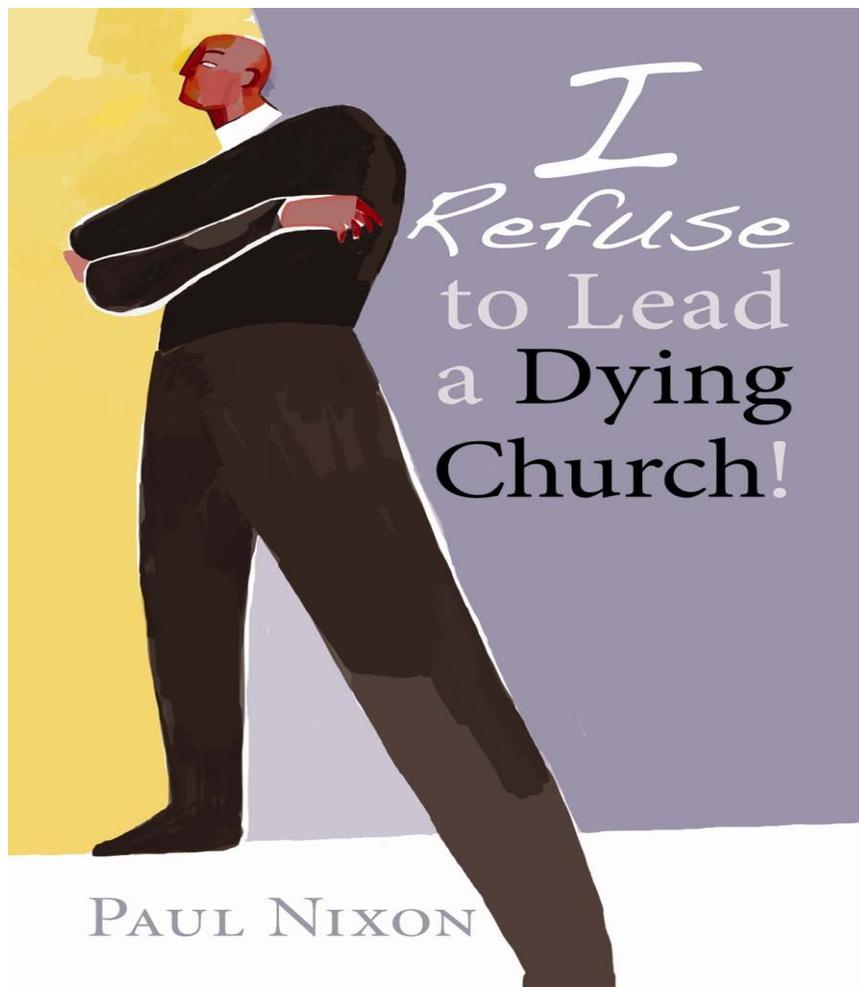


STUDY GUIDE

You are welcome to download this study guide and make copies. It is designed for groups of local church leaders and members who wish to process the ideas contained within Paul Nixon's book *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church*, published by Pilgrim Press. The material here can be formatted for one, four or seven sessions.

Copies of the book may be obtained from virtually any on-line bookseller. We recommend distributing the books to group members prior to launching this study.



A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

I am delighted that you have chosen to study *I Refuse* with the leaders at your church. The book is full of practical examples which are intended to stimulate other great ministry ideas this author never dreamed of. It is my hope that this book might help you and your church to make some positive and critical choices which will profoundly alter your church's future and profoundly bless your church's community.

As you wrestle together with the book, I encourage you to do the following:

- **Make a concerted effort to pray together** about your church's ministry – to genuinely invite God's presence into your thinking and your dreaming. Too many big-stakes church decisions are made with only perfunctory prayer.
- **Agree with one another up front that you will each refrain from dismissing ideas too quickly** – do not close down the creative process with the hasty notion that something is not Lutheran enough or Presbyterian enough. Make a group covenant to be open-minded about the ideas in the book and the ideas of your group members.
- **In the spirit of Chapter 3, have fun with this process – enjoy one another.** Get out of the church building with the meetings if possible. Warm it up!
- **Select somebody to serve as a scribe and note-taker** for the whole conversation – all modules, so that great ideas will not be lost, and there can be a record of the group's *ah-ha's* to inform future planning groups.
- **Do not treat this study as a substitute for a solid planning process.** Try to resist jumping too quickly to

implement solutions for your church's ministry challenges. If you discover some possible solutions along the way, take good notes so you can return to those ideas in coming days. You may wish to work with me directly or one of the consultants associated with the Epicenter Group in a strategic planning process upon the conclusion of this study.

- **Shoot me an email and let me know what happened as a result of this study.** I am not much of an ivory tower guy – what matters most to me is what is going on in the field, including your field, no matter how big or small.

Best wishes for your journey!

Paul Nixon

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BEFORE YOU GET TO THE SIX KEY CHOICES, YOU HAVE AN IMMEDIATE CHOICE BEFORE YOU:

You need to choose how many sessions you wish to use with your group as you process the book. *I Refuse* has a long introduction followed by six quick-read chapters.

The three recommended options for group study are

- One session (retreat format: all eight modules A-H covered in one setting; you will need to abbreviate certain parts of the module in order to fit your time constraints. If you can work over 48 hours and mix it up with worship and play time, the study will likely be

- more effective. Be aware that in Module F, you will be prayer walking in the church's immediate community – if your retreat carries you out of town, you will need to schedule a prayer walk as soon as possible within the week following the retreat.)
- Five sessions over the course of 5 weeks (one session for introduction module and then modules B-C in the second session, modules D-E in the third session, module F in the fourth session, and modules G-H in the final one). The last four sessions will require around one hour and 30 minutes each.
 - Eight sessions over the course of two months (one week to process each module, with plans to allow for extra time with Module F). These sessions will require around one hour each.

In all cases, we recommend distributing the books to the group participants in advance of the first session. If you are opting for a retreat format, the participants will need to read and mark up the entire book before the retreat. If you are choosing one of the other formats, the group members will read a certain portion of the book prior to each session.

MODULE A

Group preparation in advance: Read pp. 9-26.

Introductions: It is important that participants know one another. Even when we worship together for years or serve on the same committees, we may not know one another. Start this process by inviting members of this study group to share: *If there are more than ten people in the study, share the following around tables, but not as a large group.*

- How did you become a practicing Christian? How did you come to our church, of all the churches on planet earth? Why have you stuck around?
- If you had one wish for our church what would it be? If you had one wish for the larger community in which we are located, what would it be?

Scriptural Foundation: Read Acts 2:42-47. Invite the group members to name the components of the inward adventure of the early church, as they became one people united in faith and purpose. (Components that appear here: study, fellowship and camaraderie, shared meals, pooling of resources, accountability groups). Read on into Acts 3:1-10. How does their inward adventure now take on an outward dimension? (It says they give to anyone as they have need, which would imply a giving beyond the boundaries of the most intimate faith community.)

Processing Ideas and Experience: If the following data is available, collect data on Sunday attendance, membership and people joining the church over a period of years. Take a marker board and draw a rough bar graph that reflects the trends – over at least 10 years, preferably more. If 50 years of records are available, get the data for years ending in 0 and 5. Then, estimate the median age of the Sunday morning crowd – median means half the folks are older than this, half younger. Compare this with the median age of the community – which will be somewhere between 35 and 40 in almost every U.S. neighborhood except retirement villages and college campuses.

Ask people to reflect on this data. What does it say about our church as a movement? Are we in the ramping up years, the middle years of waning energy and rising median age or are we clearly in a season of decline? Point out that most

American denominations peaked in the growth rate and began rising in median age at least fifty years before their total numbers began dropping. Any church that is merely holding its own has reason for concern about its future, unless it sees a clear and steady influx of a new generation or population group.

For some of churches, this exercise is necessary to contend with the denial that is often present during the latter part of the middle years, when the money is still strong, but the children's ministry is nearly depleted. A church may be starting to die, even as many will scramble to deny such – for fear that admitting decline will offer a ticket to wholesale change.

On pages 17-18, there is a list of certain characteristics associated with apostolic leaders. Talk about each of the points, not in regard to your pastor, but to yourselves and to your church as a whole. Do you see signs of any characteristic in your church? Which ones? Where do you see this? Is there a one particular characteristic that you wish were more descriptive of your church? Would your group be willing to pray daily for one another, that you might, as individuals, and as a group, become more this way? What kinds of changes would be required, for those in the room to become more this way? Let's keep the focus on those of us present, rather than trying to fix someone else.

Closing Prayer: Collectively write down your deepest hopes for yourselves and one another in the study group, about what changes you would like to see in your lives in the days ahead as you share these conversations about your church and its ministry. Keep this list before the group each time you meet. Also, if there is a person or group of persons in the community for whom someone feels a sense of passion,

name that person or group, and pray together for God to show you a way to build community with them. Close the time with someone verbalizing the various hopes listed out. It is preferable that the person who speaks the prayer be someone other than the pastor.

Note: If you are pursuing a retreat format or a five session format, you will need to condense the sessions. No session should exceed 90 minutes, and often 60 minutes is plenty of time. If you combine two modules in a session, you will need a full 90 minutes. If you had a hard time wrapping up the first session, your group members may be telling you that they need more time than a four-session format can afford them. Don't be afraid to extend the length of the study. Some very important conversations are about to occur – your leaders may come to a profound fork in the ministry journey, where enormous stakes hang on what happens in this time together.

MODULE B – Choosing Life

Group preparation in advance: read pp. 27-36.

Introductions: Share around the group the place in your life where you are most profoundly see and experience the sheer joy and wonder of LIFE – it could be related to your kids, or to nature, or to an experience in serving others. Where do you really get to touch the magic and sparkle of LIFE? Elaborate as you share. What is it about that place or activity or experience that is so full of life? (Again, in this and in all sessions, share around tables if the size of the group precludes large group sharing within our time frame.)

Scriptural Foundation: Deuteronomy 30:15-20. The context here is Moses addressing the Hebrew people toward the end of their wandering years – pleading with them to make choices that will enhance life, choices that honor God’s intentions for them. If Moses could be brought back for an hour to plead with your church, what would he say? Why? What would it mean for your church to choose to live, to choose to give life away so others could live???

Processing Ideas and Experience: There are two ideas in the chapter that are probably capable of igniting a spirited discussion with your group. Those ideas are

- It is much easier to choose life when the church has dwindled to the point of desperation.
- Leaders need to reframe their task from tending a declining institution and shepherding accumulated members, most of whom are passive or inactive to the task of building a core of folks who have chosen to follow Jesus and who get on board with God’s mission for their church.

With regard to the first idea, you might ask the group if they perceive their people to be open to major changes and new initiatives in order to reach and serve the people of the community. If the sanctuary is more than one-fourth full on Sunday, most churches will have a significant number of folks who are resistant to new initiatives – or at the very least, are more interested in a focus on caring for current members than in caring for those who yet need to discover God’s grace.

The second idea is the notion of reframing the task from tending a large, diffused and shrinking flock of folks to the task of recruiting a company of committed disciples. Even when many church members are utterly disinterested in

joining in the mission, and even when the total membership is declining in number and energy, it is hopeful to discover that we can reframe our primary task as finding the people who do get it, and working to develop them and to increase their number. What is to keep our pastor or our leader team from keeping an informal roll of those who are highly committed (as measured by various benchmarks)?

Developing these people and increasing their tribe is critical to the health and future of the larger church. What if we invited all our members to recommit annually to a membership covenant? This would not necessarily entail purging the church roll of those who fail to recommit. But it would mean the emergence of a meaningful roster, within the larger one, that reveals clearly who is truly on board. It would reveal the group that must grow if the church is to thrive and to be faithful in its mission. Question for group: what would you consider to be possible defining points of a 'company of committed Christians' within your larger church? What would be the marks of such commitment? Write these on a marker board or flip chart.

Closing Prayer: Review the list of hopes and dreams for the church and community from the last module. Give group members the chance to reflect on any and to add to the list. Ask the group to look at the benchmarks of Christian commitment that you placed on the marker board a moment earlier. Ask each person to pray about their life and those benchmarks, whatever they may be. Invite (in advance) one group member to close the meeting with a spoken prayer. As before, it is preferable that the person leading the prayer be someone other than the pastor.

MODULE C – Choosing Community

Group preparation in advance: read pp. 37-53.

Leader preparation in advance: find out how many folks attend worship at your church on the average weekend *and* see if you can get a snapshot demographic study on the community your church serves. (If the regional office of your denomination has a contract with *Percept* – a major provider of demographic studies for churches, then see if you can get a six-page ‘First View’ study on your church’s zip code prior to the session. Such studies are easily downloadable and free of charge if your denominational office has a Percept contract.)

Introductions: Go around the group talking about the communities or neighborhoods that we call home. Is this the neighborhood where the church building is located or another place? Why do we live here? What do we love about it? What needs do we see among our neighbors?

Scriptural Foundations: Matthew 25: 31-40. This is the first half of a parable by Jesus, imagining a judgment at the End of time where the value and meaning of our life is measured by the way we served others. Of the six movements in the parable (I was hungry and you fed me, I was naked and you clothed me, etc.), which movement *do you feel* cuts to the heart of what God is calling your church to be and to do in ministry these days? If these six were boiled down to one, for your church, what would it boil down to? (We are assuming that different churches will hear the Spirit leading them to different kinds of ministry.)

Processing Experiences and Ideas: In this chapter, we explore both the inward journey toward community and the

outward journey. Both are important. Some churches do neither well. Some churches develop a very tight sense of community among their members while remaining quite detached from the community beyond. Other churches work to serve the community, but have inadequate strategies for bringing people into spiritual community (either current members or potential new comers). How well (or poorly) do group members see your church doing in each of these regards (the inward and the outward journey to community?)

In terms of outward community, look at the data provided by the demographic study. Hit what strikes you as highlights. Ask the group if there are any surprises for them. Brainstorm about points of connection where churches could build relationships with a community such as this.

***Note from Paul Nixon:** the above may be difficult for groups who are detached from community, significantly older than their community or who have failed in previous outreach efforts. A major part of my own coaching with churches relates to this topic. You may wish to bring in a facilitator to help move this conversation along or to work with your leaders in a separate meeting – focused on taking your church’s gifts and resources and investing them wisely in meeting community needs and building community relationships.*

In terms of inward community, there should be at least one small relational grouping within a church for every ten persons who attend weekend services. So that if a church had 100 on Sunday, there should be ten small groups where the Bible is opened, people pray, and folks share about how they are doing in the challenge of following Jesus. Sometimes, such a group may be more mission/task oriented than study oriented. How many such groups does your

church have? If you divided your weekend worship attendance by ten, how many groups would your church need?

The other reason (besides lack of small groups) that churches with good community ministries fail to grow is because they lack a worship service where the music and liturgy grow from and relate well to the primary cultural identities of the folks you are serving. They do not have a realistic means for bringing local folks into spiritual community. In other words, most churches lack worship services where the typical neighbor would feel quickly at home.

Closing Prayer: Ask the group, “What have you heard God saying to you or to us tonight?” As they share, ask if anyone else is hearing or thinking the same. For the first time tonight, the pastor may wish to sum up the thoughts and discoveries of the group, by verbalizing a closing prayer.

MODULE D – Choosing Fun

Group preparation in advance: read pp. 55-66.

Leader preparation: Take a Bible concordance (either hard copy or online) and list out an assortment of verses dealing with *joy* from various sections of the Bible. Pick those which speak to you. List out at least as many as you have group members.

Introductions: Go around and tell about the time you had the most fun either at church or in a church-sponsored event or mission project. Give people a moment to think, and then invite everyone to share. After they have shared, look to see what was revealed? What is common to our experiences?

Scriptural Foundation: Ask each group member to read one of the verses you pre-selected relating to joy. As a group collect the varied contexts for joy in the lives of faithful people. Ask the group: Do you believe God desires for us to experience joy on a regular basis?

Processing Experiences and Ideas: Was anyone in the group raised or trained to believe that the spiritual life ought to be a little bit miserable, the idea that sacrifice and misery are linked? Why are teenagers miserable in some churches? Why are men often miserable at church? What makes you miserable sometimes in worship or other kinds of church gatherings or tasks? Is there a better way?

Divide into three groups to process three sections of this chapter:

- Fun starts in Big Church
- Fun in Small Group Settings
- Fun with Challenging Tasks

Each group should ask one question: what in this section does our church need to hear loud and clear? After a few minutes, share insights with the larger group.

Closing Prayer: End on a very positive note: share prayers of thankfulness for joyful experiences shared in the context of your life at church across the years – or recently.

MODULE E – Choosing Bold

Group preparation in advance: read pp. 67-79.

Introductions: Ask members to go around and share examples of boldness that they have witnessed in others. Define boldness as ‘strong, unwavering and determined.’ Ask them to look for boldness that was within the bounds of propriety, avoiding rudeness or aggressiveness. This could range from a vignette about a neighbor taking on the cable company to a story of someone responding to their children’s misbehavior.

Scriptural Foundation: Ephesians 1:15-23. This is Paul writing to the young Christians he has mentored in Ephesus, one of the largest and most cosmopolitan cities in the Roman world.

Paul Nixon writes: *“In early 2007, as I was contemplating my move to the Washington DC area to plant a new congregation, largely as an outsider to that city, Ephesians 1:20-23 hit me like a load of bricks. It reminded me that I worked for a Power greater than any established power in the most powerful city on Earth, greater than the power contained in the West Wing, in the Supreme Court or in the Pentagon. The apostle Paul reminded me that, as a servant of Jesus, I walk and work with an authority – spiritually and morally – that can overturn empires. If God has put all things under Christ’s feet, so to speak, and if I am with Christ – and he is my head and leader – then, by virtue of my relationship to Christ, all things are placed under my feet as well. This is not an invitation to ego trip or arrogance. It is an invitation simply to hold my shoulders high and to know that so long as I am following Jesus, I am on a winning team. It is an invitation to expect great things from God and, in turn, to attempt great things for God.”*

Discuss in your group: what difference do you suspect this truth makes in Paul’s work planting a new church? Does

your church's leader team understand itself to possess such power or authority? Why or why not? What might be done to encourage such an understanding?

Processing Experiences and Ideas: Break into three groups, as you did in the last module. Assign one of the following sections to each group:

- Mr. Rogers-style worship is killing us
- Give them Jesus and the Spirit
- Bold incursions into the secular city

In each group, the single question is this – what does our church need to hear from this section? After a few minutes, each group can share its insights with the larger group.

Closing Prayer: Begin with a time of silent prayer in which members are encouraged to get still and centered. Then read Ephesians 1:20-23 slowly aloud once more as members remain in a meditative posture. Invite them to pray silently and boldly, as God's Spirit leads them, to pray for themselves, for their families and for their church. Ask them to abandon their hesitation and timidity in their praying. Finally, invite oral sentence prayers for the church, sharing what is stirring in their hearts. Designate a group member to close the prayer.

MODULE F – Choosing Frontier (two hours minimum – in daylight)

Group preparation in advance: read pp. 81-94.

Leader preparation in advance: think about different prayer walking routes from the church facility for groups of 3,

routes that would take each group about 45 minutes. You may choose to print out a Google map and highlight a route. It will generally be adequate to just point each group in a different, specific, direction and give them a time to report back. (For more information, see instructions at the end of this module.)

Introductions: Most people have personality tendencies that tend toward being settlers or toward being pioneers on the open prairie. Pioneers may find settled life too boring. Settlers find pioneer life a bit too rugged or risky. The church is made up of both – by God’s design – both settlers and pioneers. Share around the group: Are you more a settler or more a pioneer? Why? If the question is difficult – this may help clarify it: If you could have lived in a town house in 1880s Philadelphia on a nice tree-lined street and a very predictable life OR as a homesteader in Texas with a gun next to the bed and a life of great adventure – what would you have chosen?

The choice placed before us today is not settlement versus frontier, but fortress versus frontier. Those of us who are settlers may or may not have a fortress mentality. We may or may not disparage of those with pioneering instincts.

Scriptural Foundation: Read the Great Commission of Jesus together, Matthew 28:18-20. Point out to the group the continuing theme of authority/boldness (tying in to the last session). Ask what difference the following words or phrases make in this total statement by Jesus (how the statement is different without these particular words):

- *All authority... (and) therefore*
- *Go*
- *All nations (or ethnic groups)*

- *Teaching them*
- *Remember*
- *Always*

Processing Experiences and Ideas: Most churches own buildings and do most of their work within those buildings. It is easy for churches to become locked away inside a building, disconnected from community. Some buildings are more conducive to interface between church and community than others. As a group, walk through the Fortress Test on pp. 82-84. How many 'yes' answers do you record? Is it more than half? Are there ways that you could reduce the number of 'yes' answers with relatively minor effort? Is there a group member or two who would convene a team to work on this?

The best way to assess a building's spirit of hospitality (so as to improve it) is to walk from street to building to major destinations inside (sanctuary, childcare areas, restrooms, fellowship area) with a person who has never been in the facility before – someone walking through with us for the first time, who is able to comment on what they see. Invite a variety of people to walk through – invite them to be very honest about what they see and how they feel as they walk through. Identify critical areas in the building where a greeter may be needed on Sundays.

Is there a ministry that your church presently sponsors within the walls of its building that you could move beyond your walls? What might that look like?

Could your church do most of its work more effectively in another place? Relocations are often very difficult processes for established churches due to the emotional attachment to the current facility as a place of holy memory. Multi-site

strategies (staying in the current building *and* going to a new place) are popular these days in part because of churches who wish to stop their decline but who cannot bear to part with their historic facility. You should be warned that saving the church is not an adequate motivation for doing multi-site ministry or relocated, and will often lead to a disappointing experience at the new location.

When churches are motivated by compassion for the community and by a desire to be faithful to Christ's call to go, they are much more likely to succeed, regardless of whether they stay or go. But in any case, every church needs a realistic plan for connecting with its community. Does your church yet have the right motivation?

Prayer Walk: Instead of a ten-minute time for closing prayer today, you will need at least an hour. Spread out from the church building, in groups of 3, walking out into the immediate neighborhood. Walk in a prayerful mode – asking God to show you something you need to see, asking God to reveal clues of where good is happening in this community. Does your church need to be supportive of this good – to lend your help in specific ways? Is there a human need that you see, either in general or a specific person's need? Please hold off on conversation between prayer-walkers until you get back to the church to share what you saw with one another over coffee. However, feel free to engage anyone else you meet in conversation that might bring light to the questions that you are posing above.

After the group reconvenes at the church, allow about 15 minutes for them to debrief with one another. Then assign them homework – to reflect on what they saw and write a paragraph or a page about it.

Note: Prayer walking is a major strategy being employed in the planting of Epicenter Church in the DC area. In reflection on this experience, by late 2007, Paul Nixon will post a short handbook on community prayer walking at www.epicentergroup.org.

MODULE G – Choosing Now

Group preparation in advance:

- Write a reflection on what they saw and experienced on the prayer walk in the previous session.
- Read pp. 95-110.

Introductions: Invite the group to read their prayer walk reflections or to share them. Then, ask them what they have heard God say to them and to your church through the course of this study. This should be done as a large group.

Scriptural Foundation: Read the opening words of Jesus' ministry in Mark 1:15. If Jesus walked into the room where your group is meeting and announced such words, what would they mean here and now?

Processing Experiences and Ideas: On pp. 98-99, there is a *Top Ten List* of reasons churches procrastinate. Which of these resonate with your church experience? As a large group exercise, pick the top three reasons for your church.

Divide into three groups, with one of the procrastinations assigned to each. Instruct the group to use Paul Nixon's responses to the procrastinations on pp. 99-103 as they think about how your church might move beyond this excuse to do

nothing. After a few minutes in small group, share conclusions with the larger group.

Decide together:

- Which 2 of the 6 choices presented in this book are most urgent for our church?
- Do we feel that we can address these choices effectively and efficiently on our own?
- OR do we feel that an outside coach, advisor or consultant might be helpful to us in helping us face reality and climb the ministry mountain that is before us? Epicenter Group can refer you to a potential ministry coach. You can contact them at www.epicentergroup.org.
- Is this the last time our group will meet? If so, then what is the next step, so that our conversation continues in the life of the church? What shall be done with the notes from our conversations? Do some of the group need to meet with official committees to talk about concerns and convictions that have arisen in the course of this study. Be specific in details of next steps and put dates on the calendar. If, the group feels a need to meet again – why, where, and to do what?

Closing Prayer: Invite as many group members as will do so to verbalize a sentence or two to God about where they perceive your church needs God's help. Pastor can close the prayer time.

This concludes the study. But the ministry adventure begins again new every morning!