



Eric Craft

Jesus shows the way to Christ-centered church renewal

by David Young

The hour was late as my wife, Joan, and I sat with copyeditor Michael Degan to complete details for my third book, *Springs of Living Water, Christ-Centered Church Renewal*. There was one concern. Joan felt the introduction should have a title.

"Introductions never have a title," Michael explained. Nevertheless, by the end of the day, Michael relented. "Okay, what title do you want?" Joan replied, "Jesus shows the way."

Indeed, in the story of the woman at the well in John 4, Jesus shows us the path to renewal both in our personal lives and in the life of the church. Then Michael condensed my long subtitle and put it more succinctly: "Christ-centered church renewal." "That's right," I said. For Christ is at the heart of church renewal. Christ becomes pre-eminent in churches where renewal is seen as an ongoing process of spiritual growth, daily discipleship, and active mission.

The Springs of Living Water effort in church renewal began as Joan and I sensed a deep thirst within the church for revitalization. In my weekly Saturday extended prayer time, I discerned that rather than a rushing geyser, renewal for Brethren would be like a spring bubbling up, refreshingly pure. The image of the woman at the well came to mind. And then the theme: Springs of Living Water. Rather than a program, this is an initiative. This is the good news of the gospel.

In 2 Corinthians 4:16 Paul says, "So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our

inner nature is being renewed day by day." Renewal is not the result of human effort, but rather is a gift from God. It is not just once done, forever done, but a continuous process. Placing ourselves before God, we are renewed with new energy and hope through Jesus Christ. In Springs, we are establishing lifelong patterns of spiritual growth.

How do we discover this kind of new life? After studying John 4, I discovered four dynamics of renewal right in the text: thirst, encounter, transformation, and mission. Identifying them within us and in our church is a beginning point for renewal. Then we pose the central questions: "Where is God leading my life? Where is God leading our church?" God wills new life and invites us to a path of renewal.

The first dynamic from the woman at the well is a major one: thirst. From experience in leading, teaching, and shepherding renewal, we find that renewal begins with the thirst for new life. Even the thirst is given by God. God wants us to find new life on an ongoing basis. Renewal can begin with one person who has a feeling that more is possible. Rather than just hoping for something to happen, they respond to a sense that God is inviting them to more.

Now you might ask, "How can we respond to this first dynamic of renewal?" One way is for a church to become part of a district initiative like in Northern Ohio, where the first Springs initiative began four years ago. We did leadership training events of renewal teams from the churches. Clusters of churches then helped one another in the renewal process.

When I was at my first church—the Bush Creek Church of the Brethren in Mid-Atlantic District—I knew we needed some kind of program that could put everything together. Bethany Seminary created a Doctor of Ministry program in church renewal. In it, the pastor worked in concert with the congregation to arrive at mutually agreed upon goals.

We designed four units of revitalization that meshed academic learning with real-life experience. The outcome had to show measurable progress in the congregation. In Springs, a church becomes immersed in spiritual growth, servant leadership, and a spiritual journey of renewal. Grounded in Bible study, Springs has a Christ-centered theology. Discipleship is the focus. Springs is done collaboratively and is practical for the local setting.

Returning to the woman at the well, along with the thirst, she *encounters* Jesus. Jesus seeks her out at high noon. Knowing she would be ostracized in the evening, she is alone in the heat of the day. Jesus reaches over the barriers and does the unbelievable: He asks her for a drink. He treats her as a child of God, invites her help, and offers her life-giving water, a well within, a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

The common theme in renewal is continuous spiritual growth. Whether pastoring in a church, teaching in seminaries, writing in the field, or working with churches in Springs today, I find that spiritual growth is key. At Bush Creek, back in 1973, growing spiritually was put at the top of the ministry plan discerned by the pastor and church. We started in the work to see what it would mean to have people have a fresh encounter with Jesus daily.

As the renewal work grew, I served as interim pastor at the Hatfield Church of the Brethren. With head deacon Carl Holbert, we concluded that renewal doesn't occur just by holding a commitment service. Rather, renewal would take a season. We began seasonal spiritual disciplines folders with a theme, Sunday services, and a daily scripture to read, meditate on, and follow that day.

Rod O'Donnell, of Green Tree Church of the Brethren in Atlantic Northeast District, where I was interim pastor, says of the folders, "The result was an obvious reawakening of God's presence in our lives. We had people praying who had never taken prayer seriously. Others went into detailed study of the other disciplines. In other words, it gave our congregation a spiritual dimension that it never had before. There were several facets to the initiative that they found particularly effective. First was the personal spiritual growth that strengthened their personal faith."

Rod continues, "There was an emphasis on the spiritual disciplines. As individuals grew

in their faith and spiritual awareness, the obvious result was a stronger congregation. The renewal effort included a series of sermons on the disciplines supplemented with a daily devotional series of readings on the disciplines. A renewal team asked for a commitment from the membership to read scriptures from a disciplines folder and pray daily, and received positive responses from all age groups in the congregation."

When the woman at the well met Jesus, she went through an inner exploration to see who this man Jesus was for her life. As a true servant, Jesus met her as she was, where she was. Transformation began as Jesus asked her for a drink. Imagine her surprise when she discovered that she had something to offer. Transformation happened as she went through questions of the place and meaning of worship. Transformation happened as she discovered Living Water.

Servant leadership arises out of this spiritual orientation. As Brethren, we know that as we have our feet washed and are cleansed in the name of Christ, and we kneel and wash the feet of others. Servants gain the trust of others, and in so doing are called to lead. At the well, Jesus demonstrates being a servant, calls forth the gifts of another, and leads. In Springs, we do leadership training in church renewal first with renewal teams and then, through them, the church.

Congregations go through deep transformation as they discover their strengths, core values, and identity as a church. Rather than attempt to find out what is wrong and fix it, they discover what is right and build upon it. Imagine discovering they have something to offer to others. Imagine drinking deeply of Living Water, gaining new energy, new unity, new focus, new direction and ministries that share the gospel. Imagine—Brethren have something to offer!

In Springs of Living Water, churches go through a series of congregational gatherings established by the renewal team to explore their strengths, and to learn more about who they are and where God is leading them. Spiritual discernment is taught and used throughout the process for decision-making. The purpose of these events is to under-



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stand what God is calling their church to be and to do, and establish and implement focused ministries.

Story after story comes flowing out in these gatherings. I can remember tears coming to the eyes of one man as he saw 270 strengths catalogued at his church. At another church, persons who felt they had nothing in common came up with three core values that were central for everyone. A new unity was shaped. New energy came forth.

In another gathering, churches look at their originating mission. Histories of districts reveal a passion for mission. I have discovered such passion in Southern Plains, West Virginia, Western Pennsylvania, Northern Ohio, Middle Maryland, Virginia, and Michigan districts. Mission boards focused on spreading the gospel. John Kline once said, "I feel like saying to the Brethren everywhere that now is the time to sow the pure seeds of gospel truth in the west. If this be not done, tares will be sure to grow and multiply where the wheat of holy love should abound." To the core, Brethren are mission-minded!

In these gatherings, and through the use of the disciplines folders, a biblical text emerges that churches can relate to their own story. Rather than organizational principles, congregations find biblical dynamics of renewal to guide their paths. People begin to see how these strands tie together and how they can be guided by resurrection hope. The story of the woman at the well and the dynamics of renewal that emerged from it is one such example of a centering text.

One example came in my teaching at the American Baptist Seminary, near Philadelphia. Tommy Jackson, pastor of Calvary, where Martin Luther King, Jr., was student pastor, felt led to look at Jethro's advice to Moses to divide up his load. He divided inner-city Chester into block zones and assigned a deacon to each zone. The deacons followed up on missing people, new people, and people in need. Membership stabilized. Ministries emerged, which led to an overflow in worship.

The transformation of the woman at the well resulted in her heading out in mission. Her cast-off water pot is a symbol of her enthusiasm. She goes to an unusual place—her home town. Why did they receive her? Was her countenance changed? Yes! And so are churches who begin to radiate Christ. Churches that see where God is leading them discern a biblical vision and a plan. Like the woman who goes, they become engaged in their ministries.

Once people discover new life, they influence others. At an inner-city church, one person who had been abusing drugs came back, rededicated his life to Christ, and started relating to others with addictions. An individual who took two years to decide to get involved accepted an assignment teaching a Sunday school class that then tripled in size.




Bob Smith, a chimney sweep who attends Green Tree Church of the Brethren, holds up the 2,000th mini-loaf of bread that their congregation passed out to the community.

One church in an impoverished neighborhood is serving meals and sharing the message of Christ. Another church, which gained new strength through disciplines, handed out 3,000 mini-loaves of bread in their community and shared about Jesus. New people are coming to church out of this effort, and the church is becoming known in the community.

In Springs, a congregation spends the first year and a half building up the church. A renewal team coordinates spiritual disciplines folders and congregational gatherings. Springs sticks with churches another two and a half years, assisting them in implementing ministries and deepening renewal. This establishes life patterns of spiritual growth for individuals and for the church. One pastor remarked that Springs is crock-pot cooking, not microwave cooking.

What has been accomplished to date? Can Brethren be renewed? The answer is a resounding "Yes!" We are grateful for an active advisory committee and a team of 125 persons praying for renewal of the church. There are many active partners at work in districts and churches. While our focus is Brethren, we are now being called to assist other churches turning to the Brethren for help in renewal.

Joan and I stand back and say this is not our doing, this is a result of something much greater. This is of God, and of people in churches in the least likely locations giving their hearts to Christ and laboring to be the church. There is a joy, excitement, and hope as people of faith make new discoveries, shape creative ministries, and share their witness with others. Springs is spiritually focused and servant-led. Yes, Joan is right; Jesus shows the way to renewal! 

David Young is an ordained minister in the Church of the Brethren. He and his wife, Joan, have developed a church renewal initiative called Springs of Living Water! He is the author of numerous articles and four books, including *Springs of Living Water*, *Christ-Centered Church Renewal* (Herald Press, 2008). For more information about Springs of Living Water, visit www.churchrenewalservant.org.