

Written by a veteran pastor who loves the local church, this book offers encouraging stories, practical steps, and useful resources for the church leader seeking to lead his church in revitalization. It is filled with Christian hope—a trusting assurance that God still brings new life to dying congregations. Read this work, and apply its insights in your church.

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Yes, dry church bones can come alive, and Bill Henard tells us how. A straight-from-the-shoulder, down-to-earth call for revival I strongly recommend.

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Some argue for prioritizing church planting by observing, “It is easier to give birth than to raise the dead.” With perhaps eighty percent of our churches plateaued or declining, we not only must plant new churches but must seek to revitalize existing churches. Bill Henard’s *Can These Bones Live?* is a superb resource on church revitalization. Filled with biblical and practical wisdom, this book will help guide a revitalization process in your local church. Read it. Digest it. Apply it.

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BILL HENARD CAN THESE BONES LIVE ?

A Practical Guide to Church Revitalization

relating it to Israel's gathering as converted believers in God's kingdom. Regardless of how one views the eschatological significance of this passage, two important ingredients are essential for Israel's return.

The first requirement necessitates the preaching of God's Word. God tells Ezekiel, "Prophecy concerning these bones" (37:4). As Ezekiel obeys, the Scripture unveils this magnificent vision of bones taking on tendons and flesh. Note carefully that the bones described are dry bones. These soldiers who died in battle were not afforded the privilege of a proper burial. They experienced the great disgrace of open decay. Yet God intervenes, and Ezekiel speaks to the bones.

The second standard for revitalization set by God involves the work of the Spirit. The word *breath* occurs in a variety of ways in this passage. That issue causes the reader to remain somewhat in the dark concerning its meaning as God says that He "will cause breath to enter you, and you will live" (37:5). The word for breath in the Hebrew (*ruah*) is actually translated as three different words in English, namely, breath, wind, and spirit. The writer resolves this question as God declares, "I will put My Spirit in you, and you will live" (37:14).³

In order for the church to be revived, it will demand a mighty work of God's Spirit. Following a particular methodology or program does not guarantee success. One might greatly desire for the church to revitalize and grow, but genuine church growth calls for more than personal passion. It requires the Spirit of God. Church revitalization begins with laying the foundation of God's Word as it is preached and followed through a movement of God's Spirit. The two are inseparably linked.

Can these bones live? Only God knows, yet He instills hope in those who desire to see the established church thrive and revive. Just as God miraculously returned Israel to her home, He can bring restoration to a declining, dying church.

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WHY CHURCH REVITALIZATION?

The first question that one must ask is, "Why is there such a great need for church revitalization?" The answer to that question is simple. At present, anywhere from 3500 to 4000 churches across denominational lines are closing their doors every year.⁴

I have read that upwards to 7000 churches shut down, but I have never seen any real research to justify these numbers. An article by Thom Rainer stated that as many as 100,000 American churches will close their doors over the next decade if nothing changes. In this blogpost, Rainer listed eleven signs that a church was dying or already dead. These include:

1. The church refused to look like the community.
2. The church had no community-focused ministries.
3. Members became more focused on memorials.
4. The percentage of the budget for members' needs kept increasing.
5. There were no evangelistic emphases.
6. The members had more and more arguments about what they wanted.
7. With few exceptions, pastoral tenure grew shorter and shorter.
8. The church rarely prayed together.
9. The church had no clarity as to why it existed.
10. The members idolized another era.
11. The facilities continued to deteriorate.⁵

One thought gleaned from this book is the importance of assessment. Everything can look good throughout the initial meetings with committees and even during the "honeymoon" season. Yet the iceberg is melting, and if no one takes the time to assess the underlying problems, a great disaster is about to take place and the church dies.

The Interview Process

I am very much aware of the fact that some who read this book may be in a system whereby a board or a bishop makes pastoral appointments. In knowing these kinds of situations, the prospective pastor can still ask good questions that can be helpful both for him and for his congregation. In this section, though, I want to deal primarily with pastors who are called by church search committees rather than through an appointment process. The entire book can actually serve as an assessment tool, as the prospective pastor can evaluate the church's past and statistics in light of the eleven reasons why churches fall into decline.

The Big Lie. Not wishing to burst anyone's bubble, but the fact is in most cases, the pastoral search process is a big lie. It is much like dating. Two people, in some form or fashion, find themselves attracting to each other, and one contacts the other for an official date. The guy wants desperately to impress the girl, so he actually takes a shower and uses soap. He combs his hair and puts on deodorant. While on the date, he watches his manners and does not reveal the real self who sits around the house in sweat pants, rarely even brushing his teeth (not to mention other things for which guys are known).

The girl finesses herself to the point that her makeup is perfect, her outfit matches without a single conflict, and she barely eats because that is what girls do. Politeness permeates the evening, but upon arriving at home, she goes back to being whatever she was before the date commenced. This practice continues on both parts for quite a while, perhaps even until the wedding day. Then the morning after the honeymoon arrives. Bad breath, bad hair, and bad habits are

observed and sometimes repulsed. Now the real relationship begins.

During the pastor search process, both parties present themselves at their best. The church search team does not particularly want to prospective pastor to see the church's "dirty laundry." They speak of the best of the best. I do not believe that committees intentionally lie about their particular situation. Sometimes they do not understand the dire need of their church, or they have reached a point of desperation whereby they have concluded that, if the pastor knows about the church's problems, he will not accept their invitation to serve at their church. Therefore, they avoid discussions regarding finances, staff, buildings, and neighborhoods. They divert questions away from the negative and move the conversation to the positive.

Questions to Ask. Understanding how these things occur, as a prospective pastor, one must be extremely careful in the interview process. Do not completely determine the acceptance or rejection of the call based solely on problems or challenges but be aware of them. It is wise, however, to **know your challenges before you step into the pastorate.**

Here is a list of questions that should be asked in the interview process.

1. If I come to be your pastor, what is your personal expectation of me? What do you want to see me do?

As a prospective pastor, you need to understand the investment that the search committee has in you. As a result, many of them will have personal expectations of the pastor beyond the expectations of the church. Facts show that oftentimes members of the search committee will end up leaving the church because their personal expectations were not met.

2. To whom does the congregation look for leadership or approval? Who leads the church?

The pastor wants to be the leader, but oftentimes the

congregation looks to someone else for leadership. The pastor needs to know who this person/these people are. Read John Maxwell's book *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, particularly his story about Claude in Law 5, for an understanding of this principle.¹⁵ The goal of this information is not for you to find how who leads so that you might manipulate a relationship with that person but so that you will be aware of your challenges. Remember that leadership is earned, not demanded, in the church.

3. Is there any one thing that you would not be willing to do even if it would mean that your church would grow (obviously as long as it is biblical, ethical, and moral)?

Churches have sacred cows, and the prospective pastor needs to be aware of these. This particular question will probably need to be pressed and restated. The members of the committee will probably state that they are willing to make any change if it will help them to grow. The problem comes when they might not realize that a change needs to happen in a particular area of which they are fond or involved. Change is extremely difficult. No one likes change, not even pastors!

4. What did you like and dislike about your previous pastors? What were some of their biggest mistakes? What were some of their greatest successes?

Obviously, a pastor does not want to repeat mistakes, but it is also true that what the congregation might perceive as a mistake was more of personal dislike. You want to know the successes because a wise pastor will learn to build upon the successes of the past.

5. Is there a particular topic that could be addressed in a sermon that would be totally unacceptable by the congregation?

This question will assist in discovering some of the hidden

moral or political issues with which the congregation deals at present or in the past. Most churches want to see themselves as conservative, but their personal views on certain moral or biblical issues will be enlightening.

6. What was the subject of your most contentious business meeting? How do you normally conduct your business meetings?

Depending on the polity of the church, most churches make at least some decisions through a business setting. One can discover the atmosphere of the church by understanding how members conduct themselves while discussing the needs of the church. A greater understanding into the congregation's perspective of pastoral leadership is also gained depending upon how involved the congregation wants the pastor to be during its business sessions.

7. What is your perspective on how the church spends money?

Money offers one of the most volatile insights into the church's future and past problems.

8. How have the church finances fluctuated over the past five years?

A prospective pastor will want to examine the church budget, expenses, and debt at least over the last five years, if possible. One can gain a glimpse into what the church has considered to be important, and what they have neglected.

9. What are some of the times that you consider that you have grown spiritually and what are you doing now to grow in your walk with Christ?

Be careful in asking these questions, making sure that you have shared the answers for your own personal walk first. One suggestion would be to have them write out these answers if they would prefer. Normally, the search committee is a cross-section of people from the congregation, who represent those who

are the most spiritual. That fact, however, is not always true. At a later time, I will be discussing the stakeholders and powerbrokers in the church. Sometimes these leaders do not want to make these decisions because of the fallout if things do not go well. Therefore they will lead through others. It is important that you know where your leadership is spiritually. Being a leader does not necessarily equate with being deeply spiritual.

10. What is your personal vision or dream for the church? What would you desire to see happen in terms of worship, discipleship, and evangelism/missions?

The question serves the purpose of aiding the pastor in discerning the current direction of the church. If the church needs revitalization, that fact should be noticeable in the dreams of the committee. If an absence exists in recognizing the need for revitalization, this response will give the prospective pastor insight into the general perspective of the church. They may need revitalization but they do not know that they need revitalization, a reality that presents its own set of challenges.

Included with these particular questions should be discussions relating to the history of the church, the specific theological leanings of the committee and the congregation, the church staff and relationship expectations and supervision, compensation, and questions regarding church governance. All of these factors play a part in assisting a prospective pastor to understand the challenges before him and to be able to plot out a course for church revitalization.

The Established Pastor

Another recognized scenario stems from the individual who has served a particular church for some years but now recognizes that the obstacles he faces originate more out of a need for revitalization than just the ordinary struggles that every church faces. While he has obviously moved beyond the interview process, this particular

situation can be very advantageous. First, the established pastor has developed rapport with his congregation. Trust has occurred, especially if he has walked through any particular crisis with the church and has stayed rather than bailing out to another church. He knows the community and the particulars of additional obstacles facing the church and its growth and health.¹⁶

Having these advantages, a suggested process for the established pastor would be to put together a revitalization team or committee that can help in evaluating the church's need for revitalization. Some churches already have a strategic planning, long-range planning, or leadership team, any of which would serve this process well. It would be advisable for the pastor to handpick this team, if possible, putting together people from a cross-section of ages, economics, experiences, and lengths of membership. In my opinion, this process would be the most desirable, yet I recognize that some churches may not allow the pastor this particular privilege. Nevertheless, a team of people would be greatly advantageous in evaluating the church's current situation and in leading the church through change. The same questions need to be asked as with a prospective pastor. Advantageously, the established pastor and the leadership team will be better equipped to find the answers.

Throughout this book, most of the suggestions or evaluations will be directed at the new pastor who is interviewing with or who arrives on a fresh church field. Nevertheless, the established pastor can apply all of those principles to the church. In fact, the established pastor most probably will have already recognized some to the problems and obstacles and will be a few steps ahead of the new pastor. The recommendations made in this book should aid him in formulating a vision and strategic plan for bringing about revitalization.

Stakeholder Symmetry

Tom Cheney, Carl George, Robert Logan, and Gary McIntosh, among others, have all taught or written on the idea of stakeholders in the church. The concept is that a number of people, both inside

Appendix 7



Church Revitalization

Assessment Tool

Finance

- What is the average giving percentage of individuals?
- What is the average giving percentage per family unit?
- What is the per capita weekly giving average in the
 - ▶ Previous year?
 - ▶ Last three years?
 - ▶ Last five years?
- How much debt does the church have?
- How does the church manage its finances and communicate that process to the congregation?
- Is there any system of endowment or legacy giving in place?

Planning/Goal Setting

- Does the church have any kind of planning in place to help the church know where it is going?
 - ▶ To help leaders develop a vision?
 - ▶ To better allocate resources?
 - ▶ To build teamwork?
- What is the church's perspective on
 - ▶ Its mission?
 - ▶ Its purpose?
 - ▶ Its vision?
 - ▶ Its plan?

- Where is the church in its vision cycle?
- Does the church have a mission/vision statement, and how does it fit into the mission and purpose of the church?

Growth Barriers

- Who are the Stakeholders (people with a vested interest)?
 - ▶ Who are the Stakeholders in the church?
 - ▶ Who are the Stakeholders outside the church?
 - ▶ What are the Spiritual barriers – the Spiritual Stakeholders?

Growth Barriers (cont'd)

- What are the other barriers the church faces?
 - ▶ Is there a financial recession?
 - ▶ Is there a declining population base?
 - ▶ Is there competition with other churches?
 - ▶ Is the community highly resistant to the gospel?
 - ▶ Is the community stable?

Structures in the Church

- What fellowship structures and opportunities are there in the church?
- What ministry structures and opportunities are there in the church?
- What leadership/governance structures are there in the church?
 - ▶ What structure is currently in place?
 - ▶ What improvements could be made to this structure?
 - ▶ What hindrances are present that will prevent revitalization and growth?
 - ▶ Will the church/denomination be open to allowing any changes in leadership structure?
 - ▶ What hindrances to church revitalization are present because of the current leadership structures?

- ▶ Are there any ways to work within the system, while at the same time, prevent the hindrances from affecting the church?

- What organizational structures are there in the church?

Outreach/Evangelistic Approaches

- Are members more concerned about the lost than their own preferences and comfort?
- Is the church led to pray for lost persons?
- Are the members of the church open to reaching people who don't look or act like them?
- Do conflicts and critics zap the evangelistic energy of the church?
- Do small groups and Sunday school classes seek to reach lost persons within their groups?
- Is the leadership of the church evangelistic?
- Do the sermons regularly communicate the gospel?
- Are there ministries in the church that encourage members to be involved in evangelistic outreach and lifestyle?
- Have programs become ends in themselves rather than means to reach people?
- Is there any process of accountability for members to be more evangelistic?

Community Analysis

- How well does the church look like the community?
- How well does the church serve as an advocate for the community?
- Does the church have any healthy partnerships with other churches?

Mission/Vision

- ▶ How much is the church driven by mission rather than programming?
- Does the church have its own identity?
- Does the church know God's specific plan for it at this time?

Assimilation Effectiveness

- Does a new person in the church
 - ▶ Identify with the goals of the church?
 - ▶ Attend worship and special services regularly? (Hebrews 10:25)
 - ▶ Attend Communion and Sunday School regularly and have Bible reading and family devotions in the home? (Acts 2:42)
 - ▶ Attend some special functions of the congregation such as council meetings, church picnics, special workshops, and midweek services?
 - ▶ Grow spiritually? (2 Peter 3:18)
 - ▶ Become affiliated with the congregation?
 - ▶ Have six or more friends in the church?
 - ▶ Have a task or role that is appropriate for his or her spiritual gift(s)? Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4; 1 Peter 4:10-11)
 - ▶ Become involved in a fellowship group? (Acts 2:42)
 - ▶ Give regularly and generously? (1 Corinthians 16:2)
 - ▶ Tell others about the Lord and His church? (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8)
- Does the church as a whole
 - ▶ Attract guests and is there a culture to do so?
 - ☐ Preach about and pray for new people to come to the church?
 - ☐ Provide opportunities for church members to invite their friends?
 - ☐ Have a user-friendly Website?

- ▶ Conduct follow-up with first-time guests?

- ☐ How does the church begin follow-up the moment a person steps onto the church campus?
- ☐ Has the church established intentional touches that minister to newcomers and communicate effectively the church's mission?
- ▶ Provide connection points for new people?
 - ☐ Does the church have a New Member/Church Information Class?
 - ☐ What kind of small group ministry does the church have?
 - ☐ What kind of service opportunities for both guests and members does the church provide?

Perceptions/Attitudes

- What is the primary thought of the church about itself?
- What is the primary perspective held by the community about the church?

Data and Statistical Analysis

- What is the worship attendance over the past five years?
- What is the small group Bible study attendance over the past five years?
- What are the budget receipts and expenditures over the past five years?
- What other statistical information is there that would help?

Demographic Assessment

- The church rolls
 - ▶ Where do the church members live?
 - ▶ What is the age of the membership?
 - ▶ What are the marital statuses of the congregation?
 - ▶ What is the median income of the congregation?
 - ▶ What is the educational level of the congregation? • The church demographics

- ▶ How many small groups does the church have, where do they meet, and what is their purpose?
- ▶ How many new people have visited the church over the last year to two years?
- The community demographics
 - ▶ What are the population changes over the past 5 years and within a 5-mile radius of the church?
 - ▶ What are the changes in the housing within a 5-mile radius of the church?

Small Group/Sunday School

- Is there adequate space for present and future growth?
- Do class sizes match room sizes?
- What is the quality of the educational facilities?
- Are new units being created?
- What is the quality of teaching and how much time is allocated for teaching?
- What type of curriculum strategy is in place?
- How is the small group organized?
 - ▶ Does each class have a teacher and assistant teacher?
 - ▶ Is there a fellowship leader?
 - ▶ Is there a process for ministry within and outside the class?
 - ▶ Are records kept and does the class follow up with members?

Small Group/Sunday School (cont'd)

- ▶ Is there an outreach/evangelism leader?
- ▶ Is there a prayer leader?
- How does the staff relate to the Sunday school?
 - ▶ Is it a priority of the pastor?
 - ▶ Does the staff have responsibilities within the Sunday school?
 - ▶ Does the staff attend Sunday school?
 - ▶ How often and how well are volunteers recognized and rewarded?

- How does the Sunday school secure new teachers and do teacher training?
- What lines of accountability are in place?

Worship Issues

- What is the primary worship style?
- What worship wars has the church experienced or is the church experiencing?
- How well does the church actually worship?
- What is (are) the primary emphasis of the worship experience?

Prayer Emphasis

- How well does the staff pray together?
- What prayer opportunities are offered to the church?

Missions

- Does the church have a mission plan and vision in place?
- How well does the church see itself as a Great Commission Church?
- Does the church follow through with an Acts 1:8 strategy?

Facilities Analysis

- What is the overall condition of the church property?
- What is the condition of the nursery and children's areas?
- What do the major hallways communicate?
- What does the primary church sign communicate?
- How visible is the church property?
- What is the condition of the most frequently used women's restroom?

Facilities Analysis (cont'd)

- What is the condition of the worship center?
- Where is the main entrance, is it visible, and is there adequate signage?

- How visible is the directional church signage?
- How accessible and available is church parking?

Theological Issues

- Where does the church see itself theologically?
- How does its theology affect its practice?
- Is the church divided over theology?

Ministry-Staff Alignment

- Initial questions to consider
 - ▶ Would the church be open to looking for God-called individuals to come in a bi-vocational capacity to help fill the voids?
 - ▶ What are the demographics of the church and what do these demographics necessitate regarding staffing?
 - ▶ What demographic group will provide the greatest potential for outreach?
- The characteristics of a high-performance team
 - ▶ Is there a clear, common purpose?
 - ▶ Are there crystal clear roles?
 - ▶ Is there accepted leadership?
 - ▶ What are the effective processes in place for accomplishing goals?
 - ▶ Are there solid, interpersonal relationships?
 - ▶ How well does the team communicate?
 - ▶ Is there a regular process in place for evaluating staff and staff goals?

Leadership

- The Pastor
 - ▶ Am I the right person to lead this church?
 - ▶ Can I make the cultural adjustment to this congregation and community?

- ▶ Could I be a more effective leader in another church context?
- ▶ What type of church should I be leading?

Leadership (cont'd)

- The Staff
 - ▶ Who should be on the staff?
 - ▶ What position should that person hold?
 - ▶ Who does not need to be on the staff?
 - ▶ What is the calling of this person?
 - ▶ Who will be affected by this person's change in position or departure?
 - ▶ What is gained or lost in making this decision?

ENDNOTES

1. See Lamar Eugene Cooper, Sr., *Ezekiel*, vol. 17 in *The New American Commentary*, ed. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 319-21, for an excellent argument as to the various schools of thought regarding the purpose and theological focus of Ezekiel 37.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.
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4. Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 19.
5. Thom Rainer, "Autopsy of a Deceased Church," [on-line], available from: <http://thomrainer.com/2013/04/24/autopsy-of-a-deceased-church-11-things-i-learned/>. Rainer has also put these ideas into book form. See Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church, 12 Ways to Keep Your Church Alive* (Nashville: B&H, 2014).
6. Shawna L. Anderson, Jessica Hamar Martinez, Catherine Hoegeman, Gary Adler, and Mark Chaves. "Dearly Departed: How Often Do Congregations Close?" in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2008, vol. 47, issue 2, 321-28.
7. Hartford Institute for Religion Research, "Fast Facts about American Religion," Internet, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html.
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9. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22 in *The New American Commentary*