114 Things You Need to Know About Revitalizing Churches

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One of the greatest dangers in church revitalization is to deny that problems and challenges exist. If you don’t admit the problem, you can’t apply the solutions.
I was vice president of corporate lending in a bank when I sensed that God was moving me into an area I never expected. My wife, sons, and I responded to the call. We sold almost all of our possessions and moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where I would be a seminary student for six years.

Eventually, I would become a pastor. My first church was located in southern Indiana, and had seven people attending. They were trying to decide whether to close the door or call me as pastor. After they heard me preach, they weren’t sure which of the choices was the most painful direction!

But they did call me, and God allowed me to lead the church from 7 to 70 in attendance. I got my first taste of church revitalization.

My second church was in a bedroom community of Louisville. Most of the members were rural or small town residents who had watched their little community become a commuter town for Louisville. They did not do well in the demographic transition. The church was declining precipitously; attendance fell from 120 to 75 in just a few years. Again, God allowed me the privilege of being an instrument in the turnaround of that church. Attendance was about 160 when I left.

My next church was in St. Petersburg, Florida. The metropolitan area was well over a million people, but the church struggled in the old neighborhood where it was located. But we were blessed to see the church almost triple in size from 120 in worship attendance to around 300.

I got to experience a much larger church in the Birmingham, Alabama area. The church had been through several years of decline, and that trend was reversed during my tenure.

Please hear me. I am not writing these facts to brag or give myself glory. I just wanted you to know that I have been a part of church revitalization. It’s in my blood now, and I couldn’t get rid of this passion if I wanted to do so.

I left the church in Birmingham to become dean of a seminary. Do you want to guess what I taught more than any other topic to those ministerial students? I taught them about God’s work in revitalizing churches. During that time, I began researching the topic, and consulting with churches across North America. I was blessed to consult with over 500 churches. And I learned even more about church revitalization.

Today I am president of one of the largest Christian companies in the world. But my passion has not changed. I am still writing books and blog posts about church revitalization.

So, thanks for joining me on this quick factoid tour. Each of the following 114 points may be brief, but I think they will be helpful. And thanks for downloading this resource. I am humbled that you would be willing to connect with me in this matter.

And, now, here are 114 things you need to know about church revitalization.
THERE IS HOPE

Let the discouragement end. Despite the dire facts and statistics about congregations (which I will share later), there are reasons for hope for revitalizing churches. Here are a few of those reasons.

1. More church leaders are demonstrating a willingness to face reality. The first step in making changes is facing reality. More leaders are getting their proverbial head out of the sand.

2. More churches are emphasizing corporate prayer. It is not just that prayer can lead to church revitalization; prayer is revitalization.

3. Church revitalization is being emphasized with the similar enthusiasm that church planting has received for the past several years. We need both. We do not need to pit one against the other.

4. There is an increasing emphasis of the wedding of theology with practical ministry. We should never do ministry without a biblical and theological foundation and framework. More church leaders are emphasizing good theology with good application.

5. More churches are emphasizing the ministry of prayer. Thus corporate prayer is evolving to ministries of prayer. When God's people pray, God's churches begin to revive.

6. The local church ministry field is understood more clearly now as a mission field. Churches will be more effective in reaching their communities if they treat them as true mission fields.

7. The “multi-”movement is making a great contribution toward revitalizing churches. There are so many creative and healthy approaches among multi-sites, multi-campuses, multi-venues, and others.

8. More church leaders are engaging culture rather than isolating themselves from it. They see culture as a mission field to be reached rather than an enemy to be defeated.

9. More churches are surviving by being acquired by other churches. Such an attitude reflects selflessness and a kingdom focus by the members of the church being acquired.

10. More churches are emphasizing meaningful church membership. That means the new members who come in will have a selfless and giving attitude rather than seeing the church as a country club with perks.

11. Worship wars are waning. Churches, therefore, are able to focus on meaningful ministry without distractions.

12. More church members are getting involved in their communities. That means the members are missionaries on the mission field in their own neighborhoods.
I began this book with “hope” for a reason. I really do believe God is at work in incredible ways in many churches. But leaders in churches must face the brutal facts of reality. We cannot begin to lead change until we have looked at all the issues, including the tough issues. By the way, that means that those of us who are leaders must be willing to face our own leadership realities.

There are several realities we could list. Here are some of the more brutal facts for us to know, particularly in a Western context.

13. Nine out of ten churches in America are either declining or growing at a pace more slowly than the growth of their communities. Stated simply, 90 percent of churches are losing ground in their communities.

14. Over 4,000 churches will close in a year. And fewer churches will be successfully started.

15. About 50,000 churches will look for a pastor in a year. Pastoral turnover is high. Frequent change of leaders precludes healthy ministry and growth.

16. It takes 86 church members a year to reach one person for Christ. Read that statistic carefully. We are only reaching one person for every 86 church member over an entire year.

17. We estimate that only 15 percent of the Millennial generation is Christian. Those young adults and youth (born between 1980 and 2000) have the lowest representation of Christians in American history.

18. The majority of pastors and staff tell us critics in their churches demoralize them. Demoralized pastors are ineffective leaders.

19. The era of cynicism is now in the churches. Such is the reason the previous statement is true.

20. More church leaders are accepting and teaching unbiblical issues. Thus many churches are becoming more like the world and its culture.
THE GREAT NEED TO REVITALIZE CHURCHES

The needs are many. Sometimes we think that we don’t have the resources to revitalize our churches. But the reality is we have all the resources available to God. In other words, our resources are unlimited.

So, as we look at these needs, we do so with the perspective that our God will supply them. Here are nine specific needs.

21. We need church leaders and members who will both dream and persevere. More times than not, church revitalization is three steps forward and two steps backward. It takes both time and effort.

22. We need church leaders and members who will love the churches they serve. They will put the needs of the church before their own.

23. We need church leaders and members who will love the communities their churches serve. No church has a turnaround until it first seeks to make a difference in its community.

24. We need church leaders and members who will serve with the mindset of a missionary. The community should be viewed as a mission field rather than a pool for prospects.

25. We need church leaders who will “look in the mirror.” It does no good to blame others and the situations a leader is in. The leader must seek to know: “What must I change?”

26. We need church leaders and members who will sacrifice for the mission of the church. Too many church members see the congregation as a place for their own preferences and needs.

27. We need church leaders and members who will become prayer warriors. Church revitalization begins and continues with God and His strength.

28. We need church leaders and members who will share the gospel with passion. We must break out of our holy huddles and share the good news of Christ.

29. We need church leaders and members who have faith it can be done. With God, nothing is impossible, including the revitalization of the church.
WHY SOME PASTORS DON’T WANT TO GO TO CHURCHES THAT NEED REVITALIZATION

There is no shortage of pastors, but there is a shortage of pastors who want to go to established churches in need of revitalization. Why? In this chapter, I offer ten reasons.

30. Many established churches have a negative culture. They are more known for their conflicts and fights than their mission.

31. Typically these churches don’t celebrate victories. A church that does not celebrate the positive often has a negative and toxic atmosphere.

32. On occasion, the pastor has “the grass is greener” syndrome. Any opportunity, therefore, looks more appealing than a church in need of revitalization.

33. Many leaders in these churches are not equipped in leadership and relational skills. They may be well-equipped in Bible and theology, but they are not prepared in the practical skills they so desperately need.

34. The Internet age exacerbates problems in critical churches. Social media especially can be a place where negative members in established churches can have their criticisms amplified.

35. There is often a chasm in the expectations of the church and the expectations of the pastor. This situation typically develops because the church did not initially communicate what they really wanted in a pastor.

36. Unhappy church members are more likely to compare their pastor to pastors of other churches. Thus the “podcast pastor” is seen as the ideal pastor, while their current pastor is perceived to fall short in many areas.

37. Many pastors are choosing the position of campus pastor at a multisite church over a lead pastor role at an autonomous church. While both needs are great, that does reduce the pool of available pastors for those churches in need of revitalization.

38. Many pastors are choosing to start churches. Again, that need is great, but it leaves fewer pastors available for established churches.

39. Financial giving is declining in many churches. Thus, these churches are not able to support a pastor adequately.
SPECIFIC LEADERSHIP SKILLS AND TRAITS NECESSARY FOR CHURCHES IN NEED OF REVITALIZATION

Church revitalization is not easy. Many skills, traits, and much prayer are needed. Here are some specific skills and traits very helpful to leaders who seek to revitalize a church.

40. Leaders must have big hearts and good strategic skills. Both are necessary; many leaders have one but not both.

41. Tenacity is one of the greatest traits needed. Sometimes, just waking up and going to work is a victory. It is too tempting to give up.

42. These leaders must be transparent. Of course, all leaders must be transparent; but the trait is especially important in established churches.

43. Leaders must be mentors and be willing to be mentored. A leader working with a leader is vital; church revitalization is not a Lone Ranger ministry.

44. Continuous learning is vital. The path to learning does not end at Bible college or seminary. Life-long leaders are life-long learners.

45. These leaders must have a strong sense of God’s call. On some days, that will be the only thing keeping the leader going.

46. These leaders must have good relational skills. Many pastors of established churches fail because they fail to see the relational side of ministry.

47. Leaders must see the value and application of both theological savvy and practical application. The failure to grasp either reality can lead to serious problems in the established church.

48. Leaders must act like missionaries. That means they must understand and love the culture of both the church and the community.

49. These leaders must be family-focused. The call to an established church is a call for an entire family.

50. Team leaders are requisite in established churches. The team may include paid staff or laity, but the leader must include all of them in the leadership tasks.
NINE QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS OF CHURCH REVITALIZATION

The following nine questions are critical for anyone leading in church revitalization. They are self-evident, so they are offered without comment.

51. Will you pray daily for your church?

52. Will you be mission focused on the church’s community?

53. Will you make a commitment for the long haul unless God leads otherwise?

54. Will you love your critics?

55. Will you be persistent?

56. Will you be incarnational in the community of the church?

57. Will you be a continuous learner in the field of church revitalization?

58. Will you be content?

59. Will you be a positive leader and example for your family?
WHAT TRAINING DOES A LEADER NEED FOR CHURCH REVITALIZATION?

Leading a church toward revitalization is challenging regardless of the era. But the times are especially challenging in North America and many other areas around the world. What are some specific areas of training a leader needs in this environment?

60. In many ways, there are new languages to learn. Some of the languages are inherent in the typical changes of culture. Social media has added its own unique set of words and meaning. Who would have thought twenty years ago that Twitter and Facebook would be common words today?

61. The leader must be trained to lead in a non-Christian culture. We estimate that only 15 percent of the Millennial generation is Christian.

62. The cultural Christian is almost extinct. Relatively few people go to church because of cultural pressure today. They need a compelling reason to attend. The leader must be trained in that new reality.

63. The leader must be prepared to have a good work/life balance. Church revitalization is hard work. The leader must not neglect family or rest.

64. The leader must be trained to deal with unregenerate church members. Though specific numbers are not precise, I estimate that up to one-half of the church members in America are not Christians.

65. The leader must be trained as a missionary. I have noted this issue in other contexts earlier. The community of an established church is truly a mission field today.

66. The leader must be prepared to deal with a culture that has less respect for church leaders. The decline in this level of respect has been precipitous the past two decades.

67. The leader must learn to deal with conflict. I will cover this issue in chapter 10.

68. The leader must lead in a more cynical world. Christian leaders are especially more likely to be the subject of such cynicism.

69. Leaders of these churches must be equipped to lead cross-generationally. It is not unusual for an established church to have predominantly older members while desiring to reach younger people.

70. Training in practical issues is vital. This statement is not the first time I’ve raised this issue. But this is training a leader rarely gets in seminary.
THE DANGERS OF DENIAL IN CHURCH REVITALIZATION

One of the greatest dangers in church revitalization is to deny that problems and challenges exist. If you don’t admit the problem, you can’t apply the solutions. Here are some of the more common denials.

71. The leader will not be able to lead toward solutions. The first of these is obvious. The mere act of denial means that no effort is being expended toward solutions.

72. The problems will only worsen. Failure to acknowledge the problem means the condition will deteriorate.

73. Future generations will be forsaken. If the challenges are not addressed today, the church will not reach future generations.

74. The leader will have regrets. No one wants to wonder later in life “what could have been.”

75. Churches will miss opportunities for ministry in the present. The longer denial is a reality, the more often the church will fail to identify and offer ministries to those in need right now.

76. Denial means there is no urgency for change. And without change, the church will continue the slide toward decline and death.

77. Maintenance ministry engenders frustration and conflict. Church members become frustrated, impatient, and angry when the church is not moving forward.

78. Churches in denial are usually disobedient. The Great Commission becomes the Great Omission.

79. Churches in denial often tolerate open and flagrant sin among its members. And such a tolerance is disaster for a church, as we know well from the Corinthian letters in the Bible.

80. Churches in denial lose their best members. They do not want to be a part of a congregation that has no purpose and no solutions.

81. Comfort becomes a priority for churches in denial. And comfort never leads to Great Commission obedience.
HINDRANCES TO EVANGELISM IN CHURCH REVITALIZATION

What are some of the major hindrances to evangelism in churches in need of revitalization? I name a few of them below, and they must all be addressed for true turnaround to take place in a church.

82. The church has no priority for evangelism. If evangelism is not one of the church’s highest priorities, it will not be effective, and it will probably not even take place.

83. Laypersons blame the pastor for the lack of evangelism. Thus evangelism is perceived to be limited to one or a few persons. After all, “that’s what we pay our pastor to do.”

84. An excuse mentality is a hindrance to evangelism. The excuses are legion. One example is: “We are a discipleship church, so we don’t do evangelism.”

85. The church does not connect prayer to evangelism. Evangelism is the work of the Holy Spirit. If we are not praying to reach people with the gospel, our work is human-centered and ineffective.

86. Church members fail to be compassionate and Christ-like. Non-Christians will not likely be receptive to the gospel message if the gospel messenger displays no real concern for them.

87. Church members fail to be intentionally evangelistic in their daily activities. Evangelism is much more than a program done one night a week.

88. Some church members fear that new Christians will change the church too much. Sadly, I have really heard that rationale. That is not just a hindrance to evangelism; it is a blockade.
DEALING WITH CONFLICT IN CHURCH REVITALIZATION

The very nature of church revitalization means that change is inevitable. Obviously, without change, there is no revitalization. But change engenders conflict. Here are a few factoids to keep in mind when you are the recipient of criticism.

89. You will be criticized. If you are not being criticized, you are not leading.

90. Don’t take most criticisms personally. It’s usually not about you; it’s about the critic himself or herself.

91. Pray for your critics. It’s tough, but you might be amazed how God will change both the critic and you.

92. Develop a winsome spirit. Such a spirit will not prevent criticisms, but it is likely to prevent the issue from becoming a major conflict.

93. Transparency defuses criticisms. This reality is especially true if it includes such heartfelt words as “I see your point” or “Maybe I am wrong.”

94. Pray for your own attitude. Seeds of resentment toward a critic can grow into major bitterness on your part. That will harm your ministry and hurt your witness.

95. Focus on the majority. Too often, the minority who are critics are distractions from our major leadership tasks.

96. Look in the mirror. Our critics are not always wrong.
SYMPTOMS OF CHURCHES THAT NEED REVITALIZATION

There are certainly many symptoms of churches that need revitalization. Here are some of the more common symptoms I have encountered as a pastor, consultant, and researcher.

97. Severe theological errors are pervasive in the church. This problem is the most severe of all the symptoms.

98. The church is a “pastor eater.” Most of the pastors within the past several years have been fired or urged to leave.

99. There is severe conflict in the congregation. Perhaps a group has already split from the church. Perhaps other departures of members are inevitable.

100. Hardly anyone in the community knows the church exists. The church has become an island in its community.

101. The church is declining while the community is growing. Or the church might be growing, but at a much slower growth rate than that of the community.

102. The church is family owned and operated. That is a humorous way of saying that the church is controlled by one or a few families.
CHURCHES THAT SURVIVED NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

Some churches have symptoms that are more severe than others. Indeed, they seem to be on the precipice of closing. Sadly, most of those churches eventually die. But a few of these churches have survived. They have defied most expectations. What are some of the characteristics of churches with near death experiences?

103. The church had a sudden negative experience that exacerbated decline in the congregation. Perhaps surprisingly, churches with sudden problems are more likely to survive than those with slow, almost unnoticeable, erosion. The former engenders a greater sense of urgency.

104. There was a significant exodus of members who resisted change. Though such an exit can be demoralizing, the exit of dissidents in the congregation can actually lead to a greater chance of survival.

105. The membership remnant make a commitment to God to do whatever it takes to make the church healthier. This commitment typically follows the exodus noted in the previous point.

106. The church becomes outwardly obsessed to reach and minister to the community. Though unusual, a few churches have indeed switched from an inward focus to an outward focus with seemingly no major triggers to do so.
PRAYERS FOR A REVITALIZED CHURCH

I conclude this eBook with my prayers for your church, your leadership, and God’s revitalization of both. As I note these prayers, I hope you will make them a part of your prayer life as well.

107. I pray for God’s blessings on your leadership and on the church for true revitalization.

108. I pray that God will move you and the church members out of your comfort zone into areas of total trust and faith.

109. I pray for you as a leader that you will have God’s wisdom.

110. I pray for you to have God’s strength.

111. I pray that you will learn to love the church members even more deeply.

112. I pray that you will learn to love your critics.

113. I pray that God will give you endurance and perseverance to stay to true the task.

114. I pray that God will raise up more people who will have a passion and conviction to pray even more.

Such is my hope for you.
Such are my prayers for you and your church.
May God truly bless you.

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