Dear Church Leader

God can make any church come alive, but its people must turn to the Lord and experience revitalization God’s way. The entire Church Revitalization process of the SBTC is based on transferable principles from the Word of God for the people of God. Our desire is to come alongside the local church to join you on your journey to restore the church to be the beacon of hope for a community in need of Jesus.

Whether you are on a plateau, just beginning a slump, or faced with the uncertainty of how to continue proceeding forward, our methods and processes can assist you in determining what your next steps should be. Contact us at the SBTC. We are here to serve you.

In His Service and Yours,

Kenneth Priest, Director
Convention Strategies
Southern Baptists of Texas Convention
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or 877.953.SBTC

SBTC 5-TRACK REVITALIZATION APPROACH

RENEWAL For churches which have slowed or become stagnant in growth.

REVITALIZATION For churches which have plateaued or experienced decline. Particularly suited to churches wanting to make changes one project at a time.

RE-ENGINEERING For churches in substantial decline or in need of a “total makeover.” The systems-oriented approach will be to get the church healthy and functional again.

RE-STARTING For churches “near death,” this track offers the hope of beginning again as mission of a sponsoring congregation.

NETWORK For churches developing church revitalization ministries and/or partnering to revitalize other churches.

5 Revitalization Principles
every church needs to experience

1 A fresh, biblically based vision from the Lord
2 Restored unity of the people
3 Mobilizing members to do the will of the Lord
4 Renewed commitment to outreach & evangelism
5 Life-giving empowerment by the Holy Spirit

In order to see these things become realities, we provide help for pastors & the church as a whole.

For assistance or more info contact Kenneth Priest Director of Convention Strategies kpriest@sbtexas.com

2016 Events

CHURCH REVITALIZATION LAB
January 14 - SBTC Offices, Grapevine
January 21 - Mission Dorado BC, Odessa
October 6 - West Conroe BC, Conroe

CHURCH REVITALIZATION CONFERENCES
February 11 - Criswell College, Dallas
September 8 - Northeast Houston BC

STRATEGIC GROWTH FORUM
August 11-12 North Richland Hills Baptist Church

NORTH AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR CHURCH REVITALIZATION AND RENEWAL (NASCRR)
February 12 - Criswell College, Dallas

CHURCH REVITALIZATION RETREAT
March 31-April 2 - Criswell College, Dallas

sbtexas.com/revitalization
God can make any church come alive, but its people must turn to the Lord and experience revitalization God’s way. The five revitalization principles of church renewal every church needs to experience are:

- A fresh, biblically based vision from the Lord
- A restored unity of the people
- Mobilization of the membership to do the will of God
- A renewed commitment to outreach and evangelism
- Life-giving empowerment by the Holy Spirit

In order for this to become a reality in the life of the church, the SBTC Church Revitalization program partners with pastors to assist in moving the church through spiritual renewal and revitalization.

The entire Church Revitalization process is based on transferable principles from the Word of God for the people of God.

**Revitalization Methods**

- Revitalization
- Renewal
- Re-engineering
- Replant/Restart
- Leadership Driven
- Merger/Acquisition

### Revitalization & Renewal

These approaches can take on several looks, and is encouraged for support of any method of revitalization endeavors. The SBTC uses two basic options:

1. **Ezekiel Project**: This is a curriculum based approach utilizing video-driven curriculum in order to provide strategic focus on the spiritual renewal of the church. There are two series, Spiritual CPR (6 weeks) and Making Change (6 weeks).

2. **Sermon Based Small Groups**: This approach is more detailed and requires more involvement from the pastor. A 13 week sermon series is preached which focuses on the specific thematic approach to revitalization. Small groups (whether Sunday school on Sunday mornings or at another time during the week) reinforce or complement the pastor’s sermon. The series is provided by the SBTC, but is designed as a beginning point for the pastor to prepare. The topic for the week is provided and the text, but it is the responsibility of the pastor to develop his own sermons contextualizing for his unique church. The small group material has a beginning commentary and questions for use, but the pastor will need to supplement the material with additional commentary and questions. Since the SBTC is not dictated specifically what to preach regarding each topic, we cannot provide a full lesson for the small group time. Additional sermon helps and teaching helps are provided through the Church Revitalization channel of www.sbtexas.com/online.

At the end of either series, the pastor conducts a town hall meeting with the church to discuss key ministry initiatives which the church should engage. These become the vision path for the church. No more than three should be initiated. Any above that become the future ministries of the church.

### Re-engineering

This approach utilizes church assessments and consultations to determine where the church presently is and the outcomes of where it needs to go. Through this process all program ministries in the church are evaluated along with facilities and finances. The end result is a new vision path for the church with ministries re-engineered to meet the present needs of the community context in order to more effectively minister and reach the community for the cause of Christ. The church does not look the same as when it starts the process as everything is on the table to be re-engineered for effectiveness.
Replant/Restart

This approach closes the doors of the church for a season (sometimes weeks, sometimes months). The church dissolves from existence on paper. A church planter is sent in to develop a core team. The church changes its name, new by-laws, and newly constitutes. Updates are made to the facilities as necessary. The church then relaunches with a new vision and strategy for engaging the community. A sponsor church is involved and sends in the planter (typically). The sponsor church is heavily involved to insure an effective launch. The SBTC Church Revitalization Team hands this model off to the Church Planting Team as it is a plant. Church Revitalization Team remains involved in assisting the planter in coaching the existing members for spiritual renewal.

Leadership Driven

This may happen in several different models.

MODEL 1: A healthy church has a desire to assist a church in decline. The declining church comes under covenant relationship with the healthy church. The healthy church provides leadership (typically replacing the pastor with a staff member from the healthy church). The healthy church typically sends in a core leadership team to assume, or pick-up, many volunteer positions which need to be filled. The healthy church invests in the church facilities, scheduling work projects around the campus to restore the facilities to full functionality. The declining church suspends all leadership control and agrees to function under the by-laws and constitution of the healthy church for the term of the covenant. The covenant relationship could be as short as one year, or up to five years, depending on the need of the declining church. (For this model, think the old Mission Church model. Whenever a mission church was started out of a church, it would build to a healthy position and then would spin-off. That is the goal here. Sometimes however, the church after spinning off, would go through a downturn and have to “revert back” to mission status. That is essentially this model).

MODEL 2: A declining church which is without a pastor (occasionally this is done with an existing pastor who is willing to submit to the training and development needed). The SBTC provides a list of Revitalization Pastors from which to select. These pastors have gone through training and on-going continuing education in revitalization of the local church. The church selects a Revitalization Pastor. The SBTC moves into a covenant relationship with the pastor and the church; this is a three-way covenant agreement. The pastor implements a spiritual renewal methodology utilizing the sermon-based small group approach of the SBTC’s. In this model, consultations are conducted to determine the financial feasibility of the church. If there is financial lacking the SBTC may come alongside the church and provide grant funds to assist in paying the pastor’s salary for a season. The covenant agreement is for six month intervals, not to extend beyond two additional re-signs, for a total of eighteen months. At the end of the eighteen months, the Revitalization Pastor will have assisted the church in getting their search committee trained and in conducting a search for the new pastor. The end goal of this model is a revitalizing church and the new pastor being called during the eighteenth month of the process.

Merger/Acquisition

This model is where a healthy church acquires a declining church OR two churches merge together for the purpose of creating a healthy church. The SBTC philosophy is, this is a last resort model. As a matter of practice, the SBTC does not want to lose any preaching points in Texas. As the population continues to grow and the cultural diversity expands, every campus is needed to reach Texas and thereby reach the nations.
FLOWCHART OF PROCESS

Declining Congregation

Evaluation/Assessment

Revitalization & Renewal

Re-engineering

Curriculum Based

Use Spiritual CPR Materials

Assessments Conducted Every 6 Months/Continued Coaching

Revitalization of Church

Sermon Based

Use SBSG Materials

Financial & Leadership Feasibility Study

Leadership Driven

Restart/Replant

Connect with Church Planting Team

Merger/Acquisition

Additional Assessments/Consultations

Launch New Initiatives

Address Church Programming

Connect with Healthy Church for Takeover

Connect with SBTC Methodologies

See Revitalization & Renewal directions

Launch Spiritual Renewal Process

Call Revitalization Pastor (unless a pastor is in place)

Biblically Based Principles for Renewed Growth
CHURCH
Revitalization
Biblically Based Principles for Renewed Growth

STEPS FOR PASTORAL SUPPORT IN REVITALIZATION

Pastor Engages SBTC in Revitalization

Assessment/Evaluation of Method to Launch

Method is Launched

Pastoral Support

Mentoring: A regional mentor is available to work with the pastor during the entire process

Pastors Retreat: An annual retreat is held for the pastor and his spouse to attend for development in revitalization

Strategic Growth Forum: Pastor attends the annual SGF (may bring his leadership team) for on-going strategy development in revitalization

Online: Pastor has access to online courses in Revitalization
By Kenneth Priest,
Director Convention Strategies, SBTC

In exploring the definition of church revitalization, I prefer Ken Hemphill’s definition for the church; “The church is a covenant community of born-again believers empowered by Christ for the advancing of the Kingdom through the discipling of all nations.” When we add the task of revitalization to this definition for church we get: to make active, healthy or energetic again the covenant community of born again believers empowered by Christ for the advancing of the Kingdom through the discipling of all nations.

Each year LifeWay Research makes available the Growth Status of SBC Churches. The most recent one is from 2013 data, and as expected, the numbers continue to reflect a need for spiritual renewal in our churches. The SBTC specific numbers are not much different from the SBC report, recognizing 26.20% of churches are growing within SBTC churches. This means 73.80% are in plateau or decline. The need is great. So what do we do?

In Revelation 2.1-7, we have the account of the church in Ephesus. A wonderful church by first impression, the text says “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary.” And then we get the issue; “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.” The first love which is abandoned seems to be that of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. With the present plateau and decline of so many churches, and specifically a continued downward slope of baptisms by SBC congregations, I believe it is safe to say this is our issue today.

In 2007, the SBTC launched the Ezekiel Project. This approach was based out of Ezekiel 37, the Valley of Dry bones vision. The concept was new life can be breathed back into the church. As the SBTC has worked with churches around the state, we have seen successes occur in these methods. Our goal all along has been to not approach each church with a cookie-cutter mentality, but to offer options on how the church can implement a revitalization work in their respective context.

The SBTC has worked to expand its work in revitalization over the past eight years. Our approaches will continue to expand and to be customizable for the local church in its present context. What will remain true in every context is:

a) the church must first place a priority on the Word of God – Neh. 8.1-8 & 2 Tim. 3.10-17;
b) the church must insure it has not left its first love – Rev. 2.1-7;
c) the church must listen to the Lord – 2 Chr. 7.14 & Acts 16.6-10; and
d) the church must be about the Great Commission Task, Matt. 28.18-20.

When these things occur, we see the growth of the church, Acts 2.42-47.

God desires for his church to grow and the SBTC wants to be part of helping our churches impact the communities where God has placed them, so we can Reach Texas and Touch the World!
How to Assess Your Church’s Well-Being

The Importance of Assessment

Like the doctor and medical exam that pointed me to the right diagnosis and treatment, the church today needs an evaluation and an appropriate plan of action.

Church leaders are masters of measurements—attendance, baptisms, finances, and more. But sick churches can occasionally score well on these assessments.

What’s more, none of these assessments do anything to help assess the one thing Jesus commanded us to do—make disciples. Church leaders need a different scorecard for that.

The Transformational Church Assessment Tool (TCAT) takes a comprehensive look at a church’s structures and systems, identifying not only weaknesses, but also clarifying strengths.

Essentials for True Church Health

While this new scorecard measures the tangible—leadership training, worship attendance, and group Bible study attendance—it also measures some of the intangible elements of church life.

The TCAT helps churches honestly evaluate how their members perceive they are doing in relation to spiritual transformation. The results provide them with a snapshot of perceived strengths and perceived challenges based on the seven elements of a healthy, transformational church:

Scared to death.

That’s how I felt sitting in a small office in Burkina Faso, West Africa, where my wife and I were serving as new missionaries.

I hadn’t felt well for a few weeks, but had put off going to the doctor. We lived out in the bush—so a simple checkup meant a five-hour drive to the nearest doctor.

Finally, during a trip to the capital city, I stopped by a doctor’s office. I ran through my symptoms—a slight fever each day for the last three weeks; zero energy; and I was sleeping a lot. He ran some blood tests.

The diagnosis: Malaria. And not just any Malaria, but the most dangerous strain.

The doctor told me I was fortunate to be alive. The only remedy was to treat my condition immediately and aggressively.

If it weren’t for that doctor’s visit and diagnosis, who knows what would have happened to me.

Unfortunately, many churches in the United States are facing the same predicament I faced in that doctor’s office. They’ve been sick for a while, but have put off doing anything to address their illness.

But what seemed like nominal pain and marginal problems are in fact, signs of a life-threatening condition. Churches often face problems that are much deeper and much more systemic than they realize or want to admit.

By Micah Fries
VP, LifeWay Research

This article originally appeared in Facts & Trends:
http://factsandtrends.net/2015/04/30/how-to-assess-your-churchs-well-being/#.VVN0YWD1cqo
Missionary mentality. Transformational churches understand the cultural context surrounding the church. And they strive for everything they do to be in the language and culture of the people they are trying to reach.

Transformational churches know, understand, and are deeply engaged with their cities, communities, and people. Are your church members passionate about the people and community where God has placed them?

Vibrant leadership. Transformational leaders are focused on the mission of God for their church, are tenacious about the vision, and are people focused.

Vibrant leaders lead their people to worship, live in community, and live on mission. They promote a culture of we instead of me. They expect, encourage, equip, and empower members to serve.

Relational intentionality. People find and follow Jesus through relationships. Transformational churches use systems and processes designed to provide and promote relationship development—for first time guests, new members, and long-term members.

Prayerful dependence. In transformational churches, spontaneous prayer is normal in the life of the church. Prayer is not a program, yet it undergirds everything the church does.

Prayer has always held a significant role in the church, and this is especially true in times of revitalization. Is it normal to see people praying together at your church?

Worship. Transformational churches place worship at the center of their efforts. They know worship is a way of living, not an aspect of church programming.

They expect God’s presence to be real and transformative in their worship experience. Do your worship leaders value participation over performance?

Community. Transformational churches place a premium on involving people in small group communities within the congregation. They place heavy emphasis on getting new members immediately involved in Sunday School classes, small groups, or discipleship classes.

Does your church have groups where nonbelievers feel comfortable asking hard questions and where believers can find encouragement?

Mission. Transformational churches have consciously decided that their existence is directly related to the mission of seeing people reconciled to God through Christ. Evangelism is a natural part of life for their members.

Does your church challenge members to build significant relationships with people who are non-Christian? Does your church provide service opportunities for your people to be engaged with the unchurched in your local city or community?

Celebrate and Calibrate
Not only do churches struggle with appropriate assessments, they’re often weak at celebrating what God is doing in their midst.

I recently consulted with a church that took the TCAT. I helped the leaders see how they could take their top two scores and celebrate what God is doing.

This encourages the church and strengthens belief in the direction of the leaders, as well as recognizes God’s work among them.
The Six Phases of Church Revitalization

By Kenneth Priest
SBTC Director of Convention Strategies

In working with churches in revitalization, I have observed some attitudes which are outlined below as six phases of revitalization or six stages a church and pastor may go through on the path to revitalization. Not every church will go through all six phases and some will spend longer in one phase than others. However, a church in decline does experience several of these phases on their path to recovery. As you read this article, I pray you will consider if your church is in one of these phases, and if so, determine what it will take to move your church through revitalization?

Phase 1: Disbelief
“We are not in decline; God is simply pruning us for future growth.” This is one of my favorites, not that I do not believe in pruning. The Gospel of John is clear on this. The follow-up question I have is, “How long do you think God needs to prune?” I’m no horticulturist by any means, however, I understand pruning happens one time, during a particular time of the season. Once pruning has occurred, then progress happens during that plants growing season.

Yet, many pastors and churches continue to call themselves in a pruning season for many years. In Southern Baptist Convention life, the denomination I am most familiar with, we simply look at the Annual Church Profile of the congregation to see the “years of pruning.” At some point, the pastor and church need to acknowledge, there is probably more here than a season of pruning: especially when the “pruning” has lasted for five, ten, or more years. This produces a declining church.

Phase 2: Anger
Anger is also known as the blame game. Pastors may blame the congregation for not being missional and open to the community. The congregation may blame the pastor for “not doing his job and witnessing to the community.” I am reminded of a great line in the John Wayne movie “Big Jake”; Wayne’s character, Jake says to the bad guy, “your fault, my fault, no bodies fault.” Thus giving way to the issue; it does not matter who is at fault here, action is needed. Anger and blaming one another accomplishes very little. Pastors and congregations need to focus on the unity of the church and come together to address the issues present.

Phase 3: Depression
Merriam Webster defines depression as: “a state of feeling sad;” or “a serious medical condition in which a person feels very sad, hopeless, and unimportant and often is unable to live in a normal way.” This begins the “emotional slump” that is experienced. The “depression” sets in over the pastor and members not being able to see any light at the end of the tunnel and uncertain with this few people left, “how will anything ever get accomplished?” This emotive slump leaves many in the church feeling a since of hopelessness and sometimes a desire just to limp along for as long as they can, until they need to close the doors.

Phase 4: Acceptance
This phase truly begins the revitalization mindset. Starting with the pastor acknowledging there is a problem and beginning to analyze options for recovery. The pastor will begin researching what has attributed to the decline. Without placing blame, he can now seriously determine a path to overcome the obstacles. The pastor may call other pastors that have led a church through renewal or seek outside consultations. He then begins discussions with key leaders to acknowledge, “something must be done,” in order to turn things around and develop executable steps for change and growth.
Phase 5: Resolve
In this phase, the pastor and church decide they will do whatever it takes to see the church turn around. This is the most difficult phase of revitalization. When it comes to doing whatever it takes, some are simply not willing. Sometimes they have tried things in the past or they feel they are too old and too tired to continue. There could be any variety of factors. However, if a pastor does not lead his church to adopt the mindset of doing whatever it takes, then the church will not revitalize. Moving forward will not happen without the desire to do all the church can for the cause of Christ.

Phase 6: Revitalization
In this phase, the church is moving forward on a strategic process to see new life. Determining if a church is revitalized is subjective at best. I have worked with churches that did not see numerical shift, but have seen culture shift—which is most important; i.e. having a desire to be missional and open. I believe longevity is the key to determining a revitalized situation. Even if there is not any present numerical shift, if the culture shift is becoming more missional, it will ultimately result in a numerical increase. Some churches do experience numerical growth, but if the culture shift does not coincide with it, the future of the church may have a shortened life expectancy. A strong leader can step in and grow a church, but church growth and church revitalization are different. This culture shift is the key. If the church only grows, and the culture does not change, then when the strong leader is called to another church, the present church will likely experience decline again. We must strive for culture shift within the congregations to consider revitalization as being effective.

So What?!
Where does this leave you and your church? As a pastor, are you experiencing and in one of the stages above? Can you lead your church through the phases in order to bring about revitalization? Do you need help? Let me encourage you to do a couple of things:

1. Ask someone who has been there for advice.
2. Go to a conference such as Renovate (renovateconference.org) or a local church revitalization conference for encouragement and training.
3. Contact someone in your region, or the Renovate network; Tom@renovateconference.org for assistance.

Chances that succeed actually follow through! Let me encourage you to do so today.

This article originally written for the March/April issue of Renovate Magazine; learn more at renovateconference.org.
Fear of Change
You Cannot Move Forward with Nostalgia

By Jim Baker
Sacred Structures

Political, social and church history shows us that when things change too quickly or when people fear the future they will flee to leaders who promise to restore the glory of the past.

But history also demonstrates that you cannot move forward with nostalgia. Although it is impossible to do, people will often try to go back to ‘what was’ when the present is in crisis and the future is uncertain. In those times church traditionalists who see themselves as guardians of the old order arise and organize to set things right and return to ‘old time religion’ and the ‘ways and faith of our fathers.’

Dogmatic traditionalists regularly reject changes in worship, governance, church architecture and ministry. They insist that the old way is the best way and the best way to insure the future is to return to the past. They insist those ways will still work if we will only adhere to the old standards, beliefs and behaviors.

Such movements create high levels of fear among congregants and make scapegoats of pastors and other change leaders. It wasn’t the prostitutes, the tax collectors and alcoholics who called Jesus a “devil.” It was the pious religious leaders who wanted to safeguard the old church system.

Fear is a powerful motivator and can cause the good old days to look pretty good to those caught up in a sea of change and uncertainty. If defenders of the mythical golden time can play to anxieties and raise fear sufficiently they can block or reverse innovative change.

They Call Us Protestants for a Reason

Few groups are more vocal in opposition to change than Protestants. You can make an argument that it is in our very DNA. We were birthed by a people of faith who were known for protesting social, cultural and religious change. But at times in our past I fear we have protested too much....or at least ineffectively.

When these protest movements have understood the times and had a view to the future they have been unifying and catalyzing, but when they have focused on fear and returning to the past they have proved divisive and derailed needed change. Too often we have opted for the security of the past rather than the uncertainty of a journey into the future.

How then can we lead our churches from a place of fear and a desire to return to the ‘glory days’ to a path of hope and discovery of how to be the Church within a new context? As Shakespeare’s Hamlet put it in his soliloquy on suicide, “Aye, therein lies the rub.”
Five Steps to Counter Fear of Change and Traditionalism

First, church change leaders must be aware and accept that though we are in an age of rapid change, change in the church always has, still is and most likely always will be a very long process. Church change leaders must be committed to exercising patience in moving toward the future while being present in the moment to see where God is working.

Second, any significant change in the church requires a work of God as well as hard work. Church change leaders must be committed to insuring change initiatives are bathed in the hard work of individual and communal prayer.

Third, fear and coercion are rarely if ever compassionate. When fear and traditionalism threatens, having compassion on the fearful provides a stark contrast to the forces of fear and coercion and should be a vital spiritual practice of all church change leaders.

Fourthly, compassion must be coupled with a willingness and ability to speak truth and wisdom in love. Change leaders must be prophets who can clearly and compellingly proclaim a vision for what might be and instill the courage and urgency to move forward rather than back to what was.

Fifthly, church leaders must offer ways beyond anxiety towards the future and glorification of the past by emphasizing spiritual practices that change the heart through new connections between God, others and self.

In a real sense we must lead people to look farther back than the recent church past to the ancient church past. We do this by revitalizing biblical practices of prayer, forgiveness, hospitality, community and service to others that allows us to see ourselves, our neighbors and the world with new eyes and experience true metanoia…’repentance’ and ‘change of mind.’

Congregations cannot stay in a perpetual state of fear and pining for the ‘good old days’ and hope to survive. Change in the church must move forward on two rails.

We must simultaneously seek to transform individuals within the church as well as the church as an institution. If you attempt the first you will be called an evangelist. If you attempt the second you will be called a revolutionary. If you attempt both you will be called a saint!

Revitalization Conferences

February 11 Criswell College
September 8 Northeast Houston BC

For pastors, associational leaders and church leaders with churches in need of revitalization.

Lance Beaumont
Worship Strategies, SBTC

Micah Fries
VP, LifeWay Research

Nathan Lorick
Director of Evangelism, SBTC

Tom Cheyney
Founder & Directional Leader
Renovate National Church Revitalization Conference

Rod Harrison
Dean of Post-Graduate Studies

Bart McDonald
Executive Director,
SBT Foundation

Lance Crowell
Discipleship & Online Strategies, SBTC

Nathan Lino
Senior Pastor, NE Houston BC

Kenneth Priest
Director of Convention Strategies, SBTC

sbtexas.com/revitalization
The Dynamics of Change for the Church

By Dr. Terry Rials
Senior Pastor, Crestview Baptist Church, OKC

I recently asked a group of friends at a pastors’ luncheon this question, “If you could go back to 1960, and remain at your present age, would you?” Not a single person would do it; neither would I for that matter. Several of my friends pride themselves in their traditional ways too—still none of them would go back.

We reflect with fondness to the good ‘ol days, but in reality, in many ways, they weren’t so good. I’m not that old, but I remember when there were just four channels on the television; I even remember my family’s first color set. I remember using a party telephone line (and I’m still convinced that our nosey neighbors were listening to our conversations). I certainly wouldn’t go back to those days. Would you?

My great-grandparents used to drive their Model-A to town once a month for supplies. They would stop to patch their own flat tires on the side of the road and stop again later to refill the radiator with water. Today, we can make the same trip by automobile in under an hour with air conditioning and without stopping. I wouldn’t go back to those days, would you? We can certainly look with fondness at our religious past, especially in those times of God’s movement in our land.

Instead of wanting to go back, what if we decided to go forward? I am speaking about the direction of change. Modern Christianity has been known to ridicule the Amish for their resistance to change, thinking they are stuck in the past. To set the record straight, the Amish only resist change that threatens their simple, hard-working manner of living. I know a good number of Baptists who resist change with the same ferocity.

Some people are stuck in the past, but some people are stuck in the present. Churches design complex ministries to meet needs that no longer exist by the time those ministries are initiated.

Think of it this way—when you shoot at moving targets, you have to lead the targets in order to hit them. We can neither stay here, nor can we go back, we must press on. Paul had it correct when he declared, “...one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead” (Phil 3:13 NASB). Where are the future thinkers in the church today? Where are our dreamers? They are not hard to find because they are some of our most effective Christian leaders today. Many of them have figured this out!

The pace of change is something else the church will have to address. Things are changing and changing so quickly that people can hardly keep up. The youth in our culture handle the pace of change much easier than the older generation. Two-year-olds can work a computer mouse and fly with an iPad, while these can bewilder some adults! Perhaps nowhere is the pace of change more noticeable than in the family.

One hundred years ago, a father could sit down with son and generally tell him what his life would be like in the future. Today, a father cannot tell his son what to expect in the next ten years. It’s impossible to accurately predict the future. For
example, in the 1883 World’s Fair, a group of futurists attempted to predict what the world would look like 100 years in the future. They predicted that in the year 1993, there would be a telephone in every city in America! About the only solid prediction about the future of the church is that things are going to change and change a lot, even if the Lord returns!

We are seeing a grave resistance to change in the church. It is not surprising that we are resistant to change because we have fond memories and emotional attachments to wonderful times in our church life. All of us are used to our ways of doing things. We are accustomed to how things work and where our responsibilities lay.

In their fascinating book, Flight of the Buffalo, James Belasco and Ralph Stayer look at a new business model where ownership and leadership of business transfers to the employees. They say, “Change is hard because people overestimate the value of what they have—and underestimate the value of what they may gain by giving that up.” Church leaders often ask me what they have to do in order to experience revitalization in their churches. I remind them that it isn’t what they do that is important; it is what they are willing to give up. In my opinion, the frustration of always having to learn new things is the chief complaint about change, but actually disciples are called to be learners, life-long learners. We should always be willing to learn something new!

The church needs to find a new motivation to change. It has been said that people change for two reasons, they have learned much or they have been hurt much. Put another way, change only occurs when we learn the consequences of our failure to change, or when we have had enough of the pain of staying the same.

I do not enjoy visits to the dentist, but recently I had a problem that was so painful that I was anxious to get to his office for treatment. The pain was excruciating and I wanted something to change. I totally understand why Tom Hanks’ character in Castaway was willing to remove his tooth with an ice skate! Look around you—the church is hurting; some 90% of churches are plateaued and declining. It is time to get motivated and change.

I still encounter church leaders who are skeptical of even having a website for their church, a technology in its third decade of existence! I’m convinced we’ll not reach millennials without embracing the digital age because that’s how they communicate.

Have you ever wondered why there are no stage coach dealerships in your town? It is because there is no demand for their product. Kodak declared bankruptcy after 128 years of operation. They once set the pace of innovation in industry, but they died because they were stuck in the 35mm film business in a digital world and refused to change. Successful businesses know that they must change to keep up with an ever-changing marketplace. They also know that they have to change faster than their competition. In case you haven’t noticed, the world is in competition with the church for the attention, time, and affection of you and your family. We had better embrace the change. Why can’t we beat the world to the punch?

Someone once told me that the greatest leaders in history were those who saw inevitable change coming and embraced that change quickly and capitalized on that change when it arrived. There are certain theological and moral limits to that concept for Christian leaders, to be sure, but the sentiment of that thought should resonate with us.

I am willing to embrace the inevitable change coming to the church. I’m ready to help address the lostness of the first post-Christian era in American history. I am ready to face the impending persecution that is coming to the New Testament church by the hostile forces of religion and culture (I think). I know this will be difficult with an ever-shrinking and aging population with fewer churches and fewer resources. The church had better embrace change because change is coming, of this I am certain.
My simple thesis here is, revitalization is not church growth. Yes, the church may and should grow under your leadership during a revitalization endeavor. However, the growth of a church does not mean it is revitalized. Revitalization is a process of spiritual renewal among an existing people. When you grow a church and do not address the previous culture that caused decline, this only shows you know how to gather people.

Often times the outcome of a leader that knows how to grow a church and does not know how to change culture is a sheep swapping methodology. Honestly, not always a God honoring one. The leader thinks that running off the bad sheep is acceptable for the “future health of the church.” However, Jesus called us to bring about life transformation, even in the bad sheep. Look at the disciples He chose. Culturally a tax collector was seen as a traitor and a thief, yet Jesus chose to disciple one to look more like Him. Is this not the model we are called to follow? A pastor/leader must spend time with the bad sheep as well, working with them to bring about life change, then we can see revitalization.

The leader should look at what caused the decline in the first place and then ask the questions:

**Have systems and structures been placed to insure decline does not happen again?**
This is where longevity comes in, and succession planning is understood. If God calls you away to another assignment, will the church be able to function and grow in your absence.

**Has there been a culture shift in mindset of the congregants?**
A culture must be created that insures they will not revert back to the way they were. Revitalization is more than just being a leader who can turn a church around—though that is necessary. It is also creating a culture shift, so that the people who make up this local body of believers are not the same as when you started. More people, YES! But the people who started the process are also different and look more like Christ.

**Are new members welcomed and integrated into the congregation?**
Are the existing congregants truly experiencing life with the new additions; genuine, biblical community.

**Are ministries beginning to ignite?**
Revitalization is more than just numbers showing up during worship. Existing ministries begin to flourish and new ministries are launched.

**Is the church more missional?**
Biblical growth begins to occur as lives are changed. Salvations and the baptisms of adults.

This is not an exhaustive list of questions and thoughts. However, it does address the beginning differences of growing a church and truly experiencing turnaround. Those who have studied revitalization for any length of time know it takes about three years for a church to experience turnaround. This three years should be spent with focused intentionality, creating a culture within the congregation that flows from biblical discipleship. When the pastor/leader creates this environment, we can then define the church as one being revitalized!
In a revitalization process there are certain leadership attributes that help plug the holes in the ship so she doesn’t sink while sitting in the dock. Nehemiah was a walking example of all these attributes. And while I am sure God can raise up another Nehemiah, I believe He tends to use a team of people who possess the attributes necessary. Jesus used a team of twelve to show us how it’s done! Ask the Lord to provide the best gifted people to be a part of the team and here’s what to look for:

1. **The catalyst.** Someone must be the initiator of the process and the plan.

2. **The outsider.** Someone new; someone without a long history in the church body; someone distantly removed from any politics or division. Joel Allen Barker asks, “What kind of person is a paradigm shifter?” He states simply, “an outsider” is. An outsider has a clearer perspective on the situation and he/she is not overwhelmed with the grief of the problem.

3. **The problem-solver.** A person who can organize the people to follow the Lord’s leadership. The problem solver sees the probabilities for obstacles and/or barriers and plans a way around them.
4. **The visionary.** A visionary sees what others cannot yet see. Even the outsider, mentioned earlier, must be sympathetic to the need for growth and health and envision their part in developing a solution.

5. **The motivator.** A team member who can speak with confidence, and rally the troops with his/her words, is likely to find that the team is being followed by an eager crowd.

6. **The persuader.** A selfless persuader can influence a church, to press outward toward the world in need, rather than being inwardly-focused. The selfless persuader is a prize to any group or congregation.

7. **The risk-taker.** Every great leader will face a certain level of risk to accomplish what they knew was absolutely essential to the cause. Jesus is the ultimate example of this attribute.

8. **An empathizer.** A restoration leader who cares deeply for the people, enough to join them in their pain and their struggle back to productivity, and ultimately to restoration and revival is a leader who will endear themself to the people they serve.

9. **A persevering leader.** Perseverance is steadfastness in doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success. It is the character trait that compels one to struggle through failures, difficulties or opposition to achieve one’s desired outcome or goals. Leaders of change, innovation, creativity, and vision may be misunderstood by some, but a team leader - who perseveres, refuses to throw in the towel, or run to a greener field - can help a church bounce back from the brink of death.

10. **A planner.** Each time a barrier presents itself, the planner prayerfully prepares a plan to keep the work on track and reiterates the goal to be attained.

11. **A recruiter.** One who can recruit workers with a vision and a plan to accomplish the goals. Restoration is a team effort. There must be a leader who can recruit the congregation to buy into the renewal plan for the process to be effective and maintainable. Without the team environment, renewal would be similar to a coach without any players on the court or field; the game will never be effective.

12. **The organizer.** This team member makes sure all the resources are present, gives specific assignments so the group is confident concerning their task, and observes and evaluates the effectiveness of the assignments. Organization will not eliminate difficulties, but it can provide multiple options to each barrier.

13. **The delegator.** He/she does not accomplish the task in his/her own power. Michael McCutcheon speaking wisely in favor of the need for delegation, quotes J. Oswald Sanders by saying, “To insist on doing things oneself because it will be done better is not only a shortsighted policy but may be evidence of an unwarranted conceit.”

14. **A person of prayer.** Being a person of prayer demonstrates interdependence on the subject of one’s faith.

   Jesus’ leadership reaction to His followers was: “But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary [harassed] and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd [leader, guide]” (Matthew 9:36).

   Biblical leadership is absolutely essential to revitalization, restoration and church health.
Blockbuster Churches in a Netflix World

By Nathan Lorick
SBTC Evangelism Director

What has happened to our churches? Why is our church not growing? How can I turn our church around? These are all common questions that are asked by pastors and lay leaders. While the answers to these questions can be as varied as the context in which the church is found, there are some simple answers that may help us to understand the decline in churches and what to do about it. In this article I would like to focus on how evangelism can be the key to unlocking the door to revitalization in your church.

In 2000, something took place that many people don’t know about. We were living in a less technological society than we are now. The video rental market was booming and largely because of the store many of us frequently visited named Blockbuster. They had to their credit thousands of retail stores littered across the nation. Millions of customers would pour in week after week to rent the newest action thriller or comedy. Blockbuster was simply at the top of their game, or so they thought. Underneath the shadow of the blue and yellow lights there was something happening that was largely going unnoticed. A new company had formed with a new creative form of video rental that would push the limits of the norm. This company known today as Netflix had the right idea at the right time. However, for various reasons the CEO of the new company wanted to partner with Blockbuster to create a new dynasty that was sure to take the video rental world to levels not seen before.

In 2000, the CEO of Netflix approached the CEO of Blockbuster and offered to sale the newly formed Netflix for a mere 50 million dollars. While that number sounds large to us, for a major retail business this was a small investment. It wasn’t the money that caused the CEO of Blockbuster to decline the offer, instead it was missing the opportunity to see beyond the present market. As you would know today, Blockbuster is out of business and Netflix is the largest video rental company worth above 30 billion dollars.

This is a modern day picture of what many churches are going through. At one time they were thriving and growing at rapid rates. The ministries of the churches were being effective in every way measurable. Things were as good as they could be. However, somewhere along the way, attendance began to drift off, giving became less dependable, and the influence of the churches ministries became unknown to those outside of the church. Simply put, the church was so focused on the present, they stopped dreaming about the future. They essentially became a Blockbuster church in a Netflix culture.

So what can be done about this if your church is in this stage? What is the key element to moving forward into a new season of growth and vitality? While there can be many answers, I want to

Simply put, the church was so focused on the present, they stopped dreaming about the future. They essentially became a Blockbuster church in a Netflix culture.
narrow it down to one key element, re-launching evangelism in your churches strategy. Evangelism is the axis in which our church must turn in order to see it revitalized to life and growth. This is not to downplay the other aspects that will help a church to regain it’s feet in it’s pursuit of new life. However, the purest form of helping a church to once again thrive is to create an atmosphere of people coming to faith in Jesus Christ. There is nothing that brings new life to a church than to become a church where people can experience new life. So how do you bridge the desire for church revitalization and evangelism? I believe this is found in three simple answers.

First, you must create a culture of evangelism in your church. The people that sit in the seats must sense the need and urgency to reach people for Christ. They must know their responsibility in God’s kingdom work to share the good news of Christ. Your church has to create strategies that are focused on reaching the lost with the gospel. When this happens, people begin to expect God to transform lives each and every week. Creating a culture of evangelism in a church will simultaneously create a culture of new found enthusiasm in a church.

A second answer to this question is to create opportunities to train people on how to share their faith and to engage in personal evangelism. People are eager to see God use them for His purpose. They genuinely want to see people come to faith in Jesus, many just don’t know how to personally be involved with this. When your church begins to equip the people with the necessary tools to share the gospel, God uses your people to expand His kingdom through evangelism. Once someone leads another to Christ, they develop a new excitement because they know they have been used by God!

A third answer to this question would be to consistently dream about the future and try new tools for evangelism. We live in time in which we have more modern tools and gadgets to share the gospel than ever before. Churches should always evaluate what is out there to utilize as well as continue to be innovative in how they engage those without Christ.

The tragedy of Blockbuster is that they settled for being good in the present and missed the opportunity to be great in the future. To put it plainly, they missed the opportunity that was given to them. Likewise, there has never been a greater day in humanity to be a follower of Jesus and God has given us an incredible opportunity to shine His light brighter than ever before. I encourage you as a church to always be forward thinking in how to effectively engage your community with the gospel. After all, were not a part of a video retail business, we are a part of a worldwide gospel revolution.

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**NORTH AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR CHURCH REVITALIZATION & RENEWAL**

**February 12** Criswell College  
9am - 3pm  
**COST** $49

Academic writings in the field of church revitalization and/or renewal should be submitted to kpriest@sbtexas.com by Nov. 6, 2015 for review by the coordinating council. If your research is selected to be presented, you will be notified by January 8, 2016.

Writings should not be longer than 20 pages, plus a bibliography. By submitting an academic writing, you are agreeing to allow the North American Society for Church Revitalization and Renewal to publish your paper in the NASCRR Journal. Writings being presented will be included in the journal automatically. Other writings may be included in the journal for a future issue as determined by the coordinating council.
The heart of the change leadership process in the church is listening—to God and others.

When the Apostles were leading the New Testament believers in Acts 15 to question their belief that Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved they couldn’t rely just on their ability to think strategically. So they first listened, and then responded to what they heard.

Acts 15 illustrates that effectively leading change in the church involves listening attentively to the movement of the Holy Spirit, to Scripture, religious tradition, respected believers, noted experts and pertinent facts.

Here are the steps to that listening and a potential application for leading change in the church:

1. They listened to the conversion experience of the Gentiles. **Application:** Listen to those most impacted by the change.

2. They listened to the Pharisee experts in Mosaic Law. **Application:** Listen to those most opposed to the change.

3. They listened to respected believers witnessing these conversions. **Application:** Listen to respected lay leaders supporting the change.

4. They listened to Peter’s perspective. **Application:** Listen to the Pastor and Staff’s perspective.

5. They listened to Paul and Barnabas’s descriptions of signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles. **Application:** Listen to experts who have observed and experienced the impact of the change.

6. They listened to James expounding on Scripture connecting the dots between Peter’s testimony and the words of Amos. **Application:** Listen to what God’s Word has to say.

7. They listened to the Holy Spirit — “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” **Application:** Allow people time to pray and hear from God on the change.

8. They voted on the change — “Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church decided.” **Application:** Allow the church to vote on the change.

“When the people of Antioch read the letter, they rejoiced at the exhortation.”

The right and happy result of this difficult change was that God’s will had been clearly understood and followed.

The fact the early church leaders had taken such care in listening, discerning and implementing change in unity was a cause for great celebration.

This story illustrates listening is the primary language of change leadership and is deeply rooted in the biblical record.

Techniques, principles and skills in particular change management disciplines do not give us the power to lead change effectively, but listening to God and others does.
Most revitalization experts agree it takes around three years to turn around a church. In some scenarios, there is not enough time to go slow ... but what if there were? What is the ideal revitalization strategy shift in a church that has a life expectancy of four, five, or even more years left?

Tribal leadership is the art of joining the tribe in order to bring about change without losing those presently engaged and involved in ministry. This is tough, but needed.

Most revitalizers are high capacity leaders. They are unsatisfied with the status quo, especially when the status quo is not engaging the community for the cause of Christ. What should a leader do that has time and wants to rightly effect change and not lose the “shareholders?” (Shareholder is an affectionate term I use to describe the persons in the church who are essentially bankrolling the ministry. Too often these are the ones who get marginalized during a change of pastoral leadership.)

The difficulty of becoming a part of the tribe is it takes time, which is why you cannot use this method in a crisis situation. Join the tribe, become the pastor they talk about and love and then begin to offer recommendations for change. Use your honeymoon phase to initiate a couple of immediate, necessary strategy shifts, but save your big capital for when they have accepted you as part of them. No one can tell you exactly when this happens, but philosophically, this is when they want you—rather than the previous pastor—doing the weddings and funerals. This can take upwards of three or more years to achieve, but when it does, you are the pastor and leader of the tribe.

**STEP ONE:** Learn who the influencers are, both positive and negative. Whether a matriarch or patriarch, church treasurer or deacon, make certain you get to know these persons and their circles of influence. The hidden relationships are often the ones causing the most issues for pastors. As a pastor, you should know whom all influencers are connected to before you make decisions. When dealing with a positive influencer, if the person is on your side ... you just got buy-in from the majority. Likewise, the same is true for a negative influencer ... you will have an uphill battle without buy-in here.

**STEP TWO:** Learn your personal leadership style and adjust when necessary. A revitalizer must know his tendencies and strive to overcome them. Use whichever style is appropriate for a given situation, in order to do this, you must learn your style and what that means.

**STEP THREE:** Know your demographics. Not just of the community, but of the church. Understand who your people are and who you need to reach. Also, do not simply trust a demographic report, the pastor and church need to be “boots on the ground,” walking the neighborhood to be best informed of the people groups around the church.

**STEP FOUR:** Develop a plan. Look at creation—God’s plan is intricate and specific. Man could not be created on the first day since there was no place for him. Pastors and churches need plans for reaching their communities. Determine who needs to be reached (from step three) and prayerfully develop a plan.

**STEP FIVE:** Execute the plan. Churches that succeed in church revitalization do what they set out to do. This is the Great Commission—Jesus set us on a strategy to engage the nations for his cause from the beginning, and that is simply what we need to do.

This article originally written for the January/February issue of Renovate Magazine; learn more at renovateconference.org.
By Kenneth Priest  
*SBTC Director of Convention Strategies*

When you think about a compass, typically we refer to north as “up”. A turnaround church is considered “northern bound” as directionally, that is up.

The goal of any church should be to focus on a northbound trajectory. The goal of pastors and church leaders should always be moving “northern bound.” This simple thought, can help focus on the primary goal. Northern bound means: growth, growth comes from reaching people, reaching people happens because believers are on mission in their respective communities. The end-result, lives are changed and the kingdom is expanded. Are you in a northbound church? If not, maybe you should begin to ask yourself, what would it take to turn this church around, and what is your role in this conversation.

Organizational turnaround is difficult. Human nature is to focus attention on “the numbers.” When dealing with spiritual situations—ie the turnaround of a church—it’s important to assess and evaluate the spiritual condition of the environment, to make certain the congregation is spiritually where they need to be and thereby committed to success. This is difficult. First, many struggle with understanding how to assess spiritual realities of congregants. In the true simplest form, I believe this can be done in two ways. First, the Fruit of the Spirit bearing evidence in the lives of the church family. Second, lives being changed in the community.
accomplishing the same plans. If everyone is not on the same page, moving in the same direction, to accomplish the same plans, the church will not turnaround.

Too often, churches and leaders are attempting to accomplish different agendas. Whereas the pastor may be concerned for the community, the church might only be concerned with the status quo ... or vice versa. Striving for organizational health will create some level of conflict, this is not bad. Many times, spiritual leaders believe conflict is the presence of disunity and therefore the presence of Satan’s hand at work. This is not the case.

In fact, a careful study of division and disunity in the New Testament, when studied contextually, will see at times conflict exists and God’s hand is at work. The difference between healthy and destructive conflict, has to do with the end-result. When God is involved, a holy end is achieved. A simple look at the story of Ananias and Sapphira is a great example, in Acts 5. The outcome was to bring about health in the body of Christ in the early days. The two were not expected to sell the property and give the money, but they chose to sell the property and then lie about what they were giving. God brought about a holy end to insure health in the body.

The difficult position in turning around an organization is addressing those persons who are indifferent or not on board. In a church, we cannot simply kick them out. We must do all we can to disciple them and lead them to see why we need to be accomplishing the goals we have set. Typically, these goals are outreach oriented, and not everyone is on board with engaging in outreach. The church cannot keep doing the same things it has always done and expect breakthroughs. This requires additional energy to accomplish the tasks. We have to move out into the community and engage the culture for Christ.

A “best practice” approach is to visit with key leaders of the church early on, to share from God’s Word the plans and vision for the future of the church. Pastors and leaders need to have an open, honest discussion about what the future holds for the congregation. If you have someone who truly cannot get aboard — or who is causing disunity among the congregation — you must disciple them to change, or the church will need to remove them from leadership.

When it comes to adapting to strategic changes or accepting new ways of doing things, the Rogers Innovation Adoption Curve applies. Innovators are the first 2.5% to adopt the innovation. The next 13.5% are the early adopters the new idea. 34% represent the early majority of the adopters, then the next 34% are the late majority. Finally, the laggards make up the final 16% to adopt the innovation.

These stats tend to be accurate for revitalization within the church. The exception of course are times of crisis change, which is the church will close its doors in the next 6-12 months if something does not change quickly.

Many pastors spend time pouring over the laggards when energy should be focused on accelerating the time to get the middle 68% on board earlier. In revitalization, time is essential. Turning a church around is a slow enough process as it is; spending time on attempting to move a group who will always be the slowest to adopt new ideas can exhaust the pastor and other leaders and lead to not be effective for the Kingdom. The middle 68% will come around, they just need more information. Use the 16% early adopters to assist in communicating the need and sharing the vision with the middle majority. Once you have this 84% on board, the lagging 16% will either join you, or move on. None of us want to see anyone leave, but you cannot wait for them to finally “buy-in” to the needed change, or you will never move off the present decline.

The spiritual condition of the group as a whole must be addressed throughout the process. This is why in much of my writing I discuss no matter which model a pastor is using in revitalization, you must address spiritual renewal. This renewal is what will insure the church does not go back to where it was. A new leader can come alongside a church and instill some fresh energy, however, if the spiritual practices of
The Western expression of the Christian faith has largely been one of program and method. It is a church heavily influenced by the philosophy of rationalism. And Baptists have felt that influence.

The Thessalonians were evangelized not by method, but by message accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit. “For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit…” (1 Thessalonians 1:5, NKJV). Have we forsaken the dynamic of prayer and the Holy Spirit not only in church growth but also in revitalization? And if so, how? I do not ask why because for a confessional people the slippery slope into unbelief is seldom if ever intentional.

But we must ask, “Have we in Baptist church life become fixated on method and results, and not on God?” Others have defined church revitalization. Whether in the initial planting of the church, or revival and/or revitalization of the church after a period of decline, we must lead in the power of the Holy Spirit, and Holy Spirit power comes through prayer and Scripture.

Prayer seeks the Father’s heart. The Scriptures reveal His heart. God comes in response to believing prayer with ‘healing in His wings’ (Malachi 4:2, NKJV).

The first intercessory prayer in the Bible was for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18). Daniel prayed for God’s judgment to be withdrawn (Daniel 9). God expressed “astonishment” (NASB) that there was no intercessor (Isaiah 59:16) and Ezekiel said “so I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one” (Ezekiel 22:30, NKJV).

There is a direct correlation in the Book of Acts between prayer, proclamation, and the demonstration of the power of God transforming lives and communities. Certainly Jesus modeled prayer in the Gospels, but in Acts we have insight into the early Church.

In Acts 1:14 the unorganized community waited in unity and prayer. The Holy Spirit came in power on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Acts 2 is the story of God fulfilling prophecy and in so doing, the church began. The first church was formed without organization. The Spirit had come in power after a time of believing prayer on the part of God’s people.

Trace the movements of the early church throughout the Book of Acts and you will discover that every major move of God’s Spirit came in response to the prayers of God’s people (Compare Acts 3:1 with 3:11ff and 4:4; 4:23ff with 4:31; 5:14; 6:4,6 in the selection of men most believe to be the first deacons; 8:14-17, the “Samaritan Pentecost”; 9:11-15, the conversion of Saul; Acts 10:1ff the conversion of Cornelius; Acts 12:5ff, the release of Peter from jail; Acts 13:1ff, the missionary movement from Antioch; and Acts 19:1-10 where prayer is implied in the laying on of hands).

But as time goes on, the Enemy comes to “steal, to kill, and to destroy” (John 14:10). This is true of the individual as well as the congregation.

Someone has said that in the Gospels, Jesus gives the principles for life in His Kingdom (defined in the...
context of Luke 17:20-21)); in Acts we have the example of the early church living this out; and in the Epistles and Revelation 2-3 how to recover when you get in trouble. Admittedly this is simplistic. But let’s captures it and look for a moment at the last concept – recovery; or, for our purposes, revitalization.

The Church at Corinth was likely the most dysfunctional of any of the churches in the New Testament. Paul wrote two letters of correction of which the first was more direct than the second. In that first letter, he addresses the Lord’s Table. He gives the example of how and tells why Jesus instituted the Table. At the very heart of the Church’s coming together to partake of the Lord’s Table (Communion; Lord’s Supper) is the example of thanksgiving in the life of Jesus and self-examination in the life of the disciple. It is without doubt the holiest gathering in the life of the church. It is a time of deep communion with the Savior, demonstration of unity in the Body, testimony to the Gospel, and expression of hope as we anticipate the return of our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. One cannot effectively do any of these apart from prayer.

Although only five of the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 were given a corrective for specific issues in each, Jesus said to all seven, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Speaking to God is only one part of prayer. Hearing is the point of prayer – cooperation with God’s eternal purpose. Revitalization can and will occur when leadership and people return to God in an active life of prayer. Pastor, set the example of a man of prayer. Create multiply entry points in the prayer life of the congregation. Lead the people to pray. The need for prayer is usually obvious in both corporate and individual life. Lead them to actively trust God. He will transform through believing prayer. Allow the Spirit to lead you into alignment with the purpose of God through prayer and Scripture.

The revitalization of the congregation is not a given. The Church will prevail, but the church may fail. However, the revitalization of any congregation is just as sure as the promises of God when we realize the issues are all spiritual in essence. We must re-establish the local congregation as a “house of prayer for all nations” (Mark 11:17).

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