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CPR or Heart Transplant? Why the Church Needs Revitalization

by Nancy Ryan

Scripture readings

Isaiah 43:18-19

Matthew 5:17-20

John 3:1-17

Opening prayer

Lord God, thank you for the gift of your presence among us. Help us, Lord, to always recognize your presence and ask you for direction in our lives and in our ministry together. Amen.

“What is God asking of us?” The responses were as varied as those present at the consistory table: to care for one another; to remain open to God’s Spirit; to feed the hungry; to be patient; to remember why Christ came; to have a vision; to start a new ministry; to believe.

This discussion at a meeting of the Reformed Church of Fort Plain consistory in 2000 led to the ministry of Manna House Meals, a meal program for the hungry of our community.

The question that started us praying and planning for Manna House Meals is part of our “worshipful work” consistory agenda. Our monthly meetings look more like worship than a business meeting, and we do that by design.

After praying and reading a variety of resources and going on retreat

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together, we felt the Spirit prompting us to do things in a new way. With some resistance to this “new thing,” but with a fantastic faith that God was at work in our midst, we stepped out to discover what would become for us the beginning of a new and more vital ministry.

Five years later, we still do worshipful work, people serve on our consistory because they feel called by God to do so, the Manna House ministry is going strong, and a new youth outreach is in the works. Along the way we often encounter roadblocks and potholes, but that does not keep us from striving for the goal, because we know that it is not our ministry, but God’s ministry among us.

There is a spirit of hope and promise that is lived out in this place as we care for one another and for the community. Is there more to do? Absolutely! And there is a confidence within us that we are not alone on this quest that God has called us to, and that God is the one calling the shots—God is directing us and leading us through all of our ministry endeavors by the power of his Holy Spirit.

We are currently preparing for the Natural Church Development process, which will take us even further along this path that God has set us on.

We believe that it is a priority for us to ask God what he wants us to do. This means asking God where we fit in his plan of ministry, instead of asking God to bless what we think is the right thing. That is not easy by any measure, but it is freeing to know that the One who has called us into this wonderful ministry also sustains us in it.

Prayer was a huge piece of how we got to where we are, and prayer continues to be a vital factor in our life together and in our ministry. It has also been helpful to know the area in which we are called to ministry. We have sought to know who the people are, what the needs are, and what the community is about. Another piece of our revitalization has come in recognizing that we need to share these ministry opportunities with the whole community. So we are very willing to work with other churches, community groups, schools, and individuals to accomplish what we believe God is asking us to do.

Why revitalize?

In a sense, Jesus was the first revitalization expert and practitioner—he revitalized our relationship with God and the law of God. Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17).

The Holy Spirit is the driving force of any revitalization program or process in a church, no matter how organized and intentional (or unorganized and unintentional) the program or process might be. Jesus reminds Nicodemus, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

Numbers should not drive our desire to revitalize. Instead, we should be driven by the power of God’s Spirit in our midst, calling us to be his people in this place. When, in other words, we seek wholeness as God’s people individually and corporately, we are on our way to revitalization. Revitalization is more about health than it is about growth.

If the goal is simply church growth, then find a plan or principle and run with it. You could try giving money away on Sunday morning to anyone who comes to worship. More than likely, your church will grow in numbers, but certainly not in quality, health, spirituality, or any other mark that should characterize a church.

What does revitalization mean?

For our purposes, revitalization can be defined as the faithful response of a denomination or church to the God who calls us into being, and who tells us, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:18-19). Revitalization is about receiving new life or being invigorated by the Spirit of the living God. It is what God does with us, with his whole creation, with his church—not what we do with God. Remember Paul’s words to the church in Corinth: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Look for a moment at the exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus.

Nicodemus says, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God” (John 3:2). But what does Nicodemus really know about Jesus as a teacher? What does he really know about Jesus as one sent from God? It would appear from further dialogue that Nicodemus really does not know much: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (verse 4). Jesus is speaking of those things that are spiritual and that build up the person and the whole body. Nicodemus is stuck in spatial reality, so he misses the spiritual reality that Jesus seeks to draw him into through his teaching.

Real and lasting revitalization requires listening with head and heart and being willing to accept the unacceptable from Jesus. It is not unlike Paul’s vision of the unclean animals. He had to expand his understanding in order to participate in the life-giving ministry that God had called him to. This is no easy task. But the truth is, you can teach old dogs new tricks; you just have to be patient and focused. It could be said of the church that we are “old dogs learning new tricks,” or better, “the people of God learning to be the people God called us to be.”

What do we mean by “church”?

If we are to be the church of Jesus Christ in the world today, we will do well to seek renewal and revitalization. To participate in revitalization is to invite, nurture, and ready ourselves and others for the Spirit of God to descend upon us to do, as Isaiah reminds us, “a new thing.” God is always drawing us, calling us, to a new place, to a new way, to a vital ministry of hope, love, and mercy. This, in part, is what makes the church vital.

The church today is in many ways different from the first-century church. God knows this, and God continues to call us to “a new thing.” As the church, the body of Christ, we go with courage, knowing that we do not go alone. That is part of what I mean when I use the term “church.” God in Christ established the church to be his very presence now. The church is the body of Christ when it takes its cues from the Creator, when it acts by the power of the Spirit, and when it humbly follows the way of Jesus. We cannot do it without God. And if we try to,

we fail to be the church that God has established and we become the church that we want. We cease to be the church of Jesus Christ, in other words.

Nicodemus sought Jesus out and asked him a poignant and important question that still must be asked today: How can a person be born again when that person is old? Or, as this concept relates to the church, How can we be born anew when we are already here?

Jesus gives Nicodemus an answer that perplexes him and seems totally unacceptable to him. He is stuck in how things ought to be, how things have come to be at the hands of humankind, and he is blind to see what God can and will do—indeed, what God is doing and has been doing since the start of creation.

Revitalization starts when we get out of God's way and let God do what only God can do—grow God's church. We are reminded in 1 Corinthians 3:7, "So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."

Revitalization includes fostering healthy relationships within the church. The church can be an incredibly hostile environment for a variety of reasons, but when we change that and build healthy liaisons between pastor and lay leaders, and between the congregation's members, we are able to ready the arena for God's Holy Spirit to work on bringing life to an almost, if not already, dead church. Creating loving and caring relationships, engaging in need-based evangelism, promoting passionate spirituality, engaging in inspiring worship, encouraging empowered leadership, facilitating functional structures, and promoting the use of gifts in everyone's ministry are all vital if revitalization is to occur.*

Revitalization impacts every program, and should impact every person, within a congregation. The Spirit moves where it chooses, and we need to be in place and ready for it to move us.

* Ideas drawn from *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, by Christian Swarz (ChurchSmart Resources, 1996)

What does revitalization mean for you? Your congregation?

We tend to be a fearful people, afraid that we are “the only ones,” like Elijah when he argues with God that he is the only faithful one, that he alone has been jealous for the Lord, that he is all that is left (1 Kings 19:9 and following). God renewed and revitalized the ministry of Elijah and sent him back into the world to carry out the ministry that God had placed before him. God does the same for us.

We come to God as a congregation and as individuals, we place our brokenness before God, and we seek God’s healing touch to help us get back on track. We seek the Spirit of God to renew and revitalize our efforts daily. We seek relationship with Jesus Christ and the forgiveness that he holds out to us as we make our way in this world.

Part of what revitalization means for the church is recapturing the joy of being the people of God in a lost and broken world so loved by God. To recognize that God has some very wild and wonderful ways is to be on the road of revitalization. His ways are not our ways, but his ways are always better than our ways, and recognizing that is another step on the road of revitalization.

A sign of revitalization in a person’s life and in the life of the church will be a sense of joy even in the midst of hardship, a sense of hope even when trials and tribulation are taking a toll, and a loving, compassionate response to God’s people despite the pain of our own life.

We need to enjoy God and one another more, sharing each other’s burdens, which makes them much lighter for us. God has gifted us and called us to do and be certain things. If we focus on what God wants for our lives, our life as the people of God in the church of Jesus Christ can and will be blessed.

Questions

1. Are you like Nicodemus? In what ways?
2. What is your spiritual gift?
3. How can you help your church engage in revitalization?
4. What do we mean when we say that God is doing “a new thing”?
5. Is there anything about revitalization that frightens you?
6. What might change in your life or the life of your church if revitalization became a priority?

Closing prayer

When we falter, Lord, be ready with a steady hand to right us along our way. When we are overwhelmed, give us courage to go forward in your light and love. Lord, may we be born anew in our understanding of your call to us. Amen.