FROM
EMBERS
TO A
FLAME
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FLAME

How God Can
Revitalize
Your Church

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WITH DAVID SWAELY

REVISED AND EXPANDED

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Introduction

Imagine that you are a recent seminary graduate and have just begun your first pastoral ministry. The church you have been called to serve was at one time among the largest and fastest growing in the region. It had risen to a membership of almost nine hundred, with four major worship services and a vital Sunday school program. It was known for creative and effective ministries, an innovative youth program, an expanding Christian day school, and a significant commitment to world missions.

Now, twenty-five years later, the average Sunday morning attendance is below eighty. The Sunday school has fallen to fewer than twenty adults with no children. The average age of the members is around sixty-nine. At age thirty-three, you are the youngest member of the congregation, with the exception of your wife and children. Sunday evening services have been
canceled, and it is considered a notable victory if five people come to the midweek prayer service. Vandalism occurs daily on the church grounds, and minimal amounts of money are now going to missions and benevolence. The church preschool has supported the church with its meager surplus, yet not one family or faculty member from the school is attending the church.

In your first week at the church, a representative from the denomination calls you and says, “I am on the church-growth committee, and we would like for you to consider a suggestion we have. Now I know that you are new here, and I know that this is your first pastorate in our denomination, but we would like for you to consider talking to your leadership about selling the church building and property, taking the proceeds from the sale, and planting a church somewhere else.”

“Excuse me?” you say.

“We would like you to close down. We have been wanting this church to close down for about ten years. So now that you’re here, would you consider leading them to close down?” He reminds you that three previous pastors were defrocked and that others have left in abject frustration. In fact, the church has demoralized most of its previous pastors—as evidenced by another call you receive in your first week, this time from one of those frustrated former pastors.

“We are really glad to have you in the denomination,” he says, “but I have to tell you that I have been concerned since I heard that you were coming to this particular church. I used to be the pastor there, and I would rather see you serving somewhere else.”

“Why is that?” you ask.

“Well, I believe that church has the mark of Satan upon it.”

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Not exactly the most encouraging words to hear during your first week!

Not only that, but the finance committee informs you that it may be difficult to meet the salary promised to you because the church has not met its budget in years.

The local office-supply store has flagged your account; of all the churches in the area, yours is the only one that is not allowed credit. You must pay cash only.

You begin a Sunday evening service. The first night your attendance is eleven, and that is the encouraging part. The discouraging part is that five attendees belong to your immediate family. One of the others is an elder, who asks you to go out to eat after the service, but you tell him that you have to go home after the service to work on some things because a man is coming the next day to fix your refrigerator.

“Hey, listen, let’s go out tonight anyway,” he says to you at the front of the church, as you are about to begin the service. “Don’t worry about that @@%! refrigerator.”

At your first board meeting, you learn that two elders are rotating off and will need to be replaced.

“I think so-and-so should be an elder,” one of the men says. “I nominate him.”

“Is he still a member of this church?” another one asks.

“I don’t know,” he replies.

“Does he come on Sundays?”

“No, I haven’t seen him, but if we make him an elder, maybe he will.” As you get to know the elders better, you realize that some probably do not know the Lord. And within the first month, you lose two godly men—one moves away and the other dies of leukemia.

This wasn’t the picture they painted in seminary, and you are about to quit before you get started.
What I just asked you to imagine is not a hypothetical scenario. It is the true story of my first pastoral ministry, at Pinelands Presbyterian Church in Miami. That body had once, long ago, been aflame with excited members, effective ministries, and regular conversions. But by the time I was called there, only embers remained. I desperately wanted to see God ignite those embers into a fire again, so I searched His Word to find the biblical principles that apply to church revitalization. By God’s grace, we put those principles into practice, though with many mistakes. And by God’s grace, the church came alive.

Within three years, we grew to an average attendance of over four hundred. More than half of those added were by conversion or rededication to Christ. But almost as gratifying as the conversion growth was the fact that only one family from the original congregation was lost to another church in the process of revitalization. Instead of feeling disenfranchised or dismantled, the former members became a vital part of the “new work” of the Lord at Pinelands, rejoicing in what the Lord was doing and having a vested interest in the church’s ministry and the new vision for the community we served.

Since then, I have had the privilege of leading another church through the process of revitalization. Christ Covenant Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, grew from thirty-eight members to over three thousand in attendance over the course of seventeen years. The Lord also allowed the church to have a significant impact on its community, as it became “salt and light” in many ways around the Charlotte area. We were involved in launching a number of new congregations in the region, and also had the privilege of supporting and participating in many missions ministries throughout the world and sending many of our members to the mission field.
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Not every successful church will grow as big as Christ Covenant, of course, but every successful church will certainly experience the power of the Holy Spirit working in it and through it in many visible ways. And I am convinced that this kind of revitalization, when it is truly of God, will happen only as church leaders wisely apply the biblical principles related to the health of a church. In this book, you will learn those principles, and much of the wisdom, that our Lord can use to take any church from embers to a flame!