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Book Review

Revitalizing the Declining Church: From Death's Door to Community Growth

By Desmond Barrett
Wipf and Stock, 2021
100 pages
US\$19.00, Paperback

Reviewed by: Terry Neumayer. Terry is married, a father of four, a grandfather of eight, and a DMin Student at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA. He has been in the pastorate for over 35 years, serving mainly in the town & country ministry setting.

Revitalizing the Declining Church: From Death's Door to Community Growth by Desmond Barrett is unlike other works on the topic of revitalization. It is a collection of ten stories of turnaround churches that were at "death's door." (Ironically, one of the churches is located just feet from a cemetery). These stories are not about megachurches, nor do they provide a silver bullet to solving the church's problems.

Barrett writes from the vantage of familiarity with the struggling pastor: He understands the wounded pastor's heart and the dissolution of church leaders. He summarized his own story in the Preface. "Sunday after Sunday standing in the tiny foyer before anyone would arrive, I would stare out the double doors towards the church's long driveway crying out in prayer for God to send us a family with children to join the church. Week after week, it seemed no one would come except the same eight members. Was God even

listening?... Each chapter speaks about a church like yours” (p. 73). Indeed, each case is relevant for any pastor of a church that needs revitalization.

Revitalizing the Declining Church: From Death’s Door to Community Growth is a work of encouragement and hope. It is not a system or a program. This compilation of testimonies of God’s faithfulness, the power of prayer, and a need to have a living awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit in pastors and the church is consistent throughout each story.

The stories are from a variety of locations and settings, and are personal to the pastorate, such as when a pastor is tempted to ask, “Lord, did I miss your direction” (p. 73)? Each story will engage the reader to feel relief from their struggles and find hope in God’s care and unique awareness of that situation. Sometimes the struggles involve difficult relationships with leaders in their church; for others, the challenge was an outdated location or building. The church leaders and pastors, together, realized that God has to do the work. Prayer is the key to what will be needed to save the church. Such prayer is not a reciting of words or phrases. Rather, the prayer is initiated from within the pastor by a drawing of the Holy Spirit to come to the aid of their church.

Therefore, the hero is the Holy Spirit, who arrives through the invitation of praying church members. Sometimes it was at a ladies’ meeting on a certain night. Or at a planned group meeting. Other times, it was through the pastor’s prayers. In each story, a prayer focus invites and then surrenders the situation to the Holy Spirit. The diversity of the prayer expressions is insightful and encouraging. “While you cannot control what is happening in society, you can control what happens in your soul. Leading your people in intentional prayer times will re-center the church back on Christ and prepare the way for the future” (p. 73).

The pastor leading a church in need of revitalization can benefit from *Revitalizing the Declining Church* because of its encouraging expressions to endure and to be aware of how God has provided a process and plan for the church’s needs. A pastor of a declining church can be encouraged that there are other churches like his own. There is empowerment in being reminded that God is the hero of the church—not the pastor. God, who hears our prayers, sends the Holy Spirit. God, who has a plan to reach the world, sent His son to present that plan. In this book, a pastor will find new thoughts, ideas, and refreshing insights related to the challenges of the old struggles in his ministry context.

The epilogue provides a direct line of encouragement. Barrett recalls a story from his early pastoral ministry. In his story, he recalls seven words that are still with him. These words sum up the impact this book will have on a disheartened pastor. “Seven simple but profound words, in a thirty-

minute conversation, still impact me years later, and I pray will impact you. You are doing better than you realize” (p. 71).