

# Christian Life Committee

## Official Report

### **SUSTAINABLE CONGREGATIONS (Change In An Unchanging Environment)**

It is a certain fact that we live in an ever-changing world. Sometimes change comes so fast that it's hard to keep up-to-date. Most of us have, at one time or the other, purchased the latest and greatest technology gadget, only to find that when we finally figure out how to use it, it's already obsolete. For generations, the way most people got their news was via their local newspaper. Now, most people get their up-to-the-moment news almost instantly by electronic means. The result has been the "folding-up" of many daily newspapers and the struggle that many are facing to make little or no profit at all. Change came so quickly many newspaper publishers just couldn't or wouldn't change to meet the times.

What's happening in the world of technology and print publishing is reflective of what's happening in the church all across America and in many parts of the world. Some churches have refused to change their methods (not their message) and they, too, have been left behind. That's why so many churches are closing their doors for the last time. It's staggering to contemplate that research reveals, 70-75 percent of Southern Baptist churches in America are plateaued or declining. On average, 17 Southern Baptist churches shut their doors for good every Sunday.\* Research also reveals that, across all denominations, around 200 churches will close their doors for the last time this Sunday in America. It appears that the pace will likely accelerate unless congregations make some dramatic changes, soon.\*\*

Pastor and author, Robert J. Morgan, wrote a little verse that aptly fits the situation:

Churches Change –  
If they don't change by growing,  
They will change by dying.  
(2008 *Preacher's Resource Book*, p. 86)

Churches all across Virginia are changing. Some have changed their methods and are experiencing growth – we praise God for that. Many have refused to change much, if anything, and are struggling to maintain what they do have. We pray for them, that God will open their eyes to the reality of what needs to happen. The purpose of this position paper is to challenge the Baptist General Association of Virginia (BGAV) to develop some strategies that will help BGAV churches move from a maintainable existence to a sustainable presence in the communities they serve. Likewise, a challenge is issued to all BGAV churches, large and small, to be open to new ways of sharing the message of Christ in our ever-changing and diverse society.

Many of our BGAV churches are in rural areas where maintaining the status quo is the norm. Any mention of change creates angst among the membership. There is an overwhelming sense of holding on to the "that's the way we've always done it" mentality. However, this is not unique to just rural churches. Churches in cities and towns all across the state are smitten with the same mentality. The result, many BGAV churches are finding themselves in severe financial difficulties at present, but are being sustained by "old money." Unless there is an influx of "new money," there will come a time, in the not so distant future, when these churches will no longer be viable.

Perhaps this issue should be considered an ethical issue of stewardship for the churches that find themselves in this situation. Is it really the will of God to just keep the doors open? Or wouldn't it be wise to join forces with other congregations to create better stewardship of physical resources, as well as human resources? With these thoughts in mind, the word "merger" comes to the forefront.

The word "merger" will anger some, scare others, or just be ignored and given no real consideration by most. It makes sense, however, when you consider "How effective can a church be with only 20-40 in attendance on Sunday morning?" If two or three churches in close proximity would come together, they could make a stronger impact and see Kingdom Advance. After all, that is our commission (Matthew 28:19-20). We were not tasked with just keeping the doors open, instead we are told to knock down the gates of hell for it has no power over God's church (Matthew 16:18). Practically speaking, it makes much more sense to combine physical and human resources to establish a single sustainable congregation that can more effectively get about the business of making disciples and seeing Kingdom Advance in Virginia.

Respectfully submitted,  
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\* "Together For His Kingdom," 2017 Annie Armstrong Easter Offering Prayer Guide, Day 1 "A Plentiful Harvest."

\*\* "Urgent Church: Nine Changes We Must Make Or Die," March 27, 2017, Shared by Thom Rainer (ThomRainer.com).