

# Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

Volume 24 Issue 11

PO Box 892589, Temecula, CA 92589-2589

November 2012

## Revitalizing a Church Takes Time

Revitalizing a church takes time. While pastors may hope that the Holy Spirit sweeps into the building and turns the church around quickly, renewing a church most often takes years.

Church leaders often overestimate the revitalization results that can be expected in a year, and underestimate what can be seen in five. Experience actually indicates that seven years is the average time required for a complete “church makeover.”

“The older the church, the more difficult and, thus, longer, the revitalization process.”

— Charles Arn

The time necessary to revitalize a church will be affected by many issues:

*Age of the church.* The older the church, the more difficult and longer the revitalization process. The challenge increases dramatically once the church is over 50 years old.

*Length of decline.* The longer the decline, the longer the revitalization. Decline of over 20 years running is like cancer that has moved to the lymph nodes; at that point, it is much more difficult.

*Pastor's intervention skills.* The characteristics of a pastor involved in revitalizing a church are not unlike the characteristics needed of a successful church planter. High on our list are: a) strong commitment to making disciples, b) clear vision of a better tomorrow, c) strength at initiating, d) willingness to risk, e) a high emotional quotient, f) strong relational skills, g) a good listener, h) results oriented, i) able to influence others, j) enthusiastic, k) focuses on details, l) critical thinker.

Sounds like superman, doesn't it? Well, that's about what it takes!

*Willingness of the congregation to change.* The decision by members to commit to revitalizing their own church, and the change that will inevitably accompany it, is not easy. For many it is akin to admitting failure. For all, it draws a line in the sand: you're either for it or against it. If a majority of the congregation is not willing to change, the pastor should consider investing his/her efforts elsewhere.

*Ability of the congregation to change.* Sincere, well-meaning people may be willing to change, but later discover that they are simply unable.

**Check out Dr. McIntosh's new website for additional articles.**

New website address:

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# There will always be a need to renew churches.

Seven years is the average time for renewing a church.

*Location of the church.* Churches in larger towns or cities take less time for renewal—5 to 8 years. Churches in smaller towns or rural communities need longer for a complete turnaround—10 to 15 years. The reason is due to the transiency rates of people in the surrounding community. The slower the rate of people relocating, the longer it takes to build a new vision in a congregation.

Revitalizing a church is one of the most difficult endeavors a pastor/church leader can undertake. In fact, one of the more common prescriptions for churches needing revitalization is to simply close the church down, and then start a new one a year later. It's just easier to have a baby than to raise the dead! While churches that need revitalizing are not necessarily all dead, neither are they newborns with vision and energy and contagious enthusiasm for life.

The first requirement in leading a turnaround church is a willingness to be present for the long haul: seven years at least.

The good news is that the longer you stay at a church, the more people will join under your administration and the easier it will be to lead the church forward. People who have no past with the church, and only one pastor, are much more open to change and new ideas. And they are more willing to follow the only pastor they have known.

Find at least three pastors who have successfully led turnaround churches, and spend some serious time with them. If possible, follow them around for a week if they are still at their turned-around church. Ask questions like: “What are the most important things to know in

revitalizing a church?” “Where and how would you begin?” “When did you start to see progress?” “Did you have setbacks along the way? What were those setbacks, and how did you deal with them?” “What would you do differently?”

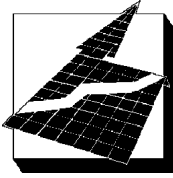
Talk to new members who joined the church during the revitalization experience. Ask questions like: “How did you hear about the church, and what attracted you to it?” “Did you have any misgivings at first? Do you still?” “What would you suggest to a church that wanted to be revitalized?”

Read book on how to turn around a church. *There's Hope for Your Church* by Gary L. McIntosh is an excellent first read. Be sure to keep a journal during your revitalization process. The experiences you have in the next seven years will make for a great book, series of papers, or lectures to those who will follow you...because there is always a need for revitalizing churches.



Adapted from the forthcoming book *What Every Pastor Should Know: 101 Indispensable Rules of Thumb for Leading Your Church* (Baker Books March 2013) by Gary L. McIntosh and Charles Arn.

*Growth Points* is published twelve times a year. The subscription price is \$16 (Bank or World Money Order) per year. Permission is granted for use in a local church. For other reprint usage, advance permission must be obtained. Formerly published under the title *Church Growth Network*. Copyrighted 2012 ISSN 1520-5096



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Ministry Insights for Church Leaders

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## Biblical Church Growth

Leaders change and trends go out of style. Only churches that are built on the solid foundation of God's Word will remain effective. *Biblical Church Growth* explores the unchanging biblical principles for church growth and applies them to today's culture. Gary L. McIntosh defines church growth as effective evangelism, not simply a methodology for increasing membership. He sets forth nine basic principles that provide an eternal foundation for helping a church, large or small, achieve lasting vitality and growth.

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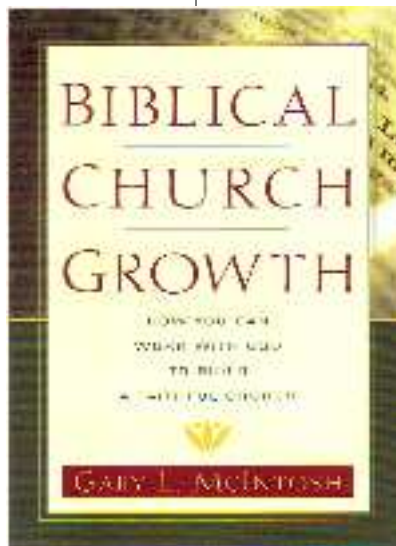
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