

RENEWING THE LOCAL CHURCH- A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE



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Session 1: Introduction to Renewing the Local Church

When something is “renewed” it is: made better, changed, strengthened, prepared for a further task. When a conscious decision is made not to renew, this can be a sign of refusal, apathy, or advocating a position of literal downward decline.

As Lutherans, we are a part of a reforming tradition. Through centering alone on the Word of God, Martin Luther set off to renew the Church for God’s mission to be done in the world. Renewal is a vital part of our DNA, although it doesn’t come easy. Sometimes congregations hold onto traditions and strongholds just because “they’ve always done it that way.” But can we truly expect our churches to be revived for discipleship growth if they continually hold onto the past, not relying on God’s transforming power?

Let’s not kid ourselves. Every congregation needs to be constantly renewed for ministry. Being large or small doesn’t make a local church good or bad. Wanting to be renewed is not an indication of being weak or less than. Shouldn’t parishes want to be revived for greater effectiveness in reaching out to our communities with the Good News of Jesus Christ?

There are many examples in Holy Scripture about renewal. **Please read and discuss the following:**

Exodus 18:13-27 – Moses is overwhelmed by his duties of leading God’s chosen people. His father-in-law, Jethro, provides Moses with some sound advice. How did this renew the situation?

II Kings 22:3-13, 23:1-20 – During the reign of King Josiah in Jerusalem, God's temple was going through a building renovation. And during this project the Book of the Law was found behind some walls. When Josiah read it, he realized that Israel had turned its back on the Lord and was chasing and worshiping false gods. What actions did Josiah take to renew the religious practices of the people, and regain a relationship with the Almighty God?

Jonah 3:1-10 – When the reluctant prophet Jonah was called by God to go to the heinous Assyrians to share the Lord's message of repentance, things happened. How do you see renewal in this encounter?

Nehemiah 8:1-12 – Nehemiah and the priest Ezra were allowed by King Cyrus of Persia to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city from exile. One of the most important things they did was gather the people together and read from God's Word, the Law. How do you think this brought renewal to the community?

John 16:12-15 – Jesus promised the disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit to guide the Church to the Truth. How does the Holy Spirit aid in the renewal of the Body of Christ today?

I Corinthians 3:1:11 – The Corinthian Church was marred with division, sexual immorality and a lack of biblical authority. The Apostle Paul makes it clear that the church is centered on the foundation of Christ. What characteristics of church renewal do you see in this Scripture?

Concluding Thoughts and Reflections

While there will always be naysayers to the renewal of the church, they are wrong. Christ wants His Church to be continually renewed so the Word can be shared, and disciples made. The Word shows us that the Spirit can and continues to revive the Body of Christ. Are you open to the possibilities?

Session 2: Dealing with the Negativity

Why doesn't our church grow?

Why are we unable to do outreach in the community?

Why do people neglect to worship or want to study God's Word?

There are many reasons for congregational apathy and decline. Culture, individualism, busyness, lack of belief, isolationism, or hurt caused by the church are just a few. But there are other factors such as: anger, blame, control, unforgiveness and pessimism which can easily cause division and negativity in Christ's Church. Obviously, Satan does not want the Body of Christ to grow — making Jesus known to the world.

When conflict and acrimony spread over the local congregation, it will be difficult for mission and ministry to be center-stage and fruitful.

Conflict has been a part of the church since its inception. In the Gospels, the disciples were fighting with one another because some wanted to be greatest in the kingdom of God. In Acts, there was anger because the widows were not being properly taken care of. In 1 Corinthians, there was division in the church, as people were following human leaders instead of Christ. And in the letters of John, the false teaching of docetism (the belief that Jesus was only resurrected from the dead as a spirit or ghost and not in His physical form) brought conflict to the local congregation.

Conflict and discord are real.

Please read James 4:1-10. What is the source of quarreling and divisiveness?

In the church, we sometimes have a tendency of avoiding conflict or conflict resolution. It's easy to avoid issues, believing that they will miraculously go away. But that is not the case. If not dealt with in a healthy manner, the issues will continue to seethe and disrupt. Satan likes nothing more than creating havoc and frustration in the church. Clearly, for renewal to take place, the darkness must be exposed and brought into the light.

Please read and discuss the following texts:

Matthew 18:15-17

Galatians 6:1-5

II Timothy 2:24-26

Biblically, we are being called to approach other believers about their behavior if it is detrimental to themselves and the life of the church. We should always work toward confession, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Please read and discuss the following texts:

I John 1:8-10

II Corinthians 5:17-21

Matthew 5:23-26

Matthew 6:14-15

Matthew 18:21-25

Trying to deal with disruption in the Body of Christ is not an easy task. There is inevitable hurt. But left unfettered, disruption will bring unhealthiness within the church. If believers choose not to follow the biblical mandate of reconciliation and church discipline, then it is a sad testament to people's understanding of Christian unity. If they choose to walk away because of their inability to control things any longer, will this adversely affect the congregation or help it?

Session 3: Discipleship is Everything

Renewal in the local church can only occur when it is centered in the discipleship of Christ alone. When we grow in Jesus through the Word, prayer, worship, witness and service, Jesus will come alive for us as we strive to make other disciples for the Lord. Simply put, a disciple is a pupil, a learner, someone who imitates the Master.

In Matthew 28:19-20 it is written, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you always, to the end of the age” (ESV).

When a congregation is rooted in making disciples, its work and perspective changes. Making disciples becomes the main mission of the church rather than focusing on “business as usual.” What does “discipleship making” look like?

Growing in the Word

In Luke 21:33 it is written, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (ESV). God’s Word is everything! It confronts, convicts, converts, cares and calls us to commitment. Christ is the Word made flesh. As we read, study and memorize the Holy Scriptures, they will draw us closer to Jesus, as the Lord will be made more real to us.

Please read and discuss the following texts about the importance of God’s Word:

• Deuteronomy 6:4-9

• Isaiah 55:10-11

• John 8:31-34

• II Timothy 3:16-17

• Hebrews 4:12

How do you think that your congregation can provide opportunities to better teach the Word of God to others?

Growing in Prayer

In Philippians 4:6 it says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your regrets be made known to God” (ESV). Whether we do it through words or listening, praying in Jesus’ name connects us with the living God. It is in prayer that we experience the Lord’s presence, strength, healing and deliverance.

Please read and discuss the following texts about prayer:

Romans 8:26-27

I Timothy 2:1-4

James 5:13-18

Luke 11:1-13

I John 5:14-15

How can we teach and model prayer in our own congregations?

Session 4: Discipleship Is Everything Part 2

As we shared in the previous session, renewal in the local congregation can only occur when it is centered in the discipleship of Christ alone. Focusing on the Word and prayer in session three, we now turn to worship, witness and service.

Growing in Worship

In Hebrews 10:24-25 it is written, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (ESV). Worship is the cornerstone of our spiritual lives. As we worship, there is surrender to the Almighty, a sacrificial offering, and an outward expression of our love for Jesus. Unfortunately, worship attendance has been declining in many churches.

Whether it's lack of interest, weekend sports, disagreement with worship styles/times, or irrelevancy, individuals are finding ways not to attend corporate worship. How do you think this can be changed? How can you increase worship participation in your own congregation?

Please read and discuss the following texts about worship:

Romans 12:1-2

Colossians 3:14-17

Psalm 93: 1-6

John 4:23-24

Growing in Witness

In Acts 1:8, right before Jesus ascends into heaven, these are the words that the Lord leaves to His disciples and the Church; “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witness in Jerusalem, and in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (ESV). We are being compelled to make Jesus known to our friends, relatives, associates and neighbors. This includes being led to build relationships, and freely sharing our faith stories of how Christ has transformed our own lives.

Please read and discuss the following texts:

Matthew 5:15-16

Luke 10:1-12

John 4:31-38

I Peter 3:15

How is your church presently “reaching out” into the community? What has been the effectiveness of your efforts? Do people know you?

How can we train others to share their faith in Jesus?

Growing in Service

In Mark 10:45 it says, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (ESV). As Christ gave His life so we could have life, we are being called to serve in Jesus’ name both within and outside of the Body of Christ.

Please read and discuss the following texts about serving:

Matthew 25:31-46

John 13:1-20, 31-35

Philippians 2:1-11

I Peter 4:10-11

What are some ways that people in your congregation are already serving?

What are some real needs in your local community? How can the Church help to meet those needs with ministry?

How is the Church being “permission giving?” How are we encouraging fellow brothers and sisters to serve in Jesus name?

Session 5: Empowering and Equipping

"If we only had, then we could be."

That is the attitude of some churches. They fervently believe that if the local parish had certain things like staff, money and other resources, that they would be a thriving congregation. For example, if we hire a youth director children, teens and young families will automatically flock into our community. While this may make sense to a few, it's not always the right direction to travel.

Rather than the church lamenting on what they don't possess, maybe we can start to focus on what we already have, what God has blessed us with to do ministry in His name. Honestly, the congregation can't be all things to all people and that's okay. If a church is going to renew, then it needs to focus on the assets and gifts that are already present to share Jesus and make disciples.

What are the assets/gifts which the Spirit has provided your congregation (i.e. aging, children, building, monetary, etc.)? How can they be used?

One of the greatest assets that God provides missions are the people. If members of the Body can be equipped and empowered to do ministry in Jesus' name, just imagine how a church can be changed and transformed. A congregation cannot be centered on the charisma or personality of the pastor alone. It will only grow so far. But when all of God's people, in the midst of their vocations (careers, relationships, associations, etc.) can be equipped and empowered to use their gifts to live out their faith in everyday life, then the church will truly grow in spirit and discipleship.

In Ephesians 4:11-12 we're told that it's the responsibility of church leadership to equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the Body of Christ.

Please read and discuss the following Scriptures about equipping and empowering:

John 15:1-5

Ephesians 2:8-10

Hebrews 13: 20-21

I Peter 2:9-10

As a congregation grows deeper in the Word, prayer, witness and service, their confidence will increase to reach out and disciple others. Yes, we are sinful, broken and consumed by the flesh. But the Holy Spirit can still use each one of us to make Jesus known. Isn't that why we've been placed on this earth?

Session 6: It Takes Time

Renewing a church takes time. It's not just quickly flicking a switch, assuming something will happen. We must begin by building the foundation, and other things will be added to ensure spiritual, generational change within the congregation. It's like putting together a puzzle. In a puzzle each small piece has significance because when connected, they allow the picture to be formed.

In the renewal process, each element is like a puzzle piece. Focusing on the Word, prayer, witness, serving and equipping will help form the picture of a discipling church. Obviously, this will not be a quick task. But we need to start somewhere.

When we embark on church renewal and turn around, it will feel like we are taking one step forward and three steps backward. Don't give up! Please do not lose heart or become discouraged. When this endeavor is focused upon Jesus things will start moving. Clearly, we have a God who wants to make all things new. In Acts 5:33-39, we're told about a man named Gamaliel. He was a Pharisee who convinced the group not to kill Peter and John who were witnessing Jesus at the temple. These were his words in verses 38-39, "So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God" (ESV). When we move forward to renew the Church in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, this is of God!

Please read and discuss the following passages:

Ezekiel 37:1-10

Matthew 6:33

II Corinthians 5:17

Ephesians 4:22-24

Colossians 3:9-10

Conclusion

Looking back over your notes and discussions from this series, as you embark on this journey of renewal, what are the first steps that you will take – individually and as a congregation?

What roadblocks do you perceive, and who can hold you accountable to take the first steps?

What plans are in place for the longer journey? Or who can you connect with (for example the church council or leadership team) to learn more and partner with?

For additional resources on this topic, please visit: thenalc.org/missionresources or connect with the author of this study, the Rev. Brad Hales (bhales@thenalc.org).