

To Dream Again: How to Help Your Church Come Alive, by Robert Dale. Eugene, Oregon: Whipf & Stock, 2004. 154 pages. Reviewed by Phillip A. Shuford.

“What we expect from life is usually what we get” (12). So Robert D. Dale, in this book *To Dream Again: How to Help Your Church Come Alive* begins his exploration of how churches in need of revitalization can become vibrant once again. Dale takes research into the life cycles of organizations and applies the principles learned in that field to the world of church life and health, offering fascinating insight into how churches grow and decline. Since its original publication in 1981, *To Dream Again* has become a classic, and is a “must-read” for pastors and church leaders interested in revitalizing plateaued and declining churches.

Dale is an author, speaker and coach whose ministry spans over four decades, and is well-qualified to write about church health. He holds advanced degrees from Kansas University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and taught on congregational health on the seminary level for many years. He served churches in Kansas, Missouri, Texas and Oklahoma and is the author of dozens of books on church dynamics and leadership. But in *To Dream Again* he makes what may be his most important contribution to the field of church health.

Dale believes in the importance of what he calls the congregation’s “original dream.” He states early on in the book: “The best way to understand a church or organization is to discover its founding dream and any remnants of that original dream which continue to shape life and ministry” (13). The rest of the book develops Dale’s fundamental premise that plateaued and declining churches can recapture their dream and become vibrant again by re-discovering the church’s original dream—or developing a new dream—and designing and implementing plans to make the dream a reality. To help the reader understand how this can happen, Dale describes how all organizations experience a life-cycle (“Organizations move through a cycle of birth,

growth, maturity, decline, and death” (14). He then takes that concept, familiar in the business world, and adapts and applies it to congregational life in a way that is insightful and (usually) helpful.

Dale generally structures his book using a parabolic curve that represents a congregational life cycle. The reader essentially “rides the curve” of the life cycle, and at key stages along the curve Dale stops and explains to the reader what is happening in the church at each stage.

The journey up the curve begins at the “dream stage,” where, in chapter one Dale posits two fundamental ideas: (1) every church was birthed out of the founders’ dreams, and (2) like all organizations, churches have life cycles. Discerning where a church is in terms of its placement on the life cycle is key to understanding the dynamics within that church. Dale deepens our understanding of the dream stage in the second chapter, with a discussion on congregational health.

Chapter three delves into the church as part of God’s Kingdom. Dale states “Jesus’ kingdom dream was the organizing and motivating fact of his life” (33). The chapter’s section on “kingdom dream themes” is one of the most helpful in the book, as it describes aspects of kingdom of God-oriented dreams that kingdom-focused churches should incorporate into their congregational life. The author states “The church is an organizational expression of the kingdom of God” (46) and then observes: “Some congregations may suffer from methodological tunnel vision by majoring on the church and minoring on the kingdom. These groups may ask too often, “How can we ‘do church’ here?” to the exclusion of “How can we bring God’s kingdom through this congregation?” (46)

. In chapter four, Dale takes the reader to the “beliefs stage,” exploring the importance of a congregation’s belief system as it relates to a church’s placement on the church life cycle. Dale asserts that a church’s actions and reactions are indicative of what the church believes. An interesting section in this chapter touches on church music. (The book was written in the early 1980s, when the “worship wars” were heating up in many churches.) He believes that the music sung in a church is indicative of the church’s theology. Dale makes an important observation about the role of worship pastors and song leaders in our churches, speaking to a reality in church life that many pastors sense but perhaps don’t fully grasp: “The person who chooses the hymns for worship is potentially the most important theologian in his congregation...His personal theology (or musical preference) will be a potent shaping force in the belief patterns of the church” (54). And those belief patterns influence a church’s “dream” in a fundamental way; Dale asks the powerful question: “Does your congregation’s praise extend its kingdom dream?” (55) His implication is clear: a church may need to change its worship in music as part of a larger strategy for revitalization and to reach its full potential in the kingdom of God.

Dale addresses the importance of goal setting in chapter five, at the “goals stage.” He correctly observes that “Church goals generally fall into two categories: mission and survival” (63). When it comes to goals, many if not most churches are in survival mode and use this formula when setting goals: *needs + resources = goals*. A better, kingdom focused formula that incorporates a church’s dream for the future is *needs + resources x kingdom dream = goals* (63). As in other chapters, the diagnostic questions included in the action exercises are very helpful, particularly Action Exercise #6 “Values Shown by our Budget.”

In chapter six, Dale takes the reader to the “structure stage,” asserting that “Structure and systems provide the muscle and sinew for attaining congregational goals” (86). Much of the

chapter, however, is dedicated not to how to organize your church around your kingdom dream, but on identifying the informal systems that are present in every church. The reader will need to look elsewhere for guidance on formal church structures. That being said, his observations on informal systems within the church are useful. Three that stand out are: “Informal structure emerges spontaneously from the natural attempts of members to meet their mutual needs” (80); “Three out of every four pieces of grapevine information is generally accurate. However, inaccurate items usually are greatly distorted” (81) and “If persons feel like outsiders to formal structures, they’ll build an informal system in which they can feel like insiders, a clique if necessary” (84).

At the “ministry stage” (chapter seven), the reader arrives at the top of the curve representing the church life cycle. The author chose to not give a comprehensive description of the various aspects of church life in the ministry stage. Instead, his attention is mainly focused on what he calls the “threat” of this stage: plateau and decline, which happens inevitably when ministry loses its focus and forgets its “dream.” He states that “Organizations die on autopilot” and observes that after a period of success or growth, churches are especially vulnerable to organizational plateau (94). Dale offers that just as sick patients need a doctor to diagnose their ailments in order to prescribe a treatment regimen, “Churches on the plateau become sick and need diagnosis and treatment too” (97). This, of course, is the rationale for Dale’s book. The author’s description of indicators of organizational plateau and “plateau pathologies” make this the strongest chapter in the book.

Beginning in chapter eight, Dale begins to take the reader down the curve, from ministry/plateau to decline. He first identifies what he calls the “nostalgia stage.” Dale calls nostalgia an “exile mentality” (105) full of “I remember when’s.” He describes three faces of

nostalgia that are important for organizations: (1) past success can seduce a church to constantly look backward; (2) loyalty to the present way of doing things limits a church's ability to "dream forward;" (3) celebrating the past can help a church frame its dream in such a way that a bridge is created between the "good old days" and the kingdom dream of the future.

. Dale writes that the nostalgia stage is the "lull before the storm" (116) and in chapter nine, the author takes the reader further down the life cycle curve, into the what he calls "organizational hell": the questioning, polarization and dropout stages. In the questioning stage, crisis is inevitable if there is no direct revitalization. "Questioning is the now or never point of congregational health. Health or death are the choices" (120). Next comes polarization, where battle lines are drawn, and "conflict is open, escalating and messy" (121). Finally, apathy sets in; members' "alienation toward the organization is total and, perhaps, final" (123).

The final two chapters of the book are devoted to how to promote a kingdom dream (what contemporary writers call "vision casting"), and ideas for how to plan for future ministry based on the church's kingdom dream. These chapters, after Dale's wonderful analysis of church life cycles, are rather anti-climactic.

As stated previously, Dale structures his book on the different stages of the church life cycle. Dale effectively weaves his main thesis (a church can gain renewed vitality by discovering—or re-discovering—its dream for existing) into the warp and woof of the book. For the most part, the flow of his argument works well. Five chapters are particularly strong.

Dale's treatment of the importance of the church's original dream in chapter one is effective in describing the book's central idea, that every church was birthed by a "dream" that either guides the church or needs to be re-discovered. Next, this reader particularly appreciated the emphasis in chapter three on discovering a "kingdom dream" for the church; if the kingdom

of God was the organizing drive behind Jesus' ministry, the primacy of His kingdom should drive the lives of his churches as well. Dale's analysis of organizational plateau in chapter seven paints a vivid picture of a church that has lost momentum and is on the verge of free-fall. His description of the nostalgia stage (chapter eight) is important because so many churches seem to live there; describing the nostalgia stage as "corporate depression" (11) is helpful and makes this stage easy to understand. Finally, Dale's description of the final stages on the life cycle curve in chapter nine give an excellent (if brief) description of what happens to a church in the final stages of life.

In addition to the unity of theme, the strong development of Dale's ideas in five of the book's chapters, the action exercises included in each chapter add another element of strength to the book; the diagnostic questions in the action exercises add a handbook quality to Dale's classic.

Having said that, *To Dream Again* is not a handbook; the real strength of the book is not its "how-to" quality, and in this way the book fails to live up to the promise contained in its subtitle: *How to Help Your Church Come Alive Again*. In spite of its value as a study of the church life cycle, a pastor or church leader needing practical steps to guide their church to revitalization would come away wanting more (at best) or disappointed and frustrated (at worst.) Thankfully, since its original publication over 30 years ago, many other authors have given more detailed diagnoses and prescriptions for churches in plateau and decline.

For all its insights, which are many, Dale's book left me with some nagging questions. Given, it is helpful to discover the founding dream of a church, because in that dream a church's "DNA" can be discovered. But what if the founding dream itself was off-base? For example, in the case of a church split, where one group in a church gets angry at another group and forms a

new church (one of the most popular forms of church planting!), and the new church's (unspoken) founding dream was "We're better than the other group!"—what then? How does a church begun that way, now finding itself in decline, come to terms with the reality that their very existence may be due to a carnal reaction to church conflict? How does this church "un-dream"—and then "re-dream"?

Along those lines, while Dale writes convincingly on discovering a "kingdom dream" for a congregation, it seems to me that the author puts the church's original dream on an equal par with its kingdom dream. Shouldn't it be the task of a church to discover God's dream, to the exclusion of its own? Very curiously, Dale seems to undercut the thrust of chapter three's theme, the primacy of the kingdom of God in the life of a church, with the last sentence of the chapter: "Christ's kingdom is a possible dream for your church" (47). Shouldn't Christ's kingdom be the only dream for a church? Would it not be a more effective prayer to pray "Not our will, but Thine"? Indeed, I was troubled by the absence of emphasis on the role of the prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit in reviving a congregation. When Ezekiel was asked "Son of man, can these bones live?" his response was not "O Lord, if we can apply effective techniques related to organizational psychology, they can!"

However, the strengths of *To Dream Again* far outweigh its shortcomings. Dale's years of experience "in the trenches" with churches shine through as he describes situations that any seasoned pastor would recognize. The book is not technical, is very readable, and offers a fascinating way to understand church life, giving congregational champions a valuable framework to interpret a church's condition. The diagnostic questions Dale includes in each chapter are, by themselves, worth distilling into a separate work. Church leaders would do well

to not just give the book a cursory read, but to study it with highlighter in hand, to not lose the many useful “pearls of wisdom” scattered throughout.

Although more than 30 years have passed since its first publication, the observation that inspired Robert Dale to write *To Dream Again*—that congregations have a definable life cycle and steps can be taken to bring new vitality to a church—is as true in the early 21st century as it was in the late 20th. *To Dream Again* will surely remain an important book for congregational champions for years to come.