



GRASPING AT GROWTH

3 Signs Your Church May Need Revitalization

Danny W. Davis, Ed.D.

Let's Begin with A Truth

Let's begin with this truth: all churches need revitalizing to some degree. Every pastor sees areas of her or his church in need of help. The youth team needs some leadership training. The women's ministry has snowballed, requiring a structural overhaul to sustain growth. The list of ministry areas in need of constant support is unending. There are those situations; however, when a church, for reasons we will examine, has lost its way requiring total revitalization.

The visible outward sign of a church in need of revitalization is a consistent stagnation and/or decline in membership and evangelistic effectiveness. Decline and ineffectiveness are only the fruits of more significant problems. Somewhere in the history of a local church, it drifted from its vision for its community. No one intended for it to happen; the drift was slow. It went virtually unnoticed by many. Then suddenly, the local church found itself in a leadership or a financial crash. Fingers are pointed, and feelings are hurt. Sadly, some are washed out and never again connect with a local church.

I want to explore three marks signaling a church is in trouble. While there may be more marks, my involvement in and research of churches requiring revitalization has led me to see these three as chief. The ordering of these marks is purposeful. They paint the picture of a church moving away from vision toward decline and death.

The Church Is Led by Crisis Not Vision

When a church is led by crisis and not God-given vision, it is a candidate for revitalization. Every

church, whether healthy or not, experiences a real disaster. A leading member of the church becomes ill and dies. Unexpected expenses push the limits of an already tight budget. The myriad of problems church leaders faces every day is nearly endless. The church's business is building people. Building people comes with a certain amount of unpredictability. Unpredictability can cause seasons of crisis.

Healthy churches navigate crises through their God-given vision. They stay on track because they have a sense of mission and calling that is articulated in their unique vision. Crisis does not equate with confusion in the healthy church. Instead, because of vision, they have systems and policies in place to guide the leadership team. When situations arise not addressed through the current system, vision provides the framework through which new policies are formulated and implemented. God-given vision becomes a source of stability and comfort when confusion and chaos are at the door.

Unhealthy churches tend not to have a guiding God-given central vision. I am not saying they do not have a vision statement. They may have a beautifully crafted set of words hanging on the wall. There is certainly no shortage of pithy and pleasant statements to borrow and tweak to give the façade of vision. The problem is this, the posted vision statement is peripheral, not central to the life of the church. The vision statement has no influence on the culture of the church. Instead, the central vision of the church is created, sustained, and driven by the latest church crisis.

Let me reiterate, crisis comes to every church. The difference between a healthy and unhealthy church is what happens during and after the crisis. In the unhealthy church, the crisis provides a momentary vision to fill the otherwise visionless vacuum. In times of crisis, both types of churches may form classes to equip people. Pastors may prepare sermons to encourage the congregation. Policies may be developed to help circumvent future problems. But when the unhealthy church comes to the end of this crisis, another vacuum develops. Without a central God-given vision, the only thing left is waiting for the next crisis. In no small way, the crisis becomes the purpose of the church.

I have been in churches where the above scenario is played out so much it becomes part of their leadership DNA. The congregation views the pastor's role as a crisis manager, not a shepherd. This type of church culture impacts its ability to have sustained growth. Newcomers may stick around for a while. They may even endure a few crisis moments, thinking it the exception rather than the rule. Eventually, the up and down of crisis-vacuum-crisis leads to nausea and people leave. The kinds of people who do stay are those who thrive on crisis because it gives them a sense of purpose. Consequently, the problem is perpetuated.

When a church has no central God-given vision, it has no choice but to be led by the crisis. The result is a chaotic atmosphere where most newcomers cannot thrive. Because the church struggles to attract and retain newcomers, it becomes inward-focused. In time the congregation ceases to reflect the community it is called to serve.

The Congregation No Longer Reflects the Community It Is Called to Serve.¹

The town I live and pastor in has a population of about 5,300 people. It is predominantly white, with slightly more women than men. The city has a wide variety of ages, but the median age is 35. The

congregation God has called me to serve is predominantly white, has more women than men and a median age of 60. Recently a church member came to me and said, "Pastor, our church is only a few funerals away from dead!"

I assured her the situation was not that dire, and the leadership team was aware of what was happening. We have engaged in lengthy discussions about how we are and are not reflecting the broader community. We are working to find solutions and build a strategy to remedy the disparity. But it was one of the major factors leading to the decision to undergo the process of revitalization.

Whether your church is in a mega-city or a rural village, change is inevitable. People come, and people go. Organizations thrive and die in big cities and small towns. The pace of change differs from one population group to another but community change is constant. The shifting sands of our community make-up cannot be ignored for the sake of comfort or tradition.

While serving as a missionary church planter in the Republic of South Africa, I was called on to assist a dying congregation. The church had, at one time, been a thriving part of the local community. But something happened. An era of deep-seated racial segregation came to an end and people in that community began to leave. In ten years, the city underwent a drastic change.

Most whites left, and a whole new ethnically diverse population took their place. This meant the community no longer spoke one language. Instead, the streets were filled with a host of languages and colors representing the New South Africa. But the church ignored the change even as its membership rapidly declined.

As I spoke to the 80-year-old pastor, he assured me the community had not changed. He patted me on the

¹ Rainer, Thom S. "Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 11 Things I Learned." Blog. *Thom S. Rainer*. Lifeway Christian Resources. 24 April 2013. Accessed: 24 April 2013.

hand and explained his language would always be spoken by everyone in the community. I wanted to cry. The church no longer reflected its community. Sadly, the church had no desire to change so that it might reflect its community. Instead, it moved from one crisis moment to another until the pastor died. Because of the church's poor record-keeping, the building was lost to a religious group whose primary concern was money and not souls.

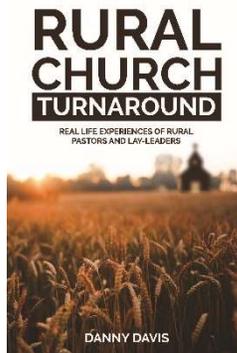
Though the names and situations are different, this scenario is played out daily in churches around the world. Instead of embracing change and asking God for renewed vision, things plod along as usual. Then one day, a dear saint steps up to the pastor and says, "Our church is only a few funerals away from dead." These words should ring like an alarm clock in the ear of a pastor.

If the pastor and church leadership are prone to crisis management, the reality of death is cause for yet another crisis. Panic ensues, sparking a flurry of research and reading. The goal: find a church or churches having sustained growth and copy their model(s). Instead of re-learning the community and how to serve it, leaders often reach for growth models and try to implement them rapidly.

Grasping at Church Growth Models

The logic seems reasonable: what works in one city or town will work in another. But this is not necessarily true. The adoption of a particular model (or a hybrid of several) offers temporary relief at best. The introduction of a new growth model and a new banner may cause short-term excitement. It is not a long-term solution, however.

I will be the first to admit I am guilty of grasping at models. Like most pastors, I want to see the local church thrive. I attend conferences and read books to further my passion for the local church. Inherent in this genuine desire for kingdom expansion is a temptation to grasp at the latest trend or church growth product offered.



A visionary pastor is continually looking for equipping tools to build people. When an idea or product seems likely to be of use, the pastor and leaders move to another step. The product or model is reviewed to understand the principle(s) better, making it successful. Time is spent understanding how the principle(s) will or will not work within the God-given vision of that local church. If the program obviously benefits the central vision it is adapted to fit the needs of that local context. It is not just a photocopied vision.

The unhealthy church does not ignore trends and church growth models. The pastors read many of the same books and attend similar conferences as other pastors. The breakdown occurs in how the trends and church growth models are processed. In the unhealthy church, little time is given to understanding the principle(s). The pastor adopts a new slogan or vision/values statement and presents it to the church with some tweaking. The presentation is highlighted with new banners and signs.

After presenting the "vision," church leaders are handed a box or a notebook. The contents of that product outline how Church ABC carries out its vision in ABC city. There are sections or booklets illustrating how the youth, small groups, and other ministry areas are fulfilling that vision. Each leader sees a glimmer of hope. They begin to see a picture of a better future. The pastor then instructs them to start implementing this model into their ministry. This is where things begin to move toward frustration.

Church leaders were not a part of the visioning process. They may or may not have any idea why a model was even chosen by the pastor. Time has not been allotted to process the proposed change or ask questions about its implementation. Instead of reflecting on how this tool might work in their context, things happen on the fly. The pastor becomes

overloaded with “how-to” questions and the whole effort bogs down. Then frustration becomes the order of the day, and many give up.

Weeks into implementation not even the pastor is still being guided by the new vision. Church leaders have done what they could to accomplish their tasks but were unsuccessful. A slow drift back to “what used to be” occurs. In many cases, the answer to the frustration is finding another church growth model to implement. The cycle of failure continues until church leaders and members lose trust in their pastor.

A strange thing happens at this point. Leaders begin to shield themselves by building silos around their ministry area. Housed within these ministry silos are multiple and sometimes conflicting visions for the church. Tensions rise as ministry leaders compete for an already limited amount of resources. Cliques and factions arise from a multitude of visions. Members feel pressured to choose sides. Many simply choose another church. The attempt to bring health to the church results in more dysfunction and decline.

Final Thoughts

As stated before, all churches require varying degrees of revitalization. The picture I have painted above illustrates a church where drastic change is necessary if it is to survive. It is a sad picture but it is not a hopeless picture. God intends every local church to be healthy. He has given us the Holy Spirit to empower the fulfillment of His intention. God has also placed within every local church the gifting necessary for success. It may not seem like it, but He has.

All Bible-believing churches share the same mission. How that mission is carried out in our locale is the stuff of vision. Every local church deserves a God-given vision. Vision dares leaders and churches to be creative in developing relevant strategies to reach their community. It creates dissatisfaction for irrelevant ill-fitting copycat programs, continually gives leaders the option to say no because they know precisely what yes looks like in their context. God’s vision for a city will call pastors to take risks. Tearing

down silos is not safe. Navigating through the complexity of human emotion tied to programs and people is dangerous. At the risk of sounding cliché, the risk is worth the reward.

Revitalization of a declining church demands pastoral commitment. Pastors carry the responsibility of empowering their church to discover its God-given vision. Finding a God-given vision is not an easy task. It forces pastors to look outward and see the reality of their community. It challenges pastors to look inward to see if the church is reflective of the city, small-town, or rural area, it is rediscovering. Vision also demands pastors spend time asking the Holy Spirit to search his or her heart. The Spirit’s work in revitalization begins with the God-called leader.

Vital to turning around a church in trouble is a partnership with an outside consultant. Pastors committed to seeing their church move from decline to health understand they cannot do it alone.

Consider partnering with Rural Church Turnaround (www.ruralturnaround.com) to help you in your turnaround journey.



Danny Davis is a rural pastor, Bible College professor, and rural church revitalization coach. He has planted and revitalized churches in South Africa and the United States. Danny holds an Ed.D. in Transformational Leadership (Concordia University-Portland). He is married to Sherry and has two adult sons.



Rural Church Turnaround: Real Life Experiences of Rural Pastors and Lay-Leaders – will be available March 2020.

Please visit www.ruralturnaround for more information or to schedule Dr. Davis for a free coaching session or speaking engagement.