

Stirring the waters

While seven out of 10 people in North America are lost, only 11 percent of Southern Baptist churches are growing through new baptisms. This second article in a series on church growth focuses on how churches can be revitalized in order to reach the lost.

By Ed Stetzer

When they called Danny Williams as their new pastor, Peniel Baptist Church was a stagnant church on the edge of Palatka, Florida. The church had about 125 in worship for many years. "It was a typical rural church that had never been able to make the changes it needed to grow," explained Danny. Over eight years, the church grew to more than 500 in two services. One year they baptized more than 100 people.

Under Danny's leadership, Peniel began a process of reorganization—from Sunday school, to leader training, to prayer and outreach. Lay leaders embraced and increased the vision. They contacted every missing member (hundreds were AWOL). They implemented a church-wide prayer ministry. Finally, they decided to get directly involved in church planting, helping start a church in Crescent Beach, Florida. The church experienced a dramatic upswing in growth and mission.

Today, Danny is leading another church through a similar process. First Baptist Church of Lyons, Georgia, averaged 150 in attendance when Danny became pastor but has added about 100 members

in 18 months. Churches can be revitalized—these churches are evidence, but they're not the only ones. Hundreds turn around every year and succeed—however, thousands more try and do not!

Healthy kingdom growth

More and more people are talking about "increasing the number of Southern Baptist Convention baptisms" this year. LifeWay President Jimmy Draper compared the SBC to a "frog in the kettle," slowly losing its evangelistic effectiveness while the world turns up the heat—not baptizing as many as in the past and not nearly enough for the present. Bobby Welch, SBC President, toured every state and Canada in a bus, promoting outreach and evangelism.* North American Mission Board President Bob Reccord has made it his mission to help many more churches become involved in church planting and evangelism.

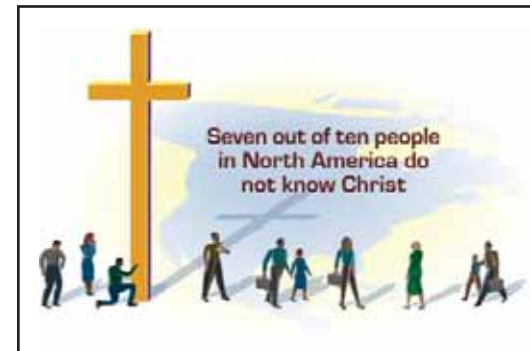
It's great to have leaders who care about the stagnant pace of baptisms. The baptismal rate is a pow-

erful measure of a church's vitality, because it's evidence that a church is growing by reaching the lost. But Jimmy Draper, Bobby Welch and Bob Reccord know they cannot make the SBC reach and baptize



Bobby Welch (right), and Bob Reccord, president of NAMB, visit First Baptist, Alpharetta, Georgia.

more. Only local churches can do that—churches like yours with ready and willing *on mission* Christians working closely with pastors who are forward-thinking and dedicated to the goal. If our churches are not revitalized, we will not reach more—in fact we will



continue to stagnate and decline. Statistically, we're losing ground—our research tells us that seven out of 10 people in North America don't know Christ, so we need to be reaching more with the gospel. And yet we aren't baptizing as many as we have in the past.

In the last issue of *On Mission*, we looked at how churches can turn around from stagnation and decline. It feels strange to say it, but if you're reading this, you likely attend a church that's not reaching the lost. This assessment has nothing to do with you personally. Just look at the statistics, and you'll agree.

I'm referring to new statistics from the Leavell Center at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS) which bear this out by showing that 89 percent of our SBC churches are not effectively reaching the lost, and only 11 percent experience healthy growth. So, if 89 percent of our churches are *not* experiencing healthy growth as defined by the Leavell Center, the average reader of this article attends one of those churches.

The method of counting by the Leavell Center was pretty basic:

- The church experienced 10 percent membership growth over five years.
- The church baptized at least one person during the two years of the study.
- The church had a member-to-baptism ratio of 35 or less in the final year of the study. (These churches need 35 or fewer members each year to baptize one new convert. For information about calculating baptismal ratios, see last quarter's *On Mission* magazine or go online at www.onmission.com and click on back issues, Fall 2004 and "Stirring the Waters.")

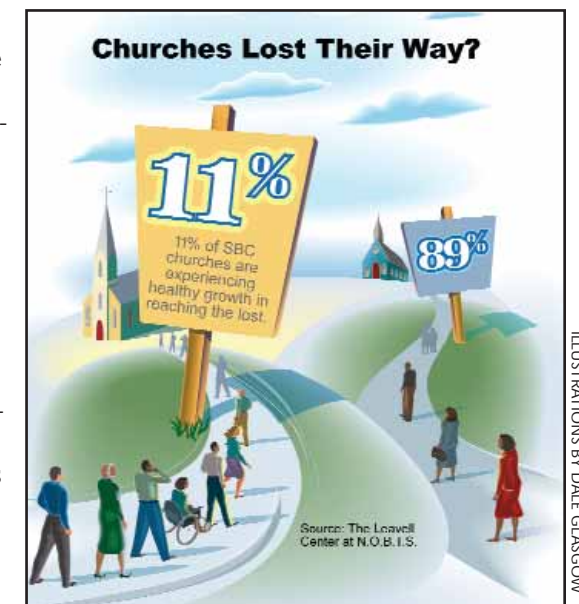
For the final year of the study, the percentage of growth that was conversion growth must be at least 25 percent.

By that standard, only 11 percent of all SBC churches experience healthy growth. You might not have all the numbers at your finger tips, but take a guess—is your church experiencing healthy growth?

Churches that need revitalization need to ask why they are stagnant in the first place. It's amazing but consistent—churches that need to grow think they can do it without change! The problem is, if they keep doing things the same way, they'll have the same results.

Instead, most churches need to be led to embrace change if they are to see different results. I've had the privilege of leading some churches to change and grow, and I always start by encouraging people to care for the lost more than they care for

their own comfort—to embrace change because it helps them to be more effective at reaching their community. Change is often needed to be more effective. However, people resist change. But, if people can see that change will produce growth, they are often more open.



Making the change to growth

As a pastor or an *on mission* church leader, you probably already know that something has to be different today to see different results tomorrow. But, what changes are needed to put your church back on the growth path?

Generally, a church needs to address more than one area of church life in order to grow. The first area is the most important: spiritual

renewal. Churches need to rediscover their passion for God, His mission and Empowering Kingdom Growth in their setting. From their renewed passion for reaching the lost will flow other areas such as

- worship that connects
- intentional and strategic church evangelism
- assimilating guests to members
- motivating people for outreach, and then
- building an ongoing strategy.

Looking at worship

Churches often rediscover their passion for God and His mission by examining their worship. Unfortunately, some think that “jazzing up” the worship is a quick fix. It is not. The solution lies in seeking God’s heart and at the same time finding worship that helps others to connect with God. In many cases, the worship of the church was once meaningful but has since lost its cultural relevance. Younger families may no longer find it “worshipful” to sing “here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by thy help I come,” so they leave for other places. Also, unbelievers may find themselves uncomfortable, not at the preaching and content of the Word, but with the expressions and cultural forms of worship. So, for many churches, the first concern is the worship and how it can both honor God and connect with the community.

Worship cannot be the end of the refocusing process, but it’s a good beginning. When we create a God-centered and culturally appropriate worship service, it helps us to begin the process of seeking God for other changes that also need to come. (Note: The next several stories in *On Mission’s* series on reaching and baptizing more will address an outreach strategy and evangelism plan.)

Kevin Hamm has led Valley View Baptist Church from a declining church of 300 to a vibrant con-

gregation of more than 2,000 in Louisville, Kentucky. The church baptized 221 last year—a far cry from seven years ago when they used buckets to catch the leaks in the sanctuary, because they could not afford to fix the roof. Pastor Hamm explained the turnaround this way: “We worked from the premise that worship is the front door of the church. So we spent the whole year looking at our worship service without expending energy trying to draw in visitors. After that first year, we had our worship settled, and we started to reach out to the community.”

Here’s the process I use to help churches experience different styles of worship. If you’re a pastor, you might try to lead your church through a similar process. As a layperson, you could help your pastor form a church growth team and start the revitalization process by examining the worship of growing churches.

① List the fastest growing churches in the area, and visit them.

On three occasions I asked the members of stagnant churches to go visit the area’s fastest growing evangelical churches. Every member returned wanting some of what they saw! Pastors and church leaders can tell the story all day, but a live picture is worth a thousand words. (Caution: Maybe your committee members won’t have to miss worshipping at your church since many growing churches have early services. But make sure their early service is the “same” as the main service.)

Offer some guidance on what to look for when they attend. I’ve created a checklist page at www.comebackchurches.com. Click on Resources for ideas of what to observe. My favorite part of church revitalization is to hear the reports of longtime church members who,

after visiting other churches, come back saying, “The Church changed, and nobody told us.”

Invariably, they come back with several observations:

- Churches that are growing by reaching people through evangelism generally look very different from those in need of revitalization. For example, almost all growing churches have an outreach strategy; almost all declining churches do not.

- Growing churches have certain things in common but generally only with each other and not with the stagnant churches. People often report that changing to be more like these churches may be easier than they initially thought. For example, most growing churches have an intentional way of welcoming guests; most declining churches do not.

- Growing churches rarely fit the stereotype the visitors from my churches expected: sold out to worldliness and marketing. The result is that committee members usually can overcome their previously held objections to the methods used by growing churches.

One note of caution: pick churches from our denomination, and screen them. You want churches that are theologically sound and focused on Word-based preaching but are reaching people in a way that your church is not. My experience is that the best examples are churches:

- With more than 100 in attendance (or scaled appropriately to your area).
- That have grown at least 20 percent in each of the past three years.
- That are not known for any major negative issues (of course, just growing gets you a negative reputation with some people!)

Be careful not to pick churches that simply fit your agenda. Instead, pick the five that are growing the fastest, so that your church members trust the process. If you rule out a

church because of the preaching or views, tell your people why.

Think of this as an exercise in reconnaissance, like the spies in the book of Numbers, but in this case they’re scoping out what the challenges are as well as what God is doing in healthy, growing churches. It’s a great assignment and adventure for *on mission* laypeople who are dedicated to revitalizing their church.



② Experience different kinds of worship.

I’ve led three churches through what I call A Worship Experience. For four weeks, the church experiences different types of music styles and formats. Here’s a basic progression:

- WEEK 1: Traditional. Worship using only hymns, with a doxology and closing with a benediction.
- WEEK 2: Blended Traditional. Worship using hymns and slow choruses.
- WEEK 3: Blended Contemporary. Worship using a contemporized hymn, some fast choruses where people clap along, and some slower worship choruses. Introduce other elements such as nametags, communication cards and offering at the end of the service. In two cases, we

also wore more casual clothing.

- WEEK 4: Contemporary. Worship using a group of contemporary upbeat songs that people clap to and slower songs that people focus through.

Of course, these are just my descriptions. Traditional and contemporary look different from community to community. (At one church, a deacon wanted to know when we did the banjos and fiddles—a worship expression that was new to me!) That’s why you visit other churches before planning your own worship experiment. Many churches are discovering the value that other biblically discern-

ing expressions can bring. One study by Ellison Research (see graphic) found that churches are embracing contemporary methodologies to make them more effective at reaching the lost.

You may not find what you think. According to Ellison Research, “churches moving toward more contemporary worship styles are outpacing those moving to more traditional styles by an 11-to-1 margin; however, this does not mean it will be effective everywhere. Many emerging churches are embracing more liturgical forms of worship while many churches are finding that Southern Gospel music helps them to relate in their context. As you start the journey to evangelistic effectiveness, be willing for God to stretch you in new ways.”

If your community is most effectively reached in a blended traditional service, then learn from the other churches and do it well. If it’s contemporary and your church is really willing to do what it takes, then make the shift.

③ Bring home and discuss

What then? Have a family meeting with the whole church, so everyone has ownership of the process. Ask:

- What are these churches doing, and why is it working?
- What is our church doing, and why is it not working?
- What can we learn?
- What can we try?

Conclusions

It’s not a cure all, but visiting other churches and having a local church worship experiment allows your church to experience what growing churches look like and what changes could be made in your church. There’s no more powerful apologetic for change than to see a church, very different from yours, that’s reaching people when yours is not. This enables your church to take the first steps to a more culturally relevant and evangelistically effective worship—often a change that leads to revitalization.

In upcoming issues we examine:

- Summer 05—Intentional and Strategic Church Evangelism
- Fall 05—Assimilating Guests to Members
- Winter 05/06—Motivating People for Outreach
- Summer 06—Building an Ongoing Strategy @

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