

**Seven Keys to Getting
Back in the Game**

by

John Mark Clifton

7 keys to getting back in the game by John Mark Clifton (1st in a series)



Recently I have been leading an urban core church on an adventure of renewal. In this process we have made many mistakes and learned many lessons. We have identified 7 key steps that have proven to be central to turning this church around.

“Gentleman, this is a football”

It was with this phrase that the great football coach Vince Lombardi began the first practice of each season. Coach was making a point. It is easy to ignore something basic and important, just because it is obvious.

So, ladies and gentlemen, ***this is prayer***. No journey of renewal in a church can begin without prayer. No need to plan outreach, enlist a “dream team” of leaders, copy what some other church has done. First we pray.

Before they even begin to plant a church, we encourage our church planters to develop a support team of at least 100 people who will pray for them. When soldiers are pinned down on the beach, they radio back to the battleship to take out the guns on the hill. When we are pinned down, we need to use prayer to focus the power of God in our lives and on our community. Develop a prayer strategy. Enlist churches and people from beyond your church to pray for your efforts. Prayer walk your community. Ask people in your community how you can pray for them.

When I first arrived at our church, I invited anyone who would, to come to our building, and we would pray over it and over the neighborhood that surrounds us. I began a Thursday night prayer service for renewal. Many nights I was the only one there, but others soon began to join me. In order for a church that is in decline to grow and thrive, God must show up, and He will not show up if we fail to pray.

Prayer is the key, the number one key.

7 Keys to getting back in the game

(2nd in a seven-part series by John Mark Clifton)

Recently I have been leading an urban core church on an adventure of renewal. In the past 8 months we have seen our attendance triple as God has moved among us. We have identified 7 key steps central to the turn around of this church.

Key Number 2 – Know the playing field

The movie *Hoosiers* is based on the true story of a small-town Indiana high school basketball team that won the state finals in 1954. The finals were played at the Hinkle Field house in Indianapolis, at the time the largest basketball venue in the world, with more than 15,000 seats.



The team had never played in any venue like this. They had never even seen a venue like this. Upon arrival at the arena, Coach Dale took out a ladder and a tape measure and had his players measure the height of the goal and dimension of the court. The dimensions were the same as in their little high school gym, the game was the same as they had always played, but the venue was very different.

For your church, the rules of the “game” never change, but the venue certainly changes. Many churches do not understand the real nature of the venue in which they compete. To put it plainly, we do not really know the needs, the concerns, the pains and the life patterns of those in our community. We do know the needs, concerns and pains of our church family (as well we should), but we should be just as informed about those outside the church family who are in our venue.

What kind of music do they listen to? How many children live around us? What is the make up of the families? What types of crimes are frequent? The degree to which you understand the venue in which you compete is directly connected to the degree of success you will experience.

Gather all the demographics you can, and get help from professionals to interpret that information. Engage your community in events geared not to getting them into your building, but getting you into their lives. Find out who is out there and the needs that are pressing on them.

Your community is changing at an increasingly rapid rate. Visit the convenience store nearest your church. Observe the people as they come and go. If they do not resemble the people in your pews, you may have a problem. It is not enough to know how to engage in church activities and ministry. We must learn how to engage our communities. Knowing who you’re called to reach, and all you can about them, is a key to getting back in the game.

7 Keys to getting back in the game *(3rd in seven-part series by John Mark Clifton)*



Recently I have been leading an urban core church on an adventure of renewal. In the past year we have seen our attendance triple as God has moved among us. We have identified 7 key steps that have proven to be central to the turn around of this church.

Key Number Three – “Things around here are going to be different.”

With that phrase, Coach Don Haskins informed his players and his university that the basketball culture was about to change.

In 1961 Don Haskins, whose previous job was coaching a girls’ high school team in Fort Worth, became the basketball coach for the hapless Miners of Texas Western in El Paso. This was a school with a history of losing basketball. The college was nowhere near the center of the basketball universe, and they had little to no resources. In fact, the new coach and his family had to live in the men’s dormitory.

Haskins could recruit no top prospects, at least no white athletes. So, he recruited numerous talented black athletes and started them at a time when this was unheard of in the NCAA.

Haskin’s coaching skills and willingness to embrace change led the Miners to the 1966 NCAA championship game. A game in which Texas Western placed on the court an all black starting lineup (the first in NCAA history) against the mighty coach Rupp of Kentucky and his all white line up. Texas Western won and changed collegiate athletics forever.

The recent movie “Glory Road” tells the story of this team, Coach Haskins and that great game.

When a church that is in decline seeks to change they must come to the harsh realization that they have in place the perfect system to achieve the results which they are experiencing. They must do more than “tweak” that system, they must change that system.

In the church where I am now working, upon my arrival I announced “we are going to make some new mistakes.” In other words, we know what we are doing is not working, so if we are going to fail, lets fail trying something new. This is what Coach Haskins did at West Texas. Most people, including other coaches, had their doubts about the path that Haskins was taking to rebuild his team, but Haskins was committed to not repeating the mistakes of the past. He was willing to make some new ones.

A declining church, after much prayer, must make a commitment under the leadership of the Holy Spirit to embrace whatever changes are needed (other than their commitment to the fidelity of scripture and the message of the gospel) to effectually reach their community.

The changes Coach Haskins made were not minor. He made major changes, and those changes resulted in the most unlikely NCAA champion in history!

If we desire real growth in some of our churches, it is going to take major changes in the church culture to which we have grown accustomed. Not until a declining church is ready to embrace the phrase “Things around here are going to be different” can meaningful change begin.

7 Keys to getting back in the game *(4th in a seven-part series by John Mark Clifton)*

With a career total of more than 15,000 yards, Barry Sanders is the third all-time NFL leading rusher, but he is first all-time in average yards per carry. Over his entire NFL career, Sanders maintained an astonishing 5 yards per carry average. Sanders was an incredibly gifted athlete, but he was also an intelligent runner. When you watch Sanders run you noticed two things, patience and acceleration. Sanders was patient to allow the offensive line to open up a hole, and he was quick to accelerate through that hole.



The fourth key to getting back in the game for plateaued or declining churches is to be patient for the opening, and accelerate through the opening. Simply put, wait on God to show you where He is moving, and then be ready to quickly and decisively move toward where God is working.

A running back that gets ahead of his blockers is in for a long day. Likewise, a running back who dances around in the backfield without moving through the opening is going to lose more yards than he gains.

Sometimes, in our desire to get things “moving” in a declining church, we take off before the offensive line creates an opening. In other words, we get out ahead of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we act like Abram with Hagar and take the initiative that should belong to God. We need to pray and seek God’s face and wait for His direction. Blackaby is absolutely correct when he reminds us that God is at work all around us. We simply need to recognize that and join Him in His work. As we sought to replant our church, we soon realized this was a God-sized task, and we need Him to provide the “openings” in the community through which we could move. This necessitated patience on our part. For the first several months we simply prayed, prayer-walked and learned everything we could about our community and ourselves. We looked at all kinds of models of ministry, and we sought to learn from what God was doing in other places. We were patiently waiting on the Holy Spirit to penetrate the darkness.

Sometimes we grow so accustomed to waiting that, when the Holy Spirit provides an opportunity for ministry, we delay, we wait, we ponder, we doubt and the opportunity is lost. We are like the running back who dances around in the backfield until the hole closes. While we are waiting for God to reveal His will, we must be ready, locked and loaded if you will, to move in an instant. The children of Israel had prayed for 400 years to enter the Promised Land. Through God’s almighty hand they were brought to the very banks of the Jordan ready to move on in. God provided the opening, and they delayed the entry. They danced around the desert for 40 years! They missed the opening that God had provided.

In our replant we have worked hard to create a culture that waits upon the Holy Spirit and then responds quickly and decisively when we sense God is at work among us. Too often our “decision making process” paralyzes us when it comes to acceleration through the hole. In our replant we had to drastically streamline the manner in which we made decisions. In short we had to trust God and trust each other. We also spend more time in “preparation” and a little less time in “planning”. Sometimes our planning is more about “our plans,” but when we spend time preparing ourselves to recognize and respond to the Holy Spirit’s work, we are more able to quickly accelerate through the “hole” and on toward the goal.

7 Keys to getting back in the game *(5th in a seven-part series by John Mark Clifton)*

When asked his strategy for winning a race, legendary driver A. J. Foyt answered, “You get out in front - you stay out in front.”



It is exactly that kind of straightforward simplicity that describes the fifth key to getting back in the game for declining churches. Simplify Everything!

When seeking to replant the church with which I am working, I read the book *Simple Church* by Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger (published by Lifeway). This book had a profound impact on my strategic thinking.

Using research and 400 case studies, Rainer and Geiger provide evidence that churches who have a simple biblical process to make disciples are effectively advancing the movement of the gospel. “Ironically people are hungry for simple because the world has become much more complex,” write Rainer and Geiger.

A simple church according to Rainer is a congregation designed around a straightforward and strategic process that moves people through the stages of spiritual growth. Rainer defines four steps to achieve simplicity: clarity, movement, alignment and focus.

“Clarity is the ability of the process to be communicated and understood .

Movement is the sequential steps in the process that causes people to move to greater areas of commitment.

Alignment follows movement and involves maximizing the energy of all members.

Focus, the commitment to abandon everything that falls outside the simple ministry process. “

The leaders of the replant with which I am involved have embraced this philosophy whole heartily.

We have as our church’s mission statement the following;

Love God and embrace His Word, love people and engage our world.

This one statement describes everything that we do at our replant. We fully engage the principles of clarity, movement, alignment and focus.

It has been my experience that many of us make church too complex. Even small declining churches can have complex and cloudy systems to communicate to the unchurched and grow disciples. Year after year programs and structure is added with very few items dropped from the church’s agenda. The result is often an unmanageable system that does not clearly communicate anything about the real purpose of the church. Likewise, many churches have elaborate missions and purpose statements, but if the majority of those attending your church can not quote the purpose statement, it really isn’t much of purpose is it.

Clarity demands a mission statement that can be easily recalled and passionately spoken. Not at all unlike A.J. Foyt’s words about racing “you get in front – you stay in front.” Simplicity such as that is far to rare in most of our churches.

Streamline the message, uncomplicated the disciple making process and communicate with clarity why you exist as a church.

7 Keys to getting back in the game *(6th in a seven-part series by John Mark Clifton)*

Who could ever forget Tom Watson's legendary chip-in on the 17th hole at Pebble Beach that led to his victory at the 1982 U.S. Open Championship? That shot was indeed "one for the ages." Any student of Watson will soon discover that while he was a good golfer, his game reached an entirely new level when an old pro named Byron Nelson took an interest in the young golfer and offered him his time, experience and advice. Watson was insightful enough to embrace the assistance offered by Nelson. The two great golfers began a life-long relationship that was beneficial for both of them.

The sixth key to getting back in the game for declining churches is to take a cue from Watson and Nelson and seek to enlist and embrace outside partnerships. The Kingdom of God offers many partners in ministry. At the church where I have been serving we reached out to numerous ministry partners to help us accomplish our missional objectives. We partnered with no less than four other churches and several other ministries. We offered our building and what resources we had, and they provided passion and people to complete the task. We certainly had to relinquish a certain amount of ownership and control. We had to embrace new people, new ideas and new methods while maintaining our commitment to scriptural fidelity and Christ centered ministry. We grew to value the expansion of the Kingdom over the continuation of "our way of doing church."



This was not an easy step to take, but it was one of the most important steps we took in our journey. We learned from others who have been where we are. We listened to what they had to say, and under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, we changed much about our approach to ministry based on their Godly advice. To put it plainly, we seek to stay in a learning mode where we eagerly enlist outside help and embrace biblically sound outside partnerships that help us impact our community with the Gospel.

We have worked to create a culture that readily admits we have lots to learn. One of the common factors among church plants is their readiness to seek out new ideas from trusted sources and quickly adapt those ideas to their ministry setting. Sometimes older and declining churches find it difficult to easily enlist and embrace outside advice and partnerships. Our experience has revealed that the degree to which we become eager learners and early adaptors has a profound impact on our ability to effectively reach our community with the Gospel.

7 Keys to getting back in the game *(7th in a seven-part series by John Mark Clifton)*

“Throw strikes, home plate don’t move.” – Satchel Page. This was the sage advice given by perhaps the greatest baseball hurler in history.

You can put the best baseball team in the world on the field, you have the greatest manager and the most beautiful stadium, but if your pitcher can’t throw a strike...you have nothing.

The seventh key to the successful replant of our urban core church was to stay on message, and the message is the gospel.

More than one hundred years ago Charles Spurgeon spoke to the very heart of this issue when he said:

“The heart of the gospel is redemption, and the essence of redemption is the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ... In this age there have risen up in the church itself men who speak perverse things. There be many that trouble us with their philosophies and novel interpretations, whereby they deny the doctrines they profess to teach, and undermine the faith they are

pledged to maintain. It is well that some of us, who know what we believe, and have no secret meanings for our words, should just put our foot down and maintain our standing, holding forth the word of life, and plainly declaring the foundation truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Talk about timely, if I didn’t know better I would ing.

The gospel is the same yesterday, today and changes, the way we do church, the time we which we engage. The church in that sense was the first person to ever bring a piano into a organ or a hymnal. Somewhere someone was someone else was the first to build a room just for service. Everything we think of as “always the way we have done it” had a beginning (and in terms of church history a relatively recent beginning). While embracing radical change to see our old church replant itself in the community, we held firmly to the fidelity of the scripture and to the true message of the gospel – the substitutionary atoning death of our sinless, risen savior.



think Charles Haddon wrote that this morn-

ing. tomorrow. It never changes. Everything else do church, the music we sing, the ministries in is always “reforming” its methods. Someone church building; someone was the first to use an the first to baptize inside the church building, preschoolers to be cared for during the worship ser-

“Home plate” never moves, the truth of the gospel is timeless and effectual. Amidst all the cultural discovery, creative communication, cutting edge ministry that we may employ to be salt and light to our world, it is pointless if we deviate from the Gospel.

Spurgeon encouraged his students to preach the cross in every message. I give each of the planters with whom I work a copy of John Piper’s book *The Passion of Jesus*. It contains fifty messages on the power and meaning of the cross. The cross of Jesus is enough. It is enough to save, to heal, to give hope, to give peace, to give joy and to overcome discouragement.

I share with our church planters that you don’t have to teach your people to know everything, but they need to know, to believe and to live as though the cross is enough. Get to the cross in every message, it is not only about salvation, it is also about life, struggle, victory and sacrifice; and it missing in much of our preaching.

So, just throw strikes. Home plate don’t move

