to 150 in worship is because 100 people is all one person can adequately network, equip, and mentor/midwife into ministry. In traditional churches the rule of thumb is one program/pastoral staff person for every 100 people in worship. In non-traditional churches that rely heavily on lay pastors the number of people per program/pastoral staff is much higher.

Hire people who can stay seven or more years and will focus on equipping laity rather than doing ministry.

For more information see our book *Unfreezing Moves* that is included in the Church Growth Toolkit. If you're ready to join the community of members who have already taken advantage of our Church Growth Toolkit, you can join here: <http://bit.ly/GrowthTools>.

#### **Mistake Number Fourteen: Scheduling the Contemporary Service Too Early in the Morning.**

It's not uncommon for ineffective churches to place a new contemporary service at 8:00 or 8:30 in the morning because they either don't want it to work or they are incompetent. No one in their right mind would think you could reach unchurched young adults that early in the morning. The best time for this service is opposite Sunday school because young adults typically don't go to Sunday School. Young adults will go to small groups that meet in homes during the week.

A cousin to this mistake is thinking that adding a second service or a radically different service will divide the church and no one will know everyone anymore. Well, let's be honest – unless you have a worship service under 35 people, no one knows *everyone* anyway. Sure, they recognize one another, but they know precious little about them. Also, this thinking shows how little the person knows about the early church that met all over the city and was considered one church. The issue isn't "Does everyone know everyone?" but does "Everyone in our city know Jesus Christ?"

#### **Mistake Number Fifteen: Believing that Putting People On Committees Is the Way to Make Disciples.**

One lady came up to us after a seminar and said, "If we eliminate most of our committees how will we know who is faithful and who isn't." Sadly to say, she was serious. We have never met a person who was converted during a committee meeting. Nor have we ever met a person who grew in their faith as a result of serving on a committee. Instead put your visitors and uncommitted to work in a ministry where they see the good being done and God at work.

We believe this is one of the main reasons Western Protestantism has developed so few spiritual giants over the past century. People just don't grow in committees.

#### **Mistake Number Sixteen: Building a Family Life Center with Nothing in Mind Other Than a Place Large Enough to Eat or Because the church down the street Did It.**

The average Family Life Center remains vacant all week long and is a serious breach of good stewardship of money. Don't build one unless you have a plan on how to leverage its use for reaching your community.

#### **Mistake Number Seventeen: Allowing People to Give to the Foundation and/or Earmarking the Money Only for Building Maintenance.**

Churches are actually being closed that have hundreds of thousands of dollars in their Foundation but they don't think they can touch it for anything other than building maintenance. If you are going to have a Foundation make sure people can give to a variety of things with a part of every gift going to actual ministry needs. And remember, any trust can be broken by acclaim of the decision making body (board, vestry, session, council, etc.).



**Mistake Number Eighteen: Not understanding that Everything Must Have Prayer as its Foundation.**

Somewhere over the past decade many churches adopted adopted a purely corporate like understanding of how to do ministry. So instead of praying something into being they vote on it. Seldom do these churches have a period of prayer where they try to discern God's will for the issue. They somehow have come to believe that pronouncing a perfunctory prayer at the opening and closing is enough. So when a final action is finally taken on some motion, whatever is attempted seldom works. Without God being a part of the mission the mission is usually ineffective.

Everything you do should be bathed in prayer if you want God to be a part of it.

# Additional Resources

## [Net Results Magazine](#)

Published since 1980, *Net Results* has been the go-to magazine for fresh, new ideas for growing churches.

## [Effective Staffing for Vital Churches](#)

By Bill Easum & Bill Tenny-Brittian. Whether you're a solo-pastor or have a multi-staff church, this book provided guidance for how to staff a growing church. Includes insights on time management, hiring, firing, and volunteer oversight.

## [High-Voltage Spirituality](#)

By Bill Tenny-Brittian. Help your church leaders find and maintain their spiritual center with this compendium of spiritual practices. Includes how-to tips for "fitting" the spiritual habits into a busy life.