

SECTION 3

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT CHURCH RENEWAL

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT CHURCH RENEWAL

By Daniel H. Allen, D.Min.

A critical issue facing the Church in America is the renewal of established churches. The statistics have now been widely reported: eighty-five percent of churches in America are either plateaued or declining. Twenty-five percent are close to death. Nine-thousand churches could close this year, with as many as 100,000 closing during the decade of the 90s. Of the new members who joined churches last year, ninety-five percent were already Christian. Approximately 60 million adults are unchurched, not to mention children and teens. More than sixty percent of adults interviewed consider church boring and irrelevant.

The verdict is in: thousands of churches need renewal. But before we rush to prescribe a treatment, let's take a closer look at renewal. Let's explore together the following questions:

1. What is renewal? Are those of us who are called to the renewal of the Church thinking comprehensively about what renewal means? It is simply a heightened sense of spiritual awareness or is it more far reaching in its implications for church life as we know it?
2. Where is renewal needed? Will we be satisfied when the spiritual atmosphere of our worship services has changed? Will that be enough? Or is renewal also needed in other areas of ministry? If so, what are those areas?
3. Why is renewal needed? Are our discussions moving beyond the symptoms to the sources of the problem?
4. What steps can we take to foster a climate for renewal? If we are accurate in our assessment of why renewal is needed, then it is possible for our churches to experience renewal?

WHAT IS RENEWAL?

There are several ways to define renewal. For instance, renewal can mean to make strong or fresh again, to bring back into good condition, to refill with a fresh supply, and to make new or as-if-new again. Synonyms include to renovate, restore, refresh, rejuvenate, and revitalize.

In the Church, according to church planter and pastor Daniel Brown, renewal means to become right for a new era. In a broad sense, to renew the ministry of a church is to help that church recapture the essence of its life and identity, while expressing that life in a way that is relevant to the needs of its members and community today. According to Brown, the focus should not be that churches have been *wrong* all these years, and therefore need renewal, but that they must be revitalized, or *renewed*, in order to be right for the new era in which they now live and serve.

Renewal also includes configuring ministries and serving people in ways that are faithful to God and God=s work in the world, as well as fruitful in their results. Too many ineffective programs and assumptions about ministry exist in our local churches. These programs and assumptions must be measured against the two benchmarks of faithfulness and fruitfulness.

WHERE IS RENEWAL NEEDED?

Since October 1991 our ministry has consulted with and coached denominational executives, pastors, volunteer church leaders, executives of parachurch (servant) organizations, emerging student leaders and close to 100 congregations in the areas of church growth, church renewal, strategic planning, organizational change, church planting and leadership development. We have served a number of denominational families and churches across the United States.

These congregations differ in size, age, life cycle phases, growth posture and community settings. For example, attendance at Sunday morning worship services averages from 30 to 5,000; ages range from just over six months to more than sixty years; some are in rapid growth phases and others are declining; several are moving toward an active growth-by-conversation posture while many seem content to serve the already converted; locations and cultural settings are as diverse as the coal mining communities of Big Stone Gap, Virginia, and the bedroom communities of metropolitan Los Angeles and Atlanta.

Approximately 70 percent of the churches we are called to serve are inadequately focused, equipped and mobilized to make a significant impact in their communities. *These churches need to be renewed.* They need to become right for a new era. Based on what we=re learning, church renewal is needed in at least four areas: 1) spiritual vitality; 2) organizational effectiveness; 3) pastoral leadership; and 4) the relevance of ministry programs.

1. *Spiritual vitality.* Spiritual vitality increases when churches seek to follow Christ=s direction for their ministry, appropriate His power through prayer and equip believers for a Christ-centered life. Churches need spiritual renewal when they lose touch with Christ, the Head of the Church, and substitute their assumptions and agenda for His. They need spiritual renewal when they function without any evidence of a corporate pursuit of remaining in Him (John 15:1-8). Perhaps it happens unintentionally, as a result of
-

normal entropic forces, but numbers of plateaued or declining churches function without any observable pursuit of the mind or power of Christ for their ministries.

Churches that are seeing a renewed and deeper spiritual life, however, increasingly are churches of prayer. Prayer is visible in hearts that hunger for God through focused intercession, in periods of waiting before the Lord to receive direction and in searching the Scriptures to identify His purposes for the Church.

In the churches needing spiritual renewal, prayer is often a formality, tacked on to the beginning or end of a meeting to fulfill a religious expectation, and prayer is usually general versus specific, often of the ALord, bless our services today≡ variety. Direction and ministry are determined by what the church did last year, a crisis, or the avoidance of conflict. The purpose of this review is not to criticize these churches. Many are doing all they know to do. My purpose is simply to underscore the point that churches need spiritual renewal.

2. *Organizational renewal.* Churches also need organizational renewal. Their structures, operational procedures and support systems need revitalization. One familiar line of thought argues that churches are organisms, needing only the life of the Spirit flowing through them as they seek to serve the Lord and one another. The underlying assumption is that by simply following the Spirit that all needs will be cared for and problems resolved.

Let me be among the first to agree that all churches need more of the life of the Spirit flowing through them, as well as the cooperation of the people with the Spirit. To be certain, churches are organisms, the visible manifestation of the life of Christ. Churches are the corporate jars of clay through which His treasure is delivered to the world. But thinking they are only organisms, and do not require some type of organizational form, overlooks the experience and teaching of the New Testament Church and apostles. The church in Jerusalem was in conflict in Acts 6, for example, because of attitudinal and organizational complexities, not because of a shortage of the life of the Spirit flowing through it. Paul appointed Timothy to Ephesus and Titus to Crete to address organizational as well as theological and doctrinal concerns. Interestingly, even churches that argue against organizing to support the flow of ministry are often themselves choking out ministry by their own informal organizational structures.

Effective organizational design results from godly, vision-focused leadership. It exists to support and facilitate the shared understanding of the mission, vision, values and strategy of the church. As pastor Ted Haggard puts it, the purpose of the corporate and organizational body is to serve the spiritual body. Other signs of organizational health include the implementation of relevant programs that are consistent with the mission,

vision, values and strategy of the church; the development of underlying support systems; and the deployment of appropriate resources so that the right people are in the right place doing the right job at the right time.

Based on our work with local churches, less than 25 percent have put these components in place. They particularly lack any sense of a compelling sense of God=s preferred future. Congregational life has become formalized and institutionalized. These churches, and others like them, desperately need organizational renewal.

3. *Pastoral leadership.* A recurring theme in all the years of our ministry has been the need for the renewal of pastors. Pastors feel isolated, alone, lonely and confused. They are caught between their personal sense of calling (and how to live out that call) and the expectations of the people they serve. They often feel trapped in systems that breed competitiveness and selfish ambition. Their personal heart life before Christ needs room to grow and deepen.

Pastors also express feeling unprepared and ill-equipped to face the changing realities of today=s ministry environment and to lead the way forward. According to our findings, church renewal, in order to be most effective and enduring, must happen in the pastor=s heart life and personal growth as a vision-focused leader. Renewal must include helping pastors learn to identify and lead their congregations toward the fulfillment of God=s inspiring vision for the church. Character counts, as do the clarification of vision and the development of vision-focused leadership competencies. In our ministry we feel so strongly about the need for pastoral leadership development that in 1995 we focused the mission and services of our ministry to help pastors and other ministry leaders deepen their character, clarify their vision for ministry and strengthen their leadership competencies.

4. *Programmatic renewal.* The general purpose for a church program is to advance the mission of the church and serve the people of the church and/or the community. Programs that outlive their usefulness should be revitalized or replaced. Many of the programs we offer in churches are woefully out of touch with the needs and realities of life at the turn of the century. They are based on a set of assumptions that led to effective ministry in the 1950s, when America was still a church culture and people were seeking out churches by their own initiative. In the post-Christian context of 1998, however, a number of those assumptions are no longer valid. In many cases we are using outdated methods to serve as a group of people that has long since moved out of the community.
-

WHY IS RENEWAL NEEDED?

While the answers vary with each church (and national/local contextual, institutional and spiritual factors must be examined in each setting) we have observed at least four common causes: 1) the changing ministry landscape; 2) the typical progression of organizational life cycles; 3) church culture; and 4) toxic terrain.

1. *The changing ministry landscape.* Churches need renewal because the context for ministry is rapidly changing. The accelerated pace of change creates stress, chaos and uncertainty. The new rules for our transitional times are still being written. Sociologists and anthropologists point out that we are living in a period of parenthesis between shifting societal epochs. Mega-change is occurring on a grand and global scale. Opportunities abound, but so does paradox.

The Church must recognize and understand the shifts and changes that characterize our times in order to design ministry that is right for a new era. The Church needs people like the *Amen of Issachar, who understand the times and knew what Israel should do* (1 Chronicles 12:32). We could also learn from King David, who served the purposes of God in his generation (Acts 13:36). Both components must be held in tension: first the purposes of God, which are paramount and have preeminence over our plans and ideas; then the realities of our own generation, where the purposes of God are fulfilled in space and time.

According to church consultant Dan Reeves, the Church is now facing the after shocks of at least six societal shifts. One of these shifts is *from few to many audiences*. Today=s current and potential church attenders are increasingly multicultural, multiethnic and multigenerational. Because of increasing diversity and pluralism, multiple new audiences, cultures and world views abound, making it increasingly difficult to connect with different groups using only one style or program of outreach.

With the accelerating pace of change and multiple new audiences comes *a shift in values*. Changing values affect financial donations, church attendance and time allocated to church-based ministry involvement. A number of trend watchers have documented these shifting values. According to Glen Martin and Gary McIntosh, authors of *The Issachar Factor*, for many Americans:

- a. Time is more important than money.
 - b. Quality is more important than quantity.
 - c. Effectiveness is more important than tradition.
 - d. Variety is more important than limited selection.
 - e. Application is more important than facts.
-

- f. Flexibility is more important than ritual.
- g. The casual is preferred to the formal.
- h. Acceptance is more important than separation.

A related *shift is in the area of needs*. The information age has reordered life at every level of society: home, work and community. As a result, it has spawned a new set of needs which church leaders must be prepared to address. Carl George recognizes the shift in needs. In his book *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, he identifies eight needs of people living in an information society. According to George, people today are asking churches for:

- a. An authentic personal touch
- b. Options for participation and involvement
- c. Help in understanding the new realities at the turn of the millennium
- d. Help in coping with rapid change
- e. Opportunities for women to minister
- f. Attention to felt needs
- g. An emphasis on people over structure and bureaucracy
- h. Evidence of genuine care and concern

Tied closely to life in an information society is *a shift in communications*. New communication systems feature images over print. As Reeves notes, A Multi-dimensional, multi-sensory images are now more compelling, affective and accessible than one-dimensional print.≡ Consequently, churches are forced to reexamine their communication assumptions, systems and practices. As a result, a number of churches are experimenting with drama, multi-media, expressive dance, illustrated sermons and other creative methods in order to communicate effectively with parishioners who now live and work in a A windows≡ environment.

A fifth shift is that people are now being reached through *new methods*. Whether it is enlisting voters for national elections or attracting people to churches, the shift is from formal events and programs to personal relationships and networking.

A sixth shift in the ministry landscape is related to *organizational structure*. Organizations across the country are restructuring and eliminating layers of restrictive bureaucracy. The shift is from a tightly held top down management style to one that empowers people based on training and trust. According to Reeves, A For the church this means less emphasis on direct controlling and more emphasis placed on decentralized empowering of new leaders.≡ Churches must embrace new styles of leadership and decision making that feature less executive-level mandates and a greater emphasis on participation in planning. Other societal shifts could be documented, but these are

sufficient to allow us to see some of the features of our generation, some of the shape of this new era in which our churches are called to serve.

2. *Organizational life cycles.* Churches also need renewal because of the typical progression of organizational life cycles. Simply put, all living organisms pass through three primary phases X birth, life and death. From the insights of organizational research we see that churches typically pass through a similar developmental process: birth, growth and expansion, plateau, decline and death. These are the normal phases of organizational development. The birth phase is characterized by excitement and hope. People share a common purpose and work together to accomplish it. Commitment levels are typically high.

The second phase, growth and expansion, is marked by organizing for work and reaching more people. Leaders are training volunteers, raising more money and experimenting with a variety of methods for meeting needs. Structure is flexible and policies are still in formation. In spite of the occasional setback or learning experience, ministry is challenging, rewarding and fun.

In the plateau phase the percentage of growth begins to decline. The number of newcomers is offset by folks leaving or moving away. The church=s philosophy of ministry has become more institutionalized, and the status quo dictates what is or is not possible. People are still finding help and hope, but warning signs emerge. The plateau can last for several years. Decline may be so minimal that initially it is not evident, but a careful analysis of key indicators reveals the slippage.

The leadership and membership now has a choice to make between perpetuating the status quo or revitalizing the purpose and plan for ministry. Unless deliberate measures for renewal are launched, the church will enter decline. In this phase the loss of members, morale and resources for ministry becomes painfully obvious. Those who remain often view the church=s better days as long past. More energy is devoted to rehearsing yesteryear than envisioning God=s bright and hopeful tomorrow. Left unchecked, decline leads to death, the final phase, which in churches can often be a slow and agonizing process as a faithful few hang on until the end.

In America today, thousands of churches are plateaued or declining. Measures must be implemented immediately to facilitate spiritual, organizational, pastoral and programmatic renewal.

3. *Church culture.* Churches also need renewal because of the conflict of cultural assumptions between pastors and people. Culture is defined as that powerful set of underlying assumptions that determines thinking, feeling and acting at every level of an
-

organization. Church culture is based on assumptions related to every facet of church life. Pastors and their people think, feel and act in their churches based on the assumptions they hold. To complicate the problem, the assumptions are usually unspoken and unwritten until conflict erupts, at which point pastors and people scramble to defend and justify the viability of their position, often wounding each other in the process.

In the majority of my consultation cases, as well as others I have studied, church culture is a primary factor driving the need for renewal. Simply put, our thinking about what a church is and does has become frozen. Our fundamental assumptions about church life and ministry perpetuate programs and practices that are no longer viable. They reinforce stability but separate congregations from meaningful ministry in society.

4. *Toxic terrain.* A fourth factor underlying the need for renewal is what Dan Reeves calls toxic terrain. Churches need renewal because they have accumulated years of toxic waste. It is found in the form of unresolved issues from the past, secretive and unconfessed sins, leadership struggles and power plays, financial misdealing, a history of church splits, abusive leadership styles, gossip, slander, workaholicism and other dysfunctional patterns of relating among church members and leaders. The toxic buildup hinders the church's witness and vitality, inhibits growth and fruitfulness, and leads to decline and stagnation. In these congregations toxic cleanup is one of the first steps to church renewal.

FOSTERING A CLIMATE FOR RENEWAL

To lay out a full framework and process for renewal is beyond the scope of this report. Therefore, permit me to focus on one area of renewal: fostering a climate for spiritual renewal. In the majority of churches that our ministry has served, increasing spiritual vitality has been our primary objective. Jesus said it first: *You cannot be fruitful apart from me* (John 15:4, NLT). Dan Reeves has noted from two-plus decades of church consulting: Without question, the single most important reason why some churches are growing and others are declining is spiritual For the vast majority of churches, spiritual dynamics are the principal factor for growth and health. Thom Rainer emphasizes the same in the title of his first chapter in *Eating the Elephant: How It Still Begins With God*.

Ministry begins with God, and renewal begins with God. Renewal happens as God's people respond positively to the call of the Spirit to repent and return to the Lord. In our ministry we speak of fostering a climate because we believe renewal happens through the partnership of God and God's people (2 Chronicles 7:14). We can put certain key elements in place, but renewal is ultimately the work of God's grace and God's visitation.

What can we do to foster a climate for spiritual renewal? In our work with churches we generally recommend some combination of the following steps:

1. *Attend to the spiritual development of the pastor=s heart life.* While a number of factors contribute to a pastor=s effectiveness in leadership and ministry, including spiritual gifts, leadership style, congregational fit, educational growth and experience in ministry, no factor is more important to lasting ministry effectiveness, says Reeves, Athan the quality of a burning and broken heart, of heart allegiance.≡

Heart allegiance refers to the status or condition of the heart in relation to Christ. Similar terms, according to Reeves, include humbled, filled, consecrated, captivated and renewed. Brokenness is a key concept. It seems to be a significant trigger to pastoral effectiveness and positive change. Surrender is part of the process of brokenness.

Pastors can attend to their spiritual development by invigorating their practice of the classical spiritual disciplines, establishing a relationship with a mentor for the purpose of spiritual growth and forming an accountability relationship with a small group of trusted friends.

Many pastors report that spiritual disciplines such as prayer and fasting (combined), meditative reading of the Scriptures and days of solitude contribute to their spiritual growth and renewal. Helpful resources on the disciplines include Ted Haggard=s book, *Primary Purpose*; John Ortberg=s tape, *AThe Spiritually Authentic Leader*≡ (call 1-800-999-9578) and his book, *The Life You=ve Always Wanted*; Richard Foster=s classic, *Celebration of Discipline*; and Dallas Willard=s *The Spirit of the Disciplines* and *The Divine Conspiracy*. Pastors also report immense benefits from completing the workbook to *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby and Claude King.

2. *Emphasize and practice the priority of prayer.* According to Ken Hemphill, pastor and author of *the Antioch Effect*, AIf the most critical element of church growth is supernatural empowering, then the fuel for all growth is powerful prayer.≡ As E.M. Bounds once observed, APrayer is not preparation for the battle, it is the battle.≡

While we may like to quote these statements, do we really believe them? Do we really believe that ministry moves forward through our prayer and loving obedience? All too often it seems that we talk about prayer to each other more than we actually speak in prayer to our Father in heaven. Emphasizing and practicing the priority of prayer often begins with a confession of and repentance from our own prayerless lives. From our place of dependence upon God we can ask God to grace us to pray, and we can invite others to join us in the process.

Step-by-step we can see God transform the prayer ministries of our churches. The following principles for corporate prayer can help us foster a climate for spiritual renewal. First, create a prayer consciousness in the church by teaching about prayer from the Scriptures. Help people become aware of the nature of prayer, how it works, why it works, what you're praying for and what is happening in response to your prayers. Two books on prayer that have helped many pray more effectively are Bill Hybels' *Too Busy Not to Pray* and Pete Wagner's *Praying with Power*.

Second, cultivate the value of prayer. Present a teaching series entitled *The Prayer Lives of Great Men and Women of the Bible* or *How Prayer Changed History*. Include sections in your teaching that address the questions, hurts and confusion related to what some people perceive as unanswered prayer.

People tend to practice what they value. They value what they believe in. They will believe more in the value of prayer when we deal openly with their questions and lead the way in prayer before them.

Corporate prayer principle number three: pray specific prayers. Specific prayers receive specific answers. Specific answers build faith. Pray to remove blockages to your ministry. Pray to be able to seize emerging opportunities. Pray for leaders to emerge. Pray for lost people by name. Pray for God to show you what to pray.

Fourth, utilize gifted intercessors. Surely you have met these people X the prayer warriors. They are people who have been especially called and gifted by God for intercession. Enlist them in the prayer ministries of the church. Tap into this avenue of spiritual power for the spiritual renewal of your church.

Fifth, provide multiple options for people to become involved in prayer. In earlier decades it may have been appropriate to have everyone meet on Tuesday at 7 pm for the weekly prayer meeting. Given today's landscape, however, we will be able to mobilize more people into your prayer by inviting and resourcing them to pray both on campus and off campus, in small groups and individually. Valley Spring Church in Arizona, for example, has started a *Commuters' Prayer Club*. People who drive to and from work use their daily commute to pray through a prayer focus sheet that is generated by the pastor on a monthly basis. Pastor Gary Hawkins identifies the prayer club as a primary factor behind the church leading 50 people to Christ in 1997.

Sixth, provide training and feedback for all those involved in prayer. Training introduces new ideas for creative and effective prayer. Feedback keeps them informed and motivated to continue praying. As momentum builds and spiritual energy grows, you will begin to see an increasingly supportive environment for spiritual renewal.

3. *Help the people of the church to connect regularly with Jesus and grow in grace.* In order to see renewal more fully established in our churches, we must help people continue their connection with Jesus outside of the weekly worship service. Spiritual growth and renewal cannot be sustained on one meal per week. We must help our people develop relationships of spiritual support and regimens of spiritual discipline.

Relationships of spiritual support could include accountability groups, prayer triplets, small group Bible studies and fellowship groups. Spiritual disciplines could include prayer, meditative Bible reading, Bible study, fasting, serving and journaling. Helpful resources include the 13-week *Experiencing God* video series, seven days of corporate fasting and prayer per quarter, 21 or 40 days of prayer and fasting to begin the new year, teaching a series on discipleship and spiritual growth such as Rick Warren=s Class 201 (see his book, *The Purpose Driven Church*), or two of John Maxwell=s resources *X Developing Leaders After God=s Own Heart* and *One Hour With God*.

To sum up, the purpose of this report is to encourage us to take a closer look at church renewal. While it is true that most churches in America need renewal, the renewal they need is *comprehensive*. It needs to focus on spiritual dynamics, organizational issues, pastoral leadership and ministry programming. The renewal of *spiritual vitality*, however, is the starting point. We must return to the God and Father of our salvation, to the author and perfecter of our faith, to the Spirit who guides us into all truth and reminds us of what Jesus did and taught. God is at work in the world today, and God is renewing the Church in America. May we partner with God=s work of renewal and become churches that are right for the new millenium.



Daniel Allen is the cofounder, with his wife Lainie, of *Allen & Allen Leadership Development Services* and *Higher Call Emerging Leaders*. Both ministries are dedicated to equipping the Church for effective ministry through leadership development. It is the passion of Daniel's heart to work with Jesus in his development of godly, vision-focused leaders who will finish well and fulfill the vision God has placed in their hearts. Daniel and Lainie live in Charlottesville, Virginia. They are life and ministry partners and the parents of two daughters.

For more information on this subject, please contact:

Daniel H. Allen

Allen & Allen Leadership Development Services/
Higher Call Emerging Leaders
Charlottesville, Virginia

E-mail: leaderdev@aol.com
