

# RENEWAL

CHURCH REVITALISATION  
ALONG THE WAY OF THE CROSS

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JOHN JAMES

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# INTRODUCTION

At the front of our church building, by the pavement, is a flowerbed. I can call it a flowerbed now, but when we arrived it grew only brambles. It was a bramble-bed. Occasionally, during a tidy-up day the thorns would be hacked back in order to avoid a public health emergency. The soil was thin, dusty and anaemic. And it was at the bottom of my list of priorities.

By the grace of God, a few years ago, we had the privilege of baptising a retired couple with green fingers. They quietly began to take responsibility for the grounds around our building. Our crisis management was replaced by their careful nurture. With triflids uprooted, branches pruned, loam worked and blades clipped, the hostile horticulture was led into flourishing new life.

I had written off the bed, but they got to work. They cleared the brambles, digging up the whole root system. They added organic matter to the dusty soil. They discovered hidden plants that were being choked. They planted beautiful flowers. They laboured tirelessly, patiently, and consistently. The result is incredible.

A few weeks ago we conducted the first wedding in our building for many years. A young local couple with school-age children both became Christians. They were now taking an important step of obedience, honouring God in their relationship. Marvelling at the way Jesus had transformed this family, I glanced at the

flowerbed. This is what God does. He works tirelessly, patiently, and consistently in our lives: digging up weeds, enriching soil, sowing the seed of his word, and growing us into the likeness of his Son. He delights to do it with us, and with his church. It is painful and messy, but it is real and glorious.

Crossway Church in Northfield, Birmingham is one of God's flowerbeds. He has tended it since 1937, but in 2009 it was looking dilapidated. There were around 14 active members left, and the one remaining elder was prayerfully considering how to wind things down over the next two years. I had preached there a handful of times, but my wife, Sarah, knew the church well. She had attended the Sunday school, and her parents were still members.

We were entering our final year at theological college, had a passion for the city of Birmingham, and for church planting. But we couldn't help thinking about Helier Chapel, as it was then known. The church family had a clear love for Jesus, his word, and their community. The context was strategic, with a great building in the heart of a needy community. At the time there was no other obvious gospel witness in the area. So the conversations began, and the church called us to a work of revitalisation. We arrived in September 2010 with a small core team of eight to get started.

No one is more surprised than me that this book has come out of that. It began as a series of short reflections, designed for a website, that quickly got out of hand. It isn't intended to be an authoritative manifesto or definitive how-to manual. But I have tried to write a book I would have appreciated back in 2010 as we set out on our journey. It is not an argument for a particular church polity, leadership style, theological vision or missiological approach. However, I hope it will be obvious that certain

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convictions about church, leadership, theology and mission underpin the approach we have taken. I have drawn heavily on the story of Crossway Church, but a number of case studies from other churches provide a wider perspective.

The purpose of the book is simple:

*To make the case for revitalisation as a God-honouring, achievable and strategic means of church planting that has a vital role to play in the re-evangelisation of our nation.*

This is my conviction, and what we have found. My prayer is that this slim volume will be a blessing to those who read it. May it envision struggling churches wondering what the future holds. May it encourage larger churches uncertain of the strategic benefits of partnership with struggling churches. May it challenge individuals considering embarking on this journey. May it instruct leadership teams beginning those first tentative steps of change. May it bless you, wherever you are on this journey.



## CHAPTER 1:

# THE WAKE-UP CALL

*'In our culture Christianity is a bit like a bad dream, the details of which you cannot quite remember, but which has left you with a sense of unease that you want to be rid of.'*<sup>1</sup>

The spiritual climate in the UK was recently brought home starkly to me. I received a phone call from an Iranian lady who got my number from the church notice board. She had been reading the New Testament, had become convinced that Jesus was God, and wanted someone to confirm her suspicions for her. We talked together at length and her grasp of the gospel was breath-taking. All I did was show her, from the Scriptures she had already read, the truth of the conclusions she had already reached. It was an immense privilege.

I put down the phone, and went to see a young couple who had asked for a visit. They are born-and-bred Brummies, living on our estate, just a few doors down from our church building. They talked about a very serious life event they had been going



through, and I began to tell them about Jesus. It was clear that they had never heard the gospel before. I shared the good news as best I could, and they both sat on the edge of the sofa, hanging on every word, jaws literally dropping.

It was a good day to be a church pastor, but it was also a wake-up call. This young couple had lived their whole lives in a supposedly 'Christian country' but had only ever heard the name of Jesus as a swearword, whilst the Iranian lady had grown up in an Islamic republic but had grasped the central aim of the gospel writers more deeply than some preachers I have heard.

Writing about the religiously unaffiliated in the United States, James Emery White speaks of a 'seismic shift in outreach that few church leaders are understanding.'<sup>2</sup> Evangelist Rico Tice detects a similar earthquake that has taken place in the UK over the last 70 years.

He explains that in 1954 Billy Graham packed out stadiums night after night. He preached the gospel and many became Christians because the basics were already in place. By 1994 there were barriers. Christianity was 'weird, untrue and irrelevant', and longer evangelistic courses like Alpha or Christianity Explored were needed to give the gospel a hearing. But today, 'we're such a long way from biblical Christianity that people don't object to faith having engaged with it; they simply dismiss it. Jesus simply isn't on the agenda; he isn't even an option to be considered.'<sup>3</sup> Our culture has changed. It is time we got real.

Our inability to wake up and smell the coffee is having an inevitable impact on the church. According to Al Mohler, in the US 4,000 congregations close their doors every year, while only 1,000 evangelical churches are planted.<sup>4</sup> That may sound terminal,

but Mohler uses the UK as a warning of the future. I am not sure this is an area in which we should be proud of leading the way. Between 2008 and 2013, 2,071 churches closed in the UK. In that same period 1,224 were planted.<sup>5</sup> The alarm should be ringing. However, desperate to remain positive, we keep on hitting the snooze button.

First, in order to avoid the wake-up call, we find ways to inflate or hype church planting statistics. Church planting is vital and encouraging, but it can also be over-reported. I have noticed for example, that sometimes 'Fresh Expressions', the Church of England and Methodist initiative that encourages new ways of being church, is included wholesale in the statistics. When the 1,780 Fresh Expressions congregations are added to the church planting figure, it gives a perception of overall growth. Fresh Expressions is a creative initiative helping many face seriously the challenges of reaching our culture with the gospel, but simply adding the figures to the church planting statistics is unhelpful. 75% of Fresh Expressions groups are messy church groups. Almost half Fresh Expressions groups meet once a month, and half meet during the week. Most are not newly established, independent congregations, but part of the outreach of existing churches.

Secondly, in order to avoid the wake-up call, we fail to properly acknowledge where much of the growth is coming from. For example, a large number of migrant Christians have moved into the UK, joined or planted churches. They are doing an important job of slowing decline and strengthening witness. It is wonderful to see such ethnically diverse congregations emerge, but let us not pretend that this is growth because we