

## EXCERPT



### **Remissioning Church**

*A Field Guide to Bringing a Congregation Back to Life*

April 15, 2025 | \$20.00, 248 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-1055-6

*Josh Hayden is the cofounder and copresident of `Iwa Collaborative, which helps leaders fly high and live low as they lead through change processes in their community. He runs remissioning trainings through `Iwa Collaborative across various denominational, nondenominational, and global networks. Hayden is the senior pastor at First Baptist Church in Ashland, Virginia. He has worked and led in nonprofit organizations, church plants, and established churches. He has a doctorate in leadership and organizational change from Duke Divinity School and is the author of Sacred Hope.*

## Pruning Church Programs to Bear More Fruit

For too long churches have been more concerned with surviving than bearing fruit. Long before the pandemic there was a growing sense in established churches that the goal was to simply survive. We have been trying to navigate shifts in technology, how people spend time, generational trends, and expectations for church involvement, among other changes. Somewhere along the line we came to believe it was okay to simply be alive as a church. We didn't have to bear fruit. There was no expectation that disciples would be making new disciples. But let's be clear: existence is not the same as bearing fruit.

Pruning branches from a living plant helps it to be more productive and healthy over time. A consistent theme I've heard from church leaders of late is that the pandemic initiated a great pruning that is functioning as an apocalypse. An apocalypse is an unveiling. It reveals what was always true but was previously hidden. The pandemic accelerated a shift that was already underway and has revealed issues that have been impacting our churches for years. This apocalypse unveils who we are. It tells us about the anxieties that lie underneath the surface. It tells us whether we are bent on survival or fruitfulness.

At our home in Ashland, Virginia, we have some knockout rosebushes. I've never had rosebushes before, and during the pandemic, when I had a chance to pay a bit more attention to my yard, I learned some things about these plants. I learned that to prune a rosebush well, there are some things to consider:

- Time: what season is best
- End goal: how large you want the plant to grow; whether you want to plant other rosebushes from the mother plant
- Minor or major pruning: minor pruning happens every year, major pruning every couple of years
- Growing or pruning season: pruning must occur before the plant has produced buds so as not to waste the energy creating those buds

Just as pruning is essential for a rosebush to thrive, pruning is a key part of leading a church.

### **Zombie Institutions**

Churches that are unwilling to repent, prune, and reorient their habits toward the *telos* of the mission of God will die, and their death will not lead to new life (adapted from Joshua Hayden, *Creative Destruction: Towards a Theology of Institutions* [DMin diss., Duke University, 2016], 97-125). Instead, their death will add to the toxic and ever-present suspicion already present toward churches while casting an even greater shadow of anxiety on organizations around it.



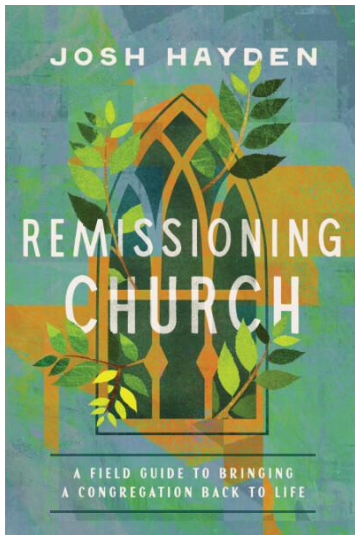
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Andy Crouch calls these “zombie institutions,” organizations that have emphasized self-preservation over risk and continued learning (Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* [InterVarsity Press, 2013], 199). He says:

Zombie churches exist to keep the lights on rather than to be the light in dark places; they turn inward rather than out, they serve insiders and ignore outsiders.

The paradox of institutional life is very much like the paradox of individual life: only those who are willing to die can truly live. Only institutions that squarely face their own decay and decline can avoid the fate of the zombies. (Crouch, *Playing God*, 200)

When churches build their habits, programs, and events around self-preservation, the amount of pruning necessary for growth becomes much greater. Creative destruction isn't merely destruction—it is death for new life. Zombie institutions are the walking dead, people stuck in a traditionalism that no longer makes sense and is devoid of creativity, preventing the future from shaping the present.

So how do we avoid becoming zombie churches? Through pruning, which is a form of creative destruction. As Jesus tells his disciples in the Gospel of John, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit” (John 15:1-2 NRSV). Pruning leads to a more excellent life. Pruning can involve the death of programs, transitioning of staff, parishioners leaving, and more. When churches participate in an intentional pruning process—whether the goal is greater social impact, reduction in poverty, enhanced worship culture, or improved education—it becomes possible to bear more fruit. Pruning doesn't guarantee productivity, but it prepares the church ecosystem for the possibility of new life.

Pruning happens when a church intentionally takes up its cross, naming and confessing the brokenness that distracts it from the full scope of God's mission through Jesus for the sake of the world. Creative destruction is the hopeful embrace of the cross to experience the power of the resurrection.

Is your church run or deeply influenced by people who are destroying your future? Are your programs running without clear evaluation of their outcomes? Are the people you are trying to serve being served, or are they being dismissed by religious insiders? Often in our churches there is a high tolerance for simply surviving without bearing fruit, or being content without asking if communal life is shaping us to live like Jesus in the world.

It is often strange for churches to consider cutting back to bear more fruit. It goes against our sensibilities, in that we usually think doing means bearing more fruit. However, pruning helps the whole plant to grow, become healthy, and bear fruit. What would it look like for you to do some pruning in your church's discipleship garden so that your efforts have a chance to become more effective?

—adapted from chapter seven, “Pruning for Growth in the Remissioning Garden”



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## Church Remissioner Brings Hope to Congregations

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Remissioning is to established churches what planting is to new church plants, looking to the biblical themes of life, death, and resurrection.

Josh has run remissioning trainings and collectives with:

- the Church of England
- the Church of Scotland
- the Baptist General Association of Virginia
- Leland Seminary
- Missio Seminary and Kairos University
- and other church and non-profit networks.

He has a doctorate in leadership and organizational change from Duke Divinity School and is the author of *Sacred Hope*. He serves on the boards of numerous nonprofits, and he and his family live near Richmond, Virginia.

*“The starting point in the remissioning journey is a commitment to a central idea: people can change. And the idea that people, churches, institutions, and organizations can’t change is antithetical to the good news of Jesus . . . If I could pull the curtain back for a moment on this entire remissioning project and show you the wizard at the end of the yellow brick road, my hope would be this: you and your church would commit to making disciples who imitate Jesus and break the generational pattern of waiting until dropout, decline, or death to pursue a clear mission again.”*

—**Josh Hayden**, chapter one of *Remissioning Church*



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