

Church Revitalisation

This seminar will first of all attempt to show the urgent need of church revitalisation which is a relatively new concept in Europe. Much thought and energy has gone into church planting over recent years, but if for every new church planted an older church disappears little progress is being made overall for the spread of the Gospel. We will draw out the theological underpinnings of the concept before moving on to a survey of the various approaches which are currently being used, mainly in the North American context, where the necessity of church revitalization has begun to become increasingly important. Finally we shall give a more detailed description of the approach which is being currently used in the European situation by the FIEC group of churches in the UK. There will also be ample time for sharing the questions and experiences of the participants.

David Brown has been involved in church planting in France since 1976, and has planted three churches (two in Nancy and one in the Paris suburbs). At present he is “replanting” a church in central Paris (Église Protestante Évangélique de Paris-Villiers). For the last ten years he has also been involved with the GBU (Groupes Bibliques Universitaires), the French student movement affiliated to IFES, firstly as General Secretary, and until recently as chair of the board. He also chairs the Evangelism Commission of the French “National Council of Evangelicals” and teaches church planting at the Geneva Bible Institute. He is married to Mary, and they have four adult children and six grandchildren.

Phil Walter has been recently appointed as Church Revitalisation Coordinator for the FIEC (Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches) in the UK. The role will develop an existing revitalisation programme and embed a culture amongst the larger churches of help for the struggling. Phil’s career was in the food industry as MD of a Danish UK Subsidiary, before pastoring a church in Northampton in 1996. During those twenty years he has been involved in a church plant as well as the revitalisation of two other churches. Phil is married to Ruth and they have two sons, both married and both Christians. Four grandchildren complete their family unit.

Session 1: David Brown

1) The need for revitalization

In North America

- 10 - 15% of churches are healthy and multiplying
- 70 - 75% of churches are plateauing or declining
- 10 - 15% of churches are at or near risk of disappearing

Source – North American Mission Board

In France

- 51% of churches are healthy and multiplying

- 38% of churches are plateauing or declining
- 11% of churches are at or near risk of disappearing

Source – Evangelism Commission of the CNEF (National Council of Evangelicals)

1) We note the same reality as in North America although the figures in France are slightly less alarming.

2) Much church-planting has taken place in France over recent decades

- 50 000 in 1950 > 460 000 evangelicals today
- 249 evangelical churches in 1950, 769 in 1970, around 2200 today.

3) But churches planted in the last quarter of the 20th Century often need revitalization. If churches already planted decline or disappear, then France will never be reached with the Gospel.

2) What are the signs that a church needs revitalisation?

Source “Autopsy of a Deceased Church” by Thom Rainer

1. A gradual erosion
2. Living in the past
3. Refusing to live in today’s world, and more specifically to be in phase with the community around the church.
4. Focusing the church budget on maintenance rather than on the needs of those outside the church.
5. Amnesia regarding the Great Commission
6. “The Preference-Driven Church”
7. The church rarely prays together
8. The church functions by routine (“Going through the motions”).

9. Too much emphasis on preserving the way the church building looks.

3) The prerequisites to revitalization

1. (For leaders of denominations) Believe it is possible! Some people think: “It’s easier to give birth to a new church than to resurrect a dead one”, but is the “bell curve” inevitable?
2. (For pastors and church members). To get to the point where they really want change. “Churches change when the pain of not changing becomes unbearable”
3. (For facilitators) Know how to create a climate for change, make the correct diagnosis of a situation and be committed to a process which corresponds to the situation of the church, manage the conflict which change produces.

Session 2: Phil Walter

Theological underpinnings for Church Revitalisation

Introduction

The letters to the 7 Churches in the book of Revelation are for the most part Case Studies of churches that need revitalising!

- 1) **Let’s firstly look at why Revitalisation is important to God and thus important to us.**
 - a) **God’s Mission** – Clear and precise – to go and make disciples, reflecting the heart of God to see people saved. Mark 16 v 15 ...good news to all creation
 - b) **God’s people** – The Bride of Christ – the church worldwide – small churches are part of that and God loves the Church
 - c) **God is passionate about His glory**
Adam and Eve - Israel - His church representations of God’s glory

2) **Let's take a look at one of Revelation's Case studies**

"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die....." (Rev 3 v 1-2)

This letter to the church in Sardis reveals:

The answer?

Remember what you received and heard.

Obey it – their lives had stopped being fashioned by God's Word it was the world that they mingled with that led their thinking.

Repent- a recognition of their situation

3) **So let us dig deeper into some theological foundations that give us confidence to revitalise churches in our particular area of calling.**

Only God can Revitalise – it is a work of the Spirit of God

4) **So why bother? Why seek to revitalise?**

Returning to Revelation 3 and v 4 we see there was a remnant that still walked with the Lord and He was giving the church a warning that they must repent and return to Him.

a. It is God who gives life

b. It is God who gives Gifts to His Church

c. God gives growth

Conclusion

In our differing situations we will come across the need for grace, tender love and compassion as we seek to help the struggling churches God leads us to.

We do so in the knowledge that this will advance the gospel and play a part in the mission God has at His very heart.

Session 3: David Brown

1) Different approaches to revitalization

1. The Ephesus church model (Revelation 2.5)
 - a. Remember (celebrate the past, but don't live in it).
 - b. Repent (restitution, restoration, reconciliation)
 - c. Recover (back to basics, putting first things first)

2. Improving the health of the Church as a prerequisite to growth (prayer, worship, Biblical teaching)

3. Issues of leadership must be resolved
 - a. The need for proactive leaders who take the initiative for change (the sine qua non of revitalization)
 - b. New or renewed leaders (75% of comeback pastors were over forty years of age and there is a positive correlation with the level of education)

4. Casting a clear vision
 - a. Better involvement of members
 - b. Delegation
 - c. Staff

5. Better integration of new people (connecting people, mainly through small groups)

6. Strategic planning
 - a. Defining and casting the vision of the Church
 - b. Introducing new ideas into the culture of the Church

7. Focusing on a few things and doing them well
8. Letting the vision determine the configuration of the church premises (not vice-versa)
9. Identifying with the community / meeting needs outside the Church (the mission of the church to love and serve others, including multi-faceted evangelism)

2) **Discerning the level of revitalization necessary**

Source Thom Rainer ("Autopsy of a deceased church")

Churches with symptoms of sickness

- Pray that God would open the eyes of the leadership and members for opportunities to reach into the community where the church is located.
- Take an honest audit of how church members spend their time being involved.
- Take an audit of how your church spends its money.
- Make specific plans to minister and to evangelize your community.

Churches which are very sick

- The church must admit and confess its dire need
- The church must pray for wisdom and strength to do whatever is necessary
- The church must be willing to change radically
- That change must lead to action and an outward focus.

Churches which are dying

- Sell the property and give the funds to another church, perhaps a new church which has begun or will soon begin
- Give the building to another church

- If your church has a transitional neighbourhood, turn over the leadership and property to those who actually reside in the neighbourhood.
- Merge with another church, but let the other church have the ownership and leadership of you church.

Session 4: Phil Walter
FIEC Approach to Revitalisation

1) Statistics relevant to the UK church scene:

2008-2013 – 2,100 churches closed
 FIEC has 560 churches affiliated to it of which over 20% have indicated the need for revitalisation and there are others who have not asked but clearly need it.

Church Revitalisation is a local church rediscovering it's calling to make disciples of Jesus. It is a process of deliberate change in order to bring about a new beginning, with the goal of the re-establishing gospel growth. It is faithfully putting to death anything that is killing the body, and intentionally pursuing biblical health in the life of the church”
 --John James

2) What might we find and what are the outcomes?

When a church seeks the FIEC’s involvement in Revitalisation it is saying “we need help” – a process then begins which lasts for 20 weeks before decisions are taken regarding the future.

We will meet different situations that require careful and prayerful consideration.

3) Examples of churches seeking revitalisation:

The process

Step 1

- **Meet the Leaders**
- **They also agree to a fee**

Step 2

- **Appoint a Facilitator**

Training
 12 week journey

Project areas: Preach & teach
Questionnaires
Community assessment
Facilities and programme
Finances and assets

Some obstacles faced during this period:

Step 3

Then 8 weeks for the church to decide whether it is willing to be helped

There will be different possibilities at this stage in the process.

1. For the church to die
2. For the church to change itself!
3. For a larger church to take it on
4. For a man with vision to be employed (FIEC can help financially)

Pain in change

4) What benefits are there for both the small and large church involved?

a. For the larger church

1. Gives an outward focus to the larger church
2. Give opportunity for men in the larger church to develop and learn

3. It can reveal our love for brothers and sisters who have been faithful
4. Gives the wider FIEC fellowship as a whole the opportunity to work together- this should be a national initiative for gospel growth.

b. For the smaller struggling church

1. Reveals to them that the work is still important to God
2. Returns them to their first love
3. Raises faith and hope in the Lord
4. Brings richness of fellowship

Suggested Readings:

Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 2007)

Rainer, Thom S. and Eric Geiger. *Simple Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 2006)

Rainer, Thom S. *Breakout Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005)

Rainer Thom S. *Autonomy of a deceased church* (Nashville, B&H Publishing Group, 2014)

Frazer, Randy w. Lyle E. Shaller. *The Come Back Congregation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995)

Harry L. Reeder, *From Embers to a Flame* (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ 2004)

