

Signs of Church Revitalization

The church faces a lot of challenges today. Most cultural trends are not in our favor. It does no good to grouse about this; grouching will gain us no ground. As I have said to many a pastor facing church problems, “Cheer up! It’ll get worse.” In other words, we might as well get happy in the Lord now, because our challenges are not going away. Most likely they will get bigger.

I am sure you do not need me to convince you of this. There is plenty of evidence. However, what you may not have noticed is, right here in our own association, there is *mounting evidence of church revitalization taking place*. In spite of the challenges, some churches are making headway toward health.

My conclusions are not based on any scientific method or official research. They are simply based on what I observe. Most ministry leaders get to see one church up close. I get to see lots of churches from both “close-up” and “wide-angle” perspectives. Increasingly I see encouraging signs of revitalization taking place in some BBA churches. Here are the “Top Ten” signs I see. You might want to use these as part of your own church-health assessment.

1. *Conflict of a different kind*. It is a misnomer that healthy churches do not have conflict. They do have conflict and sometimes it is very passionate. However, it is conflict of a different kind. Unhealthy churches are full of *petty conflict* – gripes and fights about things that have very little to do with the church’s mission. Healthy churches experience *missional conflict* – important family discussions about how to carry out the mission of the church. The result of petty conflict is always “us” and “them.” It divides. The result of missional conflict is “we.” It unites followers of Christ around a common mission.

2. *Problems of a different kind*. Healthy churches have plenty of problems. In fact, they may have significantly more as they get healthier, but they are problems of a different kind. Unhealthy churches are focused on *survival problems* – how do we keep the lights on and preserve “our” church. Healthy churches have messy *people problems* born of the fact that folks are getting saved and learning how to be disciples. Lives are in constant transition from “train wreck” to “Jesus trek.”

I was reminded of this recently by a story from one of our pastors. He was approached by a new couple in the church who wanted the pastor to perform their wedding. No problem, the pastor thought, until the details were explained: the couple wanted to get married *on Halloween dressed as zombies!* At first I was tempted to think, “How ridiculous and unchristian.” But then I thought, “Praise God! These folks are in a missional church that preaches the gospel and welcomes people with train-wreck lives. Hallelujah for the messy people problems!”

3. *Healthy processes for making big decisions*. Healthy churches are not stymied by major decisions about which there is a diversity of opinion. They patiently but expeditiously follow processes

that allow the church to make strategic decisions with a high degree of buy-in among members. In unhealthy churches, strategic decisions rarely get addressed, much less made.

4. *A focus on knowing and doing the Bible.* Bible study is behaviorally focused in healthy churches. Much emphasis is given to reading, internalizing, and acting upon Scripture. Unhealthy churches have a lot of “Bible studies” that turn into griping sessions about what people in our society (i.e., *other* people) are doing wrong.

5. *Disciple-making processes.* Healthy churches do not assume discipleship progress will happen because people come to church activities. They have a system for it. They help people take concrete, definable steps of following Jesus. They have a *plan* for growth, not just a *wish* that it will happen.

6. *Financial decisions aligning with strategy decisions.* I see revitalizing churches making tough decisions about resource allocation based on their mission. The church budget is the tool by which ministry strategy is implemented, not a means by which the status quo is perpetuated.

7. *Stability and integrity in senior leadership.* Revitalizing churches have pastors who have decided to stay and leadership teams who are committed to working toward a common vision over the long haul. Time, shared experiences, and demonstrated integrity build trust. Trust is the basis of fruitful ministry.

8. *A high level of appreciation for pastoral leaders.* Healthy flocks value their shepherds. They are generous and caring congregations where their pastoral leaders are concerned. They want their pastor to stay put, stay healthy, and stay focused on his call – and they do everything they can to make that happen.

9. *An Acts 1:8 strategy for missions.* Revitalizing churches are usually ones that have rediscovered the mission field in their own back yard. They are outwardly focused churches that give equal emphasis to their own “Jerusalem” and “Judea” as well as to “Samaria” and the “ends of the earth.” They are intentional and holistic about their missions strategy.

10. *Simplification of structure.* I observe that revitalizing churches are simplifying both what they do and how they do it to align with their mission and goals. Some of the most important decisions these churches have made is what to *stop doing*. Unhealthy churches do a lot of stuff poorly. Churches that are experiencing a return to health have usually reduced the number of weekly church activities and increased the quality and intentionality of the remaining ones. They are streamlining around their mission.

Yes, there are encouraging signs right here in our own association. Some BBA churches are experiencing revitalization. May their tribe increase!