

## 7 principles for church revitalization

**Don't hijack the church.** You can change a church without taking away its DNA. That means you may not be able to make every change you want to make. And you may move slower than you want to at times. But the general culture of the church—at least the one that has lasted for generations—should not be on the table. For example, if the church has a history of loving big events, don't kill all of them—find a way to make them work for kingdom growth. (If the culture is destructive to the future vitality of the church, then it needs to be changed.)

**Rediscover more than you reinvent.** Help the church rediscover the heartbeat of the times people loved—when things were healthy, lives were changing, and kingdom growth was occurring. Build momentum as you celebrate the emotions and passions from the good days of their heritage. Lead people to rediscover the joy they once had for the mission.

**It will take longer than you think it will.** To members of the church, it might feel like you're changing at a rocket's pace, but to you it will feel like you're moving at a snail's pace. In church planting, you can change in a week. That's usually not the case in revitalization. Take time to bring people along who have invested years in building the church. Over time, when trust is developed, it will get easier, and you'll be able to move more quickly.

**Celebrate the history while shaping the future.** Don't think everything old is bad. It's not. It's what has helped the church survive as long as it has. It may not be working as well right now, and there will likely need to be changes, but some of the old things were and still are good things in principle. Recognize that, acknowledge it, and people will be more likely to go along with the new changes you're proposing.

**Recognize the sense of loss in change.** It's the number one reason change is resisted. Don't ignore or underestimate how difficult change is for some people. Be humble, considerate, and compassionate. That doesn't mean don't change. It does mean don't change assuming it's "no big deal." It is.

**Don't let a few critics determine your self-worth.** Make no mistake about it, you'll have critics. You'll be making changes that impact people (as all changes do)—people who have been at the church for years. You know the changes are needed. They may even realize the changes are needed. But there will be resistance. And there will be angry people. And when people are angry, they say and do things they may not do otherwise. But, if God called you to it, you can be assured there are usually more supporters than detractors, even if the detractors seem more vocal.

**Love the people even when you don't love everything about the church.** You may not like some of the structures of the church or the process you have to go through to make changes. But you must love the people. Loving the people will help you lead the transitions you need to make. Years ago, God convicted me that if I focus most on loving Him, loving people in any church, any city, or any setting will be much easier for me. ■

Cheryl and I know now that God knew what He was doing. Had we not been obedient to this call, we would have missed some of the most rewarding days in ministry and in life.

We have seen a declining church come alive and grow again. We have seen young families come back to the church. We have seen older members serve in new ways. We know what it's like to see an intergenerational church thrive. We have witnessed the difference an established church can make in a community when it fully embraces its mission. But it hasn't been easy.

Church revitalization is harder work than we experienced in church planting—and church planting is hard. Immanuel is one of the friendliest churches we've ever experienced, but there have been days when I seem to have more critics than supporters. Navigating change is never easy.

I'm often asked what I've learned in the revitalization process. There are so many things, but the one that sticks out to me most is this: Don't reinvent. Rediscover.

I've found people are less resistant to change when it doesn't take away their identity. Every church has a history and a heritage in which it is proud. There were once monumental leaps of faith to start the church. And there have been special days and seasons when the church especially saw God at work. The church has had to overcome challenges, but has survived them. Part of church revitalization is to rediscover those parts of the church's history and use them to rekindle the momentum to grow again.

Shortly after I arrived at Immanuel, I spent considerable time in our history room and talking to those who knew the church's history. I learned a couple facts that proved to be monumental building blocks. First, the church sat idle for several years during World