

Hello Pastors/Leaders:

In these next several months I will be writing a series of articles on the subject of church health/revitalization. Last month I wrote on *How does a church know if it needs revitalized?* I touched on eleven indicators of a church in need of an infusion of health/revitalization. With this article I'd like to address the *Essential Qualities of a Revitalization Pastor*. There is a sense that these qualities need to be evident in all pastors, but they are especially important in someone who wants to lead a declining church to health. The truth is, not every pastor is called or gifted to lead in revitalization. Although God can revitalize a church apart from a gifted courageous pastor, He rarely does so. Courageous shepherds are a non-negotiable necessity for church health/revitalization. So what are the essential qualities? These are not exhaustive and are not in any order of importance - but these are the ones I find most vital in our churches in Northwest Indiana.

First, he must have a deep desire to ***preach the Scripture***. That is, expounding what the Scripture says and relating it to the context in which our people live is essential for church health/revitalization. After all, it is the Spirit of God working through *His Word* by means of a faithful shepherd that will revitalize a church. Superficial preaching that reads the text and then tells a disproportionate number of moralistic stories or uses a surplus of humor, but rarely refers back to expound and apply the Scripture will not produce revitalization and health in the church. Preaching that is doctrinally rich, Christ-centered, engaging, and contextual without compromising is what all our churches need- but especially a church in decline.

Second, the revitalization pastor must be ***emotionally and spiritually healthy***. The unfortunate truth is that some churches decline because of the emotional and spiritual condition of the pastor. A pastor can't lead a church to health if he himself is unhealthy. If he is just putting in his time until retirement or until another church opens up, with no hope or ability to reverse the church's decline, then he'll actually become one of the major obstacles to revitalization. A church may not experience revitalization with a healthy pastor, but it will certainly not with an unhealthy one.

Third, he needs to have a ***visionary mindset***. A church in the midst of decline is one that has lost vision and purpose. The revitalization pastor must be more than a good manager or administrator. He must be a visionary leader. He must have the ability to get God's fresh vision for the church and communicate it to the congregation so that they understand and take ownership.

Fourth, the revitalization pastor needs a ***shepherd's heart***. You can't lead a church to health unless you love God's messy sheep (and even those who are not sheep). Too often, a new pastor will come into an unhealthy church and want to be the visionary leader without being the loving shepherd. The result usually is a short tenure for the pastor or a church split (and sometimes both!). Revitalization is a long process and the pastor not

only must provide visionary leadership, but he must exercise tactical patience in leading his people.

Fifth, a pastor leading in revitalization must be a *courageous leader*. Although he must be patient, that doesn't indicate that he is passive. Leading a church back to health will encounter inevitable opposition. Some of the opposition will be intractable and hostile to the vision. The revitalization pastor will predictably have to risk the loss of people, tithes, his popularity, and even his job to lead the church where it needs to go. If job security and man's approval are high on the list, then leading in revitalization is almost impossible.

Sixth, a revitalization pastor must be in it for the *long haul*. One of the significant causes of church decline is frequent pastor turnover. A church in need of revitalization is not the place for the seminary graduate looking for job experience or for the unemployed pastor desperate for a job. Unfortunately, that has been the experience in way too many churches. A pastor should only come to (or stay at) a church in need of revitalization if he is called and is committed to staying for the long haul. Why? Because most say it takes a minimum of five years before revitalization ministry begins to bear fruit and the culture can permanently change.

Seventh, he must be a consistent *prayer warrior*. Revitalizing a church is not primarily a practical endeavor (although practical actions will need to take place), but it is a spiritual intervention. Therefore, a pastor's leadership gifts and communicative skills will be woefully insufficient unless his revitalization process is bathed in prayer. Probably, the single most important aspect in a revitalizer's life is consistent and dependent prayer.

Eighth, the pastor leading in revitalization must have *contextual insight*. That is, most churches in need of revitalization are out of touch and don't relate well with their communities. This is especially true for some churches in Northwest Indiana. In general, our churches were started by people in the south for people from the south, but not biblically contextualized for the people indigenous to Northwest Indiana. A revitalization pastor will need to have a missionary mindset and have the ability to biblically contextualize their ministries for their community.

Ninth, the revitalization pastor must practice *personal evangelism*. Most churches in decline have minimal, if any conversions. Membership has long ago given up hope of conversion growth. In fact, few are engaged in personal gospel conversations. For a church to experience renewal, personal evangelism has to become more of a corporate reality. Obviously that cannot happen without the pastor living, leading and modeling personal evangelism. This cannot just be from the pulpit on Sunday morning, but it must be a gospel sharing lifestyle.

Tenth, lastly, the pastor leading in revitalization must have a *firm identity in Christ*. It is true that every pastor and Christ-follower needs to be "firmed up" in their Christ identity. However, this is even more essential for those leading in a difficult church. The fact is, leading in revitalization will, at least initially; result in many criticisms and few

compliments. More often than not, metrics will go down before they go up. The pastor who needs the congregation's compliments for his sense of identity is headed toward despair in any ministry, but especially in revitalization. Therefore, it's critical that the revitalization pastor have a gospel identity – that he has shored up his identity in Christ and not relying on his performance or the congregation's positive feedback.

There certainly are other qualities that could be added to this list. Obviously, the qualifications outlines in 1 Timothy 3 for elders should be included. But church revitalization is a unique task and not every God called pastor is called to a lead in this way.

However, there is a sense in which all these traits are needed for pastoral ministry today in whatever lifecycle stage a church is experiencing. Pastoral ministry is more challenging in the rapidly changing contexts in which we operate today. Although these traits are important for all, they are essential for the pastor who desires to lead in revitalization.

It could be that you're in a church that needs revitalized and you look at these essential traits and you realize that you're lacking in some. The fact is, none of us measure up and there are areas that each of us would need to work on. However, the pastor who wants to lead his church toward health and revitalization must make a firm commitment to embrace these essential qualities and grow in them.

We cannot do this alone. Obviously our greater help comes for the Lord, but we also need one another. That's why training events like ***Reaching the Summit Church Health/Revitalization Workshop*** on Saturday morning April 7th is so important. We not only have opportunity to learn principles and best practices, but we gather encouragement from others in the same journey. Whatever stage your church is in currently – growth, plateaued, decline – I hope you'll take advantage of this opportunity.

May God by His grace help all our pastors be courageous revitalizers for His great glory!

In His Service,

Wes Rankin
Director of Missions
Northwest Indiana Baptist Association
domnwiba@gmail.com
219-615-9774