

“Rusty Small has experienced and led firsthand in seeking the Lord’s hand in revitalizing a church. As a local church pastor, he recognizes the realities of church revitalization and has shepherded his own church through the process. He is also a theologian and professor, so he has researched and is able to offer guidance regarding a biblically sound methodology for church revitalization. Furthermore, he now serves in leading our efforts to see a church revitalization movement take place among hundreds of churches in our larger fellowship of churches. I know firsthand that this book is birthed out of a real-world understanding of the need, as well as the opportunity, to see churches not just survive, but thrive!”

—Dr. Brian Autry,  
Executive Director, Southern Baptist Convention of Virginia

“Church revitalization is a massive need, and we don’t have enough resources to help struggling congregations. Russell Small makes a big contribution to filling the gap with *Church Revitalization: A Pastoral Guide to Church Renewal*. He answers some key questions most revitalizers face and provides a strategic and practical foundation for any leader in a church revitalization scenario.”

—Sam Rainer, President, Church Answers

“Over many years of working with churches, I have found that revitalization can be tasking, unprecedented, and overwhelming. Some churches have negative habits, adrift from the biblical mandate, limited resources, and a systemic problem to multiply and mobilize. This book combines the concepts of church revitalization, growth, conflict resolution, and polity into an introductory guidebook to understand the need and navigation for renewal. I wish I had this book when I started, especially during my first 1,000 days. If you are beginning revitalization, you need your Bible in one hand and this book in the other.”

—Dr. Gary Moritz, Lead Pastor of City United Church,  
SME for Church Revitalization and Renewal, Liberty University,  
Director of Baptist Churches of New England for Church Revitalization and Renewal,  
Author of *Carry On: Tactical Strategies for Church Revitalization and Renewal*

“Several years ago, I was writing a book on evangelism. A mentor of mine said with profundity, ‘Thom, we don’t need another book on what evangelism is; we need a book on how evangelism must be done.’ I echo his admonition. We don’t need another book on what church revitalization is; we need a book on how church revitalization must be done. Now you have the book. It’s called *Church Revitalization: A Pastoral Guide to Church Renewal* by Russell Small. Read it. Then do it.”

—Thom S. Rainer,  
Founder and CEO, Church Answers,  
author of *I Am a Christian*

“Helping churches find new life is a continuing challenge for ministry leaders today. This book is an excellent guide for this important task. Practical, workable, spiritual, realistic—all concepts interwoven through these pages. Healthy churches are the primary means for spiritual renewal and stability in communities. If you are a church leader committed to revitalizing your church, this book will help chart your path forward.”

—Jeff Iorg, President, Gateway Seminary,  
Author of *Leading Major Change in Your Ministry*

“Russell Small’s approach moves beyond defining church revitalization; he created a process-driven resource for churches determining their revitalization pathway. Russell graciously walks a church through identifying who they are, where they’ve been, where they need to go, and who can help them accomplish the task. This much-needed resource provides more than a checklist, but a dialogical approach to solving issues for a congregation in revitalization.”

—Kenneth W. Priest,

Founder, Revive This Church Ministries, [revivethischurch.com](http://revivethischurch.com)

“Russell (Rusty) Small is an excellent scholar and a faithful pastor. This reality shines throughout this very fine book on church revitalization. It is biblical, theological, and practical. It is well written, and it is structured in such a way that it can serve as a valuable resource to be consulted again and again. This is essential reading for those called to this critically important work.”

—Daniel L. Akin,

President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“If we say that we love Jesus but show little concern for his church, we have truly deceived ourselves. Rusty Small has labored to produce a resource that screams, ‘I love the church!’ He embodies our mission here in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity to come alongside the local church in its quest to fulfill the Great Commission. His insights gained, from diligent research and intentional relationships with pastors, is both convicting and inspiring. The task is hard, but your church will be healthier with these insights.”

—Troy W. Temple,

Dean, John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University

“I am excited to read Rusty Small’s book, *Church Revitalization: A Pastoral Guide to Church Renewal*. Rusty writes, not only from the viewpoint of a state convention leader, but also from the perspective of a pastor who has led his church through revitalization. I plan to use this book to train and to encourage my staff because every chapter addresses critical issues facing revitalization pastors and insights that provide a practical application of biblical wisdom. I am especially enthused about his chapter on ‘Managing Conflict, Making Peace.’ If you are a revitalization pastor, you need this book.”

—William D. Henard,

Adjunct Professor of Church Revitalization, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Author of *Can These Bones Live?* and *ReClaimed Church*

Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church, Athens, TN

“No cookie-cutter approach here, and that’s what makes this book worth your time and investment! Dr. Small’s book, *Church Revitalization: A Pastoral Guide to Church Renewal*, will cause you to ask the right questions, in order to find the correct solution for your own local church. It understands that no two churches are alike. By focusing on your church’s uniqueness in history, community, and pastoral leadership, you can implement a customized strategy plan for long-term success. Forge your own future by following the encouragement and wisdom the author shares here. You’ll be glad you did.”

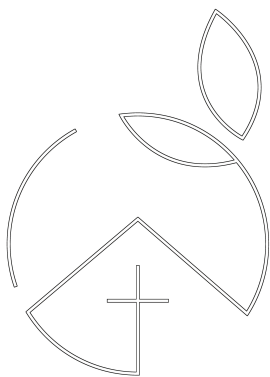
—Dr. J. David Jackson,

Replant Specialist, North American Mission Board, SBC

Author of *ReNew: Traveling the Forgotten Path*

# CHURCH REVITALIZATION

A PASTORAL GUIDE TO  
CHURCH RENEWAL



**Russell N. Small**



*Church Revitalization: A Pastoral Guide to Church Renewal*

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*To Liberty Baptist Church, Appomattox,  
Virginia, for their graciousness and patience.  
To my wife, Melissa, for her support  
in ministry and her help editing.  
To my two sons, James and Thomas,  
I pray the church will be strong for them.*



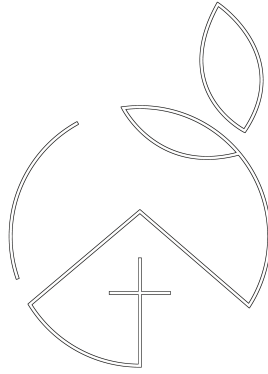
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# INTRODUCTION



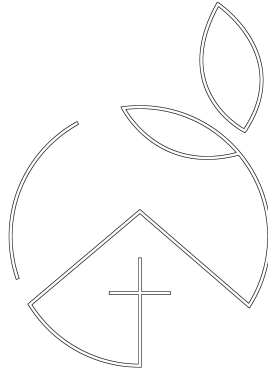
**T**he task of church revitalization is necessary today in many churches. Pastors need to be equipped to meet the need of this moment and see the church flourish. Church revitalization is a noble calling and a humbling endeavor. This endeavor requires both dependency upon God and a skill set that is capable of the task. This book attempts to provide an overview of both the theory and practice required for this task. The logic of this book requires an understanding that this book is divided into two major sections.

The first five chapters of the book will provide the ability to assess critical areas in church revitalization. Chapter one will offer the ability to assess where a particular church is in the revitalization process and review skills that the revitalizer will need to embrace to be successful. Chapter two will walk a church leader through the many decisions one must make to clarify the nature of a particular church. Chapter three will review the history of a particular church. A church leader will need to gain a good understanding of what the church has been so that he can understand possible paths for the future. Chapter four will offer an approach to assess the community around the church. Oftentimes, community demographics change, and the spiritual needs of the current community must be understood. Chapter five will assess the overall health of the pastor

and offer helpful checkpoints for a pastor to be able to develop a plan for greater health.

The last five chapters will outline a practical approach to implementing church revitalization initiatives. Chapter six will simply review the necessity of a clear, actionable plan. Many things must be done to accomplish revitalization in a church, but these must be prioritized and executed in an orderly fashion. Chapter seven states the necessity of a team. A pastor cannot and should not attempt revitalization alone. Therefore, the logistics of team organization and readiness must be evaluated. Chapter eight reviews the difficulty of execution. Execution is more about emotional resoluteness than strategy. A good strategy must be implemented; the process of implementation is full of stressors. Chapter nine addresses the reality of conflict. Change produces conflict, and conflict that is not managed properly can stop a revitalization effort. Chapter ten discusses future steps in church revitalization after a season of revitalization has occurred. Many churches have been in decline for years, so it typically takes years of sustained effort to see revitalization fully occur. My prayer is for you to read this book with intentionality and prayerfulness, not merely attempting to understand the nature of church revitalization but with a genuine intention to cultivate revitalization in your church context!

## CHAPTER 1



# WHERE TO START?

**W**elcome to the journey of church revitalization! What a joy to overview a process for church renewal. This book is not merely a book of tips or quick fixes. The content of this book will need to be processed slowly and implemented strategically. There are unique challenges in every church revitalization situation. Pastors and church leadership will know the specifics of a particular church situation better than anyone else.<sup>1</sup> However, there are key areas of competency required to negotiate church revitalization. Many pastors and church leaders are daunted by the task ahead. Churches often have deeply rooted habits, limited resources, and a lack of

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1 The intended readership will primarily be in a pastoral role. The content of the book, however, applies most directly to pastors or church leaders who have a primary role in leading a church through revitalization. Therefore, the terms *pastors* and *church leaders* are used throughout the book to denote the group of people who are primary in leading the church revitalization effort. Some sections of the book are more squarely focused on the pastoral office. Other sections of the book are broader in their application to pastors and church leadership because church revitalization is a team effort. Additionally, my personal belief is that the pastoral office is reserved for men, so I will utilize masculine pronouns to refer to pastoral roles throughout this book.

vision and strategy. Church leadership must aid in the development of a series of strategic steps that push the church to become healthy. This must be done at a pace that is doable for the church, and it requires wisdom and insight that can only be gleaned by pastors and church leadership who have the competencies for this task. This chapter will set the stage for the journey ahead, setting forth initial steps on how pastors and church leadership can ready themselves for this journey. By taking this deliberative journey to survey the terrain of church revitalization before fully embarking on the journey, pastors and church leadership can avoid missteps and achieve greater resiliency in the revitalization process.

## BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR CHURCH REVITALIZATION

What New Testament concepts relate to the process of church revitalization? While the New Testament gives us valuable information regarding the life of the early church, the early church dealt more with efforts to plant churches than to revitalize them. Paul's establishment of new churches is different from church revitalization. Some parts of the New Testament, however, do relate to church revitalization. In his third missionary journey, Paul returns to existing churches to strengthen and develop them (Acts 19–21). But in a general sense, Paul wrestles in his letters with issues of doctrinal purity, church unity, internal disorder, and moral issues. The churches he wrote to were young and in need of basic instruction, not revitalization. The Pastoral Epistles (1–2 Timothy, Titus), Paul's latest letters, show greater church development. He describes elder and deacon ministry at length (1 Tim. 3:1–13), and gives evidence that ministry to widows has already been developed (1 Tim. 5:3–16). However, even these ministries would be implemented in a contemporary church plant from the beginning. It is certainly possible in church revitalization that foundational realities about church life might be missed from its inception and that the initial instruction Paul gave to these early churches would need to be established late in the development of a

contemporary church.<sup>2</sup> Even so, directly relating the early churches in Acts and Paul's letters to church revitalization fails to recognize that church revitalization typically occurs in churches older than those described in the New Testament.

The closest parallel to church revitalization in the New Testament is found in the opening chapters of the book of Revelation (Rev. 2–3). Since the dating of the book of Revelation is around AD 95–96,<sup>3</sup> the churches described there have already experienced birth, growth, and decline. These letters that Jesus sends to the churches reveal a complex evaluation of each church situation. Without intervention a church could cease to exist (Rev. 2:5). Yet each church is called to see its strengths and repent of its weaknesses. This concept of leaning into strengths and ridding the church of critical weaknesses is more akin to the process of church revitalization. The call to the church in the book of Revelation is not a complete restart, but a serious adjustment so that obedience to Christ and revitalization can be attained.

## DEFINING CHURCH REVITALIZATION ON A SPECTRUM

One of the difficulties of church revitalization is defining what it is. Many conversations concerning church revitalization stall at the place of definition. While it is warranted to spend time and energy on giving a precise definition of what church revitalization looks like in a particular situation, it seems clear that a one-size-fits-all definition will either be too broad to be helpful or too narrow and omit certain efforts in revitalization. Rather than defining church revitalization with a precise definition, it seems better to approach defining church revitalization along a spectrum or levels of need. Four terms can be helpful in understanding the level of revitalization necessary

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2 Douglas Moo, *A Theology of Paul and His Letters: The Gift of the New Realm in Christ*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 43–52.

3 Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 20–22. Thomas makes a compelling case for a late date of the book of Revelation.

in a particular church situation. The four terms are *refresh*, *renovate*, *restore*, and *replant*.<sup>4</sup>

<b>Refresh Revitalization</b>			
<b>Duration of Decline</b>	<b>Church Resources</b>	<b>Spiritual Vitality</b>	<b>Average Time for Revitalization</b>
Fewer than five years	Capable church membership, maintained facilities, stable finances	Spiritual metrics (conversions, discipleship, etc.) relatively healthy.	Two to four years

### ***Refresh Revitalization***

The “refresh” level in church revitalization requires the least invasive interventions to bring the church back to spiritual health. Typically, in a refresh revitalization church decline has not been long term (fewer than five years). The church has resources that enable it to quickly turn around, such as strong membership, an adequate facility, and reasonable financial footing. Further, while there has been decline in conversions, worship attendance, small groups, and ministry participation, there is still a strong nucleus of support. A refresh is typically necessary after a difficult season in the life of the church. In a refresh situation, a previous pastoral staff member may have struggled, and the church entered into a season of decline. The decline was not greatly disruptive, but nevertheless the church is less healthy than in previous seasons. A fresh vision within the church could enable it to lean into untapped resources to bring about revitalization. A refresh revitalization could see clear results within two to three years.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to John Ewart, professor of missions and pastoral leadership and associate vice president for global theological initiatives and ministry centers at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, for developing this concept.

<b>Renovate Revitalization</b>			
<b>Duration of Decline</b>	<b>Church Resources</b>	<b>Spiritual Vitality</b>	<b>Average Time for Revitalization</b>
Five to fifteen years	Reduced church membership, deferred maintenance on facilities, strained finances	Spiritual metrics (conversions, discipleship, etc.) in decline	Five to seven years

**Renovate Revitalization**

The “renovate” level in church revitalization requires more serious interventions to bring the church back to spiritual health. Typically, in a renovate revitalization the church decline has been long term (between five and fifteen years). The church’s resources were expended to a great amount during this time. The membership is weakened, the facility has deferred maintenance, and the financial situation is strained. Further, there has been decline in conversions, worship attendance, small groups, and ministry participation, and this decline has seriously weakened the spiritual ministry of the church. A renovation typically comes after several pastoral transitions. The church has steadily declined even after various attempts at seeing new life established. The church has lost a sense of mission and is generally disheartened at the state of affairs. A renovation will require structural changes in the church, along with fresh vision and capable leadership. To see results in a renovate revitalization, churches should not expect to see clear results until year five.

<b>Restore Revitalization</b>			
<b>Duration of Decline</b>	<b>Church Resources</b>	<b>Spiritual Vitality</b>	<b>Average Time for Revitalization</b>
More than fifteen years	Small church membership, building in disrepair, inadequate finances	Mission jettisoned to merely survive	Five to eight years

### **Restore Revitalization**

The “restore” level in church revitalization requires dramatic interventions to bring the church back to spiritual health. Typically, in a restore revitalization the church decline has been long term, likely for generations (more than fifteen years). The church has a very inward, often small membership; the facility is typically greatly neglected; and the financial situation is focused on survival, not mission. Strangely, in some restoration situations the church has a reasonable amount of money in the bank, but this is viewed as a security for the payment of future bills and property maintenance, not strategic mission initiatives. The concept of conversions, discipleship through groups, increasing worship attendance, and ministry participation are often outside the purview of metrics the church understands. Many members who are in a church that needs restoration hope only that the church will exist throughout their lifetime. Some see no future for the church other than a nice place for their funeral to be conducted and hope to see the church remain long enough for this to happen. While this is a sad state of affairs, it is not all that uncommon for churches to face this reality. While churches in this state are not without hope, the generational patterns of unhealthy behavior will require dramatic interventions to bring the church back to life. Dramatic interventions will be resisted by a congregation that is focused on mere survival, not thriving mission. Church leadership, ideally starting with a lead pastor, will need to win the trust of the congregation and be willing to work for the long term—between five to eight years—to see real revitalization.

<b>Replant Revitalization</b>			
<b>Duration of Decline</b>	<b>Church Resources</b>	<b>Spiritual Vitality</b>	<b>Average Time for Revitalization</b>
More than fifteen years	A building with deferred maintenance and an aging church membership	Imminent death threatened due to lack of attendees	More quickly (one to three years) because a new leadership team with a new core group starts a fresh work



**Replant Revitalization**

The “replant” level in church revitalization, which is barely within the domain of church revitalization, is basically a church coming to terms with the reality that it does not have the strength to continue without outside intervention. A replant is more closely related to church planting than to revitalization. In revitalization, some aspects of the previous church exist in the new emerging entity. In many replants, the old identity is lost, a new identity is established, and the old church property may be repurposed for a new mission work. This is certainly superior to the closing and selling of the church property. However, replanting is basically a new work using the resources of an older church to accomplish a new vision with a new congregation. Some of the members may become a part of this new work, but the work will be fundamentally different from the previous work.

<b>The Difference Between Revitalization and Replant<sup>5</sup></b>	
<p><b>Revitalization:</b> The supernatural work of God that restores health and vitality in a plateaued or declining church, evidenced by submission to God’s Word, right relationships among members, and a renewed commitment to Great Commission ministry.</p> <p><b>Revitalization:</b> <i>existing church + existing leaders + existing structure + history + renewed/new effort.</i></p>	<p><b>Replanting:</b> The process in which members of a church facing imminent closure discern God’s leadership to dissolve their current ministry and work with other churches or denominational bodies to begin a new church for a new season of ministry in their community.</p> <p><b>Replant:</b> <i>new qualified/skilled leader + existing people + new structures/ approaches + outside partners + new people + history</i></p>

5 These are the “officially” adopted definitions of the Replant Team at North American Mission Board for replanting and revitalization.

## A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

At times church revitalization may require other church leaders to step in and initiate change, but for practical purposes this book will address the typical situation where pastoral staff are the primary change agents in leading church-revitalization initiatives. So where do we begin on this journey toward church revitalization? It is important to know that this journey will be a prayerful and spiritual journey. It may feel intuitive to start the process scheming about your church; however, the ideal place to start the revitalization journey is with a pastor's relationship with God. Pastors and church leadership are a major conduit for church revitalization. The spiritual resources a pastor has will enable him to negotiate not only the failures in church revitalization but also the successes.

It may feel cliché to solidify and celebrate your conversion as a pastor, but it is not. A pastor must know that he has turned from his sin and self and put his faith in Jesus Christ. A pastor must be confident in the power of the gospel to change his own life before he will have that passion to share the gospel with others.<sup>6</sup> Also, a pastor must then know the daily joy of walking in God's presence. It will be from the overflow of a healthy Christian life that church revitalization can be undertaken. Even if success can be accomplished by a pastor whose spiritual life is not in order, the pressure of achieving church revitalization can at best lead to burnout and at worst to moral compromise. Pastors' and other church leaders' spiritual readiness must be assessed.<sup>7</sup> A means to analyze a pastor's spiritual readiness for the task ahead is to examine his past behavior. If a sin issue has emerged in the past, the behavior will likely emerge in the future under the stress of church revitalization. Therefore, personal spiritual preparedness is

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6 Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016). McKnight argues the need to clarify the concept of gospel especially as it related to conversion.

7 Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988); and Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1978) are great resources for setting forth a plan for spiritual disciplines.

essential for any pastor or church leader undertaking such a spiritually strenuous task.

The path to preparedness may not be through greater striving but through a greater understanding of grace. It is easy to become performance-driven and not rest in grace. At the heart of the doctrine of conversion is the concept of grace. Grace is receiving what you do not deserve. The Christian's standing before God is not based on works. It is based on sheer grace.<sup>8</sup> Most pastors do not need to be taught this theologically. They have it worked out intellectually. Pastors, however, so often enter the pastorate with a work-based, performance-based attitude. A pastor becomes too personally connected with the success and failure of the church, and his identity becomes wrapped up in being a pastor and not merely being a Christian who has been lavished with grace. It is important when entering church revitalization that a pastor's personal identity does not depend on church success.<sup>9</sup> If pastors and church leaders find that church success is critical to their sense of identity, then it will be important to seek out a spiritual mentor to communicate God's grace to them so that they can rest in grace and not in personal accomplishment. For example, it will be commonplace for a congregation to refer to pastoral staff as "pastor." A congregation may even have a hard time separating the office of pastor from the person. It is wonderful that God has led pastors into ministry. It is a noble vocation. However, pastors need to remember that they have an identity outside of being a pastor. There are other vocations that pastors hold such as spouse, parent, and friend. Pastors should be wary of fusing their identity with the functions of pastoral ministry and the success and failure of a particular church situation. A pastor must learn to rest on God's unconditional love and grace.

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8 Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), and Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2005). These books explore the power of grace to bring about wholeness in the life of a person.

9 R. Kent Hughes and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 35–44.

Jesus is sufficient to change the lives of the people in our churches; Jesus merely *uses* pastors and church leaders to aid in this process.

Pastors' and church leaders' primary goal should be to see people come to faith in Christ and develop in Christlikeness. This singular focus should inform all church strategies and initiatives. Further, if a pastor does not have a stable spiritual life, the goal of people-pleasing and crowd-building can eclipse disciple-making. Church revitalization can be undertaken with wrong motivations, which can be subtle and deceptive. It is necessary that a pastor's desire for church revitalization be truly for the good of others and not a subtle means to fortify personal identity. The revitalization journey must be taken for the good of those within the church and the community. A pastor must engage in his own process of spiritual formation so that he can be an appropriate conduit of grace and spiritual health to those around him. The ministry is a unique calling: a pastor is the tool that will be used to lead a church. A pastor who has his own heart in order will enhance his spiritual effectiveness in discipling others.<sup>10</sup>

## A SPECIFIC CALLING

Church revitalization requires a pastor, among the other church leaders, to recognize a specific calling to revitalize a specific church. Starting with paid pastoral staff, he must take time to carefully evaluate his calling to church revitalization as a specific ministry assignment. Church revitalization is only one method in God's multifaceted kingdom work. There are many places where God can work such as church planting, international missions, and mercy ministries. Church planting is a noble calling. There are many places in the United States where there is a need for a new church presence. Further, the lostness of the world is a strong reason to contemplate the international mission field. There are many places in the world where there is no need for church revitalization because there has never been a church. In an ever-changing world, ministry oppor-

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10 Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 39–70.

tunities are endless. There are new platforms on which a person can minister. It is important to evaluate the various options before settling on church revitalization. Even if you decided to fully commit to church revitalization, the revitalized church still has a role to play in aiding in church planting, missions involvement, and various mercy ministries. Church revitalization is merely choosing the location from which a pastor and other church leaders can participate in God's multifaceted kingdom work.

A serious evaluation needs to be made as to why a pastor believes God has called him to church revitalization. It is important to write these reasons down. A pastor or church leader may need to consult this list, especially on the bad days. Some of the positive reasons for engaging in church revitalization are seeing new life come to an established church, building on a church's legacy, seeing a gospel presence reemerge in a community, and participating in God's redemption plan in the context of the local church.<sup>11</sup> There is a unique wonder in seeing a church resurrected in a community where life was previously limited. A clear theological reason to do ministry from the location of the local church is the unique love that God has for the church. While many other places of ministry are noble, the context of ministry from inside a local church receives God's most intense love.

Pastors along with other church leaders will need to develop deep convictions that church revitalization is in fact God's place for them in this season of their life. The process of church revitalization will require a great deal of work. For example, there are challenging seasons in the life of a pastor. A young pastor who is newly married may not be able to take on this task. A pastor who has many family obligations either due to children or other family situations may need to think through the sacrifices. An older pastor who may be seeking to serve in a chaplain role, not as a change agent, may not be the right fit for

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11 Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming the Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville: B&H, 2016). The thesis of this book is that revitalization should be pursued to reclaim the glory of God by making the church a visible witness of the power of God in a community.

this endeavor. For church revitalization to work, the right season in the life of the church and the life of a pastor must merge.

## BECOMING A VISIONARY

Once a pastor can discern that he is spiritually ready for this task, it is time to start thinking and dreaming about the church. It is important to see the future, what things can be, what the church can be, and to see this vision clearly. To lead in a church revitalization, a pastor must see what the church does not see, at least at first. A pastor must be able to envision what a revived presence in the community would look like. A pastor must be able to see beyond the immediate situation to a future situation when many of the obstacles and problems would be resolved. This will require a great deal of vision and mental toughness. A pastor must believe this vision because there will be many situations that will make him question its feasibility.<sup>12</sup> For example, a pastor should not be surprised when the congregation would prefer him to attempt ministry objectives without their enthusiastic participation. In some church revitalizations, there are long seasons of dryness. Congregants want to believe in better days for the church, but past experiences have been so painful that they struggle to see a bright future.

A pastor must become optimistic about a church situation that many have grown pessimistic about. A pastor must be able to negotiate the difficult tension between what things can be and how things are. The congregants will often just see what is. They will have lower expectations than pastors and maybe other church leaders. Pastors and church leaders will need to accept that these expectations have been set over a long period of time. The reason the church needs revitalization is that the execution of ministry objectives has not been met. Sadly, many churches are reluctantly satisfied with survival. In some contexts, mere survival has not been easy. Some churches have endured member conflicts, pastoral conflict, community demographic

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12 Andy Stanley, *Visioneering: God's Blueprint for Developing and Maintaining Vision* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 1999), 17–28.

shifts, and even denominational disruption. A pastor needs to be able to see the hard work it has taken for the church to exist even in the form that the church is currently in. Typically, many members within the church have personally sacrificed for the church to be in whatever form it currently stands.

The church revitalizer needs to develop a compelling vision of what the church can be while not losing sight of the beauty and sacrifice that is already there. This balance will bring a great deal of sanity to the situation. It is an all-too-common mistake to not see the beauty in the church that is there. If the vision is so future-oriented that the people get the sense that what they have worked to build is insufficient, then one's role as a pastor will be greatly harmed. So, a balanced assessment of what it has taken for the church to exist in this form, along with the brighter future that the church can have, must be held in tension.

## DEVELOPING THE NEEDED COMPETENCIES

Church revitalization requires a pastor to develop competencies that will guide him through this process. The following questions will help a pastor assess his own level of conviction in certain areas. A church revitalizer must not only have tactical skills in organizing but also possess the emotional intelligence to lead an established church. Here are seven questions to ponder as a pastor or other church leader thinks about this journey.

### ***Can You Present Solutions Without Being Perceived as the Problem?***

The reality of problems and solutions becomes complex in a church. There is no clear agreement on the problems and the solutions. Especially in conflict-riddled churches, the main goal of some church members is merely keeping the peace or status quo. Admitting a problem and seeking solutions requires changes and change often creates conflict. Often there are hidden stakeholders that desire for the church to exist in a certain way. When a solution is presented that will in some way affect these often-hidden stakeholders, a pastor or even another church leader can be labeled as a problem.

To an inexperienced pastor, being labeled a problem when presenting prayed-through solutions can strike at the gut level. Most pastors have pursued the ministry out of a desire to see a change in people, have a great love for those people, and are natural helpers. Pastors enjoy being an agent of comfort to those who are struggling. So, it is jarring for some pastors when in this loving spirit they set forth a solution to help the church and are labeled unhelpful and a “problem creator.” Moving a church toward a brighter future will often require being in dissonance with the congregation. This dissonance does not mean that a pastor is a problem or even that what he is doing is wrong. This is a healthy part of church revitalization. The issue arises when a pastor takes these criticisms personally, begins to think less of the congregation, and loses his love for certain people within the church. This unfortunate change of perspective can lead a pastor down poor paths and toward actually becoming part of the problem. A pastor will need to develop the conviction that even if his solutions are not seen as such, he will not take it personally and will see it rather as one step in a larger process of change.

### ***Can You Change Existing Structures Internally?***

A church has structures that exist before a pastor arrives. A pastor will have to work within the current system as his starting point. While there is often opportunity to change the way a church operates, the change in operations must be accomplished within the structures that presently exist. A pastor will need to discern which structures can remain unchanged, which structures can be enhanced, and which structures may need to be removed. The pastor must accept the structures that are there and learn to live within them for a season. It is wise for a pastor to live within a system for six months to a year upon arrival at a new church, learning what the structures are and how they operate. Churches are often very fluid even when they have written protocols. Therefore, it is unwise for a pastor to think that he will be able to understand how a church operates by merely reading the bylaws or reviewing a church manual.



Church structures are formed out of experiences, powerful personalities, and many other complex factors. The structure may not seem intuitive and may hinder the church from achieving its goals. There is a rationale for why things are the way they are. Any attempt to quickly change the structures will likely only temporarily shift them. Church structures are naturally prone to drift back to the place they are in presently. Therefore, a pastor must develop a deep conviction to understand how the church operates, so that real structural change can occur.<sup>13</sup> It is easy to change names and titles without a true change in function. If the pastor wants deep change in a church, this will require learning and strategic movement.

### ***Can You Embrace a Church History, Not Create One?***

Church revitalization requires entering a church that has a history. Any church that exists for any period has a history. Many churches that need church revitalization have a long history. There are few things more important than learning the history of a church. The actions and behavioral patterns of a church give you much information about it.

Unless a church has had a very bad event in its past, it is often very fond of its history. For families within the church that have a long-term relationship in a particular geographical region, the church is a monument of many past lives. The embracing of a church's history is an important part of becoming a true pastor to the people of the church. Whether a pastor is fully aware of it or not, he is becoming a part of this history.

It is appropriate for a pastor to see his work as part of a continuation of a larger work that has been happening since the church was born. One of the beauties of church revitalization is a pastor's desire to contribute a bright chapter into a long history of a church. The pastor must learn the story of the church, tell the story of the church, and thoughtfully contribute to its history. The pastor also needs to tell himself the story of the church and then rehearse the chapter of church

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13 Steve Smith, *The Increasing Church Capacity Guidebook: Designing and Linking the 18 Systems* (Lakeland, FL: Church Equippers, 2015), 5–20.

history he envisions during his pastorate. One day the pastor will leave the church. It is important for him to contemplate on the front end what his legacy at this church, and for God's kingdom, will be.

### ***Can You Be Patient and Strategic?***

Strategic patience is a critical conviction. Change in church life often goes much more slowly than a pastor desires. Further, pushing too hard in a situation will set the overall strategy back. For real change, timing is everything. In church life ideas must be presented informally, formally, and repeatedly before there is sufficient congregational buy-in. A pastor will have to engage in a push-and-pull with the congregation that desires to move toward revitalization.

Strategic patience will start as a conviction and develop into a skill over time. There will be an intuitive sense of when to push and when to stop pushing for an idea. Learning the personalities and structures of the church will enable a pastor to know when enough is enough. There is no advantage to aggressively pushing through decisions in church life. When this happens, the result is only that it will take more time to effect the next change. Strategic patience usually requires a pastor to start slowly and build momentum over time. Often in successful church revitalizations, small changes lead to bigger changes as success happens and trust is earned. A pastor must take the long view and be ready to stay at a church for a minimum of five years.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Can You Engage in Negotiation and Accept Compromise?***

Negotiation and compromise will always be part of leadership. In church revitalization, the conviction to compromise is very important. In other environments, there are clearer lines of authority and decision-making. A pastor is both a leader and an employee. Therefore, the congregation will be willing to hear a pastor's vision for the church, but they may also have ideas that are valid. Being able to negotiate and keep people

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<sup>14</sup> Jack L. Daniel, *Patient Catalyst: Leading Church Revitalization* (South Easton, MA: Overseed, 2018). Daniel sees timing and patience as key leadership characteristics that bring about revitalization.

on the team is an important aspect of leadership. If a pastor becomes overly committed to a vision for the church and becomes inflexible, then the relationship with the church will likely not end well.

It is important at the beginning of the revitalization process to embrace the reality that many goals a pastor will develop for the church will not come to fruition in the manner he desires. The positive is that sometimes the process of negotiation and compromise will produce better overall results for the church. There is often wisdom in having broad consultation, even when the resulting compromise does not accomplish what is ultimately best. There will likely be several of these situations in a revitalization. A pastor will have to learn to live with this. It is not wise to perpetually readdress areas where compromise was hard fought to achieve. Pastors in church-revitalization situations have to learn how to listen, give concrete ideas, negotiate with conflicting ideas, and bring the church to a reasonable middle position. This will be a constant in church life. This is not just difficult to develop the skill; the emotional toll of having to listen and address opinions that seem to lack rationality can lead to discouragement and anger. Therefore, the pastor must make a strong conviction to give himself to this process.

### ***Can You Embrace Progress, Not Perfection?***

The goal of a pastor is to move the church in a spiritually healthy direction. A pastor must be content with progress toward health. Perfection is not needed. A church that has existed for a long time has taken detours on the road to vitality. These detours will likely continue even during this new season because this is the nature of church communities, where a group of diverse people attempts to achieve collective goals. It will be important to constantly assess the positive things that are happening, and to document even small steps toward health. There is often a sense among pastors that although many good things have happened in their church, there are still many more things that need to happen.

A pastor of an established church must reckon with the fact that not every problem will be solved during his pastorate. There will be challenges and problems that will be left for future generations to

address. Only a limited number of things can be changed in a given period. God is gracious to give a pastor several ministry objectives that he can complete to move the church toward health even without seeing the church achieve the optimum health. A pastor needs to be emotionally settled with that. God may allow a pastor to see great spiritual health occur. If so, there is great cause to rejoice. Often in many church situations, however, progress is made but optimum spiritual health is not achieved. This is not settling for second-best. The current progress toward health is likely all the church is willing or able to accomplish at this time in its life. As a church revitalizer, you must accept progress toward health, not perfection.

### ***Can You Pastor the Church You Would Like to Create?***

Pastors engaging in revitalization have a vision for what they would like the church to become. Often, they long for a larger staff, a robust music program, a dynamic children's ministry, an innovative student ministry, small groups, community ministry, and so forth. The pastor himself must be able to rise to the challenge of leading this dynamic church. Changes toward these realities may therefore need to be slow and incremental. Some churches can outgrow the leaders that brought them through a revitalization. Church revitalization demands not only that the church body grow but that a pastor and church leadership grow as well. Many pastors who have hoped that a larger staff would solve their problems come to realize staff oversight and management are one of their largest problems. A revitalizer needs to be careful what he hopes for. Further, with a growing and thriving congregation, a pastor will be pushed to grow, change styles of leadership, relate differently to the congregation, and continually adjust his role in the church. This is good and healthy but is often an unforeseen reality in church revitalizations. A pastor must also come to grips with the reality that some leaders will be great in one season in the life of the church but will not thrive in another season. A church can be moving toward health, but leaders who cannot make the transition will sadly be left behind. This can be grievous to a pastor who has helped the church become healthier only to watch as some who were with him

early on do not have the skill set to continue in the same leadership level as in the past.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Becoming a Church Revitalizer***

The goal of this book is to enable a pastor or church leader to start the process of becoming a church revitalizer. It will not be sufficient to merely learn skills and tips. There will be important tasks to accomplish; however, these skills and tips are insufficient to prepare a leader emotionally and spiritually for what lies ahead. Revitalizers can take a realistic but optimistic view of churches. They can see things within a church that are doable based on the spiritual health of the people and attempt to accomplish them. They love the church and its intrinsic beauty. Revitalizers enjoy the simple worship and fellowship among Christians. They desire better for the church but can deeply love the church that is there. They will genuinely exude a pastoral quality, encouraging people to follow them, because of their own disposition and spiritual qualities.

This book alone cannot make someone this type of person. However, it can be a guide to this path that other pastors have traveled. Pastors should be encouraged on this journey. The church needs good shepherds. There is a spiritual hunger among so many in the culture, people who are looking for spiritual wholeness. Pastors have an opportunity to learn how to minister in this unique time, to a unique group of people, and to see God do a unique work through the church. It is worth the training and sacrifice to experience the joy of what lies ahead.

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15 John Maxwell, *5 Levels of Leadership: Proven Steps to Maximize Your Potential* (New York: CenterStreet, 2011), and Gary L. McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009). Both of these books argue the need for leaders to grow and change as the leaders' situation and church situation develops.