

POSTINGS

ARTICLES FOR CHURCH MISSIONS LEADERS

Avoiding the Boneyard

HOW CHURCHES
CAN REFIT FOR
STRATEGIC MISSIONS
ENGAGEMENT



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I live just a few miles from a boneyard. Actually, it is the largest boneyard in the world.

Now before you get too spooked, let me explain.

The Davis-Monthan Air Force Base here in Tucson, AZ, has an average inventory of more than 4,400 aircraft which makes it the largest aircraft storage and preservation

facility in the world. Because of the dry desert location, it became the US storage center for military planes post-WWII, and yes, it is officially called “a boneyard.”

The road my family takes to church each week cuts right between these rows and rows of now-motionless aircraft. The planes resemble sleepy patients emerging from surgery

with what looks like white tape and gauze covering their cockpits and joints. They appear to be just waiting for someone to remove the bandages so they can stretch their wings and fly again. Sadly, these long rows of once powerful and useful planes are now permanently grounded.

As I help church missions leaders imagine the future of their congregation's missions engagement, I hear from many who feel "grounded," maybe not yet in a boneyard, but at least ill-equipped to fly in today's missions context. They may be frustrated by shrinking budgets and/or so bound to old programs that there isn't much room to maneuver. It seems to some that their involvement in missions may be stuck in the "glory days" of the past while others are still flying but can sense that it is likely time to upgrade their craft in order to soar to new heights. Nostalgia can get in the way of seeing clearly how things have been and what needs to change—how God may be calling them to transition to new areas of missional

engagement that will meet the needs of today and take them to new horizons.

Each week as we pass through the aviation boneyard, some of these painful conversations with church leaders ring in my ears, bringing to mind a strange, modern-day version of the question that God posed to Ezekiel centuries ago: "Will these bones live?"

And I'm left with the Prophet's own reply: "Sovereign Lord, you alone know." (Ez. 37:3)

Now of course, when I picture what it would take for a congregation's missions engagement to really take flight, it is not for the purpose of going to war but to bring blessing, care, and the love of Christ to those the Spirit leads them, both locally and globally. No church wants to see themselves in a missions boneyard, but how do leaders update, upgrade, or even totally overhaul the craft that God has given them to pilot?

Ten Keys to Refitting for Missions in 2026

Here are my top 10 suggestions for churches committed to transitioning to a more strategic, contemporary missions vision. A shout-out to Mark Avery, missions pastor of Zarephath (NJ) Christian Church, for some practical suggestions I have incorporated here.

- 1 PRAY AND DISCERN AS A CONGREGATION.** A structured prayer and discernment process prepares your people to see the reason for change and begin to anticipate the fresh potential. Getting the congregation involved in praying through, and reflecting together on, some of the amazing opportunities opening in our world today will allow them to sense how the Spirit seems to be guiding your body. This process of inviting the church to speak into your fresh vision prepares them to expect change and increases their investment in the outcome.
- 2 CELEBRATE THE PAST.** While what your church has been previously involved in certainly wasn't perfect, there are likely multiple elements that you could and should celebrate. As you move on to what is next, it is important to take the time to honor God's faithfulness, the contributions of those involved, and the kingdom impact your church has had.

3 DEMONSTRATE PAST-PRESENT COHERENCE WHERE FEASIBLE.

Whenever you can, highlight how what you have done in the past links up with what God is calling you to do in the present. For example, if you previously were part of planting churches in a certain country that now is eagerly sending their own kingdom workers to new places, partnering with them to do that is a great way to maximize and build on your previous engagement.

4 CAST A COMPELLING, COHERENT VISION.

Make a clear case for why this is what your church should be involved in now. Transformational stories, far more than just facts and statistics, will help your people want to participate. Your focus should consistently be on people connecting with people, not just projects.

5 PRIORITIZE LEADERSHIP BUY-IN.

Work with your leaders (board, elders, pastors, and other staff, lay leaders, other influential people, etc.) to build alignment and adopt shared terminology for what strategic ministry looks like for your congregation in this season. Securing a strong, broad base of support will help you navigate the changes and the potential resistance. Leader buy-in will make consistent terminology in messages, missions reports, etc. more likely.

6 HONOR PAST CHAMPIONS AND DEVELOP FUTURE ONES.

Identify and create rapport with the champions of your previous missions involvement. Connect with them on a personal level. Take the time to listen and really hear their heart. At the same time, create a

REAL-LIFE STORY



City Church (not its real name) had a long-term relationship with a missionary who had grown up in the congregation. They loved supporting his family as they pursued their vision to nurture church planting in an underserved country in Africa. However, over the last decade, these workers' ministry changed. For several reasons, they relocated to a different country where they were no longer directly involved in disciple-making and training. They returned to their original region of ministry infrequently and contributed to the work there primarily from a distance and indirectly.

City Church had two issues. They did not feel the workers' current role matched up with the church's priorities, and they questioned if the new assignment fit the missionaries' gifts. The missions leadership team initiated a discernment process with these workers but were not able to find a mutually workable alignment.

City Church informed the workers that they would continue supporting their ministry for just one additional year. This schedule both gave their missionaries time to pursue other funding partners and provided the church with sufficient runway to research new opportunities that better fit their vision for supporting direct disciple-making. The congregation is excited about this new opportunity. Volunteers and donors are stepping up who were previously disengaged from City Church's missions program.

pathway for champions of a new strategic direction to come together to discuss, pray, learn, and consider options for your initiative.

7 ESTABLISH A REALISTIC TIMELINE.

Implementing a major focus shift will take time, but dragging out the transition process too long can mean lost momentum. Generally, 6-18 months is a reasonable timeframe for wrapping up and celebrating previous commitments and switching to a new focus. However, if your church was the primary donor to a work you are now moving away from, this may require a longer timeline.

8 WRAP UP WELL THROUGH ASSISTANCE WITH NETWORKING.

Mission leaders can offer assistance in helping the previous partner build new donor bases through networking and referrals, etc. That is a way to continue to stay connected if possible in appropriate ways and extend the relationship beyond the completion of a project or season of support.

9 MATCH YOUR PACE OF CHANGE TO YOUR CONGREGATION.

Keep in mind that you want to lead at a speed that a critical mass of your congregation can handle. Slow down if many of your members are older because they may not have the capacity to pivot quickly. But once they do shift, you may find to your delight that you now have strong, stable support because, once

convinced, they will loyally support your new vision and strategy. If your congregation is younger, they may embrace change quickly but require engagement in shorter bursts of activity like projects and trips that can help develop long-term commitment. Look for early adopters and entrepreneurs and utilize their enthusiasm to help others catch the vision.

10 ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHANGE.

Be prepared for the reality that some members of your congregation will not be willing to embrace the new vision. But if you are confident of the Spirit's leading, convinced that this new direction points toward greater kingdom impact, and have done all you can to prepare your people, it is time as leaders to accept whatever criticism comes but move ahead. Your clear vision will likely attract new volunteers and supporters not connected with past efforts but now ready to align and invest in your new direction.

This list is designed as a framework to help your church avoid the boneyard and embrace God's bold missions vision for your next season. It will not be easy to move your congregation's allegiance from an emotional attachment to a beloved, established project and relocate it to a calling you believe is more strategic. But it can be worth it! Getting off the ground and flying high again to where God is leading your church can bless you in new ways as you seek to serve the nations and your neighbors.

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ALAN HOWELL As director of church relations at [Mission Resource Network](#), Alan loves to help churches avoid being sidelined in anything like a boneyard. His 15 years of experience as a global worker in Mozambique as well as his teaching experience at Harding University help him understand the global context of partnership as well as what resonates with younger generations. You can connect with him at Alan.Howell@MRNet.org.



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