

Three Imperatives for Church Renewal

by Bob Young

The church is in constant need of renewal. The past is never good enough; the present is fleeting; we want the future to be as bright and good as it can be. Churches desire renewal but do not know how to find it. Church renewal occurs when multiple dynamics are brought into play simultaneously. This article identifies and describes three essential components of church renewal. These are not a cure-all or a guarantee, but they are essential to the renewal process.

Church renewal seldom occurs unless the church is reasonably healthy. Many authors have written about church illness and church health. In a church renewal workshop, Kent Allen shared eight symptoms of church illness: maintenance complex, failure syndrome, credibility gap, fellowshipitis, people blindness, overcrowding, leadership tensions, and old age. A church may be able to function reasonably well despite the presence of some of these symptoms, but experience confirms that churches that look inward, cannot see outward, lack bridges of communication and credibility to their community, and have a history of failure seldom have the spiritual strength to move forward. Allen also shared a list of signs of health: effective leadership, an agreed agenda, believing prayer, life-related Bible teaching, mobilized membership, community minded, ongoing evangelism, and new member incorporation. Such lists present two options: eliminate the negative and accentuate the positive. Most church leaders choose the latter, actively working toward church health—identifying a vision and mission that can unite the church and mobilize the members. Coupled with prayer and solid Bible teaching, these positive essentials can help initiate renewal.

Churches struggle with renewal when they don't know who they are. Church identity is not an easy task. Church identity is something about which the majority of a congregation must agree. Church identity must be studied, discussed, and prayed about. Church identity is flexible. Many of the factors that are part of church identity change—personalities, leadership, community context, ministry opportunities..... What we were in the past is not what we are today. Some think the church is the same as it was, but that is seldom the case. Churches that seek and find renewal usually find a renewed identity. There are many ways to give a church a fresh identity. Some of the more obvious factors are descriptions, ministries, vision, mission, personnel, and leadership. The church must know itself; the church must also escape any false identities that have arisen in the minds or perceptions of the community. The latter is often more difficult than the former.

Churches that find genuine renewal have a clearly defined mission. Churches are energized by a shared purpose. In my doctoral research, I demonstrated that churches and leadership teams are united and become more cohesive with shared goals. It is easy to ignore the need to define a special vision and mission. Many churches say, "Our purpose is defined by the Bible." The Bible helps us define our God-given purpose, but we must understand the specific ways we will accomplish that purpose based on the situation and ministry circumstances in which the local church exists.

A church that functions in healthy ways, knows who it is, and knows what it is about is well on its way to renewal. A commitment to healthy church dynamics plus clear identity plus clear purpose makes renewal a real possibility.