

"Autopsy of a Deceased Church"

by Thom Rainer

Instructor: John Stange

DesireJesus.com

The present state of Churches in the network I serve with

In each district we see the following dynamics at play

1. Churches that are motivated, growing, and trying new things
2. Churches that are content, frozen, and sticking to what is familiar
3. Churches that are in steady decline, discouraged, and worried
4. Churches that are already dead, but they haven't admitted it yet

What are we doing about this?

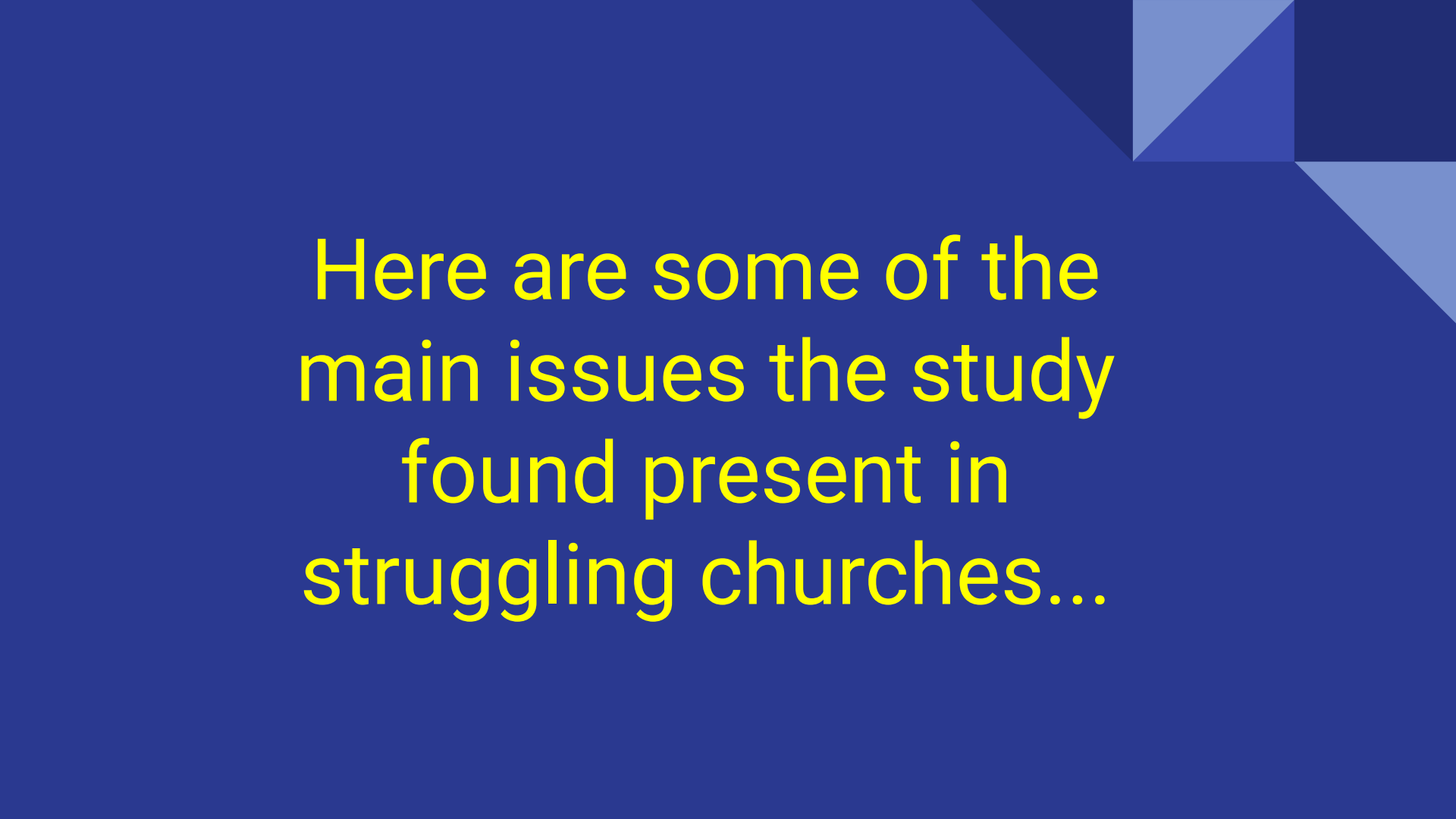
1. Some churches continue to set a positive example
2. Some churches have humbly started reaching out for help
3. Some churches are rejecting help, and if that continues much longer, they will be beyond being helped

Why we selected this training topic

1. The Lord encourages us to pray for wisdom. One of the wisest things we can do is learn from the mistakes of others so we don't repeat them.
2. There are many issues discussed in "Autopsy of a Deceased Church" that describe the present day situation in many of our churches perfectly.

Why am I optimistic about our future?

1. Change doesn't tend to take place until it hurts too much to stay the same.
2. After visiting many churches over the past few years, I'm convinced that there's a good and teachable spirit in many places.



Here are some of the
main issues the study
found present in
struggling churches...

Slow Erosion

1. Unnoticed repairs on Thom Rainer's mother's house
2. Visiting a church that had a crumbling building and a bulletin board that wasn't updated since the early 1980's
3. What do you notice when you read a church newsletters or yearbooks from 10, 15, 20, or 30 years ago?
4. Which direction do you sense your church moving?

The Past is the Hero

1. Conversation recently ago with a pastor who kept hearing about "big Easter services."
2. The difference between "idolizing history" and "making history." This is something we need to personally wrestle with.
3. What are we holding on to that it's time to let go of?

The Church Refused to Look Like the Community

1. We recently took on a project to help several churches learn more about the demographics of their communities.
2. What kind of changes have been taking place in your community?
3. I'm very impressed with what I'm seeing in one particular church in Hazleton.
4. Is your church a fortress or a hospital?

The Budget Moved Inwardly

1. Phone call I received from my father about "missions"
2. What are the primary expenses in your budget?
3. What percentage of your budget is dedicated to community outreach and community service?
4. Some churches "die broke", but some die with plenty of resources that could have been utilized.

The Great Commission Becomes the Great Omission

1. Jesus sent His followers out. They were commissioned to; go, make disciples, baptize, and teach.
2. Sometimes I think we're afraid to do that because we forget that Jesus also promises to be with us as all along the way.
3. Do we depend on the power of Christ to facilitate this?
4. Are we fixated on the days when our predecessors did this instead of giving our successors something to talk about?



Discussion Time...

A difficult topic...

1. How would you diagnose your church today: healthy, marginally healthy, sick, very sick, or dying?
2. Why do you think so many church members refuse to do anything about their dying churches?

Slow Erosion / Past is Hero

1. What has changed in your church in the last 10 to 20 years? Are the changes good or bad?
2. What are the good old days in your church?

Community / Budget

1. How can the story of the rich young ruler in Mark 10 become a warning to churches?

Hint: He was sad about letting go

Mark 10:20-25, NLT

20 “Teacher,” the man replied, “I’ve obeyed all these commandments since I was young.”

21 Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him. “There is still one thing you haven’t done,” he told him. “Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

22 At this the man’s face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions. *(...continued)*

Mark 10:20-25, NLT

23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!” **24** This amazed them. But Jesus said again, “Dear children, it is very hard to enter the Kingdom of God. **25** In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!”

Community / Budget

2. Does your church really try to reach out to AND include those in your community?

**Children's Carnival*

The Great Commission or the Great "Omission"


1. Look at and describe the different parts of Matthew 28:19-20.

Matthew 28:19-20, ESV

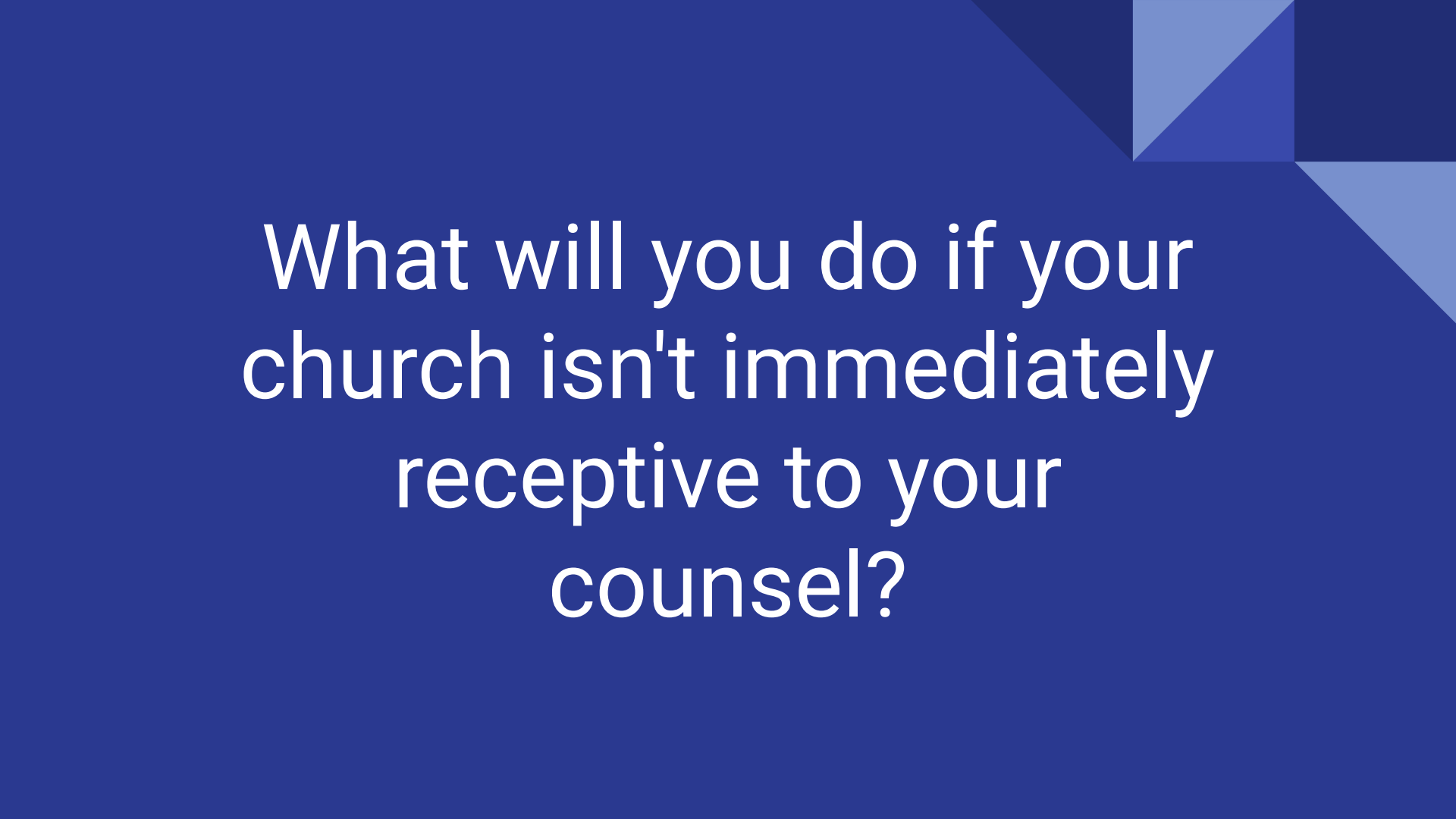
*"Go therefore and **make disciples** of all nations, **baptizing them** in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them** to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, **I am with you always**, to the end of the age."*

The Great Commission or the Great "Omission"

2. Is your church more obedient or disobedient to these commands?



What "action steps" is the
Lord prodding you to
take?

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What will you do if your church isn't immediately receptive to your counsel?

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Part 2

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The Preference-Driven Church

1. Established church that wouldn't accommodate younger families through service times.
2. The spiritual and organizational danger of not moving the focus from ourselves to others
3. What preferences would you be willing to give up if in so doing, more could be reached for Christ?
4. Christ showed us the heart of a servant

The Preference-Driven Church

We asked a church that was near death (and has now died), "*What is your biggest need right now?*" Their answer showed us that they had developed a mindset that was exclusively focused on their preferences.

Pastoral Tenure Decreases

1. Moving at a pace of two to three years
2. It's hard to develop trust in such a short time.
3. Typically in smaller churches with short pastoral tenure, there is a "**matriarch**" and/or a "**patriarch**" who tend to occupy the place of influence.

Pastoral Tenure / Life Cycle

Year 1: Honeymoon

Years 2-3: Conflicts and Challenges

Years 4-5: Crossroads (Part 1) - *Stay or go?*

Years 6-10: Fruit and Harvest

Years 11 and beyond: Crossroads (Part 2) -
Complacent or motivated?

The Church Rarely Prayed Together

1. Convicting comments from a woman at our "Prayer Meeting"
2. Genuine prayer and the health of a church go hand-in-hand.
3. Are we praying as a formality or are we praying with genuine passion?
4. Do we display the devotion to prayer of the early church?

Acts 2:42, NET

"They were devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

The Church Had No Clear Purpose

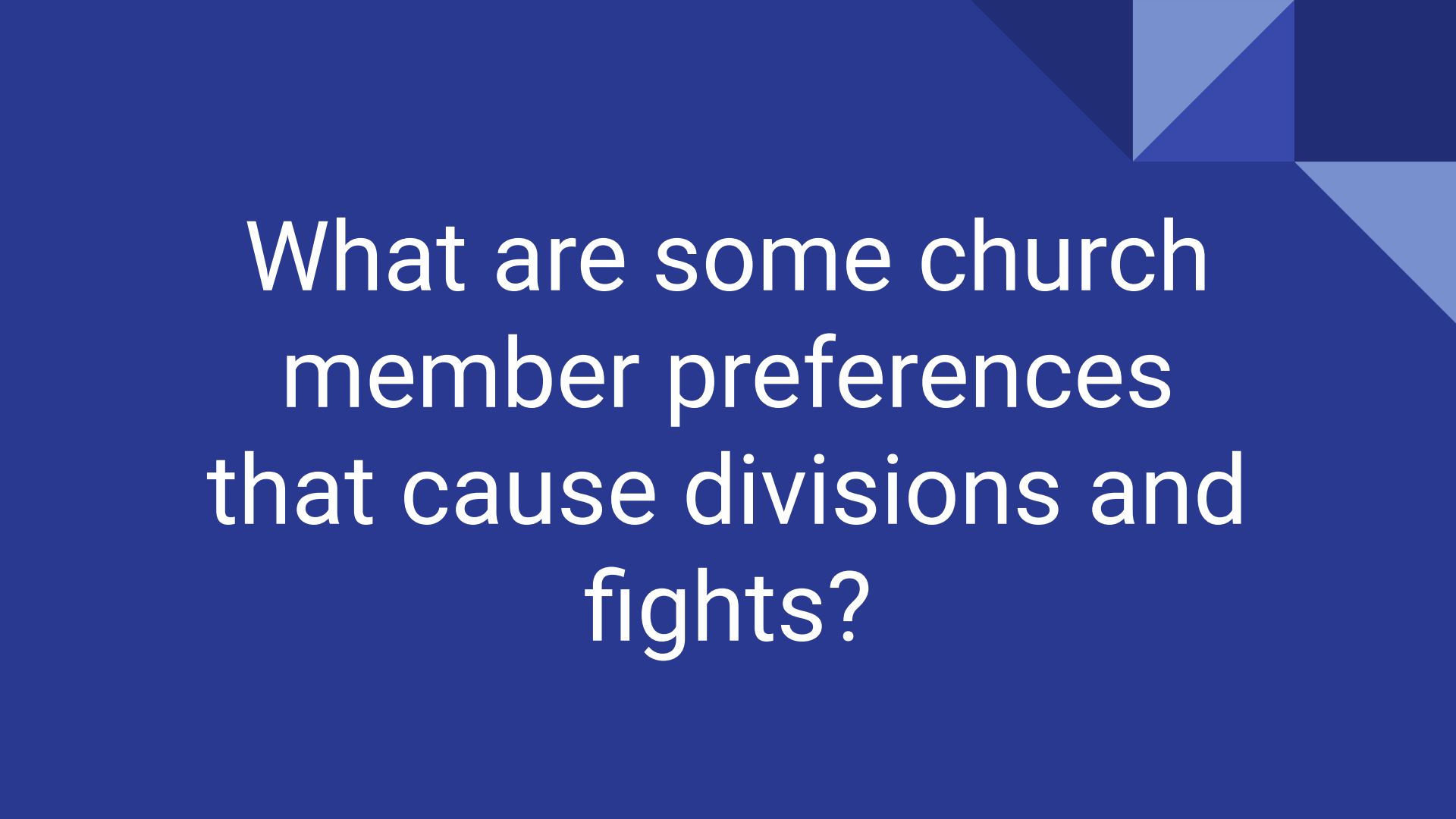
1. How many of our churches are just going through the motions, not understanding their true purpose?
2. How many of our churches are listening for the voice of the Lord to direct their steps?
3. How many people in our pews could articulate the Great Commission or the devotions of the early church in Acts 2?
4. Are we living the gospel and partnering in its spread?

The Church Obsessed Over the Facilities


1. Fighting over the "Lydia Room"
2. Getting blamed for a green scuff about 6 ft. up on a wall
3. Chuck Smith tearing up the new carpet
4. The danger of "memorials" becoming idols
5. Striking a balance between good stewardship and our greater mission



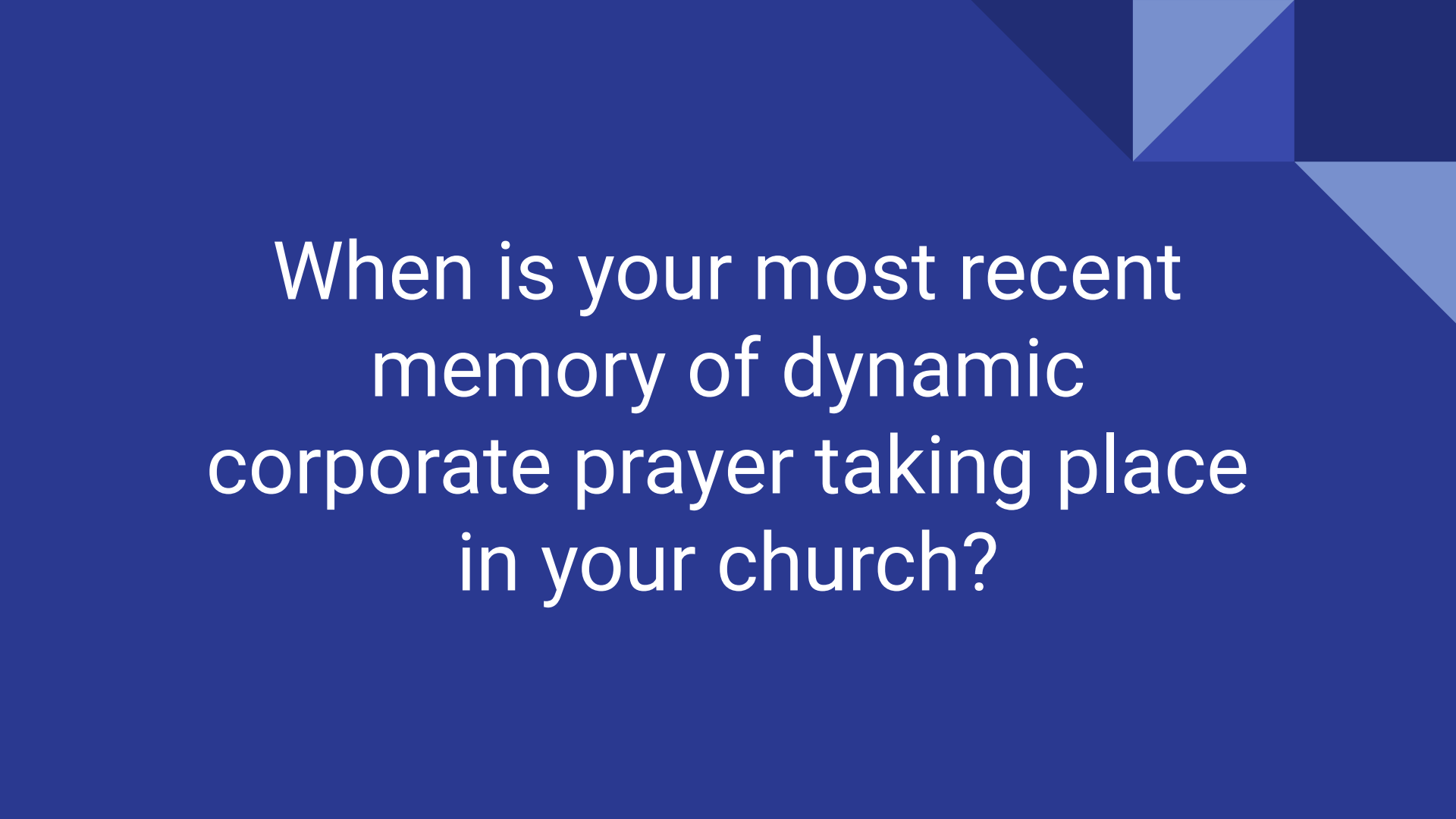
Discussion Time...

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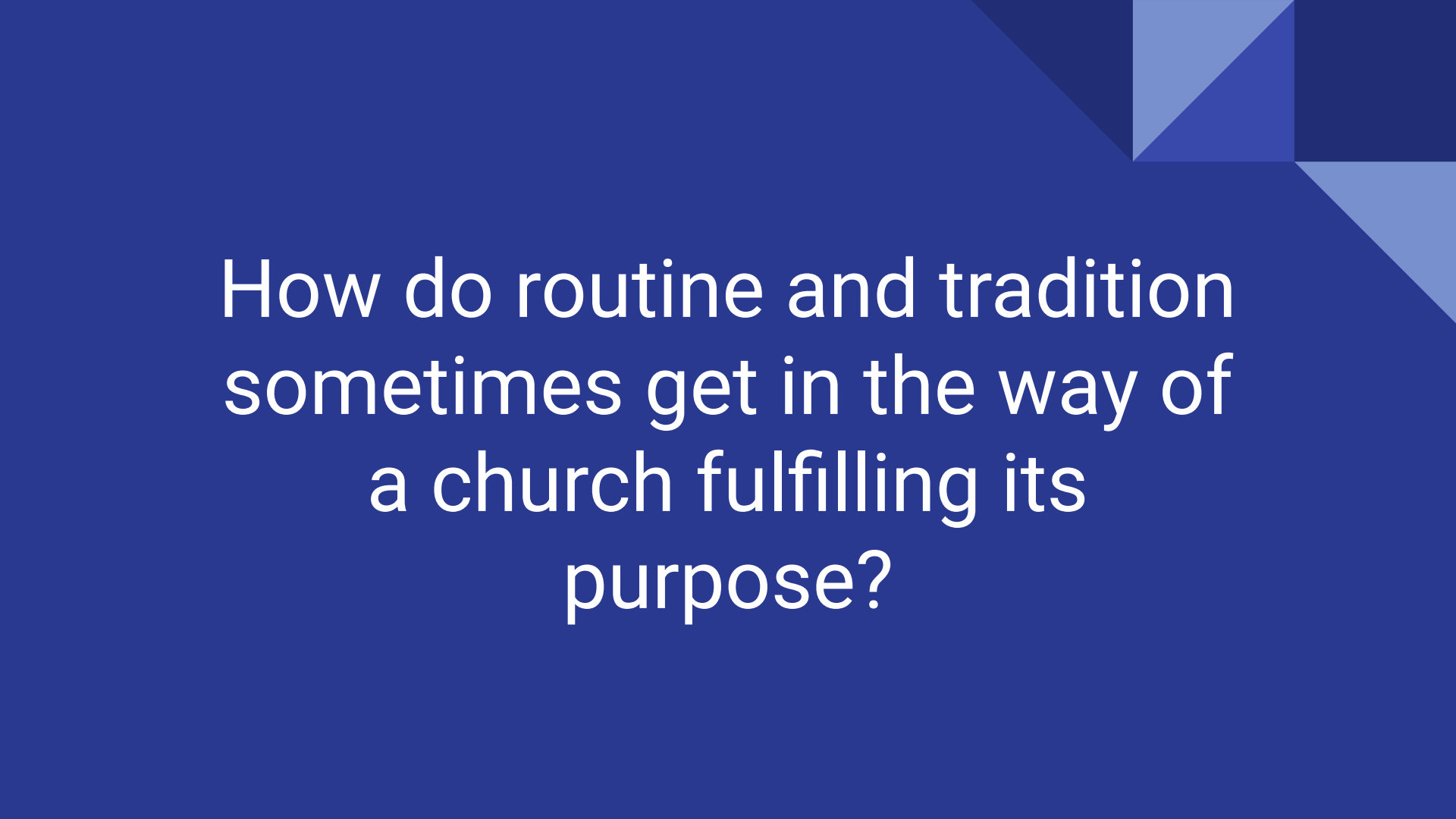
What are some church
member preferences
that cause divisions and
fights?



From what you've observed,
why do declining and dying
churches often see shorter
pastoral tenure?

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When is your most recent
memory of dynamic
corporate prayer taking place
in your church?

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How do routine and tradition
sometimes get in the way of
a church fulfilling its
purpose?

In your opinion, what is the difference between a church being a good steward of facilities and finances, and a church becoming obsessed or idolatrous of them?



What is the Lord convicting your heart about in regard to your church?

If you could only make one change in the church you lead, what change would you make?

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Church Health

According to Rainer's estimates, in North America, the health of local churches looks like this...

- a. Healthy - 10%
- b. Symptoms of Sickness - 40%
- c. Very Sick - 40%
- d. Dying - 10%

Symptoms of Sickness

1. Pervasive attitude in the church that its best days are behind it.
2. Decline in worship attendance over the past 5 years OR growing at a slower rate than the community in which they are located
3. Ministries and programs are primarily geared toward members, while programs for community outreach are minimal or non-existent
4. No clear plan for making disciples
5. Program and ministry clutter that has no real purpose other than continuing what the present congregation has grown used to

If your church has symptoms of sickness

1. Pray that God will open the eyes of your church leadership to become more invested in outreach.
2. Take an honest audit of what ministries church members are involved in.
3. Take an audit of how the church spends its money.
4. Make specific plans to minister and evangelize to your community.

Symptoms of being "Very Sick"

1. Significant numerical decline over the past ten to twenty years.
2. Prolonged times of apathy and occasional intense conflict.
3. The church is not known in the community.
4. New members are rare.
5. Revolving door of pastors.
6. The "good old days" are typically twenty or more years in the past.

If your church is "Very Sick"

1. The church must admit and confess its dire need.
2. The church must pray for wisdom and strength to do whatever is necessary.
3. The church must be willing to change radically.
4. That change must lead to action and an outward focus.

Options to consider if your church is essentially "Dead"

1. Sell the property and give the funds to another church.
2. Give the building to another church.
3. If your church is in a transitional neighborhood, turn over the leadership and property to those who actually reside in the neighborhood.
4. Merge with another church and let them call all the shots. Do this with a sacrificial spirit.

Statistics in one denomination from 2010 to 2019

1. I compared attendance at worship services for every church in this particular denomination from 2010 to 2019.
2. Some churches are growing, others have plateaued, some are sick, dying, or dead.
3. Pride, idolatry, unteachable spirits, professional jealousies, and a desire to build our own "kingdoms" will feed decline and death.
4. Prayer, humility, obedience to the Lord's direction, taking decisive action, making outreach a priority, and fostering a teachable spirit will feed the rebirth of our churches.

2010	2018	Percent Decline	Percent Growth
92	61	33%	
26	0	DEAD	
34	23	32%	
80	55	31%	
38	42		10% GROWTH
84	49	41%	
85	48	43%	
52	30	42%	
85	26	69%	
50	29	42%	
88	64	27%	
21	17	19%	
25	25	PLATEAU	
52	59		13% GROWTH
122	79	35%	
77	55	28%	
25	65		160% GROWTH
33	25	24%	

18	0	DEAD	
40	30	25%	
8	0	DEAD	
39	0	DEAD	
17	17	DEAD-NEW PLANT	
140	140	PLATEAU	
87	37	57%	
14	35		150% GROWTH
10	0	DEAD	
40	111		177% GROWTH
32	28	12%	
70	25	64%	
15	10	33%	
37	28	24%	
77	25	67%	
		DEAD-NEW PLANT	
33	32	3%	
70	130		85% GROWTH
45	40	11%	
28	18	35%	
		BEING REPLANTED	
60	49	18%	

5	17		240% GROWTH
15	21		40% GROWTH
21	16	23%	
25	29		16% GROWTH
51	43	15%	
11	12		9% GROWTH
25	20	20%	
		DEAD	
54	43	20%	
58	41	29%	
80	39	51%	
30	28	6%	
102	120		17% GROWTH
26	23	11%	
80	73	8%	
251	269		7% GROWTH
		DEAD	
138	45	67%	
38	25	34%	

46	45	2%	
42	22	47%	
		DEAD	
94	36	61% (GROWING NOW)	

STATS

Growing: 12

Sick: 15

Dying: 26

Dead: 8

Plateau: 2

0-10% Decline: 4

11-20% Decline: 9

21-30% Decline: 7

31-40% Decline: 7


41-50% Decline: 5

51-99% Decline: 7

Dead: 8



Discussion Time...



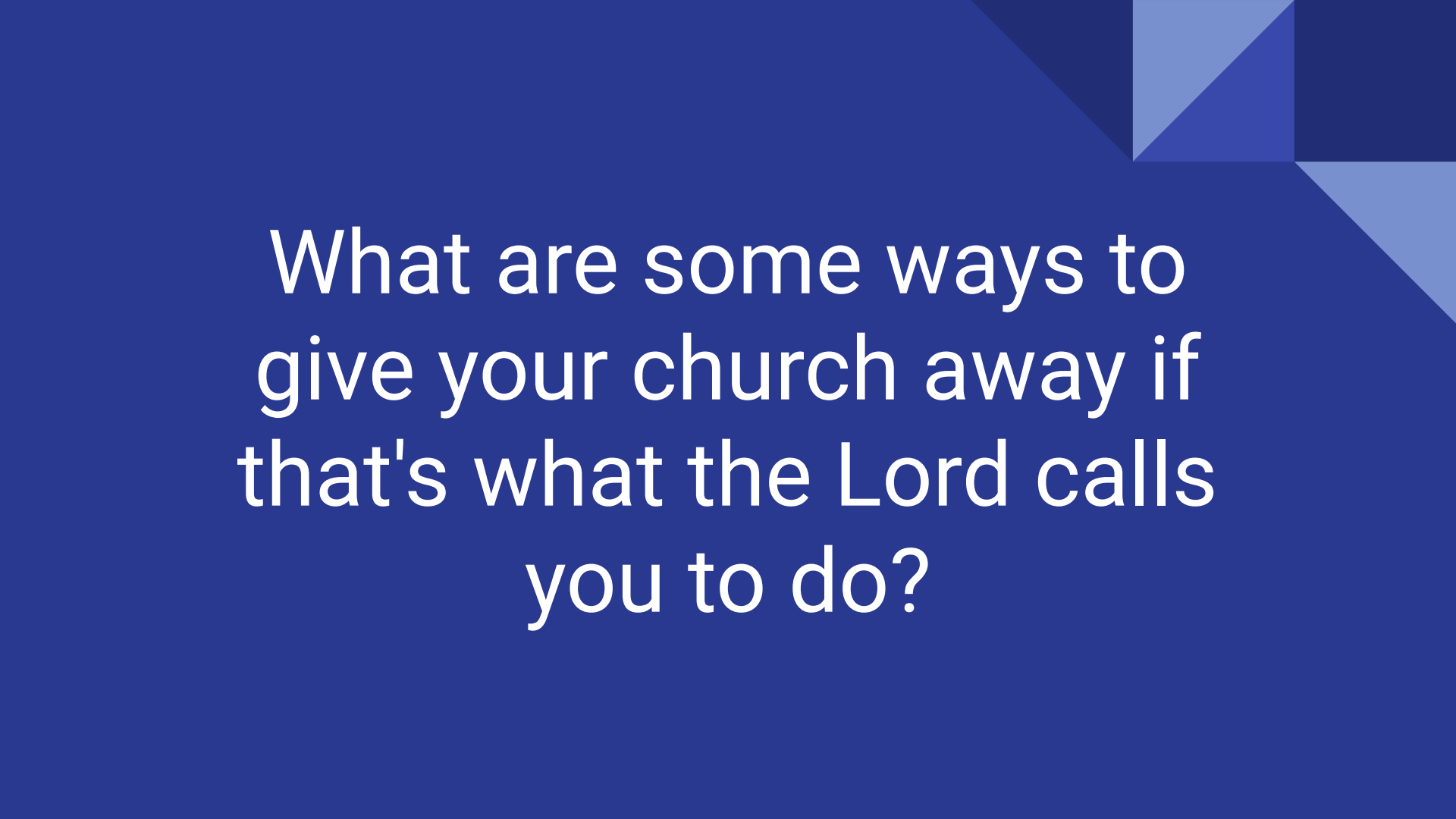
In your opinion, what are some differences between a sick church and a very sick church?

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

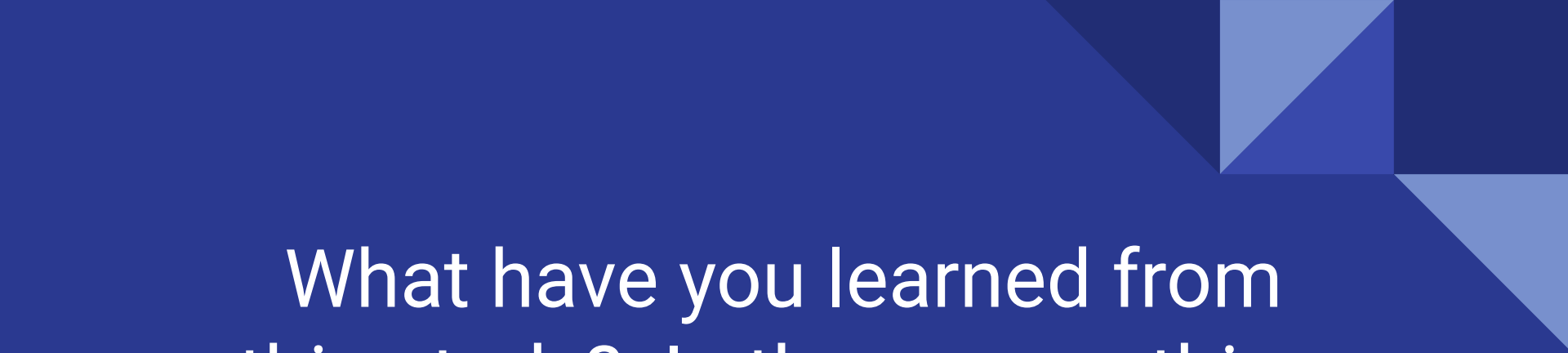
Acts 1:8, ESV

How can the teaching of
Acts 1:8 be applicable and
relevant to churches today
with early signs of
sickness?

Where does a very sick church
begin if its members and
leaders truly desire reversal?
What sacrifices must be made?
What comforts must be given
up?



What are some ways to
give your church away if
that's what the Lord calls
you to do?



What have you learned from this study? Is there something you'd like to apply in your church in the near future?

Teaching this content in your church

1. Please feel free to utilize these slides in the context of your local church
2. Small group discussion in your home with teachable leaders
3. Adult Sunday School class
4. Mid-week Bible study
5. Sermon series on becoming an "outward-focused church"
6. Model this with action. Someone needs to make it visible.
7. Use this info. to host a seminar.

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