

# REVITALISING CHURCHES

Various leaders estimate that between two thirds to four fifths of Baptist churches across Australia are plateaued or declining. Why is this and what can be done about it?

Some years ago I commenced as the lead pastor of a Baptist church that had been in decline for almost 40 years. Five and a half years later, the church had grown by 70%, and was healthier and more connected to its surrounding community. So began my journey in revitalisation of churches, which has included postgraduate study, consulting with churches, and further training in transformative processes. There have been a number of learnings at that church and in the years since; what follows are some of these lessons.

## Revitalisation is needed

God wants to see growing, healthy churches that are impacting their local communities. Jesus called the seven churches of Asia Minor to strength and health in Rev 2-3. While Paul planted many new churches, he also spent much of his ministry checking on existing churches, fostering church health, and encouraging leaders. Church revitalisation is needed, because every church tends to lose connection with the visionary impetus that brings it to birth. Roughly twenty to thirty years after a church is birthed, unless curbed, a church will inevitably begin the slide into decline. Recapturing that initial sense of vision, whether it is a similar or a new and different vision, is hard change work for pastors, leaders, and a church. But a slow, painful death is also a difficult experience for any church to go through. Revitalisation gives a church new hope, life, and the sense of fulfilment that comes from more closely living out God's purposes for the church and impacting more lives for God's Kingdom. Ultimately, God's glory and reign must be the motivation for revitalisation.

## A careful assessment

At the outset one needs to make a careful assessment of the situation at two levels. Initial assessment is done at a personal level, evaluating your heart and commitment prayerfully before God. This involves counting the cost in length of time and work to effect a turnaround, being willing to read and learn from others about leadership and change, asking whether your heart breaks for the lost in the community, and being willing to sacrifice your position for the sake of the Great Commission – you would rather perish trying to effect change than keep the status quo. A clear sense of what is God calling you to do, in spite of the obstacles, is also key.

Secondly one needs to make a careful assessment at a church level. Is there a genuine desire by the bulk of those in the church to commit to church transformation and impact their community, even when that becomes difficult? Are there those with skills and vision who will join with you to lead this process? Unfortunately there are some churches who are either unwilling or unable to undertake a journey in transformation.

Some of us can easily slip towards a negative view of circumstances. Others may naively overlook any obstacle before them. Nehemiah was a man who balanced God's dream with reality. He made a careful inspection of the broken walls of Jerusalem and knew the enormity of rebuilding those walls and of instilling a vision for a different future in people who had grown used to living in the rubble for over a century. Yet the leaders' response when he shared this vision to rebuild was, "We're with you. Let's get started." (Neh 2.18)

## **Vision is central**

At the church I pastored, I soon realized many of the current leaders did not have a clear vision for the future. As the area had changed to become more multicultural, the original vision for the church had become less relevant. Nevertheless, there were those in the congregation who did want to see the church vital and transforming lives in this high-needs community. I invited a number of these people, along with the staff, to form a vision team to facilitate with the church a process for re-evaluating our vision – where we sensed God was calling us to be in five years' time.<sup>1</sup> Among other aspects of the church's life, this led to adopting a more intentional focus to become an international church, SRE and chaplaincy in local schools, and to more strongly engage in serving needs in our surrounding community. Without the support and unity of the vision team it would have been a difficult or even impossible task to turn this church around. As the vision team helped to keep the church on track with the vision the church had signed off on, it also sidelined those who sought to put forward their own visions for the church.

## **Seek outside input**

Christian Schwarz's survey of 1,000 churches in 32 countries revealed that among the key variables related to leadership, the factor with the highest correlation to the overall quality and growth of a church, is leadership's regular use of an outside consultant or advisor (used by 58% of growing, high quality churches, but only by 12% of declining, low quality churches).<sup>2</sup> This can be in a more formal sense such as a church consultancy. My research confirms that church consultancy has a positive impact on church health and growth, even for smaller churches struggling with viability.<sup>3</sup> And/or it can be a mentor or coach for the pastor; this will often speed the process of effecting a turnaround, and that was my experience.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, William Easum, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers: Ministry Anytime, Anywhere, By Anybody*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

2. Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*. (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998), 23.

3. Ian Duncum, *The Impact of Church Consultancy* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019).

## Prayer

Revitalisation is something that God does in partnership with us. Hadaway's research suggests that prayer is a significant factor in revitalisation: 71 percent of previously declining or plateaued churches now experiencing growth reported an increased emphasis on prayer over the past several years as compared to only 40% of churches which continued on the plateau.<sup>4</sup> Creative prayer events, and nights of prayer were an important part of the advance of the church I pastored. If a church is not praying in extraordinary ways and seeking prayer from others, the likelihood of effecting a turnaround is more remote.

## Develop a process

Many efforts at change fail for two reasons. Firstly due to lack of a considered process to lead the church through, and secondly because of failure to attend to the emotional processes of people going through the change. For churches often tempted to reach for the latest faddish one-shot quick fix (and there are many of these promised in church revitalization), such a process must be contextual to the church and the community, deal with the whole church system, and be protracted enough to effect deep and lasting change.

John Paul Kotter develops what he calls the "Change Phases Model", consisting of eight steps:

1. Establish a sense of urgency.
2. Create a coalition.
3. Develop a clear vision.
4. Share the vision.
5. Empower people to clear obstacles.
6. Secure short-term wins.
7. Consolidate and keep moving.
8. Anchor the change.<sup>5</sup>

These are important steps in effecting lasting change and provide a helpful order to follow. Robert Quinn goes beyond this by anchoring the change process in the leader's own transformational journey<sup>6</sup>. The power of a compelling example and a willingness to sacrifice for change are embodied in Christ's leadership of his church.

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4. C. Kirk Hadaway, *Church Growth Principles: Separating Fact from Fiction* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1991), 164.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul Kotter, *A Force For Change: How Leadership Differs From Management*, (New York, NY: Free Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Quinn, *Building the Bridge As You Walk On It: A Guide for Leading Change*, (San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

William Bridges uses the term transition to describe the inner three phase re-orientation that occurs for people going through change.<sup>7</sup> Good leaders are able to assist people to process the disorientation they experience in the midst of change. Sermons outlining this re-orientation process (e.g. Exodus), and listening and acknowledging feelings individually, are some of the ways in which this can be achieved.

For churches in situations of struggling ministry viability, pastors, churches, consultants and denominational leaders can often give up hope. However, while possibilities for struggling churches can be precarious, to abandon hope is not an appropriate response to a God who desires revitalized churches and has given us strategies, people and power to turn churches around. God is calling pastors, leaders, and churches to embark on this journey of transformation so that hundreds of transformed churches across our nation impact their communities for Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1991).