

Voices: Keys to church revitalization, Part 1

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I have a personal, professional and academic interest in revitalization in established Baptist churches. Personally, I've pastored three congregations in Texas—First Baptist Church in Castroville, First Baptist Church in Woodville and, currently, First Baptist Church in Brenham. Each of them, for various reasons, went through an intentional interim process before I came because they had been through some combination of struggle, conflict and/or stagnation.



Ross Shelton I also know what it is like to pastor year-after-year praying and working for revitalization and being frustrated it was not happening in the way I hoped. This interest led me to seek out pastors who are leading effectively, to read widely about church revitalization, and, ultimately, to focus my dissertation research at Dallas Baptist University on church revitalization.

I examined seven established Baptist General Convention of Texas-related churches that had undergone a time of decline followed by a time of

revitalization. My first three articles with the *Baptist Standard* will focus on the findings I discovered during my dissertation.

Feelings of decline/revitalization

The most dominant and prevalent finding I discovered in my research related to the way people felt about their church during decline versus how they *felt* about their church during revitalization.

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When people described their church during the decline, they would talk about church as a negative experience. One respondent explained the negative experience in the following way: “It was, so it was pretty low, low morale. On the Sunday I came, I think it was, I can’t remember what it was, but I remember I didn’t want to be here, and neither did anybody else, really. It’s kind of how it felt.”

During the revitalization, though, the church felt the opposite. When I asked respondents about revitalization, the word I heard over and over again was “excitement.” People wanted to be together, and they were thrilled about the future. One respondent put it this way, “It was just a sense of excitement, and you know, a spirit of expectation of what God was going to do.”

The culture in these churches went from depressive and stagnate to exciting and expectant.

Two causes

The natural question is, “What caused the church to feel negative during the decline and exciting during the revitalization?” Two sources for the feelings stood out.

The first source was the experience of people observing their church either decline or grow. During the decline, the respondents spoke of how hard it was to watch people leave the church, especially if the people leaving were their friends. During the revitalization, though, they observed people joining their church, which fueled their excitement.

The second, *and most important*, source was the relationship between the pastor and church. During the decline, the pastor often—although not always—led in a unilateral, dictatorial way and did not connect relationally with the church. Along with people leaving, the unhealthy relationship with the pastor further enhanced the church as feeling negative. During the revitalization, though, the pastor, who often was new, led with vision and an open, inclusive and relational style.

That is, these pastors had the combination of being men with vision/direction *and* were people who connected relationally with the church. They loved being with people, and as decisions were made about the future, they worked hard to bring as many people and generations along. As many other researchers have noted, the pastor's leadership often is the crucial factor in church revitalization/growth. This was found true in my research as well.

Research shows ...

To summarize and apply the most dominant finding in my dissertation research, here is what I discovered:

- The culture of a church—"how a church feels"—is crucial in churches transitioning from declining to revitalized. It is important for pastors and church leaders to take seriously how their church feels, especially as it relates to a church's relational energy.
- The pastor sets the tone of the church's culture by *how* he leads, provides vision and relates to people.

I was encouraged by the pastors who led revitalization, because they were not hard-charging, my-way-or-the-highway, aloof types. They had vision, were passionate, led through some very difficult changes *and* they did so in a way that sought to be inclusive. They wanted as many people to be part of the revitalization as possible. They were very much people who thought of themselves, first-and-foremost, as *pastors* and were not interested in some other leadership metaphor to describe or define their leadership.

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