

Session One : the Need for Revitalisation

The most visible need for revitalisation is the decrease in attendance at the church. There are fewer people coming to the Sunday service and the midweek meetings (if they are still maintained) and fewer people who are members of the church. And of course fewer baptisms, especially of people coming from a non-Christian background. But although this is the easiest sign to recognize when people think of the need for revitalisation, it isn't in itself the fundamental problem. The real issue is this – how can we assess what a healthy church would look like? Here is how Phil Walter puts it on the ELF church revitalisation website :

In Acts 2:42-47 we catch a glimpse of what the health of the early church looked like. Too soon was such health under pressure as the church grew, prompting Paul to write to the churches, sometimes with harsh words as they allowed tradition to impact the church in a negative way. So what does a healthy church look like in the 21st Century? Is it a matter of size, make-up of the church or location? Is it about age range? Is it dependent on a style of worship or the version of the Bible you use or even whether you have a full-time pastor? Whilst all of these may be significant they do not make a healthy church. In the early church, the Christians were “devoted” to Prayer, Teaching, Fellowship and Breaking of Bread, resulting in people being saved and disciples being built up in the faith. A healthy church is defined by these things. Healthy churches pray together, take God's word seriously and seek to live by it. Fellowship is real, leading to the sharing of themselves in a variety of ways. Reaching out with the love of Jesus, sharing faith and seeing folk saved are all signs of a healthy church¹.

Health issues are omnipresent in people's conversations and on the internet. There are glossy monthly magazines and regular television programmes. It's not just a question of treating illness and if possible curing diseases, but the central concept is wellness. On all sides we hear advice on keeping well and fit, and this covers everything from physical exercise, mindfulness, eating patterns, and relationships. But the first step to good health is a regular check-up, in order to screen for potential illness before it develops. And unfortunately, if someone is in denial and doesn't seek treatment, this can lead to premature death.

The same is true for a church. If there is no check-up and no realisation of potential “illness”, nobody will take action to revitalise a church. So the first stage in revitalisation is to go through a check-up of the church. This will help us to see where action is needed, and may help a greater number of church members to agree to go through a process of revitalisation. This initial evaluation must not be seen as criticism. The best question to ask is always : “How can we do better?”. Better in our relationship with God. Better in our relationship with other Christians in the church. Better in our relationship with unbelievers.

So at the outset, I am going to ask you to look at your church with as much loving objectivity as possible, and think through where there may be places which desperately need improvement.

¹ Phil Walter, ‘What is a healthy church?’, article on the European Leadership Forum church revitalisation network website : <https://www.revitalisation.fr/en/issues/9-what-is-a-healthy-church> (accessed 5.7.21)

Here are the areas mentioned in the video, plus a few more. They are either symptoms of ill-health or causes, and sometimes both!

From the book "Autopsy of a Deceased Church" by Thom Rainer² :

- *Slow erosion of attendance*
- *The past is the hero*
- *The Church refuses to look like the surrounding community*
- *The budget moves inwardly*
- *The Great Commission becomes the Great Omission.*
- *The Preference-Driven Church*
- *The church rarely prays together*
- *The church has no clear purpose*
- *The church becomes obsessed by its building*

Other symptoms from pastors in Europe

1. *We no longer dare to invite people from outside*
2. *Numerical decrease and increase of the average age*
3. *Structure and activities are more important than spiritual life*
4. *Family dynasties rule the church and focus on maintenance*
5. *A culture of taboos and resistance to change*
6. *The Gospel itself is no longer central*
7. *Legalism (traditions with no Biblical basis)*

But what about good health? The Bible is the source of what we believe but centuries of history has led to a great deal of tradition building up about the way a church should function. So let's finish with a thought experiment. The story of Robinson Crusoe is well-known. After a shipwreck,

² Thom Rainer Autopsy of a Deceased Church, B & H Publishing Group, Nashville, Tennessee, 2014

Crusoe remained the sole survivor on a deserted island and spent 28 years with no contact with other humans. He managed to rescue some tools from the ship before it sank, and also a Bible. By reading this, he became a Christian, trusting Jesus for his salvation. Many pages of the book describe his coming to faith and his daily trust in God although most summaries of the book and most films about Robinson Crusoe make no mention of this spiritual dimension. But here's the thing : as Crusoe read his Bible and saw descriptions and teaching about the church, God's people, what would he have expected to find when he came back to "civilization"? Would he have been surprised at what he saw when he met up with other believers?

So here's the thought experiment. Try to imagine what Robinson Crusoe would have been expecting from reading the Bible on his own for so many years. This could be a way of seeing what a healthy church might look like.