

The
REVITALIZATION
Playbook

*Twenty Ways to Join God in Revitalizing
Your Church*

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The Revitalization Playbook
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APPENDIX TWO

TEACH THE EVERLASTING GOSSIP STOPPER

Everywhere I go I teach church leaders and church members a method for dramatically decreasing the amount of gossip that goes on in a church. You can teach this to a church in a few minutes during a sermon.

You and other leaders can share it with your congregation in numerous venues, from the pulpit on Sunday morning to the hallway just downwind from the coffee bar. I've discovered that teaching God's people – "*telling*" *actually, if we're honest* – that they should stop gossiping is not enough. Church leaders can wear themselves out telling people to stop gossiping, but when we teach people the Everlasting Gossip Stopper and *actually practice it with them*, refusing to make exceptions for "special people" with their "special hurts and problems," it can have a profound effect on the culture of a church.

I should say that the teaching of the *method* needs to be accompanied by a good *definition* of gossip itself. I have found that the old "If I'm not part of the problem or part of the solution, then it's gossip" to be an inadequate definition. It's just too easy to tell ourselves that every person we talk to is part of the solution because we're asking them to *pray* about Brother So And So.

A more understandable (and I think, Biblical) alternative is “gossip is negative information about a person which the hearer does not need to hear.” Sometimes we do need to hear negative information about another person; most of the time, we don’t.

So, here’s the Everlasting Gossip Stopper: Your friend begins to gossip. You raise both of your hands to the level of your chest and move them forward slightly while saying, “Whoa,” like you’re trying to stop your friend from heading down a path where you do not want him to go.

Then, while moving your hands back and forth – like you’re erasing a chalk board with two erasers – you say, “Wait a minute.” Then, perhaps while pointing to your gossiping friend (depending on the severity of the situation) you say, “You need to talk to _____ (name of the person being gossiped about) about this.” An option at this juncture is to point in the general vicinity of the individual being gossiped about or his or her office. This should be done very gently with the young believer in Christ and much more vigorously with the veteran Christian whom you have reason to believe knows better.

To see the technique in action, punch my name, Brian A. Thorstad, into You Tube. The beauty of the technique is that everybody laughs when we teach it and make them go through the hand motions, but many people actually put it into practice within a few weeks. If they remember to smile, it has a disarming, but powerful affect. When it becomes well known in a church it can actually become the “normal” way of stopping gossip before it starts.

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You may purchase this appendix, bundled with “Appendix Three – The Parable Of The Christmas Lutefisk,” as a download from my web site and distribute copies electronically or on paper within your church. Just go to www.helpingchurchesthrive.com and find the Brian’s Books page.

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APPENDIX THREE – THE PARABLE OF THE CHRISTMAS LUTEFISK

Author’s note: Lutefisk (loo–ta–fisk) is a version of codfish that involves soaking the fish in a lye solution, followed by baking. The end result is a piece of fish that is white, almost translucent, jelled, wiggly, has a strong flavor and an even stronger scent. Most people – including me – find the smell, if the not the taste, repulsive.

American Scandinavians (mostly older ones) eat it, especially at Christmas, to feel traditional and nostalgic. Our immigrant ancestors ate it because they lacked refrigeration: the lye treatment enabled the fish to keep almost indefinitely, at least on the sidewalks of Duluth, Minnesota. Today it is almost unknown in the Scandinavian countries themselves – and for good reason. But American Norwegians and Swedes – who generally have a taste for bland, lightly spiced foods – find great joy in religiously enduring their lutefisk, at least once a year.

Some suspect that eating the stuff is viewed as an unofficial Lutheran sacrament for atoning for one’s sins. Others call it “The piece of cod that passeth all understanding.” That brings us to the parable.

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It was on a cold September day when Ole and Lena began talking about Christmas. I'm not sure which of them mentioned it first, but it was something which the two old Norwegians agreed on heartily. The "hot" idea was to have an old-fashioned, lutefisk supper on Christmas eve, just as they had enjoyed back in their respective childhoods in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

They agreed that they should do it up properly. The main course would be the pungent lye-fish itself with no substitutes or cop-outs for the cowardly, like meatballs or cold-cuts. Just lutefisk. Lots of lutefisk. Mashed potatoes would be good, cabbage perhaps, and luse (unleavened flatbread made from potatoes).

They also agreed that all the kids and grandkids would come. No excuses would be countenanced. *All the kids and grandkids*. This was special. This was sacred. After all, Ole and Lena were getting "up there." Descendants who failed to show might miss their last opportunity to honor their father and their mother while they still lived and breathed and could eat lutefisk. This assumes – safely, I think – that there will be no lutefisk suppers in heaven.

To shorten my tale, I'll just say that by October 14th the decree went out to 6 children, 23 grandchildren and 8 great-grandchildren. No squirreling off to the Gentile (non-Scandinavian) in-laws would be tolerated. Not this year. Huh uh. No way.

By the end of October, the octogenarians were receiving protests:

"We'll come mom and dad, but we'll have to at least have some meatballs so there'll be something we can eat."

"Surely you remember mom that this is the year that we go to Stephanie's parents for sushi."

After another stern ultimatum from headquarters another round of protestations arrived:

“I trust you’ll understand if we bring some hotdogs or something for the kids.”

“Mom and dad, you surely know that your teenage grandkids aren’t going to show up for that!”

“We’ll bring a BIG meatloaf – in that blue roaster you gave us – so that there will be something the rest of us can actually eat!”

But Ole and Lena stood firm. It was tradition. It was important. It was sacred. It was inviolable.

Late November: “You will come and we will all ENJOY the lutefisk immensely, just like old times.” (That would be THEIR old times, not their kid’s or grandkid’s old times.)

Mid-December: “Sorry to hurt your feelings mom and dad, but this just isn’t going to happen. We’d rather do Chinese take-out and eat it in our SUV than to have to smell lutefisk all night.”

By the 20th of December, the resolute old Norwegian grandpa had set his face like a flint and his wife of 60 years was as uncompromising as her husband: “We’ll get thirty pounds of lutefisk, ten pounds of potatoes, sixty rounds of lefsa, put up all the old decorations and hope for the best.” “They’ll show up,” insisted Lena, “I know they will. They don’t *really* want to miss this. They’re just being difficult because of their lousy spouses.”

As day quickly turned to evening and evening to deep darkness on Christmas eve, just a few days beyond the shortest day of the year, the old couple waited by the windows. Hopes fell with the falling snow. It was heartbreaking. Nobody showed. Nobody. Not

even Glenn, their oldest and most obedient son. Not even Phoebe, their favorite granddaughter with little Bridget, their treasured great-granddaughter.

It was about eight pm when the slightly nauseated – was it from the sadness or the odor? – grim-faced pair sat down at the table to thirty pounds of lutefisk, ten pounds of potatoes, sixty rounds of lefsa and, oh yeah, the cabbage.

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As much as I dislike lutefisk, it almost made me cry writing that. Now of course, the parable isn't about lutefisk, however parable-worthy you think the stuff is.

It's about churches of course (since that's my "thing"), and their traditions and their aging and their adaptation, or lack thereof, and especially, it's about their music. And I'm not talking about the music on Christmas Eve. That's another story. Even the younger generations love the good old carols on Christmas Eve.

I'm talking about the rest of the year, when the older folks, who are usually manning and womaning the church boards, are making decisions. Far too many are not willing to adapt their churches – the way parents and grandparents lovingly, patiently, adapt themselves for the sake of their children and grandchildren, focusing, for instance, on the five main food groups of pizza, hot dogs, cheeseburgers, tacos and macaroni and cheese – whatever it takes to lure the young ones to their homes.

As much as I love older people – even older than me, that is – too many people, in too many churches would rather see their churches die than to adapt themselves to reach the young. "They can learn to love our music if they try." "What's the matter with them? It's their

duty to come to church!” “Those modern 7-11 songs – seven words repeated 11 times – aren’t worth the paper they’re printed on.” It’s just plain sad. Even sadder, to tell the truth, than Ole and Lena sitting alone in their lutefisk fog on Christmas Eve.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How does the average age of our congregation compare to the average age of our community?
2. What is the average age of those who are *making the decisions* in our church?
3. What demographic decade (20 somethings, 30 somethings, etc.) would feel most “at home” in our services?
4. What age group is our music, service times, programing choices, etc. “geared for” at our church? Do we have first-rate children’s ministries and nurseries – the most important considerations for young families – at our church?
5. What would a decorator say about our building? Does it “skew old” or would it appeal to a broad variety of persons?
6. Are we a church that is willing to adapt itself, or would we rather die than change?