

Leadership Letter 18

(Note: this is the 18th in a series of "Leadership Letters." You can read previous letters at our web-site. Go to www.GraceGlobalNetwork.org and look under the "encouragement" section.)

The Basics of Church Renewal

Dead churches are scattered all over the landscape. They are in inner cities, small towns, suburbs, farming communities, resort towns, and major metropolitan areas. They are in American and all around the world. They are churches that used to be alive and vibrant, but are now in need of renewal.

How does that happen? I remember being asked to come in and help a church that had seen better days. This church once had a great ministry. It still had a Christian school that was very popular and effective. But no one from that school even came to the church anymore! The church had a wealth of financial resources – but nobody was coming. They had a horrible reputation in their community. They were irrelevant to their culture – and they recruited me to help turn it all around. I'll be honest ... I thought I would simply step in there, recruit a great worship leader, provide superior teaching from the pulpit – and people would *flock* to the church. They didn't ... and the major reason was we were unable to solve the most fundamental problems the church had. And the church ultimately shut its doors ... permanently.

For a church to impact society, it must have a *clear purpose*, a *well-defined core values*, and a *compelling vision*. I've previously written Leadership Letters where we addressed each one of these areas in-depth. Today I would simply like to give you a framework where you can counsel churches that are dead or dying. Perhaps the most important piece of this Leadership Letter will be sets of questions under each of these three areas. Take some time to process these individually and with the Church Leadership Team.

1. A Church Must Have a Clear Purpose

The first step in revitalizing a church is to redefine its purpose. Purpose answers the question, *Why do we exist and what are we to accomplish?* Purpose defines our reason for existence and the work that God has given us to do.

The over-arching purpose of the church is to glorify God. But Jesus also revealed specific purposes for His church: *introducing people to Christ, providing fellowship and community for Christ-followers, maturing believers, creating worship environments for God's people, and equipping workers for the harvest.*

Most church failures come about due to ambiguity of purpose than for any other reason.

"Purpose" questions to ask a church in need of revitalization:

- State your church's purpose

- Could your leadership (staff, lay-leaders, small group leaders, elders, deacons, teachers, etc.) clearly state that purpose? Or when asked, would they do the “stumble-mumble”?
- Does your church buy into your purpose?
- Is your church driven by that purpose? In other words, do your activities and programs help you accomplish those purposes?
- If not, what would it take for your church to begin to operate according to its purposes?

2. A church must have a set of well-defined core values

The second step in revitalizing a church is to identify its core values. Values ask and answer the question, *Why do we do what we do?*

Core values are the passionate beliefs and convictions that motivate and direct us. They move and drive your organization toward its vision. They identify what we stand for and how things are done.

Core values answer the questions: *what are our passionate beliefs and convictions that motivate and direct us? What is important to this church?*

Church consultant Lyle Schaller, in his book *Getting Things Done*, says, “*The most important single element of any corporate, congregational, or denominational culture is the value system*” (p. 152).

“Values” questions to ask a church in need of revitalization:

- List 3-5 values that drive your church
- Are these shared values or simply the values of the pastor and staff?
- Are these the right values? Do they accurately reflect your church culture?
- Do you (the team leader) passionately live these values out in your personal life?
- How are you communicating these values to your young leaders?

3. A church must have a compelling vision

The third step in revitalizing a church is to clarify its vision. Vision answers the question, *Where are we headed?*

A vision is a clear, challenging picture of the future of the ministry as you believe it can be and must be. Vision defines our future direction. It defines what your church will become and achieve.

Vision distinguishes a strong church from a weak one. Every successful organization has a shared sense of direction unifying the members of the congregation.

Mike Regele, in his book *Death of the Church*, (p. 229) writes

The most important problem in the church today is a fundamental lack of clear, heart-grabbing vision. The church in America has no vision. It has programs

and institutions and property and ministers and politically-correct hymnals, but no vision.

Robert Greenleaf has said, *"Nothing much happens without a dream. And for something great to happen there must always be a great dream."*

Ultimately I believe that vision comes from God. He speaks to the hearts of His people about His specific vision for their particular church.

"Vision" questions to ask a church in need of revitalization:

- What is the vision of your church?
- Is it compelling? Does it motivate you? Do others rally to that vision?
- If you could shape your church's vision, what would it be?
- What do you believe God's vision for your church is? Have you sought Him in persistent prayer as to what His vision is?
- In what ways would your church look differently if it consistently lived out God's vision?

Two years ago, Stephen Bowe moved from a small town in South Carolina to eventually take over as Senior Pastor at First Baptist Church in Lehigh Acres, a Ft. Myers suburb. FBC was virtually on life-support as a church – and God has used Stephen to perform a resurrection. I asked him to comment about church revitalization. Read his story in his own words:

As I stepped into the life of FBC, it was easy to see that the people had been hurt. They carried the wounds of battles with the previous pastor and with each other. Like a child that will pick at a scab, church life had become the chore of constantly scratching at the scab of past hurts. In the early months I would listen to the people's stories and as we closed each conversation I would remind them that the hurtful past would not lead us into the future God has for the church. With individuals, and from the pulpit, we began to talk about purpose.

After having been at First Baptist for 3 months we launched the Purpose Driven Life campaign. For 40 days we became focused on the fact that God has a purpose for us. We memorized Scripture together, met in small groups, and talked about purpose. During these months I had prayed and taken 6 men aside to meet with them weekly for prayer and mentoring. We finished the Purpose Driven Campaign in November and through the holidays kept a sense of excitement flowing within the church. We had seen people give their lives to Christ and others renew their surrender to His Lordship.

January found us gathered together in an informal setting for fellowship and the casting of vision. The room was packed with people. Taking a mannequin I talked of how the church is to be led by Christ (who is the Head) and the Body was to follow. People from the group allowed me to use their glasses as we tried to place them on the mannequin. We could not go forward expecting the Head of the Church (Christ) to see through our eyes. We would have to find purpose, establish core values, and go forward by allowing the Head to lead and we would willingly follow.

New life has entered this body of dry bones. Individuals who have never invited people to visit their church are bringing guests constantly. New believers are common instead of never. The campus is a buzz as individuals head toward their ministries hand in hand with those they once disdained. The healing process is going well and our core values are driving us forward with purpose and direction. We are not complete yet. But we are reaching into our community and around the world like this church has never seen. Our focus is Christ and our determination is that we go forward, not backwards, with Him.