

Voices: Keys to church revitalization, Part II

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Here I'm providing my second of three columns reflecting the findings of my doctoral dissertation research on revitalization in seven previously declining Baptist General Convention of Texas-related churches.



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In my first piece, I described the most dominant and prevalent finding in churches that have revitalized—the way people felt about their church during decline (negative, depressing) versus how they felt about their church during revitalization (excited). Their feeling about church came from watching the church either decline or grow and the relationship they had with their pastor/how the pastor led.

In this second column, I will combine the second and third findings of my research. The reason I'm combining both findings is both relate to church facilities.

Most surprising

The second finding in my research was the most surprising to me. All seven churches that met my criteria for revitalization either had relocated to or were already located in growing, suburban areas. None of the revitalized churches in my research was located in urban or rural areas that were economically depressed and/or were in population decline.

Even more surprising was the fact out of the seven churches, four underwent complete relocations from their previous areas that were hard to locate and/or in declining population areas. Each of the four churches that relocated experienced growth connected to their relocation. In fact, one church literally doubled in one week—one Sunday at the old location and the next Sunday at the new location—in 2007 and has maintained the growth since the relocation.

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The reason this is important is that it speaks to a relationship between external factors—factors outside the church—and revitalization. Part of the reason this was surprising was that in my previous research on church revitalization, I found the causes focused exclusively on internal factors—factors within a church, such as leadership, culture, etc.

Internal & external

My research, though, revealed a contrary finding: External factors are important in revitalization. That is, external factors such as being located in a growing, suburban area may have important impact on revitalization.

The third finding also addressed the church's facilities but shifted the focus from the external factor of location to the internal factor of the actual facilities and how they looked, were maintained, were renovated and used. That is, it wasn't just where the facilities were located—an external factor; it was the actual facilities themselves—an internal factor.

Facilities matter!

To summarize, here is what I discovered in my second and third findings:

1. External factors probably are more important in church revitalization than originally thought.

If a church is not located in a growing, suburban area, it does not mean revitalization cannot happen. It does mean there may not be “the lift” that happens when hundreds of new people move to homes near a church’s facilities.

Hopefully, this will be encouraging to the many pastors and churches that struggle to see revitalization in churches that are located in more challenging—less growing, etc.—areas. If it feels like it is more challenging to lead and experience revitalization when a church’s facilities are located in areas less favorable to growth, it’s because it is more challenging!

2. Facilities play an important role in the life of a church.

As much as we may want to wish facilities don’t matter, they do. Where they are located, how they look and how many people they can accommodate are going to be a constant challenge/opportunity in growing, revitalized churches.

Ross Shelton is pastor of First Baptist Church in Brenham, Texas. To see his previous “Texas Baptist Voices” column, “Keys to church revitalization, Part I,” [click here](#).