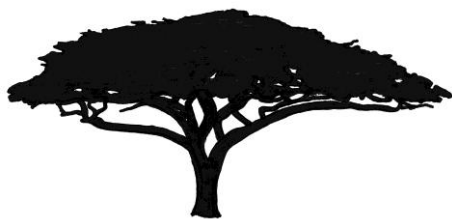


*A Vision
Renewal
Resource*

New Life in the Church



in the
Church

CRAIG C. KRAFT

Published by:



OC Africa
One Challenge. Reaching the world together.

Johannesburg, South Africa

Printed in South Africa

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VISION RENEWAL is a manual that will guide a church through 32 weeks of renewal. The manual follows a week by week approach and can be used to lead you through the four stages of Vision Renewal. For more information see www.outreach.ca

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Appreciation

This project could have never been completed without the help of a lot of special people. I would like to begin by thanking my wife Heather and my four boys, Matthew, Jonathan, Joel and Andrew. Thank you for following me all the way to Africa and for granting me the time and space to complete this project. I love you guys.

I also owe a lot of gratitude to my ministry partners. My teammates at Outreach Canada and OC Africa have been a tremendous support, encouragement and inspiration. Special recognition is deserved by John and Heather for their assistance with research and editing. And this would just be a pile of papers without Ria's outstanding help with editing and layout.

I owe most of what I know about church health to two very special men, my father Dr. Gerald Kraft and my mentor and teammate, Rev. Glen Gibson. Thank you for sharing your knowledge and experiences with me.

This book is dedicated to Glen Gibson. Glen's commitment to planting healthy churches has had been the foundation of Outreach Canada's Church Health and Revitalization Department. He is an outstanding pastor, master coach, gifted teacher, and wonderful friend. My prayers are with you, buddy, as you fight your battle for life. God is in control!

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Foreword

The past nineteen years of ministry have taught me many lessons. One of those lessons is that people learn better through stories and illustrations than just through lists of facts or numbered points. Therein lies a great challenge for many learners as most of the books and tools that we read about how to help our churches grow or become healthier are usually based on a list of observations and discoveries that are carefully expressed and articulated through the text. Many people are able to read those books and assimilate the information and apply it in their own settings. However, there are many people who struggle to remember all that they have read unless the book sits open on their desk. Consequently we do not always apply what we have read in a book.

We all remember stories, but with the long oral tradition of Africa, I have found that many times when I am asked to speak, most of the comments and questions I receive are in relation to the stories I tell. As I am learning more about the value of a good story, I decided that it was now time for a church health resource to be written in the form of a story, and so the concept for this book was born. This story is about a fictional church and pastor and their struggle to overcome the shackles of stagnation. This church, which I have chosen to call “New Life Church”, represents a conglomeration of many churches that I have worked with over the past several years as a pastor and church health coach.¹ It is the story of a church that has seen exciting times as a new church plant but

¹ Craig has been a Church Health Coach with Outreach Canada and OC Africa for five years. Most of the content in this book has been developed in that context or is used with permission from their Vision Renewal resources.

has also felt discouraged when their growth curve seemed to plateau or shift into decline. It is a situation that most of our churches have faced at one time or another. Those churches that have learned to call upon the Lord for direction and to renew their vision, usually break the gravitational pull of decline and find new ways of engaging the needs of society with the transforming message of Jesus and his love.

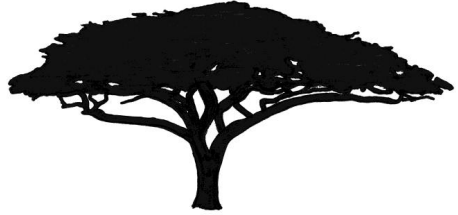
The first part of this book tells the story of Pastor John and his struggles in New Life Church. You will experience the feelings of this pastor and his wife as they carry the responsibility for a church in decline. Their situation might seem hopeless until John finds help in Eric. Eric is a slightly older and more experienced pastor who has also experienced many of the knocks that accompany a lifetime of ministry. Eric will develop a coaching relationship with John and help this church to break out of their current slump and to once again become healthy and reproductive as they follow a process of Vision Renewal.

The second section of the book is for those who would rather skip the story and see the main points. In this section I will provide an overview of the principles of Vision Renewal and how you may follow these principles to revitalize the vision and ministry in your church. I have also included samples of all the work that was done in New Life Church. These samples are here for you to see how this church was able to move from point “A” to point “B”.

I hope that you will find this book to be both entertaining and educational.

On the Path with Christ

Craig



in the
Church

Section 1

Chapter 1

Just another Sunday

It was just another ordinary Sunday afternoon, or was it? Pastor John was tired. It had been a busy week with work, counseling, a funeral for one of the young fathers in the congregation, prayer meeting, and of course the Sunday morning sermon. John was always tired on Sunday afternoon, and it felt so good to sit back and relax. A cup of tea and an appointment with the sports channel on T.V. would suit him just fine on this warm afternoon.

It seemed like the whole week built up toward that one big event on Sunday morning. The worship team would want to know in advance what he was preaching on, someone would have to make sure that the hall was clean and that the sound equipment and the chairs were set up in time for the service, ushers had to be confirmed, and a program had to be printed. Now that the church had purchased a digital projector, there was the added expectation that Pastor John would at least have an outline of his sermon available as a PowerPoint presentation for people to follow from the new screen that hung on the front wall of the little hall that served as a sanctuary for Sunday morning worshipers.

*Dear Children, let us not
love with words or
tongue but with actions
and in truth.
1 John 3:18 NIV*

It was no wonder that John was tired, the constant demand for his time and the strain of trying to provide for the needs of his family while

shepherding the flock that looked to him as their pastor was more work than one man could handle. The thought of having an assistant pastor had entered his mind on many occasions, but how could the church ever afford to hire an assistant when they could barely afford the small salary that they were paying him? He knew that there was no help coming and so he had tried to focus his attention on the things that he could do well. Preaching the Word of God was what had drawn him into pastoral ministry ten years ago and it was still the part of his calling that brought John the most joy. There was nothing to compare with the knowledge that the Holy Spirit is working in you and speaking through you on Sunday morning as you expound the truth of God's word and find creative ways to apply it to the needs of your congregation. John knew that feeling well. He was a great preacher. At least that's what people would tell him as they filed out the door and greeted him each Sunday at the end of the service. He loved being their preacher, and for the most part, they loved having him as their pastor.

Being the pastor of New Life Church had not always been what John had dreamed. He and Lynn had first planted the church with a handful of friends who wanted to see a new church, in their neighbourhood of Blindale, that would teach the Bible and bring about change in the community through the presence of Jesus Christ. Their founding vision was to "Love one another as Christ has loved us." They believed that the answer to the problems in their community would be found as they reached out to one another in love and allowed the love of God to flow through them into their neighbors. They had heard of it happening in other neighbourhoods. A new church would be planted, the people were committed to loving God and loving one another, and as the love began to spread, crime would slowly recede, people seemed happier, neighbourhoods became cleaner, and people started looking out for their neighbors instead of only looking out for themselves. These new churches seemed to be bringing about the kind of transformation that these communities needed. However, starting from scratch in their

neighbourhood proved to be a much greater challenge than John had anticipated.

The initial resistance came as people doubted that Pastor John and his start up team were really in it for the good of the community. Certainly there must be something in it for them, the residents would speculate. They had seen it before; a new preacher would arrive in town and start a church or ministry. He would make all sorts of promises to the people, offering healing and prosperity, but in the end it was only the pastor who prospered.

Gradually over time they began to see the authenticity of Pastor John and his desire to see the community grow and change. The early growth was slow, as people were curious about this new church but not ready to make the sacrifice and commitment that John would preach about on Sundays. This Christianity that he was preaching wasn't just a set of religious rules and privileges, but it was a relationship with God through his Son Jesus Christ. John loved to preach the gospel and share with people how they could know the God who made them and who had a plan for their lives. He would tell how even though we all begin life separated from God and that by our actions and decisions we continue to distance ourselves from our creator. But God cares so much about each of us that He sacrificed his only son to die on a cross to pay the penalty for our sin so that we can once again have a close relationship with him. This new relationship with God brings with it great blessings and privilege along with the responsibility to live for God and to allow His love to permeate us and flow through us into the world where we live.

John had seen the message of the Gospel change lives. Families were brought back together. Young people developed a new sense of respect for their families and the authorities in their lives. People had a renewed sense of hope and purpose in life. God's love was putting a new sparkle in their eyes and the love was contagious. After a few years it seemed like they were seeing new people and families joining the church almost every

week. The church quickly grew out of Pastor John's living room, then his car-port and for a while they would meet in his yard, even spilling out onto the sidewalk in front of his home. Their continued growth required that they find a larger place to hold their services. That is when they signed a lease to secure the use of the local community hall. It was great to have room to stretch and room to grow, but suddenly Pastor John's job description grew from preaching, teaching, and visitation, to include set-up and take-down for Sunday services, more community counseling, regular office hours, and a growing number of requests to conduct weddings and funerals in the community. John remembers thinking that at this rate; they would grow out of the community hall in a couple of years. It was optimistic, but God really seemed to be at work in this little church, and when God's hand is in it, the sky is the limit.

Now in their fifth year at the hall, it seemed sometimes that their best days were behind them. John could remember those early days in the new hall when they would struggle from week to week to make sure that there would be enough chairs to accommodate all of the regulars as well as the visitors who would be anticipated. It was nice not having to worry about such things now. It seemed that these days their biggest concern was making sure that there would be enough volunteers available to keep up with the needs of ushering, Sunday school teachers, nursery workers, and set up crews for Sunday mornings. In fact, twice in the last three months pastor John was the only one who showed up early to set up chairs for the morning service. It was no wonder that John always felt tired by the time he had made it to Sunday afternoon. This was the only time that he could put up his feet and relax without feeling the pressure of trying to be ready for the next Sunday service.

As John put up his feet and took the first sip from his cup of tea, he settled in to the soothing down time of Sunday afternoon. Breaking the brief silence, he heard the familiar ringtone of his cell phone. It was one of those unique ring tones that would always capture everyone's attention. John had not set the ringtone himself, but it had been the handiwork of his

fifteen year old son, Ben. Ben had set the new tone on the phone one evening as his dad was leaving for a meeting with the leadership team from the church. Ben couldn't wait to interrupt his dad in the middle of the meeting with the new ring tone. Just as Ben had expected, it took several rings before his dad realized that it was his phone ringing and he sounded a bit embarrassed when he finally answered the call to hear Ben say, "Hey dad, I just wanted to tell you that I changed the ring tone on your phone". Now, every time the phone rang it brought back warm memories of that Father-Son moment. In their busy lives when it seemed they saw less and less of each other, John was in no hurry to change Ben's ringtone.

The phone rang again and John pulled it from his shirt pocket. Looking at the display he recognized Ray's number. Ray was one of the church elders. John had to take the call. "Pastor, did you notice that Nelson and Eleanor were not at church today?" the elder asked. Then he continued, "This is the third week that they have been away, and this is the fifth family that seems to be slipping through the cracks this year. Pastor, I am starting to worry about our church. There just doesn't seem to be the same kind of life in it that we used to have. We don't have as many visitors as we used to and of the people who do come to visit our services, very few of them are coming back for more. Pastor, I think that we have a problem. Do you think that I should call a meeting with the other elders?" John let the question linger in his mind for a few seconds. This was not the first time that someone had suggested such a trend in the church. In fact, it was just last night that he had discussed such an idea with his wife as they were getting ready for bed. Had the church lost its momentum? Was there something missing in what they were doing? Was it something that he had done or said, or maybe something that he wasn't doing? Were other people thinking the same thing? Were people thinking that it was his fault? What would the elders say if they got together to analyze the situation, would it quickly turn into a performance review of him as their pastor?

A myriad of questions flashed through his mind as he responded to the elder at the other end of the phone connection. "Yes, perhaps we should

get together this week; Thursday evening at seven o'clock would be good for me ..." "Right, I will call the others and we will see you at the church office at seven on Thursday evening. Thanks Pastor," replied the voice on the line.

He paused and held the phone deftly to his ear for a moment. "What is happening? What am I going to do? How can I prepare for Thursday's meeting?" John tucked the phone back into his shirt pocket and returned to his cup of tea, but it didn't taste the same. Somehow the comfort of the moment was lost in a conversation that lasted little more than a minute.

Lynn entered the living room.

"What was that about?" she asked.

Ray placed the telephone receiver back in the cradle. "That went well," he thought to himself. He had wanted to talk to Pastor John about the condition of the church for weeks but he could never muster up enough courage to make the call. It was easy to discuss the problems of the church over a cup of coffee with another elder, and he had been through this very conversation a dozen times with his wife.

"Why was it so hard to pick up the phone and talk to Pastor John and share what he, and others, were beginning to feel about the lack of progress and growth at New Life Church? Everyone could see that the church had stalled in its growth and that they would fall short of their year-end projections both numerically and financially. Surely Pastor John must be able to see that?" Ray thought to himself. The meeting was set and now they would be able to get the issues on the table.

Ray and Cilla had started attending New Life Church soon after John had started holding services in his home. Having grown up in church families, Ray and Cilla were familiar with the religious routine of dressing

up on Sunday morning and heading to church. After some praise and worship and the usual offering, they would endure the sermon and try to listen for something that was relevant to their lives. That had been their experience with church, and nothing seemed to change after they began their married life together ... until they met Pastor John.

Ray could still remember the reluctance that he felt that first Sunday when they responded to the invitation to visit the new church that was located just a couple blocks from their home. He could remember thinking that since the church was close to home; he could get home quickly after the service and wouldn't miss much of the football game. But what Ray and Cilla discovered that first Sunday was more than they expected. The music and worship was satisfactory, but what surprised them was the preaching. Pastor John didn't use a lot of big words and what he had to say was practical. The pastor spoke about how we never have to face our fears or challenges alone. That God loves us so much that he offers to ride out the storms of life with us. God had shown us that love by sending His son Jesus to die on the cross for us. God continues to "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" with those who accept Him through the presence of His Holy Spirit. If we accept Christ as our savior, we will never be alone.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 8:35-39

Those were the words that Ray needed to hear. After several years of marriage, Ray and Cilla were beginning to believe that they would never be

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