

From Dead Religion to a Revitalized Church

God wants to breathe new life into struggling congregations

When I met Jason Cook three years ago he was a discouraged Bible college graduate. He had experienced failure in his personal life, and he had disappointed the leaders he served. Even though he still had a strong desire to be in ministry, the 27-year-old paid his bills by waiting tables at a seafood restaurant in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Jason could have dropped off the spiritual map like so many people his age who have abandoned faith or given up on the church. But a miracle of grace unfolded.

Jason shook free from his discouragement, and he was eventually invited to pastor a struggling Pentecostal Holiness church in Conway, about 15 miles from Myrtle Beach. The congregation had shrunk to 35. A few older members of the church resisted when Jason tried to introduce new music and an innovative ministry style—but then new people began to show up, and people in the community began to find Jesus through Jason's passionate preaching and the church's outreach.

The church has now grown to 170 in a year.

This week, Jason and his wife, Chloe, will celebrate with the rest of the congregation as they dedicate a new 300-seat sanctuary complete with a 5,000-square-foot youth center. They have renamed their church The Refuge—and Jason has plans to not only fill the building with new converts but also to construct a battered women's shelter on the property.

"I'm at a total loss for words when I see the Lord's grace and favor," Jason told me. "The Refuge is what it is because my team has an unwavering commitment to reach people that some

churches turn their backs on.”

The revitalization of The Refuge clashes with the negative statistics we hear about churches closing and denominations aging. *USA Today* reported last month that the number of Protestants in the United States has dropped from 53 percent in 2007 to 48 percent today. And the number of people who claim no religious affiliation (called “Nones” by statisticians) has climbed from 15.3 percent to 19.6 percent during the same period.

Yet Jason Cook’s story in Conway, S.C., proves that dying churches can indeed be revitalized. I believe we’re going to see a wave of renewal in American churches over the next few years. But for true revitalization to take place, we must be willing to take some painful steps:

1. Confront the spirit of religious tradition. Nothing is more toxic to the church than a religious spirit. It clings to yesterday and fights change. It resists the Holy Spirit. It persecutes the prophetic word. It hates genuine worship. When Christians lose their first love for Jesus and become religious, they lose all concern for the lost. Religious people want church to revolve around them, so they have no vision for outreach.

The religious spirit says: “We like our church small. We don’t like those new songs. We want to sing the same songs we have been singing since 1965! And we don’t want those new people around here—especially those tattooed teenagers or those Hispanic immigrants.” This attitude must be exposed from the pulpit for what it is: stubborn, arrogant religiosity.

2. Identify the anointed new leaders. Just as the young David was called from the fields of Jesse and anointed by Samuel to be king, there are many young leaders today who are waiting to be discovered. It may be true that greater numbers of young people today are abandoning the church, but we can be certain

the Holy Spirit has raised up a faithful remnant of young warriors. We must find them, encourage them and give them opportunities to serve. Give them an older church and let them revitalize it!

3. Pass the baton before it's too late. Many churches and denominations today (and even loosely organized charismatic networks) have aging leaders who are clinging to power. Some refuse to give up control simply because they were never trained to find their successors; others hang on because their identity is so tied to their careers. Whatever the reason, younger leaders will go elsewhere if they are not empowered. The New Testament model requires us to train Timothys and put them in place while they are still young.

We are entering a season of revitalization. Don't miss this moment. Churches can experience new life and new growth if we are willing to uncork the new wine of change.

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