

ARE YOU LEADING A ZOMBIE PARISH? SCORING GUIDE

1. Your typical congregant thinks the purpose of your church is to minister to the congregation.

True = 0

Uncertain = 1

False = 2

Explanation

- **Vital churches believe that the purpose their church exists, not just to serve those inside the building but also in their neighborhoods.** As a result, they tend to focus on nurturing and challenging their congregations and their neighborhoods.
- **Undead churches put insufficient effort into developing neighborhood presence, connection, and openness.** As a result, they tend to focus primarily on nurturing their congregations.

2. Your church's growth rate is lower than that of the zip code in which it is located.

True = 0

Uncertain = 1

False = 2

Explanation

- **Vital churches work to develop a significant neighborhood presence and connection.** As a result, they naturally tend to expand (and contract) along with their neighborhoods.
- **Undead churches put insufficient effort into developing neighborhood presence and connection.** As a result, their growth rates tend to be less than that of their neighborhoods.

3. Your congregation's social-cultural-demographic makeup bears a roughly positive relationship to that of the zip code in which it is located.

True = 2

Uncertain = 1

False = 0

Explanation

- **Vital churches work to establish and maintain organic connections and relationships with all the various social-cultural-demographic groups that make up their neighborhoods.** As a result, their diversity bears some relationship to that of their neighborhoods.
- **Undead churches put insufficient effort into connecting and relating with the various groups that make up their neighborhoods.** As a result, remain less diverse than their neighborhoods.

4. The makeup of your church's zip code is changing and your congregation is growing.

True = 2

Uncertain = 1

False = 0

Explanation

- **Vital churches work to establish and maintain connections and relationships with the social-cultural-demographic groups that make up their neighborhoods.** As a result, they tend to grow as the demographic makeup of their neighborhoods shift.
- **Undead churches put insufficient effort into connections and relationships with groups that make up their neighborhoods.** As a result, they tend to stagnate or shrink as the demographic makeup of their neighborhoods shift.

5. Your church has an endowment.

Unrestricted Endowment = 0

Restricted Endowment = 1

No Endowment = 2

Explanation

- **Vital churches tend to rely on income rather than endowed wealth to fund ministries and their structural maintenance. If they have endowments, they restrict themselves to using them only for capital expenses that will grow the congregation or benefit their neighborhoods.** Personal investment leads to personal engagement in and responsibility for the wellbeing of the parish. Greater engagement and responsibility lead to greater vitality.
- **Undead churches rely substantially on endowed wealth to fund ministries and structures, and tend to have unrestricted endowments that makes this easier to do.** Lower levels of personal investment lead to lower levels of personal engagement and responsibility that lead to congregational decline.

6. The vestry (or board) has done a demographic study of the church's zip code in the last five years.

Verified demographic study = 2

Unverified demographic study = 1

No study = 0

Explanation

- **Vital churches regularly study the social-cultural-demographic make-up of their neighborhoods.** This allows them to better tailor their ministries and programs to the needs of their neighborhoods. Really vital parishes really get outside the building to verify their assumptions and programmatic conclusions about the results.
- **Undead churches rely on unverified assumptions and stereotypes about their neighborhoods.** Because of this, the programs they offer to their neighborhoods, if any, tend to be poorly conceived and poorly received.

7. The vestry (or board) has asked why your church exists at least once in the last three years.

ECF Vital Practices

True = 2

Uncertain = 1

False = 0

Explanation

- **Vital churches regularly get beneath WHAT they do (ministries/programs) and HOW they do it (organizational structure/processes), and ask WHY they exist (their calling or purpose).** This encourages them to listen to what God's Spirit is calling them to do, allows them to be more creative, enables them to take appropriate risks on behalf of the Gospel.
- **Undead churches, by definition, are churches that don't know why they exist but pretend to be alive.**

8. The vestry (or board) has asked why a ministry or program exists at least once in the last year.

True = 2

Uncertain = 1

False = 0

Explanation

- **Vital churches regularly assess the vitality of their ministries and programs.** This allows them to take prayerful and thoughtful action to improve them or to end them if they are no longer serving a purpose.
- **Undead churches have undead programs.**

9. The vestry (or board) has purposefully allowed at least one program or ministry to end and reported to the congregation what they have learned from the experience within the last three years.

True = 2

Uncertain = 1

False = 0

Explanation

- **Vital churches regard failure as something to learn from rather than something to sweep under the rug.** Churches with a theology that accepts failure and death as a natural part of life can harness the power of resurrection to learn, adapt, grow, and experience rebirth.
- **Undead churches have undead programs.** Churches with a theology cannot accept failure and death as a natural part of life are unable to harness the power of resurrection to learn, adapt, grow, and experience rebirth.

10. The average active participant in the congregation can describe in one or two sentences the congregation's vision/mission.

True = 2

Uncertain = 1

False = 0

Explanation

- **Vital churches regularly communicate their vision and mission in a way that it can be clearly and easily grasped by all engaged in the life of the congregation, and that they can explain it to others.** A church's vision/mission is the DNA that both forms the congregation and allows it to adapt itself to its changing environment. As Albert Einstein once said, "If you cannot explain it to a six-year old, you do not understand it yourself."
- **The membership of undead churches has little sense of the congregation's vision/mission, if one indeed exists at all in any meaningful way).** They don't understand it themselves, they can't explain it to others, and so they just keep on shuffling forward, sapping the life force of all around them.

Add Up Your Points

Write Them Here

Interpreting Your Score

- 16 to 20: Congratulations!**
Your congregation is alive and well.
How will you work to keep it that way?
- 11 to 15: Warning!**
Your congregation may be at risk.
What can you do to build up their resistance?
- 0 to 10: Condolences...**
Your congregation is undead.
What will you do to bring it back to life?
(Or is a funeral in order?)

OMG! I'm leading a zombie church. Now what do I do?

Back to "Are You Leading a Zombie Parish?"

Okay. You've taken the quiz and found out you're leading a zombie church or a church that's at risk for becoming undead. What do you do now?

Neither condition is easy to deal with. But stretching our zombie metaphor just a little further, clearly a church that is at risk for going zombie would be a lot easier to deal with than a church that has already become Undead. After all, a church that is "merely" at risk still has a mind capable of critical thought. But by "definition," a church that has actually gone zombie no longer has a functioning mind and has therefore lost the capacity for independent thought and with that the capacity for self-critical reflection.

If your church is merely at risk of becoming infected with undeadness, you may be able to engage the congregation's critical faculties by having the members of your vestry or board take the same quiz you just did, then engaging them in a discussion of what they make of their scores. While the quiz is admittedly somewhat tongue-in-cheek, engaging your leadership playfully on issues such as these may gain a lot more traction than a more somber approach. After all, while it may really piss you off first, knowing the truth will ultimately make you free (John 8:32).

Dealing a church that has already joined the ranks of the undead is an infinitely greater challenge. Just as Hollywood zombies do pretty good jobs of emulating many activities of the living, a zombie church can also do a more than halfway-decent job of imitating healthy church life: often good enough to lure in the occasional non-member, and generally good enough to convince its own leadership and membership that a healthy, friendly, welcoming congregation. They may have even convinced themselves that they want to grow (but just can't seem to figure out why they don't). More often, however, they may be found employing rationalizations like, "Growing in number is not the only kind of growth: growing in depth is valid, too." Not that there's anything wrong with growing deeper. It's just that actually deepening one's relationship with Christ usually translates into a deeper encounter with Christ's transforming love, which is usually marked by a natural desire to share that love with others.

When a church becomes so thoroughly convinced by its own rationalizations that it no longer retains the capacity for self-criticism, the only recourse may be the proverbial "bullet to the head." Once in a while, a zombie church, as it grows closer to actual death, may benefit from the salutary effect of staring death in the face. Occasionally, this insight, combined with new leadership at the helm, may be capable of beginning the long road back to health. I've seen it happen, but it is rare. Unfortunately, many zombie churches would rather die than change. And if this is the case, the only options left are either: (a) let it "live" until it depletes the last of its own (a perhaps other's) resources of time, talent, and treasure, or (b) put it out of its misery now while sufficient resources remain to start a new church or invest in the living in some other way.

Daunting, right? Yet I can offer two rays of hope: Question #7 and a lot of prayer. If you can help your church remember WHY it exists – its reason for being – its first love – the Truth that can make it free – there may be a chance to come back from the brink. And prayer because, as Jesus said, "This kind can come out only through prayer" (Mark 9:29).
