

## Notes on the Revitalization of Rural Churches

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I am pleased that NAMB has launched an initiative aimed at revitalization of churches. While my understanding of their program is limited, it seems to build off of the one that FBC Houston has successfully practiced for the past 30 years or so. Its plan is to have a large church with significant resources to partner with a neighborhood church in a city which has grown weak. Often it is a matter of changing the “mission” of a church which was formed to serve a neighborhood that housed one racial/cultural group to one that served another racial/cultural group, because the original residents of the neighborhood have been replaced; e.g., from Anglo to Hispanic or African American. (A church is normally focused on serving a place and/or a “people group”. In most cases both place and people group are co-foci. When the people group changes, the church does not *fit*.)

This approach used by FBC Houston ran parallel with one designed by Bob Dale while he was in the Church Administration Dept. of the Sunday School Board in the 1980s. However, his plan was more of a *self-help* program. Some of you have used his book, *To Dream Again*. He noted that a new church typically has a 30 year life-cycle. As the founding generation moves off the scene, there is a need for the congregation to re-dream its dream, to refocus, and to have a purpose which fits its current context. (Dale's focus was the thousands of churches planted by our denomination from 1955 to 1965 as part of the 30,000 Movement.)

Our rural and small town churches had gone through an earlier revitalization process beginning about 1950. Many thousand of our churches changed from being essentially a Sunday School with worship once or twice a month, to a church with a much more focused and dynamic purpose. They added discipleship, mission, and music programs. They became intentional about programs of ministry for their church, their community and the world. It was called the “Long Range Rural Church Program.” (See my article, *Jubilee* [www.ruralchurch.us](http://www.ruralchurch.us).) We honored the churches that did this as being *Five Star Churches*.

Beginning in 1986 and noting that the life-cycle of rural church was not the same as that of city and suburban churches, primarily because of less ethnic/cultural change, D. G. McCoury and I wrote *We're Family* to help rural and small town churches be revitalized. This process is available in the help button of [www.ruralchurch.us](http://www.ruralchurch.us). We encouraged our rural churches to customize a set of programs, events and projects (PEP) to their context. They needed to be certain that this is done in a way that the essential functions of a church are covered. A church is both an expression of the “body of Christ” and a social institution. This was about 1990.

And since then Edwin Jenkins developed the *Healthy Churches* process for which DoAMs and others served as consultants to churches. This was for Alabama Baptists. I found many pastors to be afraid of the process and not willing to promote it. (Note, I

have recently received a letter from *Lifeway* promoting their process Transformational Church Consulting. Perhaps some of you have gotten the training and will share with us later with regard to its content. I need to know about its content and process.)

A theme common to each of these efforts has been the realization that a church has both a social and a spiritual dimension. While revitalization might focus on either the organizational, or the social side, or it might focus on the spiritual side, neither side can be neglected. So, while there has been consensus that many churches need to be revitalized, and while there is a realization that no one method will work everywhere, and while leadership of a coalition of pastoral and lay leadership is critical, it must be a God thing if it is truly real. Change can occur with programs, but revitalization generally includes both structural and spiritual development.

### **Describing My Setting**

For the past 15 years I have served in a rather typical rural, old convention Baptist association of churches as their missionary. Currently, we have 35 congregations affiliated with the association. They report 4,550 resident members and an undesignated income of about four million dollars annually. The association receives about \$120,000 from the churches and about \$50,000 from other sources. I receive a part-time salary. So, we have about \$70,000 a year for mission/ministry endeavors.

Volunteers operate a thrift store as a component of our ministry. We have no camp. We have just had a Federal Women's prison opened in our county. We are planting what I think of as a church there and in our county jail, and in the two nursing homes in the county. Most of our churches are rural, smaller membership, formed in the 19th century, and serve communities where the population is growing smaller and older.

Most of the pastors are bivocational or are drawing Social Security. Only five of the pastors are seminary graduates. Most grew up in one of the churches in the association. Located between Tuscaloosa, Al. and Columbus, Ms., jobs are available for the bivocs. God continues to call folk in our churches into ministry, so we have not had a problem with finding pastors. We have offered Seminary Extension classes and some of our pastors are studying on line.

In my estimation about a third of our churches have been revitalized during my time in the association. About one-third currently need revitalization. And the others seem to be stable, for present—some having been revitalized prior to my arrival.

### **Case Studies**

Let me now describe the revitalization process in some of the churches, as I have observed it, with the aim of drawing from this some observations about how churches get revitalized. Again, let me stress that revitalization includes both social and spiritual dimensions. Only one of these churches used one of the processes I described in beginning this paper. It did not work well.

*Church 1.* Dates from 1835 and is a founding member of the association. In the

early days it was one of three congregations serving a crossroads village. Civil War era letters between a couple in the church, Grant and Melinda Taylor, are printed in the book, *The Cruel War*. The Presbyterians had an academy in the village and a woolen mill provided income. The railroads did not build through the village and in time the stores closed as did the school. The mill was burned during the Civil War. The other churches closed also. Our church has taken on the role of a community church. For the past 30 years it has been pastored by a wonderful professor from the state university. However, his understanding of ministry was pastoral. As persons moved away or died, they were not replaced in the fellowship of the church. I supplied the first two services, first and third Sundays, after the pastor retired in April, 2012. Fewer than 15 persons attended. In December I was back and preached to twice that number. No children in April, 8 in December.

In between revitalization, the church called a man who had a dramatic conversion a few years ago. He operates a slaughter house and cafe about 8 miles north. The new pastor has great inter-personal skills. He knows many of the prospects for the church, and they know him and the changes in his life. I see evidence of church 1 refocusing from “being” to “becoming”. That is our prayer. The first outreach event was “cama Sunday” with a wild game dinner. Fifty attended. The church leaders are working with their new pastor. I suspect that the next issue will be assimilation of the new folk into church. I am optimistic about the result.

*Church 2. Dates from 1864.* Open country and on a dead-end road. Split about a decade ago. A year ago it was down to less than 10 in worship as the congregation's members died off. It invited the association to do an *intervention*. We did. One of our senior pastors who was on staff at a nearby town church, which had several men who had surrendered to ministry recently, agreed to take the pulpit with the stipulation that he could use the “preacher boys” as needed. Soon the church asked one of them who is nearly 40, an electrician, to come as pastor. The senior pastor has continued to do prayer meeting on Wednesday morning and to council the young pastor.

In the Spring the association funded a community religious census and enlisted a cadre of volunteers to help conduct it. We found about 250 persons in the area, of which more than 100 did not claim to be active in church. The census was followed by a revival meeting. In the census we found a good number of children, so with the help of three other associational churches, a VBS was held in the summer. Again, this was funded by the association with funds that are generated by a thrift store which is run by volunteers.

On recent Sundays worship attendance has been in the mid-20s, however, much of the congregation is not from the community, but friends and kin of the new pastor. We still hope to penetrate the community.

Shortly before I came to the association, it had done a similar intervention with an affiliated church. It was successful. On my watch it has had some more problems but for the past 10 years, or so, it has been healthy and growing. The pastor for most of this time is a product of the association. He started in one of our churches, moved on to a

large and growing church in Mississippi with a TV ministry. His marriage dissolved. He came home and soon was called to this church. He is now a hospice minister in addition to being the pastor of this church. His job has enriched his capacity to minister.

*Church 3* dates from 1843. When I first got to know it, it was a very good rural church with about 50 in worship. The pastor had been there for more than 30 years. Shortly, he felt that his ministry there was over (more on that later) and he resigned. When I met with the church, I pointed out that new people were moving out of Tuscaloosa into their community. Church 3 had to determine what God wanted the church to be going forward. Either, it could continue to be a very good rural church, or it could change and become a welcoming, exurban congregation. It sensed that God willed the latter. The church called a young man in his 30s who was a youth pastor in Birmingham and a part-time seminary student. He was raised in the home of a pastor. He has great pastoral skills. He cares deeply about all kinds of people.

The church grew. They built a multipurpose building and moved worship to it. The service became more contemporary. Lots of people who needed ministry came. After school and Celebrate Recovery programs were launched. Two very effective Lay Renewal Weekends were held. Worship reached about 200. Then, some of the long-time members began to leave. The leadership style of the pastor was the reason most given. And some did not like the changes in worship style. Consequently, worship has dropped off.

The pastor recently took a two month sabbatical funded by the Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence at Samford University. He is rejuvenated. My hope and prayer is that the remnant has a common vision for the future, and that the church will return to a growth mode. In any case it is a church that is changed and in my mind is a revived church.

*Church 4* is a little more than 20 years old. It was birthed by a split in the first Baptist church in its town. It grew rapidly with its second pastor and reached about 200 in worship. This pastor became very critical of Southern Baptists and racist in his views. He wanted to take the church independent. Some of the founding members resisted. Finally, about 10 years ago he led about half of the members to form a new congregation. Church 4 called the pastor who had served Church 3 for more than thirty years to be its shepherd. He is a fine man with much knowledge, deep love, and a very traditional approach to preaching and to worship. He is very supportive of the association, the leading pastor, and a good friend.

It took about five years for this church to begin to grow again. They have ministered well to hurting people and some of them connected with this loving church. In the past two years several persons from Church 3 have rejoined their former pastor here. Church 4 has regained its former strength. The founding leaders of the church have grown old and new leadership is emerging. The pastor is also nearing the end of his ministry. It will need to go through a transition soon.

*Church 5.* About a decade ago I visited with a couple of men who had been raised in this church, under the oak tree beside the church, on the occasion of its annual

Homecoming. They expressed concern for the future of the church. True the membership was very old and only 12 to 15 attended worship. Since then most of these members have died. The building dates from 1858. It is a classic rural white frame with a spire church in a beautiful setting. It numbers among its children a missionary to Africa and a former pastor of FBC Dallas. Once the community had a school, a store and a cotton gin. Only the church remains. Today the church is surviving and growing. Worship has grown toward 30.

Four events stand out in my mind as being catalysts in this. They expanded their understanding of the bounds of their church field. They accepted a leadership family from a neighboring congregation after some problems there. They reached about a dozen persons who in retirement had settled in a new lake front community on the Tenn-Tom Waterway. The church agreed to host the association in 2008, the 150<sup>th</sup> year of their building, and involved many people in rehabing the old school house as a community center. They called a fine young man from a neighboring community as pastor. His primary employment is as an engineer in a factory. He is a good student of the Bible and his messages are full of fresh insights. His child is “the church baby”.

The fellowship in the church is warm and inviting. The new leaders have been embraced by the few persons who were in the church a decade ago. The church is able to reach consensus on change items. Church 5 continues to be one of the top *per capita* supporters of the state convention children's home.

*Church 6* dates from 1942. The pastor has been there for more than 35 years. He grew up and lives in an adjoining community. Professionally, he has managed radio stations and been an on-air personality. For years this church had 35 to 45 in worship, comfortably filling their small building.

About a decade ago the congregation stepped out on faith and built a family life center. The worship services moved there, and they doubled in attendance. They were able to pay off their note quickly. Then they tore down their old building and put up an auditorium which seats about 250.

The church also has pretty much taken over the leadership of a old campground with Methodist roots and runs a children's camp in concert with the annual camp meeting each summer. (This has been largely funded by the association from the income of our thrift store which is managed by women from this church.) There and in the church, the pastor has been supportive of hard working women and encouraging them in expanding ministries. For example, at their recent Christmas program nearly 40 children were involved. Most of the children are bussed in from a housing project and a mobile home park for a vibrant Wednesday night program.

In the process Church 6 has become the 2<sup>nd</sup> church of a small town in our area. Several persons and families from the town now drive three miles out of the town to worship and serve there. As with other revitalized churches in our association, the old geographic barriers are coming down.

*Church 7.* When I first worshiped with this congregation there were only 8 old people there. I figured that I might be closing it. It was formed just north of one of our

town in 1944. They have a nice building. But like other rural communities its membership had declined as farms had expanded and small factories closed.

It is now running in the 30s in worship and has a bright future. As I see it, this can be attributed to new lay leadership, a niche ministry, a new vision, and the calling of a veteran pastor who knows how to do church.

Two families joined the church seven years ago, long time friends, whose husbands are good leaders. One was retiring back to the community and to the church where he was raised. The other was leaving the first church in the county seat where they felt under utilized. They both like projects and have successfully led them for the church. The facilities are much improved and two additional acres of land acquired.

The new pastor had been pastor of the milltown church in the nearby town in the 1950s. A widower, he married a good widowed lady in the town and moved back there. They began weekly ministry in the nursing home. Soon, the pastor at Church 7 retired, and the church called this man as their pastor. The ministry in the nursing home resulted in the reaching of persons on staff, residents and families of residents. Some of the persons who had been married by this returning pastor, but were presently unchurched, became involved in the church.

About five years ago the Federal Government announced that they were going to build a new prison in the community. The site was adjacent to church 7. The church began to think about how it could be the base of a ministry to the prisoners and staff. At the end of 2012 the first prisoners arrived. The association is providing Sunday afternoon worship services there. We are working with the Chaplain as he develops his program. The pastor of church 7 is involved, and we are ready to learn what God wills for the church in this new ministry.

*Church 8.* This church is back in the woods. The pastor has been there about 30 years. He is a very entertaining preacher. Worship there has grown from the 40s to nearly 100 during my years here. In reflecting upon this I see three factors. One is the addition of a pretty good praise band, another is the visitations of the stork, and the assimilation of persons from the two other community churches after they both experienced trouble. Often revitalization seems to be tied to change of leadership, not so here. Rather, I see flexibility on the part of the pastor to adjust the worship and the ministries of the church as its context and prospects have changed.

*Church 9.* This church may be beginning the process of revitalization. Its pastor is the son-in-law of the pastor of church 8. He comes to the church from a very effective time as youth minister at another of our churches. Attendance has doubled. The auditorium is full. New people are being reached. There has recently been another crisis there. Most of the leadership stood with the pastor.

He is the sixth pastor in my 15 years of knowing the church. Two were forced out. The others got out. Only one left on good terms. Conflict over role expectations for the pastor figure prominently in the stories. Conflict between and among the two primary extended families seems to also play an important role across the years.

The church has done many good things. It has a very effective Celebrate

Recovering ministry. It founded our thrift store ministry more than 20 years ago. It hosts many good events. Please pray with me that this church is successfully revitalized this time.

*Church 10* is an historic African American congregation dating from 1872. We connected with it when it and eight other churches, black and white, were burned by some young men from Birmingham in the winter of 2007. As the primary church related organization in the western part of the area served by these churches, we had opportunity to minister to them and to receive and distribute resources to the suffering congregation. All of them are built back and stronger than ever. Church 10 elected to affiliate with our association while continuing to participate in its historic African American one. Its old building was isolated and the new one is in the heart of a small town. Its new building is much larger than the old one. It has been able to add new programs and better serve the local community. It also is ministering in a nursing home and at the prison.

These changes have not been made without opposition both from outside and from within. I have been blessed and learned a lot from my connection with this church. The same can be said by our association and by that church. We are all enriched by it. We are doing church better as a result.

The pastor and I have bonded and become true friends. The church continues to worship well in the African American tradition, but has added some elements of a more contemporary, Southern Baptist culture.

There are several other case studies I could offer from this setting, but I do not see them adding any other factors in my quest to grasp the elements in revitalization of a church.

### **Observations about Churches**

In reflect on these case studies and on the several churches in our area that certainly need revitalization, I have made these observations. Certainly, not all of churches cited reflect all of the elements I am cited. Please help me revise this list.

1. A spiritual re-birth that comes from a renewed understanding of the purpose of church in general and of this church specifically. This can be fostered by a careful study of *Ephesians* and the letters to the churches in *Revelation*. *Prayer is key*.
2. Appropriate pastoral leadership. Good people skills. A “becoming” vision. Knows how to do church. TRUST.
3. Lay leadership which is accepted by the congregation, shares the vision of the pastor and cooperates with him.
4. Rethinking of the church field—from six miles to 30 miles.
5. Encouraging people to form new ministries and use their “gifts and graces.”
6. Break the less than 40 barrier, and for some the 75 barrier, and still others the 200 barrier.
7. Be blessed by the stork.

8. Adopt and work together on one or more successful projects.
9. Reaching, even being mostly replaced, by a new people group.
10. Finding and implementing a "signature" ministry. e.g. Firewood ministry.
11. Resolving a conflict and moving forward in unity and love.
12. Desperation. What to do when the "bell cow" or the "stud duck" dies?
- 13.

### **Observations Regarding the Role of an Association**

1. Provide appropriate training for those called to ministry.
2. Tell the story of churches that have experienced revitalization to the other churches.
3. Provide funding to help churches needing revitalization.
4. Provide good council to persons and churches.
5. Keep before the churches the biblical ideal for churches.
6. Connect new and young ministers with mentors.
7. Offer consultations.
8. Provide interventions.
9. Affirm diversity in the associational stock of congregations.
10. Prayer.
11. The DoAM be seen as a person who cares about the health of their church.
12. Find leadership in other churches that will be willing to help a weak church for a few months to get on its feet; e.g., a music director or pianist.
- 13.

*Please see this paper as a 'work in progress'. Most of you are experienced in helping smaller churches in distress. Share your observations, your experiences, and your observations regarding the role of churches and associations. By sharing we can be better prepared and more effective in this part of our work.*