

Hello NWIBA Pastors/Leaders:

As I mentioned to you in an email sent out before Christmas, over this next year I will be writing a series of articles on the subject of church health/revitalization. I realize writing articles is in itself a weak response to the need of revitalization in our churches. Obviously, articles written from a safe distance, divorced from the tension of actual church revitalization, can only do so much. But my hope and prayer is that these articles may create both mourning and hope... mourning over the condition of some of our churches, and a hope that when we lead courageously, God can bring about a glorious change.

Choosing topics to write about concerning church revitalization is akin to choosing the best sites to get a majestic view of the Grand Canyon – there are so many that it’s difficult to limit them down to a workable few. However, I will endeavor over the next few months to choose topics that I believe will be pertinent to our churches in Northwest Indiana.

So the natural place to start is: *How does a church know if it needs revitalized?* Most church members, if they have any spiritual discernment, know this instinctively. They know by observation, and even feel, that the church is in decline...that a spirit of apathy and hopelessness has taken grip. However, there are some factors, both objective and subjective, that can be observed that indicate that a church needs renewal.

First, there are the ***numerical indicators of decline***. Generally speaking, over a five-year period if there is numerical decrease in metrics such as, baptisms, worship attendance, Sunday school/small groups, and missional involvement, then the church is in steady decline and in need of revitalization. There are exceptions to this. For example, a church that has begun the revitalization process, a church that is transitioning itself to become more effective, or a church that is tightening up its membership process will often find, at least initially, that its numbers will decline while at the same time the church is becoming healthier.

Second, a church is in need of revitalization when its members ***value its preferences over mission*** – over reaching the lost! This is a huge problem across the SBC, but especially a significant issue among our NWI churches. Preferences are lifted to the level (and sometimes above the level) of doctrine and gospel. What are these preferences? In our churches they generally center around music, programs, times and number of church services, preaching styles, bible translations, leadership structure etc. The point is, in a dying church many members have prioritized personal preferences above any interest to fulfill the mission of the church.

Third, dying churches tend to be ***program dependent*** for stability and growth. What I’ve discovered in working with declining churches is that they are often looking for a “silver bullet” to turn them around. Generally, for Southern Baptists, this means a new program or a new dynamic preacher. The problem with this is that keeps them from dealing with the real sin issues in the church and making the difficult changes in order to become

healthy again. In addition, normally the programs are of a past era that are no longer effective. Furthermore, for the program dependent church, they fail to see that a purely attractional methodology that was once effective is no longer connecting to the community.

Fourth, lack of *flexible governing structure*. Many of our church constitutions and governance styles prevents the church from making decisions in a timely manner and unbiblically ties the hands of pastors and church appointed leaders to lead the church. Southern Baptist churches are congregational, but that doesn't mean congregational control. God appoints and the congregation affirms leaders to lead the church in accordance with Scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The extreme democratization of our churches and the outdated burdensome restrictions of some of our constitutions create disunity, eliminates needed flexibility, and guarantees continued unhealth.

Fifth, a church in need of revitalization generally *lacks biblical unity*. I say biblical unity because unhealthy churches can unify around preferences, traditions, nostalgia, or even the status quo. But generally, a church that becomes inwardly focused inevitably begins to turn on itself with divisions and arguments among church members. These carnal and sometimes demonic divisions will kill and suck life out of the church. When the church becomes "the peoples" then Jesus will eventually agree and let them possess it!

Sixth, no *meaningful membership process*. A common characteristic of a church in need of revitalization is a membership process that lacks any standards or expectations of what it means to be a member of one of Christ's church. Generally there is a lack of any real examination of a member candidate as to the genuineness of his/her salvation. In turn, too often unconverted people are becoming members of our churches with full voting rights and some even become leaders in the church. In addition, the unwillingness to carry out church discipline (sometimes even for the most blatant sins) in accordance to Matthew 18 grieves the Spirit and minimizes His work in our congregations.

Seventh, a church in need of revitalization generally has *no compelling vision*. Churches in decline generally just exist week-to-week without any clarity as to why they exist. Maintenance over mission is their ongoing reality. Ask a member of a church in need of revitalization what uniquely identifies their church as distinct from other churches and you're likely to get a blank stare.

Eighth, a church in decline is generally *aging upward*. Because of the church's resistance to needful change then it becomes increasingly difficult to reach younger generations. Therefore, the aging congregation no longer fits their community's primary demographic. Unless a way is found to reach younger people, then the church will age out to eventual death.

Ninth, normally, a church in need of revitalization has a *discipleship problem*. Too often our discipleship is superficial and haphazard. It lacks scriptural depth and practical application. It is almost always absent of any expectation of reproduction (making

disciples). The sad result is some members with long tenure in our churches with little spiritual discernment and maturity.

Tenth, another indicator of a declining church is **deteriorating facilities**. Now this is not always the case. Sometimes unhealthy churches will put more emphasis on maintaining its building than investing in reaching their community for Christ. However, in general, the physical structure will follow the spiritual shape of the church. A dated facility, pot holes in the parking lot, leaking roof, shabby and antiquated nursery etc. are indicators of church headed in the wrong direction.

Eleventh, the last sign of a church in need of revitalization is they are increasingly **unrelatable to their communities**. Because of their reluctance to biblically contextualize the gospel, they create unnecessary hurdles for people to cross to hear the gospel. In a sense, they are hiding the gospel from the very people they are commanded to evangelize – sometimes in the misguided defense of not “compromising with the world.” Often times the declining church can even begin to blame the community for their decline. They are irritated that the community is no longer attracted to their church and excuse their decline by blaming it on the deterioration of the world, the decline of the nation etc. They mistakenly believe that the community is there for the church instead of the church being there for the community.

There are many other signs of a church in need of revitalization. Not every church in need of revitalization will necessarily have all the above indicators. However, if any of these factors show up, then that is something that needs to be addressed. In a sense, every church needs to be in continual process of revitalization.

So what’s the way out? Over the next few months I will be putting forth articles that I hope will provide both theological and practical guidance on issues regarding revitalization. However, in the meantime, there are a number of things there are being done to address this need. First, we are having a workshop on church health/revitalization on Saturday morning, April 7th from 8:30-12:30 led by church health strategist, George Yates. Second, our NWIBA Revitalization Team is in the process of developing an approach to helping churches that call upon the association for help. This strategy will include assessment, recommendations, affirmation, help with implementation, and on going coaching through the revitalization process. Third, as DOM I am available to lead your church’s leadership through a visioning process that will deal with issues of revitalization. If you want to talk about that process, please contact me.

Am I hopeful for the future of the churches of the NWIBA? Yes, but I am also realistic. I am hopeful because God is still firmly established on His throne and it is His power by the Spirit of God working through His Word by means of a faithful shepherd that will revitalize a church. I’m hopeful because I believe we have some of those faithful shepherds who will be willing to pay the price for revitalization to happen. However, I’m realistic in that there will be some churches that will resist the significant changes and repentance required to experience renewal. But my sincere hope and prayer is that God will bring great glory to Himself by giving new life to the churches of NWIBA.

In His Service,

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