HAVEN’T YOU EVER LOOKED skyward for answers? As a pilot, I have discovered that at least one of the life-and-death principles of aviation may have a lesson for our churches as well.

When learning to fly, it is important to learn the early warning signals of a “tailspin” or “death spiral.” When a plane begins to fall out of the sky, it will go into a nose-first spiral toward the earth. One’s natural instincts are to reduce the power in order to slow the plane and pull back on the controls in order to make the plane go up. Giving into these natural instincts will guarantee the results—a perfect nose-first corkscrew into the earth.

In order to recover from this situation, you must ignore the natural instincts and remember what you were taught. First the pilot must apply full power and then push the controls forward. This will allow the pilot to regain control of the plane by flying it downward. Then, and only then, can the pilot fly it out of the nosedive and regain altitude.

Likewise, when a church begins to decline and enters a “death spiral,” if the leaders follow their natural instincts, the church will most likely “crash and burn.” The Church Death Spiral follows a predictable, four-stage pattern.

Stage 1. Elimination of Missions. As churches begin to struggle, one of the first places they will look to cut back is in their mission support. Often the pattern will progress from the reduction of world missions first toward the elimination of local missions such as food banks, homeless shelters, and so forth. This will strip the church of its primary reason for existing.

Stage 2. Cut Programs and Ministries. As the Death Spiral continues, the next cuts will be the teaching, nurturing, and supporting programs of the church. A church may eliminate men’s and women’s fellowship programs, reduce the number of church school classes, and eventually offer little outside of worship and pastoral care.

Stage 3. Reduce Pastoral Services and Availability. When the first two stage attempts fail to reverse the decline, the next obvious move will be reduce pastoral services, regressing from full time, to three-quarters time, to half time, to Sunday worship supply and funerals. After all, less people will require less pastoral care.
Stage 4. Unable to Maintain the Facilities. The natural progression of the Death Spiral will eventually reduce the congregation to a point where they are no longer able to pay the utility bills and support the routine maintenance of their facilities. This is a predictable result when a congregation declines to less than thirty active, supporting members who will grow weary, feel hopeless, and resolve to give it up, throw in the towel, and call it quits.

Aviation teaches us that a Death Spiral does not need to terminate in a crash and burn. There are several defensive measures that can help our churches counter the Death Spiral.

- Recognize the Warning Signs Early. The sooner you recognize that your congregation has entered a Death Spiral, the more easily you can reverse the affects. Congregational tendencies for denial are very strong. Be honest, call it what it is, and react quickly and boldly to avoid disaster.

- Do More When You Feel Like Doing Less. The temptation is to follow our natural instincts and respond to our decline by doing less and offering less. Remember that we have been called to follow Jesus and taught to be the servants of Christ. Cutting back and doing less can never be a reasonable response to our call and it cannot get us out of the Death Spiral.

- Spend More When You Think You Have Less. A conservative financial plan may help to prolong the Death Spiral, but it will not reverse it, and the result will inevitably be a crash and burn. Many churches have died with hundreds of thousands of dollars in assets while trying to save it for a rainy day. Does the water have to cover our heads before we admit that it is raining? As soon as you recognize the early warning signs of decline, it is time to embrace an aggressive plan to use your resources to reverse the trend.

- Focus Outward Instead of Inward. Remember why the church exists—to be the servants of Christ for others. Thinking about the wants, needs, desires, and limitations of our members will only serve to accelerate the Death Spiral. The best way to reverse the decline is to focus on the needs of those outside of the congregation.

- When All Else Fails—Try Something New or Different! Stupidity is doing the same things over and over and over and expecting different results.

A Death Spiral in an airplane or a church does not need to result in a crash and burn. But we must use our heads and remember what we have been taught in order to fly and serve another day!

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