

A Guide to Church Revitalization:
Guide Book No. 005
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A GUIDE TO

CHURCH REVITALIZATION

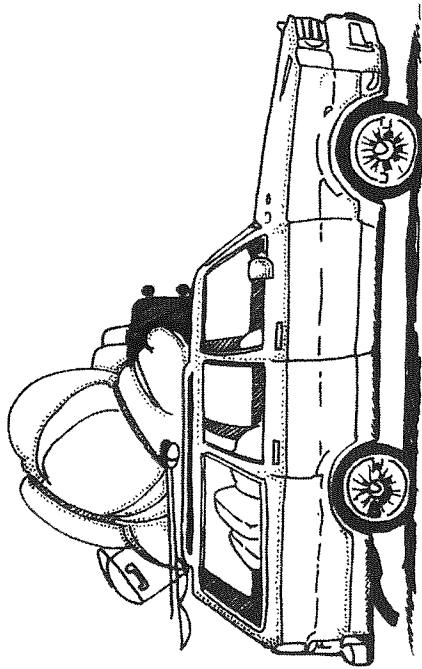
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A ROAD MAP TO REVITALIZATION:

Pursuing Faithfulness and Survival

BRIAN CROFT WITH TIM BEOUGHNER



When you plan a vacation, there is so much to do. There are clothes to pack, laundry to wash, money to save, lodging to book, transportation to decide, snacks to buy, and on and on. It can be especially exhausting if you have children, but it all works to the end goal of going on vacation.

There has been plenty said already about the key components to revitalization. Leadership, preaching, membership, and preparing your church for change all need to be considered before moving forward in the work of revitalization. But at some point, the work must begin, and knowing the way to proceed is essential. The most well-planned vacation will be a waste if there is no road map to get you to your destination. Likewise, when it comes to church revitalization, a good plan in itself is not enough. You must have a road map to know what to do, where to go, and how to reach your destination.

This chapter seeks to create that road map. But before we dive into the details, it is

essential that you believe in the work of revitalization. There is a popular saying among church planters: "It is easier to give birth than to raise the dead," meaning that starting a church is often easier than restarting an existing one. Church revitalization is always difficult, but we must believe that revitalization is possible. We must believe in a God of resurrection power! Further, we must also believe revitalization is worth it. Jesus loves his church. He loves not just healthy, growing churches, but he also loves sick, struggling churches. Jesus loves churches that need revitalization, and we should love what Jesus loves. We must believe that helping a struggling church "recover her first love" is a vital kingdom ministry, but it requires pursuing faithfulness as well as survival.

These two elements — faithfulness and survival — are essential to traversing successfully. There are the things a pastor must do to be faithful to this work, and there are the things a pastor must do to survive in this work. One without

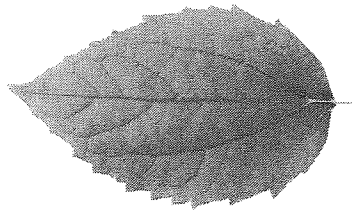
the other in the work of revitalization leads to disaster.

This chapter seeks to help pastors embrace both facets and marry them together as he sets his eyes towards the goal of a healthy, faithful, local church that possesses true spiritual life.

Faithfulness

This facet seeks to answer the important question, "What does God instruct us to do?" In other words, how does God's Word inform what this road map should look like? There are five basic principles that every pastor must follow to be faithful, regardless the kind of revitalization work before them.

1 TRUST THE WORD It is tempting for many pastors to look to modern gimmicks and pragmatism to bring life to their struggling church. But the answer is the same as it was when Paul instructed Timothy to "preach the Word" (2 Tim 4:2). Only God by his Spirit can breathe life into death. This is captured in the way God's Spirit by the power of his Word



breathed life into the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37). It is the same for the old, historic, established church about to close its doors. Pastors must preach and teach the Word in such a way that they believe it is the only way God can revive a struggling congregation. If a pastor doesn't trust God's Word, he will trust in something else to bring life.

2 SHEPHERD SOULS In many cases, the decline and struggle of local churches can be traced to decades of unfaithful shepherds who cared more about numbers, programs, politics, and personal gain than the biblical call for pastors to shepherd the souls of God's people (1 Pet 5:1-4; Heb 13:17). Many churches need-

ing revitalization have hurting, broken, discouraged sheep that need a shepherd to care for them and nurture them back to health. This is where a pastor's time needs to be spent as he seeks to be faithful. If God is going to breathe life into his church, it must come through the revival of his people who are there.

3 LOVE ALL PEOPLE As we see the imperatives for pastors in Scripture to "shepherd the flock" (1 Pet 5:2) and to do so "as those who will give an account" (Heb 13:17), it is important to recognize that pastors don't get to choose who they will answer for in the church. It is tempting to conclude that a pastor will only answer for those who like him and gladly submit to his authority and ministry, but that is not the case. This is why a commitment to love all people in the church is essential to faithfulness. Some in a church are more difficult to love than others, but the key to faithful revitalization is not just pouring into the teachable and supportive, but pursuing those hard to

love and seeking to win those who are cynical toward your ministry. Tell your people and show your people — all of them — that you love them.

4 PRAY HARD The despair and discouragement that often accompany dying churches can create a panicked approach that could lead pastors to act hastily and think they have to solve every problem now. Sometimes the best thing to do to be faithful in a struggling church is to stop and pray and cry out to God for your church and your people. The despair of church revitalization can wire us to try and solve the financial crisis, rather than praying for God to provide. It can cause us to remove leaders quickly instead of praying that God would intervene and mature that leader. If we truly believe that God — and not our clever schemes — is the one who breathes life into a dying church, we better make sure we find ourselves on our knees crying to the Chief Shepherd who loves our church more than we do.

Faithfulness requires a pastor to love the older in the congregation and realize he needs them in a revitalization work if that church is to reflect God's design.

5 CELEBRATE OLDER MEMBERS

If a church has been around for many years, inevitably there are long-term older members still in these churches who long for their church to return to its former glory. These are typically the ones who have kept the struggling church open for many years, but are also the ones who are commonly resistant to needed change. Because of this, these longtime faithful

members can appear to be more of a hindrance for renewed life instead of a benefit. Faithfulness in revitalization is to take these long-term members, love and accept them where they are, and find ways to celebrate them.

It is all too common for a young pastor to walk into a church and conclude these older members are the problem and therefore the solution is to run them out. But God reveals his design for the local church to have both old and young in the church (Titus 2:1-8). Faithfulness requires a pastor to love the older in the congregation and realize he needs them in a revitalization work if that church is to reflect God's design. If a pastor will find ways to celebrate these long-term faithful saints that have kept that church going when everyone else bailed out, it will cause them to be most receptive to the younger who also need to come to the church for the church survive into the next generation.

Survival

There are many pastors who have been faithful to walk in

these biblical principles just listed. We wish we could say that faithfulness is enough. Unfortunately, the wounded sheep and lack of general health that accompany many churches in need of revitalization create hostile environments for pastors who seek this work, leaving faithful pastors either fired or fallen into deep despair. Because of this, there is required a divine wisdom and discernment for every pastor who steps into this work. Here are five areas of this required wisdom that are critical to a pastor's survival for both his ministry as well as the preservation of his own soul.

1 BE PATIENT In the early years of revitalization, pastors are often convinced they — in contrast to their members who are so resistant to change — are the patient ones. We have both thought this at one time or another in our revitalization efforts in the face of criticism, conflicts, and attacks on our ministries. We as pastors thought we were being more patient and faithful than the church mem-

bers. As the years have passed, we have realized increasingly that it was the other way around; these faithful saints wounded by previous pastors were the patient ones. They were patient with us as we grew as preachers, as we learned to love them, and as we made rookie mistakes. They were patient through all the changes they did not understand or agree with, yet somehow trusted us not knowing how this would turn out. The longer a pastor endures, is patient, and stays, the greater will become his realization that he was shown much grace.

Patience might be the most important key to survival as it will cause a pastor to wait when he needs to wait. It will cause a pastor to make decisions with a longer view in mind. Patience will cause a pastor to forebear with a difficult person. Patience is not just a significant fruit of the Spirit in every Christian's life but a key element to both surviving and avoiding great discouragement. And if that is not persuasive enough, let us be reminded that patience is commanded of the pastor, "I solemnly charge you in the pres-

ence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (2 Tim 4:1-2).

2 EXPECT SUFFERING If you are a pastor trying to revitalize a church holding on to the hope suffering will not come, you should find another line of work now. It is amazing the number of pastors ready to resign after about two years of ministry in one place because they finally met the adversaries the enemy placed in an open door of ministry. As many pastors talk through discouragement and struggles, we eventually ask them, "Did you think becoming the pastor of that church would not bring with it adversaries to your gospel ministry?"

Ironically, in many cases it is their confrontation with adversaries against the gospel and their ministries that make them conclude it is time for the next place of ministry. The

Apostle Paul takes the opposite approach — the presence of adversaries makes him conclude he must stay longer: "But I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries" (1 Cor 16:8-9).

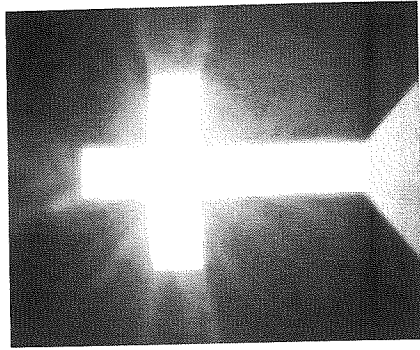
Becoming a pastor means placing our families on the front lines of spiritual battle. Why are pastors so surprised when the enemy comes against our gospel ministry, especially in places it has been suppressed for decades? Charles Simeon said, "Brothers we must not mind a little suffering." Expect suffering in this work of revitalization so when it does come, you will not be shocked, and preparation for this suffering can lead to your survival through it.

3 PICK BATTLES WISELY A key to a soldier's survival on the battlefield is to know there are land mines out there and to avoid stepping on them. The work of revitalization is similar in that you can survive a long time if you can know where the battles are,

and know which ones to fight and when to fight them.

Yet, even when you step on a mine, or choose a battle unwisely, God will use it to give you discernment to know what battles to fight tomorrow. God in his sovereign grace uses the worst moments in our ministries to bring perspective like nothing else once real revitalizing change occurs. Because of the trials we have endured in our churches, we both have a perspective in decision-making that few in our churches now have. This perspective allows a special wisdom and discernment to choose battles wisely.

So when our newest seminary student is really uptight about those eight to 10 members on the fringe or those family members of long-time church members still on the rolls, he does not remember the blood, sweat, tears, and bruises that came to remove hundreds of members a few years ago. He does not know about the finger pointing threat received in the deacons meeting five years earlier. God grows a unique discernment and wisdom in you through the



pastoral scars of battle. Nothing can serve a pastor as well as the wisdom wrought by scars. Those scars will bring wisdom, and that wisdom is a key to survival.

4 LOVE DIFFICULT PEOPLE We all want everyone to receive us and our ministries instantly. But we have learned that it is sweeter and more rewarding to have church members love and trust you who once were hostile to you. We have some incredibly supportive people in our churches now, but the relationships that mean the most are those with whom we fought in the early years, strug-

gled to love in any way, and yet grew and learned to love. To be greeted every Sunday with a smile, hug, and warmth by the man who led the charge to get you fired just a few years ago is hard to describe.

There is a special evidence of God's redemptive grace every time a pastor sees that man in the church who was once his foe, but now is his friend. Without a commitment to love the most difficult of people through the conflicts and struggles, this relationship redemption is not experienced. Loving those who are hostile to you and your ministry is essential to discern whether they are a wolf in sheep's clothing or a hurting sheep longing to trust a shepherd who would prove worthy of that trust. We must not forget that all persons (including us) can be difficult to love at times, as the poem reminds us: "To dwell above with saints we love, that will be grace and glory. But to live below with folks we know, now that's a different story!" Sometimes that is a very different story, but a key part of revitalization is let-

ting Christ love difficult people through you.

5 TRUST THE CHIEF SHEPHERD The Chief Shepherd never abandons his under shepherds. Christ promises never to leave nor forsake his sheep. This is arguably the most important truth we must hold for survival. Jesus is with you! He knows the struggle in your church. He is near and working, even when you do not see it. That is the smiling face behind the frowning providence. He is your shield in that deacons meeting. He is there when you are publically rebuked. He is compassionate when your mistake or failure in a decision harms the church. He is sad when his sheep attack you because they do not understand and are afraid. He is your defender when wolves in the church try to harm the sheep. The Chief Shepherd will never abandon his shepherds. He is with you and doing whatever he must to give you the grace to remain steadfast in this task to care for souls on his behalf until he returns. How could we think Jesus would not fight relentlessly

TRUST

for those who faithfully labor, suffer, and endure to care for his sheep? If a pastor can hang on to this unshakable truth of being in Christ and an under shepherd of the Chief Shepherd, the most brutal church revitalization can be survived and even revived.

Conclusion

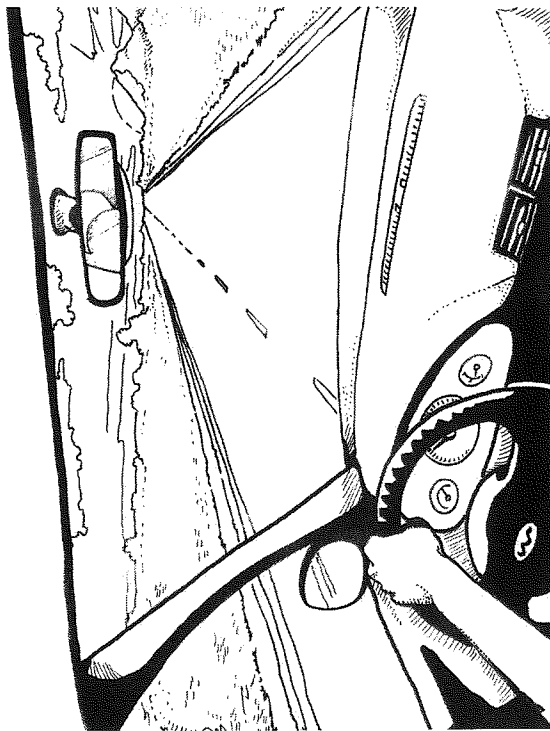
There is a call upon every pastor to be faithful, but you will not have the opportunity to be

faithful in the work of revitalization without a means of survival. This is the road map to guide you to accomplish both. Does this road map scare you? Are you ready to set out on the journey of this noble work? Our hope is that this guide will not just give you the tools to move forward in your journey, but provide an unmistakable reminder that the Chief Shepherd will always be with you as you travel.

ARE WE THERE YET?

Indicators of Success

ERIC BANCROFT



Are we there yet?" asked Anthony, the exasperated little boy who had enough of being strapped down to his NASA-inspired car seat.

This road trip was a lot longer than he expected. He had been told that, when they arrived, it would prove worth the wait and just as exciting as he hoped, but he was now in doubt. He was only getting glimpses of the journey as he could just barely peek out the window, thanks to a car door that was not designed with little boys' insatiable curiosity of the world in mind. His patience was beginning to run thin as the duration of his waiting approached an eternity.

Anthony's road trip experience is often how many pastors today feel about pastoring their churches. They started on the pastoral journey with the expectation that it would take some time to arrive at their destination, but they believed it would be worth the wait. Eventually, more time has passed than they first expected, and they wonder if they are ever going to get there. Perhaps you have felt this way.

Good news. You are not alone in this godly yearning for God's glory in local churches. Other pastors over the centuries have longed to see their churches grow in godliness and for every Christian under their care to be "mature in Christ" (Col 1:28).

While some church consultants wax eloquently today about the promises of brand marketing, engaging websites, and updated fonts on church documents, I would like to encourage you to strive for something more promising. This is an appetite for the Word, a culture of discipleship, passion for evangelism, and unity within a plurality of leaders. When such features are in place, you can be assured you are arriving at the destination the Lord intended for your church.

Appetite for the Word

Rare is the church that calls a man to come and pastor them without the expectation that he will teach them from the Bible. Candidating conversations can include questions like, "What would you want to teach us from the Bible?" and "What transla-

tion do you normally preach from?" Such questions presuppose the man will be teaching from the Bible. The problem, however, comes to many men after they have been installed in their churches and begin to preach week after week. Confusion and frustration begin to be voiced by many congregants who were under the impression that the pastor would reference the Bible as a support but, for the most part, would provide "a word from the Lord for today."

It should be your prayer and committed practice to unfold to the people of God the whole counsel of God. This will demonstrate your constant commitment to the Great Commission, specifically "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:20). The best way to commit to this is through expository preaching, the kind of preaching where the sermon is closely tethered to the text. While there might be an understandable occasional desire to deliver pastorally informed topical sermons due to something the entire congregation is facing, the majority of

your preaching should be done in an expositional manner. Doing so helps guarantee that your people encounter the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), and allows God to speak to his people without

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you continuing to "interrupt" with what you would like to say.

As the years begin to pass by, your church's appetite will be weaned off of cultural commentaries, psychological assessments, and other in-complete offerings and will instead hunger for the Word of God. They will begin to understand that this was what Jesus prayed for them when he said in John 17:17, "Sanctify them in the truth; your

word is truth." Their growth as Christians is directly connected to their exposure and obedience to the Word of God.

Something exciting will begin to take place in the rest of the church as a result of this growing appetite. They will want this commitment to the Word of God to inform other areas of ministry offerings. They will look freshly at the VBS curriculum to make sure it is accurate. They will audit their youth pastor's sermons to make sure they're biblically sound. They will ask for their Sunday school classes to consistently complement what they have been taught as a church. Even the books they pass around to each other will start to be replaced with more solid and trusted resources. This appetite for God's Word in every area of the church comes from years of preaching God's Word to God's people.

Culture of Discipleship

"If they knew the truth about me they would never want to talk to me." One of our ladies in our church said this when we were meeting. It had come after

a recent sermon when she felt particularly challenged by the implications of the gospel in her life, namely that she could confess her sin to her Christian friends so that they could encourage her, pray for her, and hold her accountable. The problem was she thought they were going to learn something about her that they didn't already know. I assured her they already knew the truth about her — that she was so sinful that it took the Son of God to die on the cross to make payment for her sins. After that reminder, it was just a matter of the details.

When the Word of God is preached, people begin to understand who they are and the hope they can have in Christ. This explains why the Apostle Paul wanted to come to the church in Rome that he might preach to them the gospel (Rom 1:15). The Christians in the church in Rome had already believed the gospel for their conversion, but they needed to continue to hear the gospel for their sanctification.

A local church that is being resuscitated by the Word of God will become more genuinely

will mean an intentional pursuit of older and/or younger saints in order to help each other grow in Christlikeness.

Passion for Evangelism

Do you get the same emails that I do? You know which ones I'm talking about, the emails about the new sermon series that other churches are using and that

relational. While people might have been sharing recipes and talking sports scores for years, it is likely that they have been only an inch deep in vulnerable conversation. Your goal in pastoring is to see a culture of discipleship where people who have been washed by the Word and had their minds renewed by Scripture are increasingly seeking each other to enjoy the relationships God has given them, both old and new alike. For some this will mean starting to practice hospitality. For others it will mean transparent discussions in their small group gatherings. And yet for others it

has led to thousands of decisions for Christ. If only it were that simple. If only these "magic beans" produced such amazing and promising results. But often this is not the case. Instead, pastoring your people to evangelize consistently and faithfully takes a lot of work and is done as much on your knees in prayer as it is standing in the pulpit. While churches should be faithful to proclaim the gospel to non-Christians who visit local churches, it is the pastor's job "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12).

local, national, and global; and testimonies of how God opened their mouth and made it clear how they should speak the truth to others (Col 4:3-4).

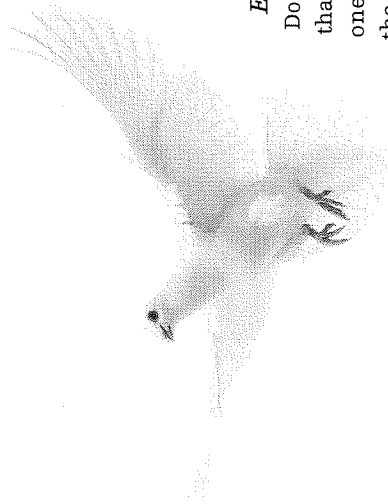
Unity of a Plurality of Leaders

I don't know what kind of leadership structure you have in your church. It is likely that you have either deacons or elders. I am personally convinced that the Bible teaches that each local church should be led by a plurality of elders. Saving that lesson for another time, let me say that even if you have deacons, this goal of a plurality of leaders operating in unity should not be lost on you.

As a pastor, you want to raise up other men who are convinced of the truth as seen in Scripture. This ensures that there is more than your voice heralding the hope that God's Word gives for his people. This helps protect against your people thinking your pastoral initiatives (modeling expositional preaching, instigating relational pursuits, equipping others for evangelism, etc.) are just your "thing." Those

Getting Christians to acknowledge they should evangelize is like getting children to admit they should eat their vegetables. They might nod their head in agreement but they no more enjoy it or intend to do it than before you talked to them about it. There are many reasons this is the case. These range from fear, to inexperience, to hypocritical lives being practiced outside the pastor's sight. Your goal is for your people to respond to the gospel in their lives so overwhelmingly and so convincingly that they can no longer be silent. This takes time. They will need to see this and hear about this in your life. They will need your encouragement even when their efforts are sorely lacking or misguided.

In time, though, as God chooses to bless his people, they will love proclaiming the excellencies of God found in Jesus Christ (Phil 3:8). Signs of this in your church include a shift from individuals expecting the church to evangelize for them to individuals doing the evangelizing themselves; a desire to increase funding for evangelism efforts



Unity in any local church starts with its leadership.

who have been around the church long enough have heard motivational messages calling people to everything from giving more money to joining the church's softball team. It is likely that your appeals will be lost on some. But a shared belief among the leaders helps thwart this obstacle.

Unity can seem like an illusory goal in any church, especially if there's a painful history of splits or other similar divisions. But unity can and should be seen in every local church. In fact, Jesus even prays for this in John 17:21, "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us." Why does he pray this? "So that the world may believe that you have sent me." Nothing less than the reputation of Jesus Christ is on the line.

Unity in any local church starts with its leadership. While the men might come from a variety

of backgrounds and have different gifts, they should share a common theology and philosophy of ministry. While the other goals in this chapter have a more public action associated with them, this goal is often happening behind the scenes and starts from the very beginning of your pastorate. It comes through hours of shared conversations, books read and discussed, lessons taught and considered, ministries evaluated and thought through, and people cared for and prayed over together.

Almost There

By no means are these your only goals during your pastorate as you seek to revitalize your local church, but they certainly should be some of your main ones. While we are all tempted as pastors to keep up with other churches, comparing our attendance and our budgets to one another, let us take heart. God has already given us all we need in his Word to pastor his people. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have all the resources we need.

But remember this: you cannot do this by your strength. Don't trust in your formal theological

Call out to God and ask him to bless your labors. Ask him to glorify himself in your ministry, that his people would bring glory to his Son, Jesus Christ.



training, years of pastoral experience, network of counselors, or persuasive personality. Start pastoring on your knees. Call out to God and ask him to bless your labors. Ask him to glorify himself in your ministry, that his

people would bring glory to his Son, Jesus Christ. When you do this, not only will you enjoy the view along the way but you will enjoy the destination when you arrive. It will have been worth the wait.