

Sustainability – Does Your Church Have the Capacity to Endure?

With the prediction that [6 out of 10 churches will close in the next 10 years](#), sustainability is obviously a hot topic for today's churches and church leaders. But what does it really mean to be sustainable?

Sustainability is "the capacity to endure" ([Wikipedia](#), November 15, 2010); to be here even while others disappear. But sticking around doesn't mean everything stays the same. In fact, it's quite clear that churches need to make some big changes if they want to stay open.

This happened to one of my coaching clients. Until a short time ago, he'd been coasting along towards retirement, doing what he'd always done. When it became clear this wasn't going to be enough to sustain his church, he felt like an old dog being forced to learn some new tricks. Now, after 35 years of ministry, he says he's on the ride of his life!

Sustainability is not just about the numbers, though it's easy to go there. Why not just blame the economy? But the truth is that it's not about the numbers. It's about what you're doing with them. It's about people management, not financial management. What do our people need from us? How can we be more relevant in their lives — now and for a long time to come?

As Dan Dick comments in [an article about a new "Call to Action" in the Methodist community](#), "If we don't know what to do with the ... people we already have, there's no reason to believe that we'll do any better with another million people."

Sustainability also has to do with healthy leadership. We're really seeing that in the response to our coach training, hearing over and over again, "Help me be a better leader!" But not just any kind of leader; to keep their doors open, churches need leadership that is [empowered, effective and entrepreneurial](#).

As Christmas nears, I'm also reminded that sustainability is about both endings and beginnings. What do you need to let go of to embrace the next phase in your church's life? What will be born out of this challenging period?



One pastor I was coaching discovered that letting go of several full-time staff members was the best thing to happen to his church. As difficult as it was to make the choice and tell the staff, it created a wonderful opportunity for some willing and talented volunteers to get involved in their church.

This pastor was willing to do whatever it took to sustain his church and keep the doors open. Are you?

Here are some questions to help you reflect on your level of sustainability:

In order to survive, stick around and sustain, a church must know their purpose.

- What is your core reason for being today?
- If your church suddenly disappeared, would the community notice anything, other than the big hole in the ground?
- How do you WANT to be known by your community?

Sustainability is about the church still being around, even if you're not.

- What is your succession plan as a leader?
- How will you help your church transition into a new phase of leadership when it is time for you to move on?
- What steps need to be taken today? Right now?

For the sake of sustainability, your church is calling on you to makes changes, let go of what's not working and buckle up for the ride of your life!

