

TEN WAYS TO RECOGNIZE THE NEED FOR REVITALIZATION AND RENEWAL

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Church revitalization is the ongoing process of bringing a church back to health and vitality. It is when a church that was once spiritually dead is brought back to life. Church revitalization takes a unique, visionary leader who is passionate, patient, humble, and willing to work hard. Sometimes you may use different strategies to accomplish revitalization, but the main goal is to get every area of the church functioning with vitality.

The battle for the church is real. “Church decline is a choice just like church revitalization and renewal.”¹ Most churches in America have under one hundred people attending on a weekend². A recent study done by Exponential and Life Way Research found “6 in 10 Protestant churches are plateaued or declining in attendance and more than half saw fewer than 10 people become new Christians in the past 12 months.”³ Their research identified that the churches that had self-reported to be declining were “characterized by subtraction, scarcity, and survival.”⁴

Life Way Research examined the U.S. Census projections for the population in the United States as it relates to the number of church congregations needed to serve the population. They estimate that in the year 2050 we will need 400,000 church congregations for a 400,000,000 projected population in our country.⁵ This would provide a 1:1000 ratio of church to congregant. The Hartford Institute in 2010 reported that there were currently 314,000 congregations for the approximate U.S. population of 309,000,000.⁶ These statistics tell us that from 2010 to 2050, it will be necessary to net at least 86,000 churches or an average of 2,100 churches per year.⁷ In 2014 Life Way Research reported that we were “planting about 4000 churches and closing 3700 churches, netting 300 churches” a year.⁸ This trend will be detrimental to the future of the church, and it needs to be reversed. Part of the process of changing the trajectory is to keep churches from dying and closing.

¹ Tom Cheyney, *The Church Revitalizer as Change Agent*. (Orlando, Florida: Renovate Publishers, 2016), p. 9.

² Aaron Earls, “Majority of American Churches Fall Below 100 in Worship Attendance,” *Lifeway Research*, February 24, 2016. <https://lifewayresearch.com/2016/02/24/majority-of-american-churches-fall-below-100-in-worship-attendance/>.

³ Aaron Earls, “The Church Growth Gap: The Big Get Bigger While the Small Get Smaller,” *Christianity Today*, March 6, 2019. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/march/lifeway-research-church-growth-attendance-size.html>.

⁴ “Becoming Five Multiplication Study,” Exponential, February 2019.

<http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2019ExponentialReport.pdf>.

⁵ Daniel Yang, “The Future of the Church,” Exponential Roundtable, 2021

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

In addition to church decline in attendance, we are also living in a time where there is a growing cultural pushback against the church's existence in communities. In 2012, a religious study showed that one-third of the adults under the age of 30 in the United States do not identify with any religion⁹. This does not mean they do not believe in God or don't have faith; they just do not recognize or identify with a particular denomination or religious institution. The individuals that participated in the study reported that they felt that "religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics."¹⁰ The American church is in desperate need of revitalization. We need a united movement of church revitalizers across our nation to join in the movement to renew the local church. The church is no longer fragmented, it's fragile.

When you think about the process of bringing a church back to health and vitality, you must first acknowledge that something is wrong or in decline. Something has stopped working and is not healthy any longer. When you think of your physical body and an organ that has stopped functioning, this decline in health and effectiveness affects the whole body and can often lead to death. It is the same with the church. When a church realizes that a part of the church or body needs attention because it is not functioning properly, it can focus on the process of revitalization and renewal and bringing the church back to life and effectiveness again.

So how do you know that your church needs help? Here are 10 ways to recognize the need for revitalization and renewal in your church.

1. **DECLINE IS APPARENT:** The numerical indicators of decline in a local church require church leadership to look back over a 3–5-year period to see if there has been a numerical decrease in the church and its reach. The areas to look at include, but are not limited to salvations, baptisms, worship attendance, new members, small group attendance, demographics and ages of families, missional deployment and outreach, first-time guests, giving units, and offerings. *Numbers don't tell the entire story, but they start the story.* If there has been decline in these areas over the course of time, it is an indicator that the church needs to act if it desires to have kingdom impact in the future.
2. **PREFERENCES MATTER:** When preference becomes the "why", your "what" is always lost. Personal preferences are an act of the flesh and not of the spirit, and they can affect the church moving forward in its God-given mission and vision. What are these preferences that can stall growth and lead to decline? In churches they generally center around things like style of music, the use of media and technology, programs that have been around for years and the people that control them, service times, the number of church services, preaching styles, personalities, Bible translations, leadership structure, committees, and church organization and structure. In a declining church the priority centers around preferences instead of making disciples and planting New Testament churches.
3. **PROGRAM DRIVEN:** Churches that are declining try to find vitality in a program. The problem with this mindset is programs keep the focus off dealing with the real issues in the

⁹ "Nones' on the Rise," *Pew Research*, October 9, 2012.

<https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

church. In a post-Christian, post-COVID world, programs are not the answer. They never were. People follow Jesus because they believe the Gospel and because the Holy Spirit is working in them as a child of God. The attractional methodology of programs never brought people to Jesus, His resurrection did. People follow Jesus Christ because something happened over 2,000 years ago, and it wasn't a program. Jesus' last command of "Go and make disciples" needs to be the first concern of the church today.

4. **TOO MUCH CONTROL:** Many churches that are in decline are structured more for control than growth. This is evident in the governing documents of the church and the structure and method of decision making. Often these churches are committee driven rather than pastor and staff led, and personal preferences have become policy. Sadly, too much control can prevent the church from growing and can lead to frustration in its leadership. Often control is mistaken for accountability. A church in decline needs to examine the church governance, control, accountability, and decision making through a fresh lens and perspective to determine if too much control is keeping the church from accomplishing its true mission and vision.
5. **LACK OF UNITY:** Unity is essential in the body of Christ. *When you have no unity, you have no community.* When a church becomes inwardly focused it begins to attack itself. A church in decline is often not unified in mission and vision. It is plagued with conflict and disagreements which cause some members and attenders to eventually leave. Satan loves division in the church. If he can divide its members over things that aren't kingdom minded, he can destroy the church and keep it from having any impact in the community. This is exactly how cancer operates. It starts inside the body with the goal of reproducing unhealthy cells that can eventually destroy the body. The church is no different. Cancerous divisions can exist that kill any momentum and eventually limit the life of the church.
6. **VISION IS AMBIGUOUS:** A church in need of revitalization and renewal has no clear and compelling vision. The visionary leader sees first and sees the furthest and is focused on a clear, God-given vision for the church. Declining churches show up week-to-week without any clarity as to why they exist and what they are moving towards. The vision is not communicated from the stage; therefore, the people in the seats are not sure what they are moving towards and what their role is in the church. Charles Spurgeon, the "Prince of Preachers", once said, "If there is mist in the pulpit there is a fog in the pew." Sadly, this is true in churches today. When a church lacks vision and mission it starts to drift away from the gospel and focuses on things that don't matter for eternity.
7. **AGING UPWARD:** Many churches that need revitalization and renewal are not reaching the next generation. A good exercise is to look at the median age in your community and compare it against the median age of your church. If the church is missing the target age in their community by 5 years up or down, it needs to reassess why the next generation isn't engaged and showing up. An aging congregation can lead to the future death of the church if the next generation is not engaged and ready to lead it.
8. **DISCIPLESHIP IS MISSING:** The church exists to make disciples who make disciples; however, a Sunday school class, program, and/or Bible study is often mistakenly classified as discipleship. While Bible studies and classes are a part of the discipleship process, they are

focused on information instead of transformation. The true test of biblical discipleship is when someone who has been properly discipled is then able to disciple someone else. Discipleship is life-on-life. Jesus spent three years with twelve men, pouring into them, and getting them ready to lead the charge in the church. Sadly, there are churches that have been around for decades with no reproducible fruit and true discipleship.

9. **EVANGELISM HAS STOPPED:** A declining church has forgotten how to contextualize the Gospel. People are not sharing their faith as they should, and there are few fresh stories of life change. Week to week it is the same people showing up at church, and first- and second-time guests are few and far between. When the Gospel is not shared, people can't accept it. A declining church cannot blame the community they should be reaching for their decline. The days of people reaching out to the church for help are over. Instead, the church needs to be reaching out to the community. A church that is dying is generally a church that has become inward focused.

10. **THEY STOP LEARNING:** Growing churches are led by growing leaders. A declining church often doesn't recognize the signs that they are in decline. If the same people show up each week, they think things are fine. They spend unnecessary energy on things that do not matter neglecting the necessary action of educating themselves on how to make things better. The status quo is more important than continual growth and kingdom impact and advancement. There are so many great books, webinars, and [podcasts](#) to help leaders and churches grow in this area and to stay relevant with what is happening with culture and church growth trends. There is always something to learn and a new strategy to try on the journey toward church revitalization and renewal.

Statistics tell us that church revitalization is an area that needs much time, energy, focus, and attention. Sadly, over the years there has been a lack of focus on church renewal, and many leaders no longer want to cultivate the skillsets necessary to see churches experience revitalization and renewal. The American church needs pastors who are willing to step up and be part of the solution in bringing churches back to health and vitality. Spend some time reflecting on the ten ways to recognize the need for church revitalization and renewal. Do you recognize any of these signs in your church? If so, pray and ask God to help you start the journey toward renewed health and vitality, then contact me at gmoritz@bcne.net to discuss how the BCNE can walk with you on this journey.