*Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap*
**by Thom S Rainer. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan,**
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**$6.99 Ebook**

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

With the decline of church participation throughout the Western world, church leaders are looking for principles and strategies to arrest the decline and better grow and influence their broader community. How does a local church that is declining or plateued turn around and grow again? What changes in perspective or behavious does a leader need? Are there are transferable keys for church revitalization? What processes can help? These are kind of questions that drove Thom Rainer's team in their research project into "Breakout Churches".
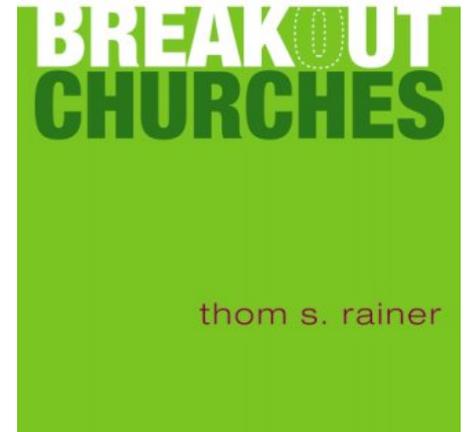
Rainer is President if LifeWay Christian Resources, a church consulting firm, and was a Dean at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. His publication expertise is applied research that helps inform churches how to better connect with people outside the church. His imagination was grabbed by Jim Collin's seminal volume *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap … and Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001). Rainer wanted to pursue a similar research project on churches, and so borrowed Collins' structure, outline and research process.

Of 400,000 churches in the United States, Rainer's team examined 50,000 and of these was able to identify and investigate thirteen "breakout churches" which had broken out of a slump and showed healthy signs of substantial growth under the same pastor. The research sample did not include churches that have been consistently growing, nor churches that turned around with a new pastor. They wanted to learn from churches that had experienced problems and decline and then were able turn around and grow again, with the same leader. To help strengthen the reliability of the research findings, Rainer also identified 39 comparison churches that were similar in size and situation but have not turned around and remained in decline. Like Collins asked of businesses, Rainer asked of churches what plans, strategies and processes helped the church transition to greatness? Rainer says he found close similarities with Collins, but also some different findings unique to churches as nonprofit entities.

Rainer tells the story of the 13 churches and discusses six components of the "chrysalis factor" that facilitated a transition to greatness:

1. **Acts 6/7 Legacy Leadership** that equips others and seeks to benefit the church for when after the leader is gone (patterned on Collins' Level 5 Leadership).
2. **ABC Moment** or wake-up call of "awareness" that something is not right, "belief" about the brutal facts and "crisis" that leads to motivation for fresh learning and restructuring (patterned on Collins' Confront the Brutal Facts [Yet Never Lose Faith]).
3. **Who/What Simultrack** of identifying what the purpose of the church really is and who needs to lead and staff it (patterned on but contrasting with Collins' First Who … Then What).
4. **VIP Factor** of vision discovery from the intersection profile of a leader's passion, community needs and congregation's gifts, sometimes

expressed with a key flagship ministry in which the church excels (patterned on Collins' Hedgehog Concept [Simplicity within Three Circles]).

5. **Culture of Excellence**, giving the atmosphere that "Somebody really cares about this place" (patterned on Collins' Culture of Discipline).
6. **Innovation Accelerators**, not introducing new things for their own sake but with consideration and discernment (patterned on Collins' Technology Accelerators).

Like Collins used the image of avoiding a doom loop and needing a flywheel of successes to build momentum, Rainer says churches need to move on form "Blind Erosion" that refuses to face decline, and instead strive for the "Big Mo" that comes form overcoming struggle, building up potential, experiencing a breakout point and then fostering momentum as success builds on success.

Because the book does not focus on just the biggest and brightest churches, but churches that recovered from a slump with the same leader, it is an encouraging resource for church leaders looking for new hope and directions to break out of mediocrity. The book is full of useful, albeit sometimes counterintuitive advice. For example, it explains Breakout Church leaders showed a "compelling modesty" in their leadership rather than driving their churches with the force of their charismatic personalities. They often engaged with outside influences, whether a conference or a consultant, who helped break them out of their rut. They brought on new staff from both within and without, often staffing ahead of growth and being bold in appointing people with passion; one pastor commenting, "I have always sought to hire wild horses that had to be tamed rather than tame horses that had to be prodded" (p.104). And they were surprisingly slow in adopting new trends, realizing innovation needs to serve the vision, lest the tail (innovations) wags the dog (the main vision and mission), or even a church develop a wagging tail with no dog! And breakout churches and leaders persisted and preserved until they grew again – there is a correlation between pastoral tenure and growth, but the control sample and other average tenures show that pastors are perhaps too quick to leave in conflict.

Whether the factors Rainer identifies are a cause or correlation of revitalization is not easy to determine. Another issue is that Rainer's sample categories selected churches that were at least medium-sized (200+). The majority of churches that need revitalization are much smaller than that, at least in the denominational system in which I work including my own local church. In my Australian context, the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) has been surveying churches across the country every five years over the last twenty years. That may provide data for a broad-based similar study of breakout churches in Australia. At least Rainer's project points to some excellent principles of research-based best practice for churches that want to break out of mediocrity and see substantially fruitful growth and renewal. *Breakout Churches* is ideal reading for pastors and leadership teams of churches longing for revitalization, and those who are consulting with, training, researching or otherwise seeking to learn from them.

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