

FROM  
EMBERS  
TO A  
FLAME



FROM  
EMBERS  
TO A  
FLAME

---

HOW GOD CAN  
*Revitalize*  
YOUR CHURCH

---

HARRY L. REEDER III

WITH DAVID SWAVELY

REVISED AND EXPANDED

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2008 by Harry L. Reeder III

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

*Page design by Lakeside Design Plus*

Printed in the United States of America

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Reeder, Harry L., 1948–

From embers to a flame : how God can revitalize your church / Harry L. Reeder with David Swavely.— Rev. and expanded ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59638-071-4 (pbk.)

1. Church renewal—Biblical teaching. I. Swavely, David, 1966– II. Title.

BS680.C48R44 2008

253—dc22

2007039542

## *Contents*

---

- Acknowledgments vii  
Introduction 1
1. The Need for Church Revitalization 7  
*Church-Planting or Church Revitalization?*
  2. The Biblical Paradigm for Revitalization 27  
*Church Health, Not Church Growth*
  3. Revitalization Strategy 1: Connect to the Past 37  
*Learning from the Past without Living in the Past*
  4. Revitalization Strategy 2: A Call to Repentance 47  
*Cover Up or 'Fess Up*
  5. Revitalization Strategy 3: Gospel-Driven and Christ-Centered Ministry 57  
*The First of the First Things*

## CONTENTS

---

6. Revitalization Strategy 4: Personal Gospel Formation 83  
*The Discipline of Grace*
  7. Revitalization Strategy 5: The Priority of Intercessory Prayer 95  
*The Ministry of Prayer*
  8. Revitalization Strategy 6: The Primacy of Preaching 107  
*The Ministry of the Word*
  9. Revitalization Strategy 7: Staying on Mission with a Vision 127  
*Simplicity and Focus in a Day of Complexity and Chaos*
  10. Revitalization Strategy 8: Servant Leadership Multiplication 149  
*An Effective Yet Most Neglected Strategy for Church Vitality*
  11. Revitalization Strategy 9: Small-Group Discipleship 177  
*The Biblical Delivery System for Effective Discipleship*
  12. Revitalization Strategy 10: A Great Commitment to the Great Commission 187  
*The W.E.L.L. Church*
  13. Where Do We Go from Here? 201  
*Getting Started*
- Conclusion: A Few Final Words 207
- Appendix: Revisiting the Prayer of Jabez 209
- Notes 221
- Index of Scripture 229

## *Acknowledgments*

---

How can I, in such a brief space, thank so many people?

Thanks go to P&R Publishing for agreeing that this is a needed book, and to Dave Swavely, who crafted it so well.

I owe thanks to the Briarwood Church membership and leadership, for allowing and supporting this endeavor, and to my ministry assistant, Marie Gathings, for her able and encouraging support. I also want to thank Pinelands Presbyterian Church and Christ Covenant Church, where I had the privilege to serve.

I'd like to thank my sisters, Vickie, Beth, and Amy, along with their husbands. And it is an enormous blessing to be supported by my children, Jennifer, Ike, and Abigail, along with her husband, Ryan, and my grandchildren, Brianna, C. J., Mack, Matthias, and Taylor.

Especially, I want to dedicate this book to my wife, Cindy, the one through whom I came to Christ and with whom I have

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

been able to serve Christ; and to my dad and mom, who wanted to see this project finished but in God's providence were both promoted to heaven in 2002.

Finally, I thank all those faithful pastor-shepherds serving Christ's sacred church in difficult, trying, and challenging situations. I salute and honor you. More than that, the Lord will honor you as you are faithful. I hope this book helps you to lead His church to vitality and influence as you *remember*, *repent*, and *recover* the first things.



## *Introduction*

---

Imagine that you are a recent seminary graduate and have just begun your first pastoral ministry. The church you have been called to serve was at one time among the largest and fastest growing in the region. It had risen to a membership of almost nine hundred, with four major worship services and a vital Sunday school program. It was known for creative and effective ministries, an innovative youth program, an expanding Christian day school, and a significant commitment to world missions.

Now, twenty-five years later, the average Sunday morning attendance is below eighty. The Sunday school has fallen to fewer than twenty adults with no children. The average age of the members is around sixty-nine. At age thirty-three, you are the youngest member of the congregation, with the exception of your wife and children. Sunday evening services have been

canceled, and it is considered a notable victory if five people come to the midweek prayer service. Vandalism occurs daily on the church grounds, and minimal amounts of money are now going to missions and benevolence. The church preschool has supported the church with its meager surplus, yet not one family or faculty member from the school is attending the church.

In your first week at the church, a representative from the denomination calls you and says, “I am on the church-growth committee, and we would like for you to consider a suggestion we have. Now I know that you are new here, and I know that this is your first pastorate in our denomination, but we would like for you to consider talking to your leadership about selling the church building and property, taking the proceeds from the sale, and planting a church somewhere else.”

“Excuse me?” you say.

“We would like you to close down. We have been wanting this church to close down for about ten years. So now that you’re here, would you consider leading them to close down?” He reminds you that three previous pastors were defrocked and that others have left in abject frustration. In fact, the church has demoralized most of its previous pastors—as evidenced by another call you receive in your first week, this time from one of those frustrated former pastors.

“We are really glad to have you in the denomination,” he says, “but I have to tell you that I have been concerned since I heard that you were coming to this particular church. I used to be the pastor there, and I would rather see you serving somewhere else.”

“Why is that?” you ask.

“Well, I believe that church has the mark of Satan upon it.”

Not exactly the most encouraging words to hear during your first week!

Not only that, but the finance committee informs you that it may be difficult to meet the salary promised to you because the church has not met its budget in years.

The local office-supply store has flagged your account; of all the churches in the area, yours is the only one that is not allowed credit. You must pay cash only.

You begin a Sunday evening service. The first night your attendance is eleven, and that is the encouraging part. The discouraging part is that five attendees belong to your immediate family. One of the others is an elder, who asks you to go out to eat after the service, but you tell him that you have to go home after the service to work on some things because a man is coming the next day to fix your refrigerator.

“Hey, listen, let’s go out tonight anyway,” he says to you at the front of the church, as you are about to begin the service. “Don’t worry about that @#%! refrigerator.”

At your first board meeting, you learn that two elders are rotating off and will need to be replaced.

“I think so-and-so should be an elder,” one of the men says. “I nominate him.”

“Is he still a member of this church?” another one asks.

“I don’t know,” he replies.

“Does he come on Sundays?”

“No, I haven’t seen him, but if we make him an elder, maybe he will.” As you get to know the elders better, you realize that some probably do not know the Lord. And within the first month, you lose two godly men—one moves away and the other dies of leukemia.

This wasn’t the picture they painted in seminary, and you are about to quit before you get started.

What I just asked you to imagine is not a hypothetical scenario. It is the true story of my first pastoral ministry, at Pinelands Presbyterian Church in Miami. That body had once, long ago, been aflame with excited members, effective ministries, and regular conversions. But by the time I was called there, only embers remained. I desperately wanted to see God ignite those embers into a fire again, so I searched His Word to find the biblical principles that apply to church revitalization. By God's grace, we put those principles into practice, though with many mistakes. And by God's grace, the church came alive.

Within three years, we grew to an average attendance of over four hundred. More than half of those added were by conversion or rededication to Christ. But almost as gratifying as the conversion growth was the fact that only one family from the original congregation was lost to another church in the process of revitalization. Instead of feeling disenfranchised or dismantled, the former members became a vital part of the "new work" of the Lord at Pinelands, rejoicing in what the Lord was doing and having a vested interest in the church's ministry and the new vision for the community we served.

Since then, I have had the privilege of leading another church through the process of revitalization. Christ Covenant Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, grew from thirty-eight members to over three thousand in attendance over the course of seventeen years. The Lord also allowed the church to have a significant impact on its community, as it became "salt and light" in many ways around the Charlotte area. We were involved in launching a number of new congregations in the region, and also had the privilege of supporting and participating in many missions ministries throughout the world and sending many of our members to the mission field.

Not every successful church will grow as big as Christ Covenant, of course, but every successful church will certainly experience the power of the Holy Spirit working in it and through it in many visible ways. And I am convinced that this kind of revitalization, when it is truly of God, will happen only as church leaders wisely apply the biblical principles related to the health of a church. In this book, you will learn those principles, and much of the wisdom, that our Lord can use to take any church from embers to a flame!