

# SCRAPPY CHURCH

GOD'S NOT DONE YET

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NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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I have been told our community, those who connect with my blogs, podcast, books, and Church Answers each year, is around fourteen million people. That blows my mind. I am so grateful for all of you. You bless me by connecting with me through my books, my blog, ThomRainer.com, my podcasts, *Rainer on Leadership* and *Revitalize and Replant*, and my subscription ministry, Church Answers. You have come to learn from me, but I have learned so much more from you.

I love my family. I really do love my family. A follower on Twitter recently told me my love for my family was the most obvious thing about me. I consider those words some of the greatest encouragement I have ever received.

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This book is a composite of conversations, interviews, and comments from an amalgamation of church leaders. The names have been changed and some of the details are different to protect anonymity where it was necessary. Some of the stories are individual stories; some are composite stories. But for all those who spoke with me, shared with me, laughed with me, and, on occasion, cried with me—thank you. This book is your story. And your story will have a profound impact on many.

You are part of the scrappy church revolution. It is a powerful story that is just beginning to unfold. Wait for it. Watch for it. And become a part of it.

See the great things our God will do.



## CHAPTER 1

# Why You Should Have Hope for Your Church

AMAZON.

The name evokes the spectrum of emotions.

For some, the name means an incredible selection of resources, unparalleled delivery, amazing customer service, and convenience not known just a decade or so ago. Amazon is what's right with the world. It's the embodiment of the future and the hope for society. If we are truly living in a material world, Amazon is king, queen, and crown prince of this world.

For others, the name evokes fear, distrust, and a disquieting sense of unfairness. You loathe Amazon, particularly if you make the fatal mistake to compete with the beast. The creature devours mom-and-pop stores. It disrupts industry after industry. It has the unfair advantage of hordes of cash and the favored status of countless government entities.

If you are in the former category, you shout exclamations of joy every time the box with the smile arrives at your porch. You celebrate one less trip and futile shopping effort to the mall. You express glee when your shipping charge is zero. Nothing. Nada. After all, you are part of the elect; you have Amazon Prime™.

But if you are in the latter category, you tremble with fear with each new Amazon pronouncement. They are the modern-era Langoliers, but they consume businesses instead of time. They are relentless, uncaring, and unforgiving. If you get in their way, you will be consumed. If you are fortunate, they will purchase you at a deep market value discount. Either way, you will cease to exist.

I admit my own schizophrenia with Amazon. I have been a customer of Amazon so long, I actually received a *handwritten* thank you note for being such a good customer many years ago. I was a Prime member before Prime membership was cool. And, as a confessing introvert, I absolutely love shopping without people around. As a consumer, I really do like Amazon.

But I have been on the other side of Amazon. They have been my competitor. The company I have led is not that small. We have a half-billion dollars in annual revenue and 5,000 employees. But we are gnats compared to the giant. In fact, I seriously doubt Jeff Bezos knows my name or my company. I have had to lead my organization to confront the stark realities of the massive Amazon. I know the challenges. I know the angst.

## Hope in the Amazon World

We all know at least parts of the story of Amazon. Jeff Bezos started the company on July 5, 1994. One day after Independence Day, he began the organization upon which many of us would pledge our dependence. At its onset, Amazon was an online bookstore. Storing books in a garage, Bezos saved us a trip to the local bookstore. In the past quarter century, Amazon has entered so many industries and offered so many services, we've lost count of them. And in an amazing turn of events, Amazon has become the largest provider of cloud computing services in the world.

But Amazon started as an Internet bookstore. Amazon started in Bezos's garage. So, if any industry should be afraid of Amazon, it should be the book retailers, right? For certain, many of the big chains have felt the wrath of the Amazon power. Try to find a Borders bookstore in your town, and you will understand.

But something amazing has taken place in the shadow of the seemingly omnipotent Amazon: *Independent bookstores are not only surviving, many are thriving.*

This reality has flown under the radar of most observers. I guess most of us assumed the "indie" stores were long gone. Not so. To the contrary, it is a thriving industry. Dozens of articles are now surfacing about this resurgent and resilient business.

So what did the indies do?

They did not try to compete directly with Amazon. They did not offer Prime™. They did not sell a gazillion books. They did not offer free shipping. And they did not offer endless streaming videos for you and your family to consume.

But they did connect with their communities. They did have fun events that reflected the hopes and dreams of those who lived nearby. They offered intensely personal services, not innately digital services. They curated their books so the consumer could better understand what was available. And they responded with new local ideas instead of new data-driven algorithms.

I know. This book is about churches, not Amazon. It's about reaching our community, not selling our books.

But I'm guessing you are understanding the reason for this early excursion. I think you get why I am writing about independent bookstores in a book about churches.

The main reason is to provide hope. And a close corollary is to demonstrate how that hope is actually played out in local congregations just like yours.

## **The Hope around Us**

How many times have I heard such statements?

“We can't compete with the megachurch in our town!”

“A new church was started two blocks from us. We've got plenty of churches without them!”

“The church brought another one of their campuses near us. It’s totally unethical what they are doing.”

“We can’t reach young families. They all go to the big church that has all the children’s and student stuff.”

“We don’t have the money or the people the other churches have.”

To answer my own question, I have heard comments like those hundreds, if not thousands, of times. They are statements of hopelessness. They are statements of despair. They are statements of defeat. They are statements of fear.

And to be fair, I get it. Those are not delusional statements. They are statements based upon the real and painful experiences of countless church members and church leaders. These church leaders don’t want to feel this way. They desire to break out of the mediocrity of the same, lame, and tame existence of their churches. They want to make a difference. They want their churches to make a difference.

They want to know if there is hope. God’s hope. God’s possibilities.

And the answer is an unequivocal “yes!”

I do not make such a bold statement without basis. First, and above all, God is not done with your church. He put your church in your location for a reason. Do you really think He does not desire your church to become a potent force for Him in your community?

Second, I make the statement based upon the stories of other churches. I have seen too many so-called hopeless churches become turnaround churches. I have seen congregations defy all the doom-and-gloom prognosticators. I have seen churches spit in the face of the objective facts that say it can't be done.

I call these turnaround churches “scrappy churches.”

## **Scrappy Churches and the Football Team**

I like the word *scrappy*. It brings back memories of my high school football team. Yes, I know. I'm taking a trip to antiquity. But the memories of Johnny are vivid even today.

Johnny was our quarterback. He really got the position by default. We had no one who could throw the ball within ten yards of the intended receiver except Johnny. But we didn't have a lot of confidence in him as we began to go through the grueling two-a-day practices in the sweltering summer heat.

Johnny had never played quarterback. We won two out of ten games the previous year. The local pundits were wagering (yes, they really had a betting pool) we wouldn't win a game. After all, we were a lousy team the previous year without a proven quarterback. Why should anyone give us a chance this year?

But Johnny was scrappy. He worked relentlessly. He memorized the playbook for the quarterback. It was the most difficult

playbook on the team. He ran hard. He exercised hard. He was determined he would not be defeated for lack of effort.

The rest of us on the team were inspired by Johnny. We became scrappy players just like him. We had an offensive lineman who weighed 160 pounds, but he was unbelievable with his blocking skills. He went against guys who weighed 70 pounds more than he did, and he took them to task.

One of our linebackers, weighing a similar 160 pounds, was a machine at tackling. He would not be deterred.

What about me? I know you are dying to ask. I was the tailback on the team, which meant I accounted for about 90 percent of the running plays. You can stop snickering now. It's true. The previous year I had been moved from linebacker to running back because I intercepted a pass and ran it for a touchdown. The coach thought if I could run that fast, I should be a running back.

So, I went from a total beginner to finishing fourth in the state in rushing and making the honorable mention all-state team. I even had a couple of scholarship offers at small colleges.

We became a scrappy team because we had a scrappy leader.

The other teams were bigger.

The other teams were faster.

The other teams were more athletic.

But we beat most of the other teams. We made it to the quarterfinals of the state playoffs.

We were scrappy. Johnny showed us how to be scrappy.

Undoubtedly, whether you're a Boomer, Gen Xer, or Millennial, you've seen the legendary 1993 film *Rudy*. Based on a true story, Rudy Ruettiger was a dyslexic, underweight boy who belonged to a family of Notre Dame football fanatics. In the Ruettiger household, there was no higher allegiance than to the Fighting Irish. After high school graduation, because of low grades—surely due in no small part to his dyslexia—Rudy's application to the University of Notre Dame was denied.

But even if he had been accepted, what were the chances a 5'6" 160-lb. kid from Joliet, Illinois, was going to play football for the mighty Irish anyway? The deck was stacked against him.

Rudy did not give up. He ignored convention. Rudy attended nearby community college Holy Cross and was accepted at Notre Dame two years later. Not only that, and you know how the story goes by now, Rudy's scrappiness off the field translated onto the field, and Rudy suited up for his childhood dream as a walk-on.

So, you are undoubtedly asking, what does a scrappy church really look like? Let's take a look.

## **Scrappy Church: God's Power at Work**

*Scrappy.*

Feisty.

Tenacious.

Determined.

Dogged.

Persistent.

You get the picture.

These churches have leaders and members who refuse to give up. To the contrary, they have people in the congregation who truly believe the best days of the church are in the very near future. Sure, they have their frustrations. But they see the power of God working every week in their church. They are excited about both the present and the future. They don't see limitations; they see God's possibilities.

Kent is a pastor in upstate New York. He was warned by many people not to consider going to the church seven years ago. But he decided to listen to God rather than the naysayers. You see, Kent talked with several of the members as he was considering his call to pastor the church. His words are memorable, if not powerful.

"The church was in a tailspin," he began. "In its so-called glory days, the attendance almost reached 300. When I began talking to the church, it was closer to 100."

Then Kent began talking to some of the leaders. He was amazed. Totally amazed.

Beth had been at the church for more than forty years. "She began to share the opportunities to connect in the community. She knew everyone, and she had a plan for how the church could minister to them," Kent said. "Her vision was powerful and compelling."

He had another incredible conversation with Milt. He had been at the church for less than three years, but Milt too was excited about the possibilities. “Milt really understood the neighborhood around the church,” Kent told us. “He may not be an expert in demographics, but he has an intuitive sense about the immediate area. I could really see God working in his ideas.”

“Okay, Kent,” we asked, “were there any pessimists in the bunch? After all, the church had declined by nearly 70 percent. Were all the conversations so rosy?”

Kent chuckled, “Of course not. There were a lot of defeated people in the church. There were some who told me outright that the church probably would not survive. Yeah, the hopeful ones were in the minority, but they were a God-powered minority!”

A God-powered minority. You’ve got to love it.

I guess you might expect to hear about the immediate turnaround of this church. Well . . . not exactly. Listen to Kent tell the story:

“The first three years were pretty tough,” he said frankly. “I have a lot of emotional scars from those early days. But God would not let the vision we had die. By year four we began to see some real turnaround. Now in my eighth year, we are truly a force for the kingdom in our community. We are almost as big as

the church was in the glory days, approaching three hundred in attendance. But our turnaround is more than numbers. It's much more than numbers."

We could park on Kent's story the rest of this book, but we have a bigger purpose. We want you to hear from hundreds of scrappy churches. We want you to see what God is doing in places where most have given up. We want you to hear the collective story instead of an isolated piece of hope here and there.

Before we go further, let's look at the "before and after" of the scrappy churches. Let's see six of the incredible transitions they made, transitions that defied the conventional wisdom that said it couldn't be done.

### **Transition 1: Excuses to Ownership**

Fred serves a church near the Metroplex of Dallas. There is no shortage of people in the area. But Fred admits he started his leadership at the church with a ton of excuses.

"I didn't realize how excuse-driven I was," Fred told us. "For a few months I was pretty pumped about my leadership opportunity. The church was landlocked in an older neighborhood, and it had declined from around 275 in attendance to 130 the past ten years. I guess I thought I could just go in and lead a turnaround. I had never served as the lead pastor of a church, always in another staff position. And I was arrogant

enough to believe I could do things so much better than the pastors I served under and all the pastors who preceded me at my church.”

He paused. “But I was wrong,” Fred admitted. “Dead wrong.”

The church had a minor spike in attendance for about six months, then it resumed its pattern of decline.

So how did Fred respond?

“Excuses,” he said flatly. “A bunch of excuses.”

He began to reflect on the excuses. “I couldn’t compete with the larger churches. That was my first excuse. Sure, they had more programs to offer than we did. I heard that specifically from members who left. They went where the action was.”

He continued, “My next excuse was my neighborhood. It was transitioning in two ways. First, it had mostly transitioned to families with a lower income than the members of the church. Almost all those who attended were driving several miles to get to church. Second, some of the homes were being sold to higher-income families who were remodeling them. I would learn later the name of that transition was gentrification.”

So Fred’s church had seen lower-income residents move into the neighborhood for several years. Then a new trend developed where higher-end residents were populating the area.

“That’s right,” he affirmed. “I had excuses both ways. We couldn’t reach the lower-income residents at first, then we couldn’t reach the higher-income residents. I was making

myself the victim of the Goldilocks syndrome. We had no chance unless the income of the residents was ‘just right.’”

The church is now on a healthy path. Yes, the congregation still has challenges, but the trajectory is really encouraging. We asked Fred what precipitated the turnaround.

“God just woke me up,” he responded. “In my prayer time, I began to realize I was leaning on excuses instead of leaning on God. He put my church at this address for a reason. He put me here for a reason. I decided to take responsibility for the leadership God gave me. I decided to move beyond excuses. My new attitude was the beginning of the turnaround.”

Indeed. That was the beginning of the turnaround.

## **Transition 2: Obstacles to Allies**

Leading a church would be a lot easier if we didn’t have to deal with people.

The sentence is cliché, but it’s true. Dealing with people is a messy business.

Not only do we have to deal with people in churches, we have to lead them *and* love them. It’s the loving them part that can be really difficult.

Church members can be critics. Church members can be bullies. Church members can be undependable. Church members can be fickle.

To be fair, those church members are more the exception than the rule; but it doesn't take too many difficult church members to make our ministry really messy. The apostle Paul told us how to respond to difficult church members as he was dealing with the members at the church at Corinth. Right after he gave us a beautiful metaphor of members of the church being like members of the body (1 Cor. 12), he wrote these words to remind us about how we should treat each other:

Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs.  
(1 Cor. 13:4–5)

Do you get that? We are to love the members of the church without condition. They are not our obstacles. They should be our allies.

Patrick serves as a pastor in Oklahoma. It took him a while to understand that God gave us the members in our churches for a reason. They are members of the body of Christ. They are to be our allies, and we are to love them.

“When I realized God gave our church the members we had for a reason,” he said, “it changed my perspective. I started asking them to tell me their stories. I asked them about their dreams for the church. I would then ask them how we could work together to reach God-given dreams for our church.”

Patrick stared ahead for a moment in deep thought. He continued, “That was the key to our transition, I believe. God gave me a new heart for our members. They were no longer my obstacles. They were a part of the dream for the church. Our church really began to dream again.”

### **Transition 3: Limitations to Abundance**

Your church has everything it needs. Really. Let me put it another way. God has given your church all the resources you need to move forward.

You have enough money.

You have enough people.

You have adequate facilities.

You have enough people to reach.

You have the right aged people in your church.

It does you absolutely no good to complain that you don't have sufficient resources. It does you no good to imagine how much easier or better your church would be if you just had something else. A mind-set of limitations creates a limitation on your leadership.

You know this verse, don't you? “And my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). Of course you do. But do you believe it for the church you lead? Do you think the Bible is applicable to other churches and leaders, but not your church and your leadership?

Your church has everything God says you need to move forward. You have everything you need to lead forward. Be a leader who truly believes in God's abundance rather than your perceived limitations.

#### **Transition 4: Despair to Joy**

"I entered vocational ministry with some naiveté," Marcus told us, "but I had a lot of joy. I was really excited about serving God's church. I don't know exactly when I started surrendering my joy to life's circumstances, but I know it happened. I let the underbelly of church life bring me down. I focused on the negatives more often than not. My whole perspective and attitude stunk!"

Marcus remembers specifically his shift in attitude. He was studying the book of Philippians and read these words in Philippians 4:4, 8: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! . . . Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is just, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is anything praiseworthy—dwell on these things."

"It hit me like a ton of bricks," Marcus exclaimed. "I was dwelling on the wrong things. I was focusing on the negatives rather than what God wants me to dwell on. That was a major attitude shift for me. It was amazing to watch the church follow my lead with a similar joyful attitude."

We heard statements like Marcus's again and again: "That was a major attitude shift for me." It seems like many of the scrappy churches had leaders who decided they would be scrappy in God's power.

### **Transition 5: Fear to Courage**

"My name is Roger, and I was a coward." Roger smiled as he recited those words to us. He was remembering how he had become frozen with fear as pastor of the church. The scenario occurred four years earlier as Roger celebrated his fifty-fifth birthday.

"No, I didn't celebrate my birthday at all," he confessed. "I had heard from too many of my peers that another church would never consider me after I turned fifty-five. I felt stuck. Even worse, I began to live in fear."

Roger was in his second year at the church when he turned fifty-five. The church was in a slight but almost imperceptible decline. The members were mostly happy. And that became his de facto strategy: keep the members mostly happy and don't rock the boat.

The church continued its slow decline under his leadership, or perhaps more accurately, lack of leadership. He realized there was no such thing as status quo though. The church had to let go of a long-time staff member because the budget could no longer support him. Roger retreated into a greater depth of fear.

When we spoke to Roger, however, the church was on a healthy trajectory. It had turned a corner. Roger was leading from God-given confidence instead of human-centered fear. What, we asked, was the turning point?

His answer was a simple one-syllable word: “Peg.”

Peg is Roger’s wife. Seeing the misery evident in her husband’s life and ministry, she confronted him.

“Peg held back no punches,” Roger recalled. “She told me she would rather us lose our job than lose our vision. And she read the Bible to me. I remember the words of Joshua 1:9 even now: ‘Haven’t I commanded you: be strong and courageous? Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.’”

Roger paused, then resumed. “Peg told me I was living in fear and disobeying God because I was not trusting God. I was more concerned about a paycheck than obedience. My security was my job but not my God.”

He smiled again. “I love that girl,” he said. “She was so right. It was almost immediate for me. I began to lead again from a posture of faith and courage instead of fear. I will turn sixty on my next birthday, and I am more excited than ever to see what God will do next.”

## **Transition 6: Impossible to Possible**

“I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

My original title for this book was *The Impossible Turnaround Church*. I really liked conveying the idea that many churches were doing incredibly well despite the human odds that seemed stacked against them. But my publisher did not like the title. She said it was too general and could be taken in too many different ways.

She was right. We settled on *Scrappy Church* since it conveys the personalities of these turnaround churches.

But I still like the idea of how these churches demonstrated God’s possibilities when most people would have deemed it impossible. I like how these leaders made profound decisions to change their own leadership approach to one of trust and excitement. I like how these churches did not accept the verdict of inevitability regarding their decline and demise. I like how these smaller and mid-sized churches survived and thrived, often in the shadows of larger churches.

They moved from the impossible to the possible.

Better stated, they moved from human impossibility to God’s possibility.

So how did they do they it? What changed about them? What makes them different from other churches that have not seen a turnaround?

What did they do to prepare themselves to be a scrappy church?

Those are all excellent questions.

I will begin to answer them in the next chapter.