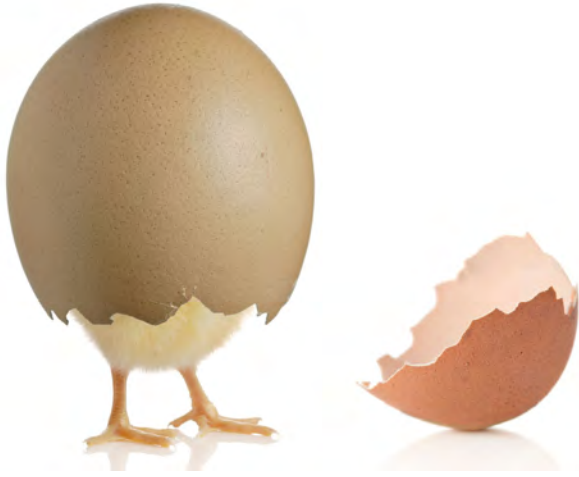


# RENEWAL IN TIMES OF FEAR AND OPPORTUNITY

By David S. Young



David S. Young, pastor, teacher and church renewal servant, describes a practical model of renewal he has developed for congregations in his new book *Springs of Living Water, Christ-Centered Church Renewal* with foreword by Richard Foster. With wife Joan, he leads renewal initiatives in three districts of the Church of the Brethren and assists in churches of other denominations. His web site is [www.churchrenewalservant.org](http://www.churchrenewalservant.org)



In pulpit and pew people are eager for new life in the church. But the question is, “How do we go about renewal?” This question is further impacted by the times in which we live. When fear can dominate and finances dictate, how can the church offer hope and have ministries that speak to critical times, turning fear into opportunities to spread the Good News? Three foundations of church renewal equip us for these times – spiritual disciplines, servant-leadership, and a being a healthy church with an urgent mission.

Let us first ask, “What is renewal?” In 2 Cor. 4:16 Paul spoke of being renewed day by day. Written in the past tense, these words imply God does the renewing. And it is done on an ongoing basis, daily. Renewal is an ongoing process needed by all churches at all times to be vibrant. *Springs of Living Water, Christ-Centered Church Renewal* the book I authored, with foreword by Richard Foster, tells how a church can enter a deeper faith journey, experience new vitality, and enter into its mission.

## *Spiritual Disciplines*

During an interim in renewal in a church north of Philadelphia, I was talking with the lead deacon. We concluded that if we wanted to have our church renewed it was going to take more than a commitment Sunday; it would take a season of renewal. So I drafted a bulletin-like folder with a theme, Sunday services, daily Bible texts, and an insert of spiritual practices like worship, daily Bible reading and prayer and service.

The church board took it a step further. They asked people to mark the insert and indicate their commitment to engage a spiritual discipline and then sign it and place it at the foot of the cross ... on Easter. This church was not known for “walking forward.” How would this happen with visitors present? With the spirit of excitement, I agreed to present this and asked the board to go first. After the Easter message, I explained the board’s invitation. Following the board’s example, nearly everyone came forward.

Amazingly, when the next Sunday came, nearly everyone was back, members and visitors alike! And on the next Sunday, most were back! Then I got an urgent call. “Please come out, Pastor.” I remember standing at the door not knowing what to expect. “Pastor, our life is totally different. We see beauties every day. Our marriage has been enriched. Our lives are totally changed. How can we draw closer to the church?” At that point I realized that we cannot underestimate God’s movement within people and need to provide the tools for their spiritual growth.

Individual and corporate spiritual formation is the foundation for church renewal. If we want the outcome of our efforts to be a growing, vibrant spiritual life, our input needs to be designed that way. In times of fear spiritual disciplines provide inner strength for individuals and congregations and will be the anchor to set the

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tone of hope and give direction for people's lives. Congregations begin to feel like they are on a faith journey.

The book *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster is a primer for people to learn how to practice classic spiritual disciplines. In *Springs of Living Water*, churches use spiritual discipline folders. They learn about spiritual practices in worship, Sunday School, and small groups. They tie spiritual growth to a servant leader style, use spiritual discernment in decision making, and plan spiritual growth as integral to all ministries. Spiritual disciplines are the foundation for the church to be in continuous renewal.

Rod O'Donnell, a steel sales executive, gives this testimony about his church. "The result was an obvious re-

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awakening 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." Rod speaks of how special it was to see his young adults following the spiritual disciplines folders and reading the daily Bible text.

When they are spiritually attuned, churches often find a scripture arises that speaks to them. As in spiritual guidance, where one discovers a text and allows it to guide them, so in renewal congregations discern a text and find in it dynamics of new life and resurrection hope. In my own weekly spiritual retreat I felt led to the text of John 4 with Jesus and the woman at the well for a renewal initiative because of the quiet but effervescent way I have witnessed renewal happen in churches.

In John 4: 1-42, Jesus shows the way to renewal. Plumbing this text, I discovered four dynamics of renewal: thirst, encounter, transformation, and mission. These dynamics make up the four major sections of the book *Springs of Living Water, Christ-Centered Church Renewal* and continue to call us to our focus in renewal. Church-

es have discovered all kinds of texts that speak to them and guide them. In times of fear and uncertainty, a text can speak a powerful message and give hope and direction.

***Servant Leadership***

Coming out seminary I was faced with how to help my first congregation near Frederick, Maryland recover from decline and find new life. I soon realized that leadership was going to be critical for this challenge. How would I tie a spiritual focus with a leadership style in a church where people were discouraged while a growing community was springing up all around? That is the same question we face in this time when fear can dominate and yet opportunity calls. How can the church have a leadership style?

Being in a tradition where servanthood is the paradigm of how transformation takes place, I thought about the ordinance of foot washing. In the two-fold action of the foot tub, after self examination, we first have our feet washed and cleansed by one acting in the name of Christ. In turn, we kneel in the name of Christ and wash the feet of someone else. Spiritual transformation is a foot tub experience.

What if I figuratively took the foot tub with me into the community and knelt before others to understand their needs and provide a listening ear for what they were facing? I carried very little literature and sought not to pressure people, but rather lift them up in some way and encourage them. As newcomers began coming to church, I tried not to see how they could fill our vacancies, but how they could grow in faith.

With long-time members, I tried to provide this same ministry for their lives and provide support when they feared what new people would mean in the church. We tried to see how all people could grow their gifts and we paired new people with members with similar interests. The long term bonds that developed were thrilling to see. Inner unity of a church helps the people face tough times. A church united has great power.

In my first congregation, we were learning the second foundation of church renewal which today we call servant leadership. Deeply rooted in the Spirit, servants understand themselves as vessels and attempt to be active listeners who work among people to help them become a life-giving body. Arising out of the spiritual journey, such

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leadership is forward-looking, active, caring, and practical in working toward mission.

Pastors play a critical role for renewal and are eager to know how to go about it. Spiritual formation and servant leadership merge here. Tommie Jackson was pastor of Calvary Baptist Church which was in decline years after Dr. Martin Luther King was student pastor. In a renewal class at Palmer, the American Baptist Seminary, Tommie said, "It is not that my spiritual life is all that bad, but if I want my church to be renewed, I need to be renewed. I need to go deeper into the Word, deeper in prayer."

Tommie took another step and found Exodus 18:18 where Jethro, his father in law, offered Moses the advice that he should not wear himself out but divide up his load. Tommy did the unthinkable and divided up inner-city Chester into block zones and assigned a deacon to each zone. Deacons would follow-up with members missing in worship to see if a need was present and would follow-up with newcomers as well. Membership stabilized and then grew and grew. A food co-op was established; a Saturday morning Bible study developed; a homeless shelter was founded.

Tommie saw a servant not as servile but as being a servant of Christ and a servant leader for the church. This servant style is exemplified by Christ and is the second foundation for renewal. Being a servant ties the spiritual life with an approach to meet the spiritual and practical needs of people. Servant leaders work in and among

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people, draw forth their gifts and talents, and build bonds of trust. Such leadership is the fulcrum to turn times of fear into creative responses with vital ministries for a church.

### ***A Healthy Church with an Urgent Sense of Mission***

Building on spiritual formation and servant leadership, in renewal a church focuses on being a healthy congregation with an urgent sense of mission. Rather than find out what's wrong and fix it; they find out what is right and build upon it. In the process a church holds a series of congregational gatherings established by a renewal

team. The first gathering is to identify strengths. When they discover them, name them, and build on them, churches discover vitality.

Often after Sunday morning worship, churches have a carry-in meal after which the entire congregation can have table conversations to identify its strengths. These are catalogued in the larger group and a time of celebration follows. Energy goes up! Gatherings become transformational events right before your eyes. Rather than trying to meet every need, a healthy church builds on its God-given strengths.

The process proceeds with six such gatherings which build on one another. They are on spiritual appreciation and how lives are shaped spiritually in the church, learning servant leadership and the life cycle of a church, learning about its originating mission and demographics, discerning core values, congregational identity, a guiding biblical passage, a biblical vision, and a plan. There can be other gatherings on special topics.

Churches report the energy and fun coming out of these occasions. People begin to know one another on a deeper level and talk about things they never talked about before. Deep inner renewal is in the making. Rather than being discouraged, churches become energized and see where God is leading next. Then the church has a session bringing all this together and discerning a crisp vision and steps in a plan.

In the process of renewal, the church then implements the plan over a period of three years. Here is where real transformation continues. The work includes designing ministries, calling and training leadership, establishing mentors, and involving the entire church as an integral part of the effort. One focus often identified and strengthened is youth ministry, but the gamut is wide both within the church and beyond its walls.

The stories are varied and exciting. One church decided to host a month long season of repentance focusing on scriptures and sermons that used the image of clay in the hands of a potter. For one service a potter came who shaped red ware during the entire service. Other examples include a Wednesday family night with meals and classes, and a ministry for children of incarcerated mothers that grew into a state wide effort in Oregon. Such ministries are service and in them everyone grows in faith.

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With new energy another vital interest is reaching out to others, discipling newcomers and inactive members and training persons to be apostles reaching others. The church with the first disciplines folders called a team to greet visitors in worship, and, if desired, sit with them, and help them with the hymnal and Bible. The church saw a need for a basic introduction to the Christian life. Using the Alpha videos with a meal and discussion groups, both newcomers and current members entered in the experience. What lively discussions of faith. What rich prayers were offered! What a ministry!

Under development by Springs of Living Water for these times of uncertainty is a model of a ministry to assist persons and families in times of job loss. Named "Break Bread Daily", from Acts 2:46, this ministry draws on the life of early Christians and has both a spiritual and practical emphasis. Spiritual disciplines would provide

anchors to keep in tune with God. Another component is being reconciled to loss and opening oneself to God's direction. Practicing the discipline of simplicity would be another facet. Persons will learn about practical resources on finding a job that expresses the purpose for one's life. There is also celebration of Eucharist in church and home.

The outcome of ongoing renewal is that Christ becomes central. This is seen in the spiritual formation where a congregation feels they are on an intentional faith journey. It is seen in servant leadership where like Christ a church takes the towel and washes feet. Being Christ-centered is seen in its ministries which speak the Good News of the gospel in an exciting, creative way. In renewal we feel the lift of the vision to which God has called us. Joy is being a vital, growing church. 