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Who are the people in the most pain in your community?

If we are going to be truthful, we need to ask this question, and it requires us to look at the mission in which we should be involved.

So, who are the people in the most pain in your community?

When I ask church members this question — whether they are from a rural, suburban, or urban community — I always get the same answers.

- 1) Youth are in trouble — e.g., pregnancy, drugs, alcohol, etc.
- 2) The economically disadvantaged are challenged to find employment in their community.
- 3) The church is not viewed as a viable necessity in the community.

Yet, wherever there are people with problems, there is an inherent necessity for the church to address those problems. The church will not be successful, though, until it moves from an internal to external focus.

The fact is, many churches are in trouble.

1. With the repopulation of urban centers, a movement is taking place whereby the historically indigenous populations — which are also historically impoverished — are being displaced.
2. In suburban areas, residences are in one of two economic predicaments, which makes church secondary. They are financially stable with much disposable income and free time, or they are exhausted from long days and long commutes. In both predicaments, church no longer becomes the locus of suburban life, as it was previously.
3. Rurally, depopulation, the challenge of earning a livable income, and the lack of available services are causing hardship and affecting the church.

So the denomination has a challenge and an opportunity.

Churches that are intentionally engaged in the needs of their communities are having a positive effect on those communities and experiencing growth. Churches ignoring the needs of their communities are experiencing decline. This should be a lesson for our denomination.

To be successful as the church and as a denomination, we need to T-O-U-C-H our communities.

T — We need to be **Truthful** with ourselves and others. If our denomination is a ship, we have hit an iceberg. Now, we're taking on water. If we fail to respond and change, we'll no longer be effective in our ministry. Right now, we're rearranging deck chairs, telling the band

to keep playing, and sinking because we're not being truthful about our condition and ministry.

O — We need to be **Others-focused** and decide if we'll be a church in the community, to the community, and with the community. Our churches were built when they were vibrant and vital to a community, but when demographics shifted, the churches didn't change. Churches need to invite people inside the walls and become places where the indigenous community becomes the church.

U — As a church, we've been judgmental as to who should be granted access or empowerment, instead of providing God's required **Unconditional Love**. Until the church can accomplish this, it will be a secondary or third option, behind Starbucks, the couch, or the mall.

C — When we tell the truth in love and focus on the person on our doorstep — regardless of his or her life, lifestyle, degree of pigmentation or historical experience — then we can transform the **Community** as the church is called to do.

H — When all these elements come together in a Jesus kind of way, there will be **Hope** for our communities.

Show me a community with a vibrant, vital church at its center, and I'll show you hope for the community. When there's hope, life is restored to the places in our community and people return to our houses of worship.