

Church Planting or Church Revitalization: Which is Better?

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Church planting seems to be in vogue today, attracting hundreds of young seminarians and Bible College men. This resurgence has resulted in an estimated 4,000 new churches being planted in North America every year. That is a trend for which all Bible-believers should be grateful.

Yet research also indicates that about 3,800 churches dissolve and die every year in America. Many others struggle with declining attendance and inadequate leadership. Some Christian leaders thus argue that revitalizing unhealthy churches is as vital for Gospel advance as starting new ones.

Having been a church planter for over 35 years, I admit I'm a little biased. For years I have advocated conventional church-growth wisdom: "It is easier to have babies than raise the dead." Yet in recent years I've become convinced that we often quit too soon in our attempts to revive and turn around churches in decline. It may be more strategic, in some cases, for healthy existing churches and church planters to invest their time, energy and resources in revitalizing struggling congregations.

Pastors, planters and church leaders need wisdom. Some churches are so far gone they should be "put down." These churches need to acknowledge that spiritually they are already dead--no one has been saved or baptized for years, sin is rampant and worship lifeless. They should formally close their doors, sell the property and quit dishonoring the Name of Jesus in their communities. Yet I strongly believe that God's heart is for the revival of many of His churches. Though turning dying congregations around may be difficult, many could be successfully salvaged.

Thus church revitalization – bringing life to dying churches by dealing with the causes of decline and building toward renewed fruitfulness and faithfulness – is a worthwhile pursuit. Rescuing struggling congregations should be seen as a viable option to give them a future and a hope. In this article I would like to build the case for church revitalization, discuss some of the challenges, and then give some guidelines for successful church renewal.

The Case for Church Revitalization

Why might we invest in rescuing failing congregations? I see several biblical and practical reasons. First, I would suggest church revitalization is a **biblical burden**. Both Jesus and Paul

made this a priority. In the letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus Himself seeks to set right what is broken and given new life to what is dying. Addressing each church, He places the spotlight on the particular reasons for their failing community testimony: lackluster love (Ephesus – Rev. 2:2-7), false teaching (Pergamum and Thyatira – Rev. 2:13-17; 20-23), lukewarm devotion (Laodecia – Rev. 3:15-19). To the church at Sardis, Jesus says “*You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of God*” (Rev. 3:2-3, ESV).

Some see Revelation 3:2 as a proof test for church revitalization – “*Strengthen what remains and is about to die.*” Shouldn’t we be as concerned for congregations today with littler or no Gospel witness as Christ was for Sardis?

The Apostle Paul seemed to demonstrate an equal concern for the health of churches he planted as for evangelizing yet unreached regions. The NT indicates he often returned to cities and regions where he had previously labored in order to “strengthen” newly planted churches (Acts 15:36, 41). At other times he delayed his aggressive church planting work to write young churches with pressing problems. His first letter to the Corinthians is a case in point. Beset with divisions and factions (1:10-17), sexual immorality (5:1-13), lawsuits among members (6:1-8), confusion over marriage and sexuality (7:1-40), and worship wars (chs.11-14), the Apostle boldly rebukes the Corinthian believers, seeking to reform and restore the church to health.

Second, church revitalization enables us **to reclaim valuable resources** for gospel purposes. Millions of dollars have been invested in land, buildings and equipment as faithful believers have given over many decades. In dying churches these resources are being little utilized. Church planters are often desperate for property and facilities of their own; often their best people must set up for weekly services in a rented school or hotel ballroom. Rescuing aging churches on life support may, in some cases, be good stewardship. If Bible believers don’t revitalize those that are recoverable, many of these valuable properties may be lost to liberal churches, Muslim mosques or condominium developers.

Third, church revitalizations **avoid logistical challenges** commonly found in new church starts. Mike McKinley, who replanted Guilford Baptist in Sterling, VA, points out, “Most church planting models require the planter to coordinate a lot of logistics with little manpower.” Planters often struggle to find a suitable and affordable place to meet. Providing a quality children’s ministry, welcoming guests, and getting volunteers to set up and tear down each Sunday can become a huge burden for a newly birthed congregation.ⁱ

Finally, revitalizing unhealthy existing churches can be a **“two-for-the-price-of-one” investment**. Not only do we reclaim a vibrant testimony for the gospel, but we also remove the poor witness that was there previously. Pastor Mark Dever of 9 Marks advocates this model because he believes that sickly churches are “terribly anti-missionary forces.” They malign the gospel and defame God’s name with false advertising of what Christianity is about. When a dying church is rescued the community is once again “confronted with a genuine corporate witness for Christ.”ⁱⁱ

The Challenges of Church Revitalization

Though church rescues do have these advantages, there are two significant challenges.ⁱⁱⁱ First, older, dying congregations often have a terrible community reputation. A past moral scandal, corporate unfriendliness, longstanding isolationism, or even racism may be harming the church’s witness. Thus pastors seeking to revive these churches will need to labor patiently to rebuild a positive image in the community.

Second, stagnant churches may not desire to change and grow. There are usually painful reasons why these churches are dying. Years of poor leadership and past traumatic events within the church body have caused significant attendance and financial decline. Entrenched leaders, carrying lots of personal baggage, will oppose reformist pastors with fresh ideas. Aside from the congregation’s poor spiritual state, facilities and programs may be in ruins. It may take years for a congregational turnaround.

Starting a new church from scratch normally avoids these issues. Church planters rarely hear, “Pastor, we’ve never done it that way before.” Planters can focus on reaching lost people and new community residents rather than be distracted by carnal inwardly-focused Christians who don’t want to change and evangelize their community.

Turnaround Guidelines

What can we do to help churches accomplish a genuine turnaround? I suggest planters and healthy churches have two viable options for helping unhealthy churches: restarting or replanting. A restart is birthing a brand new church out of a practically dead or dying one. A replant is revitalizing and refocusing an existing declining church which still has some potential.

In the **restart approach**, the congregation usually agrees to stop public services in their church building for at least three to six months, meeting only for home Bible studies and prayer, before

relaunching public ministries. Experience has shown for a successful restart to take place, six conditions should be met:

1. The original church body must be willing to die, dissolving its constitution and legal status.
2. The restart must have new leadership, both pastoral and lay; often a church planter becomes their restart pastor.
3. The new church relauches with a new name to give it a new identity and reputation.
4. It relocates, at least temporarily, to a new site for its meetings.
5. It must develop new statements of mission, vision and core values to guide their future.
6. It must normally refocus on a different ministry group. Based on a renewed understanding of the demographics and dynamics of their community, the new church reaches out to a different “slice” of the local population.^{iv}

Sometimes a stalled church plant which is only a few years old, prematurely launched without proper understanding and much prayerful preplanning, must be re-launched, this time utilizing proven missiological principles and better planting methodologies.

In the **replant approach** the emphasis is on turning the ship around and giving it new life. This type of total church transformation happens only if God is at work. Ultimately moribund churches will be reformed and enlivened only through solid biblical preaching, fervent prayer, and subsequent corporate repentance. A refocused Gospel-centered ministry should bring a renewed concern for evangelism and the lost.

Dan Reiland, the “Pastor’s Coach,” proposes an eight-step plan for corporate revitalization. First, core leaders need to be convinced of the crisis. “If your leaders don’t believe that the church will die without change, you will not turn it around.” Secondly, the specific reason(s) for the crisis must be identified. Reiland lists common reasons for church demise: The church doesn’t accept newcomers; doesn’t demonstrate reliance upon God; isn’t making disciples; has no heart for lost people; is mired in church “traditions, bureaucracy, committees and red tape; doesn’t confront sin; and has a pastor unwilling or unable to lead. Third, a new corporate dream and a compelling vision must be cast and caught by the people. Fourth, a leadership team committed to congregational turnaround must be recruited to lead the process. Fifth, they must stay focused with effort and energy on the really significant changes that will make a difference. Sixth, it is imperative to “honor the [church’s] history and lift up what is not going to be changed.” Seventh, help the church distinguish between core biblical values and current ministry methodologies. Finally, we must always offer “generous amounts of hope and encouragement” realizing that church turnarounds are never easy or accomplished overnight.^v

While there is no guaranteed formula for success, these guidelines, combined with much prayer, passion, and persistence, can lead to congregational turnarounds.

With both the restarting and replanting approaches to corporate revitalization, one item is essential: partnership. Experience has shown that church restoration can be a grueling, lengthy process, with inevitable setbacks. It helps to have sister churches and praying friends to encourage you along the way. Wise restart and replant leaders will not attempt to do this alone. They will also make it a priority to disciple and mentor promising leaders in the congregation who can one day be supportive partners in the ministry. Seeking the aid of an outside pastoral coach or church consultant would also provide great benefit. A Consultation team could help the church's leaders assess corporate spiritual vitality and develop a strategic recovery plan with a strong ministry vision for the future.^{vi} One such proven consultative team is Christ Way Ministries led by Drs Milo Thompson and Howard Bixby. Learn more at: www.ChristwayMinistries.us.

The Last Resort: Death with Dignity

At times a thorough evaluation of a church body, kept lingering on life support for years reveals that their vital signs have gone flat. Possibly their survival has depended on massive infusions of money and effort from outside the congregation, but all to no avail. In the past, dying congregations have been advised to merge with healthier ones (not normally too successful) to relocate. Many others disbanded, scattering their parishioners to other community churches.

Recently, a few historic congregations have begun to see the death of their church as a way to plant new churches. Like Sarah, Abraham's wife, aged churches – and even some on their deathbeds – can produce new life. Dying churches are selling their property and assets and giving the resultant funds to agencies to start new congregations. Project Jerusalem, the church-planting and training ministry which I direct out of Baptist Bible Seminary, has been a beneficiary of a dissolving church in New York State. Donated assets were used to plant Living Hope Baptist, a vibrant multi-ethnic church in Mt. Pocono, PA.

For dying churches, leaving such a legacy is to pass on to future generations something of great significance. A closing congregation can give birth to a new church, can carry forward their values and beliefs; continuing to fulfill their Great Commission mission in a nearby community. For more information on dying with dignity, see *Legacy Churches* by Stephen Gray and Franklin Dumond (Church Smart, 2009).

Final Applications

Both church planting and church revitalizing strategies carry unique opportunities and challenges. Both approaches share the same overall objective: to see a God-honoring congregation established in a community with insufficient gospel witness. The question should not be which strategy – whether planting a new church or revitalizing a dying one – is best. It is both/and not either/or. If you are an aspiring church planter, the decision depends to some extent on your gifts, leadership style, personality temperament, and opportunities. Take the time to investigate whether there might be struggling churches in your targeted community that you could assist and rebuild.

Church revitalization should be a ministry that healthy established churches seriously and prayerfully consider. Could your church use its resources and manpower to assist a nearby congregation in decline? (9 Marks) Bobby Jamieson advises, “Get to know them. Discover their needs. Build relationships with them. Be open to helping them in whatever ways you can, including if the opportunity arises, sending a pastor and people to help with the work of reform.”^{vii}

Biblical churches that are passionate about spreading the gospel of Christ should be concerned, as both Jesus and Paul were, to strengthen and restore the witness of sister congregations. Ultimately we should be motivated by a jealous concern for the glory of our God to be magnified in the community. We should desire to see His Name and Fame no longer defamed by nominally Christian churches that misrepresent Christ to a watching lost world.

ⁱ “The Pros and Cons of Planting and Revitalizing” *9 Marks eJournal* (Nov/Dec 2011--vol. 8, issue 8), 25.

ⁱⁱ John Folmar, “What Makes a Church Reform Possible?” *9 Marks eJournal* (Nov/Dec 2011), 34

ⁱⁱⁱ McKinley, 26

^{iv} David Jackson, “Restart: a New Option in Ministry,” in *Plant Life* (Missional Press, 2008), 77-79.

^v Dan Reiland, “Turning Around a Congregation,” *The Pastor’s Coach* e-newsletter, Oct. 2002 (Vol. 3, Issue 18).

^{vi} One such proven consultative team is ChristWay Ministries, led by Drs. Milo Thompson and Howard Bixby. Learn more at: www.ChristWayMinistries.us.

^{vii} “The Bible’s Burden for Church Revitalization,” *9 Marks e-Journal* (Nov/Dec 2011), 21