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# 1

## DYING IN THE DISTRICT

*“You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.”*

—MATTHEW 16:18 (THE MESSAGE)

One Sunday afternoon, we gathered in the church basement to talk about the future of our church. Twenty very tired and discouraged people expressed their frustrations and fears. Senior adults shared their worries that the church they had been part of all their lives wouldn't be there to bury them. A few middle-aged adults had one foot out the door. We sat on stained and torn carpet with mold hiding behind peeling paint—results of an ongoing drainage problem the church couldn't afford to fix. We rehearsed the stories of families and individuals that had visited but never returned. I (Dan) had grown used to the “deer in the headlights”

look on the faces of guests that quietly questioned their decision to visit the church around the corner from home.

They wouldn't be back.

After services, the entire church practically mobbed these poor unsuspecting people with a welcome served with a side of desperation. It didn't matter. Guests could smell death.

## **New Pastor, Old Church**

It was my first year at National Memorial Church of God in the heart of Washington, D.C. I faithfully followed the tried-and-true advice to spend a year before initiating any talk of change. After a year, I had successfully maintained the average attendance of thirty-two people that I started with! Throughout that first year, it became increasingly challenging to stand in front of a mostly empty sanctuary.

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*A church in severe decline can get extremely creative in its efforts to survive.*

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During my first month in D.C., I discovered that the church treasurer had allowed the building insurance to lapse during the absence of a pastor. My second month, I had to deal with some conflict-of-interest issues with our board. My third month, I discovered that part of my job would be to vacuum up hundreds of gallons of water every time a storm dumped more than an inch of rain an hour (yes, I tracked it).

That first summer, I also discovered that to help the church stay afloat, I would have to continue the practice of hosting hundreds of students on mission who would pay to sleep on the floor of our building throughout the summer. My other job was to coordinate the two ethnic churches that rented the facility. By serving as a hotel and a landlord, the church had been able to survive financially through some extremely lean years. A church in severe

## Dying In The District

decline can get extremely creative in its efforts to survive. This is called the “long tail” (we’ll talk about this in the next chapter).

### The Church’s Past

National Memorial Church of God opened in 1942. It was a proud effort by the Church of God denomination to place a representative congregation in the nation’s capital. It was one of the last of twenty-five “national churches” to be built in Washington, D.C., just three miles directly north from the White House on a street commonly referred to as “church row.” Once the novelty wore off, however, the church struggled to live up to its mission. By the 1970s, National Memorial had plateaued and then started a very long and steady decline.

By the time a long-term pastor retired in 1997, my predecessor greeted less than twenty people on the Sunday after his installation service. He was young and creative and was able to build up the attendance to fifty. After he resigned, the church went nearly two years without a pastor and lost any momentum it had gained. By the time I came to Washington, the leaders were tired and out of ideas.

### Shifting Demographics

During a board meeting, I played a video of one of our recent worship services and asked our leaders to watch it through the eyes of a guest. They all said it was boring and flat.

Then I played a recording of a pretty conservative worship service that I thought might be palatable to them. They hated it! We seemed to be at an impasse. Finally, one of the board members stated bluntly: “If people would just stay around long enough, they might learn to like our kind of worship.”

*Change was happening all around us, but National Memorial had stuck to the same formula.*

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I was staring into the well-meaning faces of a generation that had developed their worship recipe in the 1950s and had not changed it since. Unfortunately, the world around this church, like so many other churches throughout the United States, had gone through enormous shifts.

The shifts were similar to what was (and is) happening in cities all across the United States. After the white flight of the 1970s and the slowly declining populations that followed, things again changed. Housing values skyrocketed. Young families moved into the neighborhoods. The population of our area in northwest D.C. grew even more diverse.

Change was happening all around us, but National Memorial had stuck to the same formula. The Allen organ still sat proudly on the chancel ready to accompany the tried-and-true hymns or a hot-off-the-press Gaither chorus. Even though our membership reflected some diversity, the flavor of worship and leadership makeup was decidedly Euro-centric.

As individual church members grew older, they had followed the trend of moving to the suburbs of D.C., where housing was affordable, and schools weren't failing. As a result, just a handful of people in National Memorial lived within the ministry area of the church. Adding to the disconnect was the reality of a church full of suburban dwellers trying to relate to an urban demographic. In short, we weren't getting any takers for the growth plan of sticking around long enough to "learn to like it."

I (Dan) interviewed a restart church in Baltimore, Maryland, that had a similar experience of a growing disconnection from its local community. Over the course of a decade, the community had experienced a 29 percent increase in the African-American population in its zip code. During that same time, the Anglo population had dropped by 37 percent. The church named Transforming