



CHURCH
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LEADER GUIDE: EPISODE #4 WHY CHURCH MERGERS ARE EXPLODING & HOW TO REVITALIZE AGING CONGREGATIONS

AN INTRODUCTION TO CHURCH CHANGER:

It's time to rip the lid off your leadership and push past organizational pain points holding you and your church back. **Church Changer** is designed to equip church leaders with practical tools, proven strategies, and best practices to help you reach more people for Christ and shatter growth barriers in your ministry. Listen today, and put key takeaways into practice tomorrow! We're here to collaborate with you and cheerlead for you. Join Co-hosts Pastor Tim Lucas and Lauren Bercarich, along with special guests, as they outline a clear path forward so you can increase your impact, and let's have some fun in the process! New episodes drop the first Tuesday of each month.

EPIISODE NOTES:

Overview

Thousands of Protestant churches are plateaued or declining, while other congregations nearby thrive. Warren Bird helps us explore an approach to combine forces and spark a revitalization through ministry mergers. In fact, Warren notes that almost 100% of churches are a candidate for a ministry merger, which means this topic is applicable to everyone. No church is too small, too big, too young, too old, too urban or suburban for a partnership designed to revitalize your church or another in your community.

Warren's call to action for YOU - every church in America should be praying about whether a church merger is the right move for them.

Our Guest

Warren Bird is the Senior Vice President of Research and Equipping at the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability or ECFA. He is an award-winning researcher and author of over 30 books. Warren has published almost 200 magazine articles and more than 30 major research reports. He is also an ordained minister and has served on staff for 11 years at Princeton Alliance Church in New Jersey and taught for 15 years at Alliance Theological Seminary.



80% of the 320,000 Protestant Churches in the US are plateaued or declining. Can you help explain the phenomenon?

Pre-pandemic 80% of churches were either holding even or losing ground. Historically, that's not that unusual across church denominations. However, the pandemic was an accelerator of what was already there and those on the borderline of survival are in a worse state today and may be asking themselves if a merger is the next best step.

"For multisite churches, 41% of campuses come by way of mergers. So multisite growth is widespread and it's happening largely because of ministry mergers. And for the church planters out there, those who acquire a facility, 1 in 5 do so through a merger."

- Warren Bird

When we talk about church mergers, traditionally we've heard about two declining churches coming together in a last ditch effort to survive. But, today the model is for a dying church to merge with a growing church. Essentially these are two churches at different life stages. What does that look like?

99% of the time, two declining churches coming together does NOT work in terms of a ministry merger. When you're talking about a ministry merger, one church has to lead and the other has to follow. The leading church is the one with the momentum. Typically, it's the larger church, but that's not always the case. The key is that it's one church that sets the pace, has the DNA, and the other church saying "we will become you," giving up our DNA and how we do church in order for this ministry merger to work.

Are you seeing a culture today where churches are more likely to embrace ministry mergers?

People follow vision and those churches that didn't hunker down and hide during the pandemic are now emerging with momentum. Those that didn't pursue progress during the pandemic, are now in need of help and so mergers are only on the rise coming out of the pandemic.

You believe almost 100% of churches could be a candidate for a ministry merger, how is that possible?

Some struggling churches need financial support or are in danger of collapsing. This is a leading reason for church mergers, but it's not the only reason. For instance, other churches don't have a succession plan. Other churches simply want to multiply their impact and they see that happening through a merger. There are actually 12 different motivators that could lead into a merger (outlined in Warren's book [Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work](#)). For example, maybe two churches of different ethnicities decide to partner together to become more diverse. That's why all churches could contemplate a merger, whether as the lead church or the joining church.



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Practically speaking, how does the church merger conversation happen?

So, first let's ask who initiates the conversation? The potential joining church might, saying we need help. Through a relationship, they could explore a merger with other churches. It could also be the lead church, reaching out and offering help to a neighboring church. The key is this offer of help is genuine - it's not a land grab. You have to come with a true Kingdom motive. A third source would be an outside consultant who is pointing a church toward a merger.

You really have to have a Kingdom heart in the process and a desire for others to flourish. A relationship is key in this process. Start with a friendship, build trust, and a shared source of mission. Then a merger might happen organically from that friendship.

Keep in mind that not every merger is motivated by desperation. Some mergers bring together two healthy churches, but one sees that another church has a bigger vision and believes they could multiply their impact through a partnership.

What are some mistakes you see churches make in ministry mergers?

The timeline can go sideways. You need time to do a "chemistry check" and to make sure that the merger is a good idea for both churches. You don't want to rush a merger or let it drag on for too long. The average length of time for a successful merger is 8 months. It's not change that's the challenge, but the transition is tricky when adjusting to a new reality. So, you need to assess your compatibility level and there are 25 factors to consider (outlined in Warren's book).

Leadership decisions are key as well. One of the key questions is what happens to the Lead Pastor of the joining church. And our research shows that in the majority of cases, that pastor remains on staff, but not in that role and often not at that campus. So, maybe they become a pastor of care, missions, or small groups - it's another role altogether.

The misperceived roles of the churches is a common mistake. This is not a marriage of two equal parties. One church has to clearly defer to the other church and say "I am willing to become you." This is an adoption model. Clarity on who is playing what role is key.

Miscommunication to the congregation is another pitfall. You need to be clear with your church about what you're getting into and WHY you're moving ahead with a merger. Otherwise people will feel caught off guard when they discover the men's pancake breakfast is canceled!



Four questions churches need to ask themselves before moving into a merger.

1. Would our congregation be better by merging rather than remaining separate?
2. Could we accomplish more together than we could separately?
3. Would our community be better served if we joined together?
4. Could the Kingdom of God be further enlarged by joining together?

Churches Making Waves: Christ Fellowship Miami

As part of the Church Changer podcast, each month we want to spotlight churches “making waves” and doing great work. It’s not just about giving them a shout-out, but about pointing you in the right direction. For anyone working in ministry, it’s a great idea to see how others are excelling to discover some key takeaways that would work for you and your church.

This episode, we’re spotlighting [Christ Fellowship Miami](#). 100 years ago a Baptist Church in Florida planted other churches in the surrounding Miami-Dade area, and one of them became known as Christ Fellowship Miami, which has since flourished and grown to 10,000+ attendees. Meanwhile, the founding church experienced a gradual decline over the years. So, eventually the “daughter” church came back to the “parent” and asked... Can we help revitalize you? They came full circle and now the founding church is a campus of Christ Fellowship and it’s once again flourishing!

Book Recommendation

We highly recommend “[Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work](#)” by Jim Tomberlin and our guest Warren Bird. At Church Changer we love practical guidance, and that’s exactly what this book provides whether you’re a struggling or a vibrant church. Get key questions answered about the merger process: How can a merger help a church go forward? How will a merger process unfold? Where can a declining church find another congregation to join? What are the pitfalls that both pastor and congregation should avoid? This book will help you to feel equipped!

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Continue the conversation! Here are questions to ask yourself and your team to help your church thrive. We hope Church Changer will inspire you to put into practice what we discuss each month!

1. **Have you considered whether a ministry merger is right for your church in this season? Is this an active conversation among your leadership?**

2. **If you are a church with momentum, are you actively reaching out in friendship to support other churches in your community who might need your help?**

3. **If you are a struggling church, are you open to pursuing revitalization through a ministry merger? What might be holding you back from considering a merger?**



4. How has the pandemic changed your thinking regarding ministry mergers?

5. If you've already been through a ministry merger as a leading church, can you identify mistakes made to be avoided in the future?

We are rooting for you! May 2022 be the year you shatter growth barriers in your ministry!

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