

# RECOMMENDATION: OPTIONS FOR THE STRUGGLING CHURCH

There is no one-size-fits all approach to revitalizing and Replanting churches. Let that sink in for a moment. This means the work is often messy and there are no road maps or recipes that allow you to follow a linear, step-by-step process that will necessarily lead to success.

Granted, some approaches are easier or more successful than others. There are approaches that take a great deal of time and effort and involve greater risk. But the reality is that no two churches are identical; therefore, no two revitalizations or Replants will be identical.

It's tempting for us as we work with churches to recommend the easy and sure methods over the difficult and uncertain. We may find ourselves justifying choosing the former over the latter because we are busy, we are leveraged, and we are dealing with fickle people and valuable properties, which means we are dealing with a lot of "what if's," a great number of variables and the real prospect of seeing hours of work and millions of dollars lost if a church chooses to say no or chooses a path that is high-risk. Despite all this, opting to take the easy route simply because it's easier isn't an option. Our duty is to labor to discover the faithful route and recommend it to the church.

God doesn't call us to easy—He calls us to walk by faith. He receives more glory when we exercise great faith, which leads to greater praise for Him as He shows himself faithful.

Having completed the exploration and examination phases, you now find yourself at the point of asking, "What is God's best for this church?" This is the recommendation stage. Much like a physician, you have conducted tests and concluded your examination. Having determined that the church you're working with cannot continue as it has, your task is to recommend a course of action.

In our work with churches, we focus on six primary recommendations. Each has inherent risks, benefits and success rates. Some are more difficult to accept, others are easier to implement. Each one is valid and is an option for a church to prayerfully consider. The leaders of the church you are working with need to understand each option, and they need to hear which one or two you recommend they prayerfully consider.

Typically, we offer no more than one or two recommendations. We explain our reasons in a written one- to two-page document, which is given to the leaders during the presentation. An example of a recommendations report is in the resource section of this book.

## Church Revitalization

**Revitalization:** The supernatural work of God that restores health and vitality to a plateaued or declining church, evidenced by submission to God's Word, right relationships among members and a renewed commitment to Great Commission ministry.

**Revitalization = existing church + existing leaders + existing structure + history + renewed/new effort**

## **Characteristics**

- This is the least invasive approach.
- It utilizes existing structures, leadership and congregants.
- It requires less change up front.
- The church is less likely to experience conflict overall.
- Revitalization may be led by an existing or a new pastor. It is less likely to occur successfully with a long tenured existing pastor; more likely, a new pastor is the best way to move forward.
- The pace of change is slow.
- It is risky as the church may reject the efforts of the pastor and leaders and ask them to leave or remove them through elevated conflict or forced termination.
- The church is less likely to experience lasting change and more likely to be a continuation of the same practices.
- This is the least effective approach for churches facing imminent closure.

### **May recommend this option when:**

- The church is not ready/resistant for drastic change
- The church is unwilling to partner or give up control to a Supporting or Sending Church
- The church has adequate funds (5-10 years) to continue doing ministry
- The congregation is motivated and unified
- The congregation is contextually congruent with the surrounding community
- The majority of the congregants live in the community. General rule: The farther away congregants live away from the church (true of urban and suburban areas) the less likely that group is going to be able to revitalize the church.
- They are willing to follow a new leader

### **Can our church be revitalized?**

This is one of the most frequently asked questions by churches we consult. First, it is important to be clear about the general distinctions between revitalization and Replanting.

Revitalization is generally described as a deliberate, dedicated and protracted effort to reverse the decline or death of an existing church. While much may change in the way the church approaches ministry, the church most often retains its existing leadership, identity (name) and decision-making structures and processes.

As the name implies, a church that is going to be revitalized must still have enough in the way of people, resources and energy to become vital again in proclaiming the gospel in its context. We have discovered that not every pastor is skilled or equipped to lead a church in revitalization. As a rule, pastors who have presided during a time of active and or accelerated decline—that is not due to dire external circumstances—and have not slowed or reversed that decline are not likely able to turn the church back toward health.

Though most of these churches want to be revitalized, we have found that those same churches who have long been in decline have passed over or missed key opportunities to address internal leadership and spiritual issues necessary to become revitalized.

Frankly, revitalizations are risky. According to Thom Rainer, up to 80% of churches who seek to be revitalized fail in their efforts. Why? We have found the following to be contributors.

### **Why Revitalizations Often Fail:**

- The existing pastor is not skilled or equipped in revitalization.
- There are few revitalization leaders within the congregation.
- The church has simply run out of time and resources necessary to engage in a protracted revitalization effort.
- Those resistant to change oppose the necessary actions which could lead to revitalization

Most churches prefer to be revitalized rather than Replanted. This is because revitalization offers a much less invasive approach, it requires less surrender, and it is more likely to preserve much of what the church values and holds dear.

Is church revitalization possible? Of course, God can do anything. Is it probable? In many cases no, it is not. The long-declined church often does not possess the courage, will and the right kind of leaders to pull itself out of its prolonged slide.

#### **Tip: The Revitalization Window**

Churches experiencing decline have windows of opportunity in which they can address decline and see a turnaround. If they fail to address the underlying issues of decline, they could miss the window and head toward irreversible decline and eventual closure. For more on this topic, consult the “Revitalization Window” document in the resources section.

### **Replant**

Replanting a church is different from revitalizing a church, though there is often a great deal of overlap. Replanting is the decision to close an existing church and re-launch as a new church with new leadership (pastor), new name, new identity, new governance, new ministry approach and overall new philosophy of ministry. In some cases, it is not necessary to adopt a new name but to simply adjust it. In some instances where a denominational label is a hindrance to reaching the community or where the name is unnecessarily long or confusing, or where the church has a bad reputation in the community a name change may be appropriate.

**Replant = new leader + new people + new structures/approaches + history**

**Replanting:** The process in which members of a church facing imminent closure discern God’s leadership to dissolve their current ministry and work with other churches or denominational bodies to begin a new church for a new season of ministry in their community.

## Characteristics

- Builds on the history/legacy of the previous church
- Requires new leadership (assessed and approved replant pastor)
- New decision-making structure and new decision makers who handle the daily decisions (replant leadership team, transition team)
- Offers a break with the past (end date) and a fresh start for the future (launch date)
- Historical factors may linger among those who were part of the previous church
- Resource hungry: salary for replanter, money for redecorating, facility upgrades, rebranding, need for new congregants, volunteers and staff.
- New identity can create momentum and enthusiasm and interest in the community
- This is the most drastic approach and is often rejected or not entertained by existing churches
- May be eligible to apply for funding as a new church plant (according to State Convention Process)
- High risk and high reward
- Often takes 5-7 years for the replant to become established culturally
- May not grow to be self-sustaining

## May recommend when:

- There is a high receptivity and readiness to embrace change
- The existing community and facility are in a highly unreached and underserved by a gospel-proclaiming church.
- The existing church facilities are in adequate shape and the community context is growing and or stable.
- The congregation is aged and disconnected with the surrounding community
- The church will not survive financially in the next three years and an end date is imminent and may be hastened by departures of members, church splits, deaths of long time congregants.
- There are existing people groups who are not being reached with the gospel
- When the church is “all in” and ready to do whatever it takes to reach others
- A potential replanter has been identified and the church is willing to call them as pastor

## Two Styles of Replanting

There are generally a couple of types of church Replants—those Replanted from within and those Replanted through partnership. Both require the church to bring to a close its existing style of ministry and start over as a new congregation. Associations and state conventions refer to them by different names, but they have this characteristic in common: The old church ends, and the new church begins.

- **Replant from within:** the intentional restarting of a local church by a new pastor with existing people/leaders and without partners from the outside. The church

adopts new decision-making structures, ministry focuses and programs and usually a new name.<sup>2</sup>

- **Partnership Replant:** the intentional restarting of a local church with the help of outside partners through one of the following actions: marriage/merger, adoption/campus church or family network. The church being Replanted allows the partner church to lead directionally and surrenders its assets and facilities.

## Partnership Replanting

### Marriage/Merger

**Marriage/Merger = one struggling church + a strong church or church plant = combined history and combined church. The strong church takes the lead.**

The joining together of an existing unhealthy or declining church and a healthy existing church or church plant.

### Characteristics

- Two churches come together to form one new church.
- A healthy church plant in the area is looking to launch.
- The healthy church takes the lead position.
- The unhealthy church gives up assets, control and decision making.
- It requires lengthy process meetings and clear communication as the specifics of the merger are developed, addressed and agreed upon.
- Legal consultation is required as one church closes and ceases to exist and assets are transferred to the other church.
- Can be a blessing to both churches with increased members and a greater number of volunteers.
- Requires caution as some may develop an us and them posture toward one another.
- It often requires the assistance of a third party to facilitate discussion and decision making between the two congregations.

### May recommend when:

- There is a strong effective gospel proclaiming church in the immediate community
- The church is open to forming a partnership with another congregation
- The struggling church is willing to follow the leadership and adopt the ministry style of the other congregation.
- The legacy/established church is “open handed with their facilities”
- There is a high receptivity and readiness to embrace change and new leadership
- There is a short window of opportunity in which to act for the future of the church.

<sup>2</sup>Replanting from within requires 5-7 years on average to see a turnaround, and it is the least likely to succeed due to the lack of outside partnerships.

## **Adoption/Campus**

**Adoption/Campus = (strong church and its resources, leadership and brand)  
+ struggling church**

The adoption or absorption of an existing church that is in decline or near death by a larger healthy church.

### **Characteristics**

- The adopted church gives up all control and assets to the adopting church.
- New leadership replaces existing leadership.
- It results in immediate growth numerically.
- It typically yields abundant resources for facilities and ministry.
- It most often results in a loss of historical identity and legacy.
- There is the strength of a recognized brand in the community.
- The risk is much lower than revitalization, Replanting and merger.
- Existing church members have the option of becoming members of the adopting church.

### **May recommend when:**

- A nearby, healthy partnering church has a sizeable group of people attending worship gatherings at their location, who are driving from your church's neighborhood.
- The existing church is not able to or willing to take radical actions to address its true condition.
- There is a good match between ministry philosophies and a commitment to the greater work of the kingdom.
- A church is resource deprived and in great need financially and strategically.
- The existing or established church is humble and receptive to outside leaders and families.

## **Closure of Church/Disposition of Property**

**Closure = depleted resources, tired congregation, no ability/desire to continue + willingness to let go for the sake of the kingdom.**

The existing church closes, and deeds assets and property are transferred to a denomination or church.

### **Characteristics**

- This is the least desirable option, since it fails to build upon the history and legacy of the pre-existing church. It is the option of last resort.
- It is the easiest approach.
- It is administratively burdensome on the entity receiving the assets and property.
- It allows for the potential creation of a ministry center that could house multiple congregations.

### **May recommend when:**

- The people are done and there's no desire/ability to keep going.
- Most of the congregation is highly unrepresentative of the surrounding community.
- The church may have declined because the community around them has transitioned to a non-neighborhood.
- The church facility is in great disrepair.
- Large established or healthy church plants are in the immediate area and serving the neighborhood in which the church meets.
- Financial resources are completely exhausted.

### **Two Additional Options**

#### **Church Fostering**

**Foster = a struggling church + a stronger church or churches + a defined relationship + a defined time frame (temporary) + the desire to for the struggling church to regain health and autonomy.**

In a fostering relationship, a healthy, established church provides wisdom, support, and resources to assist a struggling church for a defined period of time so that the struggling church regains vitality and full autonomy.

#### **Characteristics**

- a time bound temporary relationship in which a stronger church provides care for a struggling congregation
- a compassionate response to provide aid not enlarge a campus or network church system
- guided and guarded by a defined written agreement between the fostering church and the church being fostered
- the church being fostered willingly agrees to receive guidance and follow leadership
- a return to autonomy is the goal
- any consideration of or a request for a formal partnership or permanent relationship is the responsibility of the fostered church to initiate

### **May recommend when:**

- The church is not ready for (or resistant to) drastic change
- The church is unwilling to give up complete control to a partnering church, but open to outside help from sister church(es) and the Associational Revitalization/Replant Team
- The church's main need is equipping, coaching, and resourcing
- The congregation is motivated and willing to receive outside leadership Further development required

#### **Further Development Required**

During the consultation process, you may become aware that the church is experiencing significant and severe conflict and lacks unity in seeking options for its future. When this occurs, it is wise to recommend specific actions to address the spiritual condition and unity

in the church. This would likely involve a very intentional prayer campaign, sermon series, biblical study and focused discussions on revitalization and Replanting options.<sup>3</sup> Any factions or individuals stirring up or fostering conflict must be addressed personally and encouraged to unify with the body as they engage in the process and consider the options or depart from the congregation if they are not inclined to seeking the Lord with the congregation.

**May recommend when:**

- A church is evenly split for and against the recommendation.
- There is strong opposition on the leadership team working with your consultation team.
- A shadow campaign of unofficial meetings working against the process or recommendations arises.
- Negative emails and letters, anonymous or not, are being sent to the church body regarding the recommendations or proposals.
- The discussion in townhall meetings devolves into serious accusations and conflict.

**Communicating this option**

“We hear your hesitancy about moving forward. Please understand that we will always support the congregational form of church governance and will never override your concerns or ignore your burdens. It could be that we are missing some insights or that the proposed pace of change might be too rapid at this juncture.

“However, that being said, this could be the time in which the Lord is graciously allowing division and disagreement to surface so it might be dealt with in a godly, respectful and direct manner. Perhaps the addressing of these problems and the removal of barriers to kingdom engagement is the biggest part of the work we have to do together.

“Our recommendation is that your congregation engage in an intentional and prayerful process over the next number of weeks/months and that we revisit the openness to future options at the conclusion of that process.”

<sup>3</sup> We recommend leading a congregation through the church study series Reclaiming Glory by Mark Clifton or Flickering Lamps from Blackaby Ministries International.