

CAN THESE BONES LIVE?
A Practical Guide to Revitalization
By Bill Henard

A Synopsis

Briefly summarizing the content of this book has proven to be a most difficult undertaking due to the wealth of material from which to choose. Consequently, content is limited to what I consider **key** captions and **supporting** statements I trust will whet your appetite to purchase this comprehensive “handbook” for church revitalization.

Can These Bones Live? is a must read for both pastors who *have* hope and those who have *lost* hope for revitalization in their churches. Although the principles and pathways to revitalization equally apply to prospective pastors, my summary will be limited to those of you now pastoring an established church either plateaued or declining. Additionally, the value of a call to this area of ministry will be affirmed.

Consulting with a church that has declined from a high attendance of 3000 to a present 300, I can personally attest to the effectiveness of this invaluable resource. Many of these detailed principles and pathways had been implemented by the pastor prior to my joining him in this venture. Consequently, evidences of revitalization abound.

Why Church Revitalization?

At present, anywhere from 3500 to 4000 churches across denominational lines are closing their doors every year. Thom Rainer’s eleven signs of a church dying or already dead are listed.

Some churches seemingly need to close and will, in spite of any attempts at saving them. Others are certainly salvageable. They may have lost their way and lost their vision but there is hope for the church. The church belongs to Jesus; she is his church. She exists as his bride, and Christ clarifies that the church will survive.

The church has a future and a hope. Before any of us can go forward with the idea of church revitalization, we must arrive at that conclusion.

Church health results in church revitalization. An honest approach of modern church growth methods affirms the need for this perspective. We have learned how to grow churches through a variety of means. We have become so concise and advanced in our methodology, technology, and programming that a church leader can grow a church and quite possibly never have to mention the name of Jesus. Not all growing churches are experiencing biblical church growth. Thus, church revitalization becomes a viable means of church growth because it necessitates church health.

Look at Acts 2:41-47 and an immediate recognition of healthy church practices emerges. Eight characteristics are identified and detailed. Throughout the remaining chapter the basic qualifications to include both personal and biblical prerequisites essential to church revitalization are outlined.

Conclusion: The truth is, regardless of the present state of any church, revitalization in some form will be necessary at some point. Church revitalization offers an exciting ride.

Assessment

If you are an established pastor having served a particular church for some years but now recognizing the obstacles faced originate more out of need for revitalization than just the ordinary struggles, recommendations made in this section will aid you in formulating a vision and strategic plan for bringing about revitalization.

As stakeholders, two specific generations are initially identified and the implications of each on church revitalization are detailed. The first identified are the *Thirties*. These have been in the church for at least 30 years and are possibly the power brokers. These, then, are divided into two subgroups: the older thirties and the younger thirties. In this section you will find the perspective of each and suggestions for gaining their trusts.

The same can be found for two other generations within the established church. These are identified as the *Tens* who have been in the church for ten or so years and the *Newbies* who have joined the church after the arrival of the present pastor.

Over the next several chapters, different reasons are going to be examined as to why churches fall into decline. The process given provides the necessary information for a pastor to do some effective assessment regarding the state of his current church. The first:

The Church Does Not Recognize the Need for Revitalization

This situation occurs primarily in two church arenas—the suburban church and the rural church.

The first set of churches which might not recognize their own demise will be medium-sized to larger churches in a suburban setting. The rate of decline has been more subtle and slow, thus not as visible as in other churches. Many exhibit growth in numbers but are genuinely unhealthy as New Testament congregations. Couple this with the fact that most of the same people, the ones with whom the *Thirties* have established friendships, continue to attend and serve, and the resulting opinion remains that the church is doing well.

The second church which oftentimes refuses to recognize the need for revitalization is the rural or country church. Acknowledging these are diverse and cannot be placed in a cookie-cutter category the author subdivides them into two and identifies the characteristics of each:

- The Rural Church Now Surrounded By Development
- The Rural Church Now Located In The Country.

To initiate change within churches like these the pastor must be committed to stay. This fact stands true in every situation. Both the positive and negative realities of a tenured pastorate in revitalization are identified in this section, as are the difficulties and possibilities of these two scenarios. A significant attribute of these churches is an established presence in the community where they have made an impact in the community through the varied ministries carried on by the church.

The Church Does Not Want to Grow

While the remaining assessments play major roles in church decline, this reason, expressed in two dynamics, offers the most difficult problem to solve and the most complicated one to immediately assess (in most cases).

The first dynamic is expressed as a spiritual issue. The problem of spiritual deficiency does not necessitate the rejection of the established church as unredeemable. However, if the church does not want to grow and the reason lies in the lack of spiritual growth in the church, the pastor needs to set aside most any major plans or vision to concentrate on developing disciples. In the disciple-making process, the author provides extensive suggestions for dealing with opposition - the second dynamic.

The author has found that, when it comes to how Satan attacks the church today, he uses God's own people far more than he does those outside the church. When opposition occurs, 13 suggestions for dealing with it are offered. These 13 alone-and the elaboration on each-will prove to be invaluable to the pastor desiring the staying power to lead his church through opposition to revitalization.

Physical Barriers to Growth

From the moment a church begins, barriers will surface which offer real obstacles to the church going to the next level. One of the greatest hindrances to revitalization and getting the church back on a growth track are the church facilities. When a church sits on a plateau or is in decline, the buildings and grounds turn out to be one of the first areas of neglect.

Observation of the facilities offers a firsthand look at needs and areas of neglect. A checklist of questions and perceptions for assessing the condition of and positive/negative of the church facilities is provided. Among them: Nursery and children's areas, hallways, signage, women's restroom, visibility, parking, etc.

The author includes, under this Physical Barriers to Growth chapter, an extensive section on leadership-both staff and laity. The information in this section could well have formed

an entire chapter. Captions include leadership assessment, five levels of leadership, the pastor's leadership, and the church's leadership skills.

The physical hindrances to church revitalization offer some important challenges for the church, but many are easily resolved once identified.

The Gifts Do Not Match the Church

The extensive chapter on leadership in the previous chapter serves as a springboard into this one. Under the caption "Leadership Ability That Does Not Match the Church" the author answers this question often asked by pastors: "When do I know when I should leave a church"?

His response: One place where the pastor must look for the answer comes from his own leadership capabilities and the current status of the church.

Because of spiritual gifting, personal abilities, likes and dislikes, and backgrounds not every pastor has the potential of success in every church. Four **pastor's assessment** questions are listed and elaborated upon.

In addition to the pastor determining his own effectiveness in a particular congregation, questions must be asked with regard to pastoral staff and volunteers. Jim Collins' five categories of leadership in his book *Good to Great* book serves as the primary resource for this section under **staff assessments**.

One must realize pastors and staff can be the greatest hindrances in church revitalization, especially if gifting, talents, and abilities do not match the six listed characteristics of a high-performance team. The accompanying descriptions can also serve as an assessment resource.

One of the obvious reasons for church decline and resultant revitalization stems from the fact that communities change over time. Therefore, a pastor needs to be aware of not just the demographic shifts happening in the area but also the attitudes the church maintains because of these changes. This necessitates an evaluation of both a church and the surrounding community.

Five categories of essential information are including in the **church assessment**. Additionally, six resources are provided in discovering the dynamics and changes in the **community assessment**.

Changing people's attitudes toward others is essentially a spiritual issue and critical when the church rejects the community. The conclusion of this chapter provides an eight-step process for successful attitudinal change.

The Church Turns Inward

Many times because of some of the problems and issues mentioned in the earlier chapters, a church turns inward. Leaders move into a protective mode and a resistance to change because of an innate fear of death. They turn inward because they have lost sight of the biblical purpose of the church. The church at Sardis is referred to as an example. (Rev. 3:1)

The church at Corinth is the example of a church which ignores the problem believing it will go away. One of the primary reasons a church turns inward comes from present or past conflicts within the congregation. The resulting unforgiveness within the church is identified as the root of this barrier to revitalization. Fix the problem or die!

Throughout the remainder of this chapter the author provides both Old and New Testament words for forgiveness, biblical requirements for forgiveness, and leading the church to forgive. Once forgiveness is in place, revitalization becomes a genuine possibility.

External Factors

While it is possible to trace many problems which cause church decline to sinful behaviors or poor leadership, some issues surface which cannot be blamed on any one person, program, or committee.

The following factors are addressed including suggested corrective measures for each:
Financial – Declining Population Base – Competition with Other Churches – A Community That Is Highly Resistant to the Gospel – A Community That Is Stable.

In the conclusion of this section the author acknowledges it takes work to revitalize a church...especially when the church faces external situations beyond its control. If revitalization becomes a part God's calling on your life, do not give up when circumstances become more difficult. See the obstacle as God-given challenges for the church to survive.

The Church Has Lost Its Vision

Vision or planned direction is essential for any organization. Church revitalization necessitates the establishment of a renewed vision the church can identify with. When a church loses its vision, most probably the trouble traces back to a loss of understanding about the Great Commission. The problem moves from theological to internal to pragmatic. Four suggestions are stated to get the church back on track.

The following definitions are quoted from Aubrey Malphurs:

What Vision Is Not

A Dream – Goals and Objectives - A Purpose – A Mission

What Vision Is

Clear – Compelling – A Mental Picture – Future of the Ministry – Can Be – Must Be

Part of the reason that vision becomes a problem is the cyclical nature of vision. Robert Dale's bell curve diagram from his book *To Dream Again* is pictured to depict the nine stages from dream to death. Each of these is well defined.

Additionally, as quickly as culture is changing, so does vision. Understanding these trends might be helpful in laying the foundation for leading the church to find a shared vision. Will Mancini's 11 trends are listed to assist in addressing these changes.

Operating through Inadequate Ministry Structures

The church in need of revitalization can often be identified as being a mimeograph organization in an iPad world. The structures addressed related to revitalization are: Fellowship – Facilities – Ministry – Leadership – Governance – Organizational.

Churches refusing to change their structures in each of the above will struggle to survive. The information contained relating to each will enable a pastor to find which ones are the easiest to change and make necessary adjustment. Then successes can then lead to other successes.

Also evaluate which structures will be the most difficult and most resisted and proceed cautiously as those turbulent waters are navigated.

The Change Matrix

In looking at the big picture, how to go about initiating change without tearing a church apart requires a methodology. The change matrix is suggested as a four-step methodology.

Although extremely practical it takes time to be initiated and implemented. Additionally, the matrix means all four steps work concurrently, not just consecutively and must be repeated consistently. It offers flexibility for each church to experience God's will and unique vision.

A diagram is provided to assist in both comprehending and implementing the matrix. It depicts the **four steps** and elaborates on the **five parameters** of each:

1. The Biblical Priorities
2. The Parameters
3. The Players
4. The Process

Conclusion

To lead a church through revitalization involves risk. It requires time, patience, and a biblical ecclesiology. The rewards, however, remain strong. Jesus promised he would not give up on the church and neither should we. Commit to become a revitalization pastor.

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