

## **Pastoring a Comeback Church** **by Dr. Ed Stetzer**

Anybody who has done it for any length of time knows how difficult, stressful, challenging, and joyous it can be. No, we're not talking about running and finishing a marathon, though that might apply as well. We're talking about *PASTORING*. It is hard and rewarding at the same time—particularly when it involves leading a church to evangelistic effectiveness after a period of decline.

We surveyed 324 churches that experienced significant revitalization. These churches represented 10 denominations. And not one of the Comeback Leaders from any of the churches said, "Oh, making a comeback... piece of cake. Smooth sailing all the way. Easy as 1-2-3."

On the other hand, neither did we hear anyone say, "I wish we had never started this revitalization stuff at our church. It's awful the way our church has started growing again. Having more people around just creates more problems. Tell everyone else to stay plateaued and declining. It's not worth it."

Our study of Comeback Churches revealed some things about revitalization that might help pastors. And that's good news, because pastoring is hard work. We need all the insights and good advice we can get. So, here are four key factors that can help you begin the process of revitalization.

### **1. Leadership is foundational.**

According to Comeback Leaders we interviewed, nothing was more vital than leadership. John Boquist, pastor of Cardinal Baptist Church in Ruther Glen, Virginia, asserted the following about leadership when he referenced *The Twenty-One Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*: "The two points most influential to me and cardinal are 'The Law of the Buy-In' and 'The Law of the Lid.' People aren't going to buy into the vision until they can buy into you.

The Law of the Lid affirms that God has designed you to do something. The question is what are you doing with what God has given you? Like it has been said, everything rises and falls on leadership." [\[1\]](#)

These principles of Comeback Leadership should help pastors who desire to lead their church in making a comeback:

#### 1.1 Be proactive and intentional about making necessary changes.

Comeback Leaders take the initiative for change. They refuse to be passive. They make an effort to establish tangible growth goals. Comeback leaders are willing to identify, challenge, and address attitudes that stand in the way of revitalization and they lead their churches to become more outwardly focused.

#### 1.2 Decide to get more people involved in the ministry of the church.

Comeback Leaders develop and promote an atmosphere of teamwork and give away non-ministry tasks such as building maintenance and administrative tasks. They focus more time on strategic tasks such as developing new leaders and doing more outreach.

As lay leaders came forward, Vernon Johnson, pastor of Trion Heights Church in Trion, Georgia, made dramatic changes in his schedule. Pastor Johnson said, "I went from counselling, reconciling relationships and putting a lot of my time into studying the Word to less study time and more focus on lay leader training." The men's, women's, children's and youth ministries are all lay-led now. The deacons have taken over visitation and coordinating building projects at the church and members' homes." [ii]

We are not suggesting that the study of God's word is unimportant, but some respondents said they had focused a disproportionate amount of time on study, consuming too much of their ministry. Conversely, at least 40% (the largest response in the category), said that as part of the change they now spend *more* time in sermon preparation, not less. These leaders freed themselves up for not only more study, but more leadership training, and more evangelism.

### 1.3 Cast a shared vision.

Andy Stanley observed, "All God ordained visions are shared visions. Nobody goes it alone. -But God generally raises up a point person to paint a compelling verbal picture. A picture that captures the hearts and imaginations of those whom God is calling to embrace the task at hand."<sup>3</sup>

The vision that's cast and the vision caster must both have credibility. Additionally, the vision should paint a compelling verbal picture and be realistic. Don't underestimate the cost of commitment, because it doesn't come easily. You will need to develop a strategy to keep the vision consistently.

### 1.4 Develop a simple plan to recruit and train new leaders.

Perhaps one of the most vibrant examples of revitalizing leadership was found at Cumberland Community Church in Cumberland, Maryland. Pastor Ron Yost stated, "We make all of our leaders go through the Saddleback Leadership Seminar. We constantly talk in our meetings about what it means to be a leader. In addition to being a member, our leaders must go through a spiritual gifts test and a spiritual maturity class." [iii] Whatever process you may choose, keep it simple and keep at it.

Comeback Leaders indicated that revitalization starts with godly leadership that is proactive, but it also involves more people in ministry, activates a shared vision, and develops new leaders. Godly leaders understand that they are gifts God has given to bring the body of Christ to a renewed sense of belief in Jesus Christ and in the mission of the church. Good leadership always moves God's people to godly action.

## **2. Renewed belief is motivational.**

Renewed belief is about the simplicity of the gospel, the centrality of Jesus Christ, and the purpose of the church. When a church forgets why it truly exists, it is likely to slip into a plateau and decline. Comeback Leaders know that change takes place as the church is renewed spiritually. Consider the motto of the Welsh Revival: "Mend a church, save the world." Our hope is that this book will create ripple effects throughout the church that will impact the world with the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ.

Faith is the indispensable, foundational ingredient for true growth in the church, both spiritually and numerically. Without faith, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6) and to reach people for His kingdom (Colossians 1:28-29). Vibrant faith in Jesus and the mission of the church leads us to set personal and congregational goals to accomplish God's purpose. *Renewed belief motivates us to get back on mission.*

We heard many stories of renewed belief in Jesus Christ and the mission of the church—both of which are indispensable ingredients for church revitalization. Loving Christ and not loving the church is like telling a friend that you love him, but you couldn't care less about his wife. Both the groom (Jesus) and the bride (the church) are essential. Before our Lord Jesus died on the cross, was buried and rose again, He said that He would come back with "great glory" (Matthew 24:29-31). So where is His glory on display now? In the church!

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus, wrote, "*Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen*" (Ephesians 3:20-21, NIV). Churches are renewed when God is glorified anew in them.

Renewal is a common word in church revitalization circles, but it means different things to different people. For the Comeback Leaders in the survey, it means that they know Jesus more fully, and love the church and its mission more passionately. Pastors who want to lead their churches in making a comeback should focus on the following principles.

*Focus on growing more in love with Jesus Christ; then help others know and experience the reality of Jesus Christ in their lives .* According to Pastor Dave Banfield of Bethel Baptist Church, a Baptist General Conference church in Mankato, Minnesota, developing an atmosphere of renewed belief involved "a gradual, consistent teaching of Scripture combined with a day-by-day lifestyle of spiritual maturity.

Strategic discipleship classes helped us grow. Also, our ALPHA and Divorce Care ministries, along with ministry to internationals and college students at Minnesota State University allow our people to see what non-Christians really think. This has helped them re-establish their belief in the mission Christ has for the church." [\[iv\]](#)

*Help the church grow more deeply in love with your community through teaching, preaching, and praying .* At Lynchburg Church of the Nazarene in Lynchburg, Virginia, a Saturday morning prayer meeting was the first project for Pastor Stephen Willis. Next, a prayer lab was started—an entire Sunday morning service of music and prayer for the community. This occurred twice a year. They also conduct twenty-four-hour prayer vigils twice a year, church-wide prayer chains, and Pastor Willis preaches one series a year specifically on prayer. The staff meets for prayer four mornings a week. [\[v\]](#) As the church and staff prayed for the community, they developed a heart for the community.

*Lead the church to develop a greater love for the lost and to become more outwardly-focused .* Pastor Jeff Le Bert of the New Hope Church of the Nazarene in Rogers, Arkansas, said, "I really preached on the purpose of the church using

Ephesians 3.” [vi] The church organized a community carnival called “Family Fest” offering games and activities for kids, as well as music and door prizes for adults.

Everyone who came had to register for the door prizes, giving the church a prospect list. “However,” says LeBert, “they knew up front they would receive an information packet from the church.” The church did excellent follow-up on the prospects. All this led to new attitudes. A love for the lost usually leads to changes in programs, priorities, finances, and a commitment to serve.

### **3. A renewed attitude for servanthood must be cultivated.**

Comeback Churches develop a renewed attitude for servanthood. At Southside Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas, membership was down to nine in 1998 when Al Byrom came to be the bi-vocational pastor.

“The church had no mission, vision, or excitement for ministry. I came in, under the Lord’s leading, and empowered the people to *do* ministry. I led by example. I have a ‘no-nonsense’ approach to leadership. My leaders now are proactive and excited about ministry because it is more enjoyable.” [vii] By 2004, the church’s morning worship attendance was 744. As Byrom modelled and led the church to serve, the difference was immediately evident.

As you begin to love your community, you’ll likely discover some community needs that aren’t being met. By starting a particular ministry you’ll not only help your community, but you’ll build relationships with unreached people who have those particular needs. Some churches find that Divorce Care, Celebrate Recovery, parenting classes, and other programs become important connecting points for their outreach strategy.

A Comeback Church exhibits a different attitude, realizing that its purpose is about more than itself and its preferences. It develops the attitude of Christ and engages in acts of service. William Temple, the former Archbishop of Canterbury once said, “The Church is the only organization organized primarily for the benefit of its non-members.”

These principles will help you lead your church to develop a servant’s attitude:

- *Help people care more for their community than for their preferences.* Being contemporary to your culture will mean different styles in different communities. If we choose not to serve our community as it exists, what’s the alternative? We are then making a choice to function by our own preferences and the internal cultures we create. Sadly, churches that preserve their preferences and church culture do not reach the unchurched and don’t experience revitalization. You must have a genuine servant spirit not to focus on your preferences.
- *Develop the same attitude Jesus had—don’t just focus on spiritual maturity* (Philippians 2:5-11). Jesus modelled putting others before ourselves. Sometimes we try to separate the tasks of evangelism and discipleship even though they go hand-in-hand. Realize that making more believers is not antithetical to making better believers. This spiritual dynamic is not an either/or proposition; it is a both/and proposition. Our dual mission is to make *more* and *better* followers of Jesus Christ. A disciple who is growing spiritually will evidence a growing desire to be a witness and reach out to those who are lost.

- *Model and promote acts of service.* At Venango Woods Church in Franklin, PA, Pastor Dan Sardinas recently led his church to do a “Gas Buy Down” for their community. They bought gas down by 25 cents per gallon for an hour at a local gas station. Pastor Dan and other church members pumped gas, washed windshields, directed traffic, and talked with people just to demonstrate God’s love to the community in a practical way. That led several families to visit the church for the first time.

#### **4. Evangelistic efforts must be intentional.**

It’s hard to continue reaching new people with the gospel, And keeping a clear, compelling, consistent, and outwardly-focused vision before the people can be extremely difficult. It’s easy to get distracted from doing the “main thing.” Pastors and members get busy. Churches lose focus. But, evangelism can and must remain a top priority or transformation will not occur.

Hundreds of churches turn around every year, stop their decline, and grow both spiritually and numerically. According to our study, most of them develop and implement a more strategic and intentional evangelism process to accomplish the transformation.

But how can a church develop a comprehensive and effective evangelistic strategy? First, by realizing that it is possible. While this point is easy to understand, it’s not as easy to implement. To develop an effective evangelistic strategy, you must have a good plan and people who are willing to go “fishing” with more than one type of lure.

No “silver bullet” exists when it comes to reaching people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The days of “Lone Ranger” evangelism are long past. Developing an effective evangelistic strategy requires incremental stages, helping people move from the ranks of the inactive and unreached to being active followers of Jesus Christ.

In the book, we explain seven principles for effective evangelism that we’ve gleaned from Comeback Churches and from our own ministry. Those principles are outlined briefly for you here:

**Principle #1** : The best motivation for effective evangelism is renewal in God’s love for us, compelling us to love those He loves (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). Based upon that renewal, pastors can cast a vision for outreach that is shared by the leadership and then the congregation.

**Principle #2** : If we are going to train people to “go and tell,” they need to learn to live like Jesus lived—as a messenger of God in this world.

**Principle #3** : Organize for evangelism using multiple methods.

**Principle #4** : It takes a leader to help the church get involved in reaching out to the community.

**Principle #5** : The whole church has to be mobilized to embrace the mandate for evangelism. Everyone can be involved as a prayer, bringer, server, and/or teller, and should be trained and mobilized in one or more of these areas.

**Principle #6:** Prepare for outreach with prayer and training. Don't try to get people to *do* evangelism without preparation.

**Principle #7:** Plan for and utilize multiple “Doors of Entry” to the church.

At the First Assembly of God [\[viii\]](#) in St Charles, Missouri, Pastor Jerry Harris said their staff leads their evangelistic efforts, encouraging the people to live a lifestyle of evangelism. Church members are challenged to be, do, and tell the gospel to their friends, neighbours, and families. Pastor Jerry models outreach for the church and shares his stories with the church regularly. His defeats and successes in evangelism help motivate others to share their faith.

In addition, the church staff partners with the church family to help them bring their friends. They organize, promote, and conduct five major evangelistic events each year—Halloween Outreach, Easter production, July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration, Fall festival, and a children's Christmas musical.

The July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration includes a brunch for veterans and their families. This outreach event especially appeals to a particular segment of their community. The children's Christmas musical includes children who may not be members or even attenders. It's open to anyone who wants to be involved, creating an opportunity to touch those in the community who don't attend church. Several unchurched families came to see their kids at the Christmas musical. Some of those families have now come to faith in Christ and some are still on the journey. [\[ix\]](#)

While your church may not be able to do all of these things, you can start somewhere. Pick one special event or way that you can reach out to your community, make plans with church members to do it, and do it well. Remember to be creative, but don't forget to check your community calendar!

## **Conclusion**

These are not all of the important findings from our study, but are four of the top discoveries from hundreds of churches that experienced revitalization. Leadership is foundational, renewed belief is motivational, a renewed attitude for servanthood must be cultivated, and evangelistic efforts must be intentional.

Throughout its history, the church has followed a pattern of growing, decaying, and being restored. Considering this cyclical pattern, is it possible for pastors to lead today's plateaued or declining churches toward renewal? Is it realistic to think that we can help them move from being stuck and stagnant to being vibrant and growing? The answer from history and the testimony of Comeback Churches is a resounding, “YES!” Our prayer is that many who read these words and apply these principles will find that they too can pastor Comeback Churches.

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Ed Stetzer (Ph.D.) and Mike Dodson (D.Miss.) have recently published *Comeback Churches: How 300 churches Turned Around and How Yours Can Too* (B&H Publishers, May 2007).

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**References:**

[i] John Boquist, Interview by NAMB Research Team, February 4, 2006.

[ii] Vernon Johnson, Interview by NAMB Research Team, February 2, 2006.

[iii] Ron Yost, Interview by NAMB Research Team, February 2, 2006.

[iv] Dave Banfield, Interview by NAMB Research Team, February 1, 2006.

[v] Stephen Willis, Interview by NAMB Research Team, January 27, 2006.

[vi] Jeff LeBert, Interview by NAMB Research Team, February 7, 2006.

[vii] Al Byrom, Interview by NAMB Research Team, February 7, 2006.

[viii] [www.stcharlesassembly.org](http://www.stcharlesassembly.org)

[ix] Jerry Harris, Interview by NAMB Research Team, January 31, 2006.