

"A WEALTH OF WISDOM"—ED STETZER

THERE'S

HOPE

FOR YOUR



CHURCH

FIRST STEPS TO RESTORING

HEALTH AND GROWTH

GARY L. MCINTOSH

“*There’s Hope for Your Church* provides a wealth of wisdom for anyone seeking to turn around a declining or plateaued church. McIntosh skillfully draws on his three decades of church consultations to forge a step-by-step strategy for restoring vitality to struggling churches. This book give you hope and will show you the way to revitalize your church.”

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Elmer Towns, cofounder of Liberty University

“I like this book because it helps me understand ‘where’ the church might find itself today and ‘what’ contributes to ‘why’ we have to wrestle with spiritual and pragmatic issues. But it doesn’t leave me there. Gary McIntosh moves beyond mere analytical explanations and gives practical ‘how-to’s.’ This book will take you from concept to completion. You’ll not only read this book yourself but will want church leaders to read it as well.”

Samuel R. Chand, author of *Cracking Your Church’s Culture Code* (www.samchand.com)

“Once again McIntosh delivers a down-to-earth, practical book on how to turn around a troubled to dying church. Gary shares the turnaround wisdom he has gleaned for more than

four decades of consulting with more than a 1,000 churches. This isn't armchair theology; it's the real deal."

Bill Easum, church consultant and author
of *Preaching for Church Transformation*

"Once again Dr. Gary L. McIntosh's wealth of wisdom and experience shine a bright pathway for those wanting to see their churches healthy again. This book gives hope and practical insight for those doing the hard work of revitalization. I can't wait to get it into the hands of some of the pastors I work with!"

Bob Rowley, EFCA Texas–Oklahoma
district superintendent; adjunct professor,
Dallas Theological Seminary

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Preface

As you consider the future of your church, do you ever wish you could talk with a person who could answer your questions and point you in the right direction? As you consider the challenges and opportunities before your church, do you ever wish you had someone to coach you? Do you ever wish you had a mentor who could help you gain confidence in leading your church through a turnaround?

Well, allow this book to be your personal coach. It is the distillation of four decades of working as a coach and consultant with over one thousand churches, most of which were in need of revitalization. As you might expect, some did well and others did not, but lessons were learned from all of them—lessons I'll share with you in the pages of this book. I'll also share lessons discovered from pastoring two churches that were in desperate need of leadership. In one I faced traditional resistance to change and not much happened, but in the other, I was modestly successful. My experience in those two churches helps me to understand the dynamics and challenges that church leaders face in difficult situations. In addition to my position as professor of Christian ministry and leadership at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University in Southern California, I read numerous

books, research studies, and doctoral dissertations that focus on various aspects of how to renew a church's vitality. So while I can't promise to know all the answers (I'm a learner as much as anyone), my hope is that *There's Hope for Your Church* will give you confidence and direction as you seek to revitalize your local church.

For simplicity, I've written in a down-to-earth, practical style. However, if you desire to explore church revitalization in more depth, an extensive reading list is included in appendix C. Support for the concepts taught in the following chapters can be found in these resources.

While I present a logical, step-by-step approach, revitalizing a church is messy. In real life, the following chapters often take place all at once, rather than step-by-step. Read the table of contents and feel free to jump into any chapter you feel might be helpful in light of your challenges. Fundamentally, however, it will be good for you to read the entire book straight through to gain a perspective of the entire process. *There's Hope for Your Church* is presented primarily to pastors, but anyone who is interested in helping his or her church move toward renewal will find the ideas helpful.

The church revitalization chart found at the beginning of each chapter will serve as a guide. The first step on the way to revitalizing any church is to see the possibilities. If you see potential for your church, start reading chapter 1 and keep going until you've thought about how each chapter figures into your church's ministry. Then when you finish reading the book, continue immersing yourself in the literature of revitalization (see appendix C). After you've spent time reading and reflecting on how to bring about renewal in a church, you'll begin to think and act differently. Hope begins in your own heart and mind, after which it seeps into your speech, practices, and body language. Your hope becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you honestly believe there is hope for your church, your actions and attitudes will change.

So picture your church in the not-too-distant future. Imagine a gradually changing attitude reflecting a new sense of expectancy. Imagine people with a contagious enthusiasm for Christ and your church. Imagine classes pulsating with new life. Imagine a new spirit of hope in your church.

Is it possible? The answer . . . a resounding yes! It is possible. Indeed, God very much wants to see it happen. Do you believe that? I do. Can you see the possibilities? I can. Just think about it. There's hope for your church!

Church Revitalization Chart

See the Potential

Commit to Lead

Assess the Situation

Learn the Principles

Discern God's Vision

Build a Coalition

Lift the Morale

Make Hard Decisions

Refocus the Ministry

Equip for Change

Deal with Resistance

Stay the Course

Breaking Through

See the Potential

There are no hopeless situations; there are only people who have grown hopeless about them.

CLARE BOOTHE LUCE

Do you believe that?
I certainly do. If you want your church to experience fresh vitality, you must believe it too!

Unfortunately, many pastors and lay leaders engage church life with a certain lack of hope. Having begun with great hope for what God could do in their church, over the years they have become worn down by resistance, barriers, and circumstances. Many appear to have tried, as best they know how, to renew their church's vitality. Yet, after years of trying, struggling, and failing, they are discouraged. One of my friends expressed it this way: "Many local churches start with good intentions that are somehow lost amidst the fray.

Early advantages and opportunities slip through their fingers. Patterns of complacency and compromise emerge. *Slow death* goes to work with symptomless deception.”¹ Consider, for example, the story of Pastor William Douglas.

One Pastor's Story

When Pastor Will accepted his appointment to Faith Evangelical Church, his heart literally raced with excitement. After talking one evening for an hour and a half with members of the pastoral search committee and hearing of their enthusiasm for his coming as their new pastor, he could not sleep. Tossing and turning throughout the night, he envisioned a great future for the church and, of course, for his own ministry. His heart was filled with hope for the future.

Members and attendees welcomed Will and his wife, Gail, with great fanfare. Expecting their first child, Will and Gail dreamed of a long ministry at Faith, perhaps even one that would last a lifetime. They fit the church well, matching the average age of the congregation and its middle-class values. Will's theology paralleled the church's viewpoint perfectly, and people showed evidence of a loving spirit. From any person's perspective, Will and Gail were right for the church and it for them.

After his first month of preaching, Will gathered the leaders of the church in a small classroom to plan the coming year together. Vacation Bible school, adult fellowship meetings, and holiday events were penciled onto a large calendar placed at the front of the room. All who participated in the planning seemed hopeful that the next year would be one of the best in the church's short, twenty-three-year history. Everyone shared openly and in prayer for the future of the church. The future looked promising.

Ministry flowed smoothly for the first three months as Will enjoyed the natural wave of congregational morale during

what pastors call the honeymoon phase. However, a casual meeting with one of the church leaders during his thirteenth week caused Will to see a different reality.

“Will,” Elder Lowe remarked, “I guess you know you were our last hope.”

Reacting with a bit of surprise in his voice, Will asked, “What do you mean?”

“Well, I guess you should know that we had gone through nineteen candidates before we asked you to be our pastor,” Elder Lowe revealed with a hint of embarrassment. “Each one turned us down for one reason or another. We finally decided we’d give it one last try, and if another candidate turned us down, we’d vote to close the church.”

Shocked at this new information, Will simply sat at his desk in quiet thought. Elder Lowe finally broke the silence, declaring, “Pastor, you are our last hope. We’ve been on a slow decline for the last, oh, eight years or so. If you can’t help us reach some new families, we still might need to close our doors.”

Last hope? Will did not know what to say. He just thanked Elder Lowe for the information and excused himself by saying he had another appointment.

Will filed Elder Lowe’s comment in the back of his mind and threw himself into his work for the next three months. “After all,” Will ruminated, “I’m not the Savior of the church; Jesus is.” His attempts to start a couple of new ministries were met with apathy. Church leaders never rejected his ideas outright but simply said, “That’s fine, Pastor. Do what you want.” Few people, however, ever volunteered to help. Eventually, Will determined to try some drastic measures to awaken the people. He suggested the church relocate to a new, growing area of town. This idea woke up the people all right, but just enough to rouse their anger. They rejected the idea through a congregational vote. He then turned to a fellow pastor at a sister church to discuss his situation. After several weeks, Will suggested to his church the possibility of a merger with

their sister church. Several months of meetings, discussions, and shared worship services ensued, but in the end, the result was the same. When it came to a vote of the congregation, Will's idea was turned down. Two years of hard work left Will greatly discouraged and without hope. He resigned exactly two years to the day he had arrived.

Will's saga is not new. Going from hope to hopelessness is an old story that was first noted in the second and third chapters of the book of Revelation. Ephesus experienced fatigue and forgot its first love. Pergamum became careless about church discipline. Thyatira ignored internal conflict and refused to confront sin. Sardis lost passion for the future by resting on past accomplishments. Laodicea lost its influence due to its affluence. Five of the seven churches mentioned, 71 percent, faced difficulty, which is close to the 75 percent of churches that are at risk in North America today.

Roughly three-fourths of established churches in North America are either declining or on a long-term plateau. Such churches are ineffective at making disciples—at least new disciples—and function with a lack of fruitfulness and hope. Yet, as Clare Boothe Luce noted years ago, “There are no hopeless situations; there are only people who have grown hopeless about them.”

One of the most revealing illustrations of Luce's statement is found in the research of Viktor Frankl. While a prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp, he watched people living and dying daily and later published his observations in *Man's Search for Meaning*. He observed that people simply die when they have no hope. If people allow apathy to set in, if they have no purpose, and if they see no meaning in life, they give up. But if they have hope, if they lean toward the positive in life, and if they have a purpose, they live.

While Frankl's focus was on individual people, I've noted that churches act like individual people. Local churches have traits, personalities, and attitudes. Just like people, churches that have no purpose allow apathy to set in. They lose hope

and die. The good news is churches that see problems as opportunities, set goals, and move into the future with hope, live! There's hope for your church! Do you believe that? If you do, your church is likely to thrive. As Henry Ford reportedly remarked, "Whether you think you can or can't, you're right."

Reasons for Hope

There's hope for your church! Do you believe that? I do. Why am I so hopeful? Let me give you three reasons (there are more, but these will suffice for now). First, God wants your church to grow. The first mention of the church in the Bible contains God's promise that his church will grow: "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matt. 16:18). The concept of "church" in this passage contains the seeds of both the universal church and local churches. Today there are approximately two billion Christians in the world. Compared to the small band of believers that met together in the upper room in Acts 1, the worldwide church makes it clear that Christ's church has grown. He has kept his promise. These two billion people meet in local gatherings called churches. They may meet secretly in a home in China, out in the open under a tree in Africa, or in a modern, air-conditioned building in Canada, but they gather in communities of faith to worship, pray, and learn. Thus, as local churches grow, the universal church grows; as the universal church grows, local churches grow. According to Christ, even the gates of Hades will not stop the advance of his church. Since your church is part of God's plan, there is hope for your church in God's promise to build his church.

God wants your church to be fruitful and multiply. Acts 12:24 reports that "the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied." This report regarding the early church brought back powerful memories to the disciples. The words

fruitful and multiply imply an expectation of numerical growth of new disciples and churches. Tracing the phrase in the Old Testament confirms this.

The phrase *fruitful and multiply* goes all the way back to the creation of man and woman in Genesis 1:28, where God said, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.” Over the ensuing years, Adam and Eve obeyed this command, and the earth was gradually filled with people. Unfortunately, the sin of man (Gen. 6) brought forth God’s judgment through the flood (Gen. 7–8). Yet, after Noah and his sons left the ark, God reiterated his command, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1). God commanded Noah and his sons to produce offspring and to spread across the face of the earth. Later, God used the same two words in his promise to multiply the seed of Abraham (Gen. 17:6; 22:17), a promise God restated to Jacob in Genesis 35:11: “I am God almighty; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you.” Once again, there is no doubt that this promise included an expectation that the nation of Israel would grow numerically. So it is no surprise when the first chapter of Exodus states, “But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them” (1:7). The people of Israel understood that numerical growth of their nation was tied directly to their obedience. God promised Israel that if they kept his commands, “I will turn toward you and make you fruitful and multiply you” (Lev. 26:9).

When Luke used the words *fruitful and multiply* in Acts 12:24, the early disciples understood the implication: churches are to grow and multiply across the world as new believers accept the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. Even the apostle Paul used a similar phrase when he described the expansion of the Christian faith in the world. Speaking about the spread of the gospel, he wrote, “Just as in all the world also it is constantly *bearing fruit and increasing*” (Col. 1:6, emphasis added). Wouldn’t you like to see your church constantly

bearing fruit and increasing? It can happen. God expects it. There is hope for your church, just as there is for all churches that obediently follow God's commands.

Second, God revitalizes and restores people, nations, and churches that have lost spiritual energy. The Old Testament records several cycles of rebellion, repentance, and restoration in the book of Judges. Whenever the nation rebelled and then repented, God raised up a new leader called a judge—Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, etc.—who brought restoration to the nation. Chronicles records several revivals under King Asa (2 Chron. 14–16), King Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 20), King Hezekiah (2 Chron. 30), and King Josiah (2 Chron. 34). The New Testament records beautiful pictures of restoration, such as the return of the prodigal son in Luke 15 and the call to the churches in Revelation: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). The implication in Revelation is that God will restore churches that hear and repent. The bottom line is that there is hope for your church! God desires to renew your church and will do so if the people listen and repent (more about this later on).

Third, God is revitalizing churches right now. For the last three decades, I've observed churches throughout the United States and Canada being renewed and revitalized. While there is not room here to share all the details, here is one church's story.

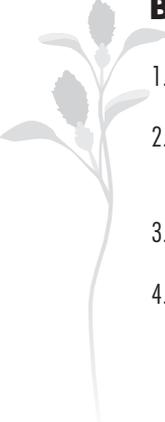
Crestline Community Church was in financial trouble following the resignation of its fourth pastor in less than five years. While church members often commented that they were the friendliest church in town, the facts proved otherwise. Few visitors bothered to come through the doors of the church, and during the five years of turmoil, the church had declined 13 percent. The church was in trouble, and everyone knew it, even if they didn't speak about it openly.

In a last-ditch effort to turn the church around, a call was issued to Pastor Neal Westman. He had seven years of

church-planting experience, and the church members hoped he could bring the necessary tools to restore the health and vitality of their church. In a letter to Pastor Westman, the church board told him they were desperate and were ready to do what was needed to attract and keep younger families.

Pastor Westman hit the ground running, and the congregation allowed him to make several significant changes during his first year. Facilities were refurbished, a new children's ministry was started, advertising was sent to the surrounding community, a new adult class was added, an evangelism training course was introduced, and a building fund was started with a small deposit of one hundred dollars. Over the next year, morale gradually increased as attendance rose 52 percent. Within five years, the church grew from 52 people to a high of 145. By the time Pastor Westman left the church ten years later, worship attendance was averaging 210 people in two worship services.

This too is an old story. God is in the practice of restoring, renewing, and revitalizing people *and* churches, if they are willing to follow him and pay the price to see it happen. There is hope for your church!



Bringing It Home

1. Is there hope for your church? Why do you think this?
2. Which of the reasons for hope mentioned in this chapter do you find most appealing? Which do you question?
3. What other reasons for hope can you think of that were not noted in this chapter?
4. If your church were willing to change, what might the potential be for the future? Be specific and paint a picture of what you see for your church in the next five to ten years.

**Church
Revitalization
Chart**

See the Potential

Commit to Lead

Assess the Situation

Learn the Principles

Discern God's Vision

Build a Coalition

Lift the Morale

Make Hard Decisions

Refocus the Ministry

Equip for Change

Deal with Resistance

Stay the Course

Breaking Through

Commit to Lead

If you're gonna stand around here, you've got to keep movin'.

COMMENT BY A POLICEMAN
TO PEOPLE STANDING ON A CORNER

An old adage assures us that “a new broom sweeps clean.” If you are a church leader exploring the potential of revitalizing your church, you are the new broom. In your efforts to bring fresh energy into your church, you will be attempting to “sweep your church clean,” to shake things up, to get the church moving, to implement changes.

Your passion is admirable, but you will be faced with unseen hazards that must be removed or avoided before you can proceed. How do you revitalize your church without losing your sanity? Or, in the case of a pastor, your job?

A great deal of research during the last sixty

years has focused on the issue of church revitalization. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Church Renewal Movement stressed the importance of spiritual renewal, focusing on small group Bible study and prayer. The following decades of the 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of the Church Growth Movement with its emphasis on evangelism and strategic planning. An emphasis on church health gained momentum in the 1990s, returning to an inward look similar to the Church Renewal Movement's emphasis on spiritual dynamics. That emphasis merged with the spiritual formation interest found in numerous churches. More recently, the last two decades have stressed missional outreach as a means of revitalizing local churches. In all the research completed throughout these years, one aspect stands out: the importance of leadership, especially pastoral leadership. In order for a church to be revitalized, the pastor is the key.

However, it must be a particular kind of leadership. Revitalization consultant Ken Priddy¹ points out that there are two types of pastors: a revitalization pastor and a revitalization leader. Important differences make one an effective turnaround leader, while the other sees much less success.

According to Priddy's analysis, revitalization pastors see the church as their client. This makes sense, since most pastors are called or appointed by a church committee, report to a church board, and receive a salary from the church. As a result, both the church and the pastor view the pastor as an employee of the church. Thus, pastors feel they must do what the church desires, and the process of revitalization is seen as gaining a consensus among the church members to take the church where it wants to go. Unfortunately, consensus building takes a good deal of time, and implementing changes in such a situation is extremely difficult. Add to this the desire of most pastors to receive affirmation from the congregation, and it is easy to see that doing anything contrary to what the church wants brings pain rather than joy. The bottom line is that revitalization pastors rarely see a church turned around, even if they think the church needs to change.

In contrast, some pastors are revitalization leaders. While they work for the church, report to a board, and receive a salary, such pastors see God as their client. Therefore, they do what God desires rather than what church members desire. Rather than being an employee of the church, revitalization leaders believe they are called by God and must lead the church where God wants it to go. Thus, they see the process of revitalization as taking the church where it doesn't want to go but needs to go. Revitalization leaders expect to encounter resistance and are willing to lead without affirmation and often with pain.

Terry Walling, a leader who specializes in helping churches refocus their ministry, puts it like this: "For churches to transition into a new era of ministry, courageous, godly leadership is paramount."²

CASE STUDY 1

Pastor or Leader

"I never signed up for this," Pastor Sam Holland thought quietly. He would never say such a thing to others, well, maybe to his wife, but not to any worshipers at his church. Nevertheless, he honestly thought ministry would be smoother.

He just wanted to preach to, love, and care for the people at West Island Church. He hoped that by doing so his church members would show respect and love in return. Things had gone well for almost two years, but now he sensed an increasing dissatisfaction with his leadership from the church family.

He knew the church was in need of repair. In particular, the sanctuary needed upgrading to be attractive to newcomers. When he suggested that seating in the sanctuary could be improved by taking out the old pews and replacing them with movable seating, people criticized him publicly. A few key leaders even threatened to leave if the remodeling idea went forward. Some of them recalled with emotion how they had raised the money to purchase the pews from a mortuary that had

closed. The brass plates attached to the ends of the pews bore their names and the names of their friends who were now gone.

The problem got even worse when others threatened to leave if the church didn't move forward on the project. One of the newer members told Pastor Holland, "If we don't remodel the sanctuary, it'll be a vote for no growth. My family and I will be leaving if we don't move forward on this new vision."

Pastor Holland agonized over the fact that people were disagreeing on such a small matter. At least it was small from his viewpoint. Finally, rather than causing the church and himself so much pain, Pastor Holland decided to drop the idea and work for peace among the parties. He hoped that neither group would leave the church. "After all," he mused, "we should be able to get along."

Analysis:

- Is Pastor Holland a revitalization pastor or a revitalization leader? What indicators can you point to that support your view?
- What seems to be the major obstacle that Pastor Holland is struggling with in his own heart?
- How difficult is it going to be for Pastor Holland to revitalize West Island Church? What makes you think that way?

Revitalization Leaders

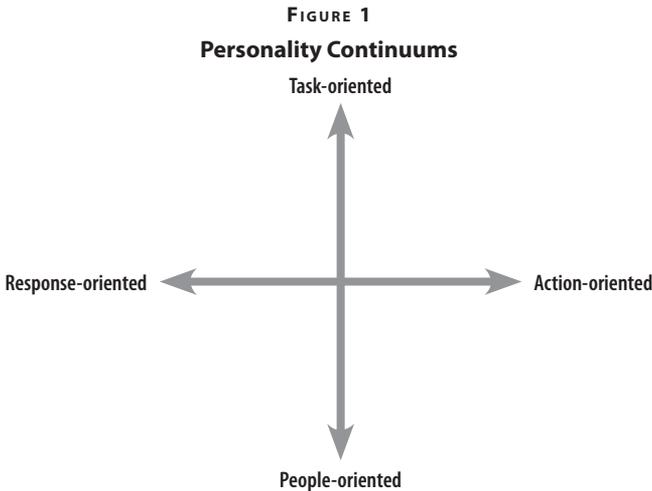
Leaders who are willing to accept the challenge of guiding a church toward fresh health and vitality exhibit the following characteristics.

The right personality.

Studies of pastors who have led a church to renewed and sustained growth consistently show that there is a distinct

personality type of a revitalization leader. According to the familiar DISC personality profile, a revitalization leader overwhelmingly falls into either the D or the I personality type.

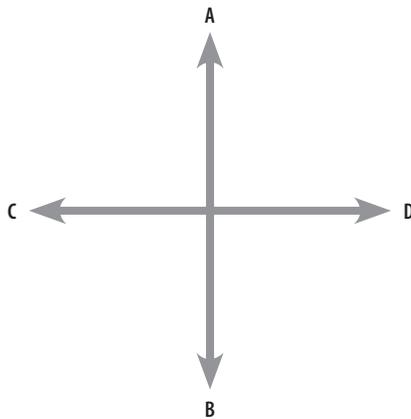
The DISC personality profile is built on the axis of two continuums. The first continuum identifies people as either people-oriented or task-oriented, while the second continuum separates people into response-oriented and action-oriented. Put together, the two continuums look like figure 1.



Basically, people tend to focus on either completing a task or taking care of people, and they tend to take action to accomplish a project or to respond by helping others complete a project. The DISC personality profile is built on a complex series of studies, but answering the two questions below can give you an indication of your personality type. Read the following two questions and circle the letters on figure 2 that correspond to your answers.

Question 1: When working with a group of people on a project, are you motivated mostly by (a) finishing the task or (b) fellowshiping with the workers?

FIGURE 2
Personality Quadrants

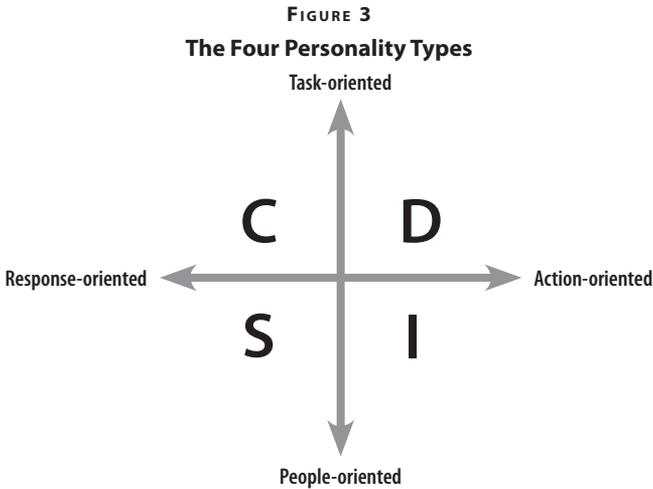


Question 2: When you see a job that needs to be done, do you (c) wait until others start doing it and then help them or (d) jump in and begin to do it yourself?

The two continuums produce four quadrants. The quadrant between the two letters you circled is generally your personality type.³ Using the DISC descriptions, the four personality types are Dominance, Influence, Supportive, and Conscientious. This is illustrated in figure 3.

People who have a D personality are dominant, often leading in a somewhat demanding way. D's are typically decisive and directive in their leadership style. Their tendencies include getting results, creating action, making fast decisions, solving problems, and taking charge.

Like a D leader, the I leader is also action-oriented but seeks to influence those around them to move forward rather than demanding they do so. I's typically take initiative and influence people through an entertaining style of communication. Their tendencies include making a good impression, articulating vision, generating enthusiasm, entertaining people, and creating a positive environment.



The S leader likes to encourage and care for others. S's typically are steady and supportive in their personality style. They enjoy working with others to complete a task. Their tendencies include supporting others, listening well, displaying loyalty, remaining patient, and calming others.

The C leader is concerned with the details surrounding a project. C's are highly conscientious about getting work done and desire that things be done correctly. Their tendencies include attention to detail, critical thinking, doing things correctly, complying with authority, and promoting quality.

Speaking about pastoral leadership, C. Peter Wagner noted years ago, "Some pastors are take-charge people, and some never bring themselves to take charge."⁴ Revitalizing a church requires leaders to take charge rather than waiting for someone else to begin. Thus, revitalization leaders tend to be either a D or an I personality type. God, of course, can use anyone, and he does at times use people with an S or a C personality to revitalize a church. However, studies completed on pastors who have successfully revitalized a church demonstrate that such pastors are invariably either a D or an I.⁵

If you are a D or an I, you have the potential to lead a turnaround in your church. However, if you are an S or a C, do not despair. You can do it, but you'll have to build a strong team to do so (more about this in chap. 6).

The right timing.

Revitalization leaders are committed to stay at their church for an extended period of time. It normally takes five to seven years to revitalize a church in a city. It takes much longer in a rural situation, say, about ten to fifteen years (or longer!). Obviously, if a pastor desires to see a church revitalized, he or she is going to have to stay long enough to see it happen.

Length of stay is directly tied to a pastor's understanding of a call to ministry. Considering the difficulties and challenges faced in turning a church around, a pastor must be committed to a clear call of God. A pastor's call provides the assurance that he is in the right place at the right time.

Our church did not begin to move forward until the congregation believed I had made a commitment to stay with them.

PASTOR DAVID F. NIXON

Howard Sugden and Warren Wiersbe, writing in *Confident Pastoral Leadership*, assert, "The work of the ministry is too demanding and difficult for a man to enter it without a sense of divine calling. Men enter and then leave the ministry usually because they lack a sense of divine urgency."⁶ This

is certainly accurate of revitalization leaders. After extensive research on the personality traits of effective revitalization leaders, Robert Thomas concluded that revitalization ministry "is extremely draining and exacts a toll on the pastor and his family. A person must be certain of a 'call' from God before embarking upon this task."⁷

In my interviews with pastors, I've found that revitalization leaders are certain about two aspects of their call. First,

they are certain that God has called them to make their living from the gospel; that is, they are sure God wants them in the ministry and not some other field of work. Second, they are certain that God has placed them in their current ministry location; that is, they are not looking over the fence at another ministry position. Revitalization leaders do not question either of these two aspects. Rather, they move forward in confidence that they are where God wants them to be.

One of the reasons most pastors are not successful at bringing about revitalization is that they don't stay long enough. John Maxwell illustrates the impact of staying at a church in his "Five Levels of Leadership."⁸ According to Maxwell, during the first two years of a pastor's ministry in a church, he or she leads from positional authority. I remember a conversation with my grandmother years ago. I had been critical of my teachers in school, and my grandmother told me, "Gary, no matter what your teachers are like, you must still respect them." Like others, I soon learned that it is proper to follow and respect others just because they have a certain position. Thus, no matter our feelings, we honor our teacher, the policeman who pulls us over for a traffic violation, and the pastor of our church. Yet, positional leadership is just the beginning, and it is not a very strong platform from which to lead a church toward revitalization.

As pastors build solid relationships in the first two years of ministry, people begin to follow them because they are likable. Maxwell calls this second level of leadership leading by permission—the people like you and give you permission to lead them. This is a much stronger form of leadership than positional leadership because it moves beyond the initial platform of respect to that of relationship. This level of leadership lasts about another two years for most pastors.

During the fourth to the seventh years, a pastor transitions onto a more powerful level of leadership referred to as leading by production. Ministries and programs that were put into place during the first four years begin to bear fruit

by the seventh year. Good ideas planted in the first few years sprout good results in the fourth to the seventh years, leading to a new level of leadership. When people see that your ideas have borne fruit, they start to follow you because they trust your leadership skills. This level of leadership then slowly evolves into a new level of leadership known as leading by personal development.

The fourth level of leadership—personal development—comes about when people's lives are changed. Over the years, a pastor contributes to people's lives through preaching, mentoring, and caring. Long days spent with people at the hospital, evening counseling sessions with couples, and hours of mentoring future leaders begin to pay dividends as people recognize how they've grown from your investment in their lives. Gradually, between years seven and fifteen, a pastor notices that people are following at a new level. An investment into members' lives is returned in a new level of trust.

The few pastors who stay fifteen years or longer discover an even higher level of leadership authority called leading by personhood. A pastor who ministers effectively in a church for fifteen years or more has baptized, counseled, and taught many people. In a real way, church members, worshipers, and even people in the larger community around the church esteem such pastors highly. People follow because of who the pastor is as a person. Unfortunately, few pastors in our day reach this level of leadership authority.

The problem related to revitalizing a church is that the average tenure of a pastor is less than four years (my observation is that senior or solo pastors in the United States stay in a church an average of 3.8 years). If my observation is correct, some 90 percent of pastors don't make it past the four-year mark in a local church. What typically takes place is that a conflict of some sort arises in the third or fourth year of a pastor's ministry in a congregation. Perhaps church members and leaders begin to understand the impact on the church of what the pastor desires to do and begin to resist changes. For

example, the people may say they want to grow. However, when people begin to realize growth means changing the worship style, or a host of other possible changes, they resist the idea. The congregation votes against any changes with their money, time, attendance, and, if a congregational meeting is needed, their actual votes. The pastor sees this resistance as an unwillingness to follow his leadership and leaves the church, only to repeat the process in another church.

The desire to give up and move on is intense. A ministry friend, Chris Conrad, has written about the desire to leave as follows:

I've had the privilege of spending most of my life in what most would call "successful ministry situations." I'm humbled by the fact that I've had the privilege of being used by God to lead "successful," high-paced, life-changing ministry. I know what it's like to feel like I'm going Mach 2 above the desert floor, having the time of my life as God pours out more blessing than we ever deserve. To him be the praise!

I also know what it's like to crawl in the sand on that very same desert floor. To have sand in your hair, in your mouth, in your eyes . . . longing, pleading for a drink of refreshing ministry . . . but nothing comes. And all you can hear are the sounds of planes overhead as they break the sound barrier with their fast-paced, awe-inspiring, high-profile ministries.

That's what a tough ministry challenge feels like. Crawling in the sand of the desert floor while others fly high overhead.

The temptation to give up is intense. So is the temptation to develop "ministry envy." To look at others who, for whatever reason, have been given easier ministry assignments and ask, "What's up with this, God?"

I once attended the retirement banquet for a pastor who had been in pastoral ministry forty years. When it came time for him to say a few closing words, he said, "I'm proud to say I've pastored ten churches in my forty years." The truth was he had not had forty years of ministry but rather four years of

ministry repeated ten times! That length of tenure will never lead to revitalized churches. The great majority of churches will not be revitalized unless pastors commit to staying at least seven years. The bottom line is that revitalization leaders stay.

It is possible, however, for pastors to stay too long. In my experience, if a church has not experienced revitalization within ten to twelve years of a pastor's tenure, it is not going to happen. Many pastors have a vision capacity for about ten years in a single church. Some, of course, can lead a church for twenty years, and a few thirty to forty years. Yet, the average pastor's ministry tends to lose momentum after ten years. Why is this so? The average pastor usually has the knowledge, skill, and energy to maintain a ten-year ministry. After ten years, many pastors frankly do not know what to do. The original vision they had for the church has most likely been accomplished, and now the church flounders, searching for a new direction. Some pastors are able to reenvision their life and ministry for another ten years in the same church, but some cannot and find it best to move to another ministry. My advice is that if you have been in your church for less than seven years, you need to stay longer; if you've been there ten or twelve years, you must either capture a new vision for the next ten years or leave for a different ministry.

The right action.

Revitalization leaders are proactive rather than reactive. This is one of the reasons D's and P's are able to help revitalize a church when S's and C's have more difficulty. D's and P's are proactive, while S's and C's are reactive. Revitalization leaders do not wait for a consensus but take control and set direction. They take advantage of the honeymoon phase, realizing there is no time to waste. Observation shows that growth and revitalization happen faster rather than slower in a majority of churches. For example, one study of twenty revitalization leaders discovered that each was able to see

renewal in growth between six months and three years of becoming the pastor. However, Robert Thomas reminds us, “Although rapid preplanned change is possible, many years of persistence are required to keep it in place.”¹⁰

While a few churches take longer, some up to ten years, to turn around, in most situations the longer it takes, the more difficult it becomes. Long turnarounds lose momentum, people become discouraged, and leaders leave before true revitalization can happen. The exact speed of a turnaround is controlled by numerous variables. Progress, however, must be made even if slowly at first. Remember the law of the snake pit: if you ever find yourself in a pit full of snakes, keep moving but don’t make any sudden jerks.

The right attitude.

One of the movies I remember watching as a child was about the fabled character Ulysses. In one scene, the enemy captured Ulysses and tied him between two teams of horses. The enemy commander ordered the horses to be whipped in an effort to tear Ulysses apart. Of course, in the movie, Ulysses had the strength to hold both teams of horses together, even though it was painful to do so.

Effective revitalization leaders are much like Ulysses in that they have to hold on to the old church while simultaneously building the new one. They have to minister to the former people while assimilating new people. They must work from the left, casting vision and hope, while working from the right, answering questions and bearing criticism. At times a revitalization leader will feel like Ulysses holding two teams of horses.

Leadership calls for suffering and struggle.

JIM COLLINS

Leadership coach Sam Chand says, “The growth of a church is in direct proportion to a leader’s willingness to suffer pain.”¹¹ Revitalization leaders are willing to suffer

the pain of criticism, people leaving the church, misunderstood motives, and a host of other occurrences. When I was going through a painful time of leadership some years ago, a friend told me, “If you are succeeding without suffering, someone has suffered before you. If you are suffering without succeeding, someone will succeed after you.” I’ve since found those words to be true. No church is revitalized without someone suffering. If you are willing to suffer the pain, your church can be revitalized. If you are unwilling to suffer pain, the church cannot be revitalized. This is why it takes a revitalization leader rather than a revitalization pastor. Revitalization pastors want to lead with affirmation and joy, which never happens in a turnaround situation. Only revitalization leaders are willing to suffer the pain of a turnaround.

The right focus.

To a great extent, a fruitful ministry hinges on the heart of the pastor. If a church is to capture the heart of its community, Christ must first capture the heart of the pastor. Revitalization leaders live the mission. Leading a church through a period of revitalization takes a great toll on a pastor’s emotional well-being. Remaining whole emotionally, spiritually, and physically is a fundamental necessity for those lead-

*I know the price of
success: dedication,
hard work, and an
unremitting devotion
to the things you
want to see happen.*

FRANK LLOYD
WRIGHT

ing churches in fresh directions. Spiritual disciplines of prayer, rest, and quietness are prerequisites for lasting spiritual health. Pastors leading a church in revitalization will find their emotional lives taxed to the limit. Quiet reflection and trust in God will sustain the revitalization leader through times of discouragement and suffering.



Bringing It Home

1. Do you see yourself as a revitalization pastor or a revitalization leader? How do you know?
2. According to the DISC profile, are you a D, I, S, or C? What does this imply about your ability to lead your church toward revitalization?
3. How long have you been at your church? What does this say about your ability to lead? Are you willing to remain at your church long enough to see revitalization become a reality?
4. What is your reaction to the statement, "The growth of a church is in direct proportion to a leader's willingness to suffer pain"?