

Church Revitalisation Talk 1

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Date: 02 December 2016

[0 : 00] Brilliant, thank you very much for that introduction. It's a pleasure to be here in Stormy. Someone said in the way that we're over 200 at the WFM meeting in here, so maybe I'll come back and speak at the WFM and see if we can get more folk in. It's great to be here. I'm unplugged tonight, we're not using technology. I do have a PowerPoint prepared and if you want it I'll send an email to you, but tonight I just wasn't in the mood for PowerPoint and I just thought it would slow me down. Apparently the trendy way to communicate these days is just to stand in front of people and to talk. Apparently that's cutting edge in the communication business. Well again, thanks for inviting me to talk about this subject of revitalisation. Although we're in a free church context, what we're going to be talking about is transferable right across the whole church spectrum. Now if you had asked maybe 25, 30 years ago for someone to come to speak to a free church audience or indeed any church audience in the Western Isles of revitalisation, they would have perhaps laughed. Well, I think they would have been too polite to have laughed, but they would have said, well why are you talking to us about revitalisation? The area of the UK with probably the highest per capita church attendance and the strongest church in the whole of the United

Kingdom. Why on earth are you talking to us about revitalisation? And indeed, 30 years ago in the free church, we only had one subsidised congregation in the Western Isles. That was the congregation of Bernara, which has since closed down. Everything else was really going well. Everything else was certainly financially on top of the world. So we're talking about revitalisation, but first of all I want to sketch in a little bit specifically to the Western Isles. There's a lot of things going on and I'll touch on them. I'm going to talk first of all about the general background. There's a change in the demographics in the Western Isles. And indeed two weeks ago the council called what they called a crisis seminar. And the crisis seminar was on the population crash that's expected in the Western Isles. Last year apparently in the Western Isles there were only 222 births recorded and that was very, very low. And this year so far there has just been 190 births recorded in the whole of the Western Isles. And there's reckoned to be a 28% decline in the age group 0 to 15. And so you can look out and the population is going down and the population is getting older. Increased number of older people decreasing number of younger people.

And the whole demographic is changing. Not only is the population smaller than it used to be, nor only is it older than it used to be, it is far more diverse. So you've got what are sometimes people that are going to say. And they are dominating many villages. Just to give you a little hint of what's coming out. So what? You know, people are people. And maybe it is good for us in the church to minister to people of different ethnicities and we don't really speak the way we speak.

So there's that going on. There's all these interesting things in the background. In terms of the Free Church of Scotland, we've done some really in-depth statistical analysis.

[4 : 04] And 28% of members of the Free Church are over the age of 70. Now that's quite a high number, 28%. If you like stats, 36% are aged between 55 and 69. So the weight of the membership is towards older people. And I know that you eat incredibly healthy stuff over here. But, you know, everyone will die. And statistically, someone over 70, this is a real encouraging night tonight, will die off within the next 20 years. And so that's the stark reality of the situation. 10% of the members, only 10%, are aged between 16 and 34, the so-called millennials. So you're very heavy on baby boomers, very low on millennials. And that, of course, is reflected right over the church. But we are talking about revitalisation. The first thing I want to say is that I hope that we have what I call a revitalisation mentality. I think Neil Macmillan is going to talk a little bit about church planting, because he always does. Every congregation has got a church planting mentality. In other words, no matter how old a congregation is, it still has to have that mentality, that mindset of a new-born congregation. And so it's always got to be thinking about rebirth. So just as there's a church planting mentality in every congregation, so we've got to have a revitalisation mentality. Mindset is so important. Tomorrow I'll be talking about developing an evangelistic culture within a congregation.

The famous management guy called

Peter Drucker is famous worldwide, and he's got a very wise statement that culture eats strategy for breakfast. In other words, you can have all the strategies you like, but if the culture of your congregation is wrong, then you will make absolutely no headway. And we'll talk a little bit more about culture tomorrow. So we've got to have a revitalisation mentality. And, you know, church planting and revitalisation don't share an exact skill set, but if we, in our denomination, if we are looking for a revitaliser, if we are looking at new ministers, and we've started to assess ministers more than we used to, we reckon that a revitaliser requires about 80% of the gifts of a church planter. So they also have to be entrepreneurial. They also have to be outgoing. They also have to have this kind of thinking outside their natural box, but inside a biblical box, to get the churches going.

Another thing I'd say, by way of introduction, revitalisation is a thing. It is a real thing. In the Bible, I'm looking here, my Bible is open at Acts 15.36. And Acts 15.36 simply says, After some days, Paul said to Barnabas, let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaim the word of the Lord and see how they are. Acts 15 again in verse 41. And he went throughout Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. So it's a thing. We've just not invented revitalisation. People, cynical people say, we never had this church planting nonsense and this revitalisation nonsense years ago. They are real biblical issues. It's interesting that Paul's third missionary journey is almost an identical repeat of his second missionary journey.

So he's a revitaliser. He is strengthening the things that were there. Things do not stay the same. And we've got to remember that in the church in the Western Isles, the church in the Western Hemisphere, the church in the North, the church in the South. If you paint a post, and if you put that post in the middle of a field, and it's subjected to weather, it's subjected to all the forces that nature can throw at it, it will not stay the same. It will decay. There is a law of entropy. There is a law of spiritual entropy. Churches naturally are susceptible and prone to decay. That's why we've got to strengthen these things which remain. That's why we've constantly got to maintain our churches and grow our churches.

And if we don't do that, they will all naturally, of course, die out. So a hyper-conservative attitude of doing nothing is an act of utter recklessness. Now, two things before we begin.

[9 : 28] Two things before we begin. We know that God is sovereign. The major critique that I get from people is, you are doing what God is supposed to do. It's a sovereign act of God. So all your strategies, all your ideas, all that nonsense, only God can grow a church. Now, I would smile at a person like that, and I would welcome the conversation. Paul may plant, Apollos may water, but God alone may give the increase. That is obvious. What does the verse say? Paul may plant, Apollos may water, but God alone may give the increase. So what I am pleading for just now is to accept that. But when we talk about revitalization, when we talk about evangelism, we are calling the churches to improve their gardening skills. God provides the increase, but we are called to use our God-given gardening skills to get the garden to grow. Now, again, folks say, techniques are nothing. Nonsense. Let me give you two examples. Number one, we have

Ezekiel. Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones. Ezekiel chapter 37. Now, I've had some really, really, really, really desperate congregations in front of me in my day. But a whole valley full of dry bones, that is pretty tough. I used to preach in a place called Couture, Atlantshire, and there were four folk in the congregation. True story, all the stories of truth. Went there one day with a friend of mine. He was doing the presenting, I was doing the preaching. Within five minutes, they'd all fallen asleep. I could have gone out, had a cup of coffee, come back, and there would have been none the wiser. We have some bad congregation. We have some difficult congregation. The Valley of Dry Bones. But God told Ezekiel to do something to these dry bones. He told him to speak to the bones. And he actually told Ezekiel to do two things. Number one, speak to the bones on behalf of God. Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. And secondly, he tells Ezekiel to speak to the wind, the ruach, the spirit. Speak to God. And so there it was a sovereign act of God, but he was to speak to the bones on behalf of God, and he was to speak to God on behalf of the bones. And we are called to do exactly the same thing today. Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. He got a strategy together.

And Nehemiah is one of the most brilliant strategic documents that you can ever read. And so what I'm trying to say, folk, is please do not come up with this sovereignty of God issue.

And pretend that you are some sort of last bastion of orthodoxy. If that is your position, you are a heretic. That is not the classic position of the church. It is not remotely Calvinistic. It comes from some other place. And it is foreign to our soil. And that philosophy is not welcome within our midst. [13:11] And it has to be rooted out, and it has to be dealt with. It sounds pious, but it's totally man-centered. Let's look at one of two things here. Where do we begin then? We're talking here about revitalization.

We begin here by asking a question. And what I have written here is, I think we begin with the question of honesty. And it's a question that Jesus asked in John chapter 5. Remember to the man at the side of the pool, he says, do you want to get well? There's a certain comfort in illness. I remember that when I was growing up, and I was a little bit off colour. And, you know, my mum would be really, really nice to me. She normally was. But she was especially nice when I was unwell, and I had this little sleeping bag with Rupert Bear prints on it. And I would be in a settee, and there'd be an open fire, and I'd be in a Rupert Bear sleeping bag. And she would make me what was called then milk pudding, and I'd be watching the TV, and I'd have my beano. And there was something nice about being a little bit unwell. It was comforting. I had no responsibility to do homework. I had no responsibility to do anything.

Do you want to get well? And, you know, sometimes when you're unwell, you can blame circumstances. You can blame your situation on external circumstances. And so it is with a church. My first question to any church would be, do you really want to be well? It's like you're living in a house, and, you know, you don't double glazing, so it's poorly insulated. The heating is really, really noisy. It's inefficient. But it's home. You know, and you kind of get used to it. And the hassle of getting it fixed seems to be not worth it.

So you're just happy with the steady decline. Sometimes it's like that with our churches. We're actually happy with the decline. And if we blame it on external circumstances, that gives us a certain degree of comfort. It suits us. And you say, well, I like it.

[15:48] And so it's me. I remember doing what we call a quinquennial visit in a congregation, talking to the two elders. They basically said, we're happy with this church. It'll do our day. And the subtext was, once we're dead, you can do anything to it. But we are happy here in this state of decline. Sometimes you've got an old coat and an old jacket, an old tweed jacket, and you wear it. You're comfortable with it. You know? But over the years, it becomes threadbare. It becomes inefficient. But that's the way it is. Do you really want your church to be well? And go through all the change process as God blows his spirit of renewal in that church?

As God changes the church? Sometimes we're just happy the way we are. So that's the first thing. Do you want to get well? And if I were meeting with a congregation, a group of leaders in a congregation, I think we would explore that question. Let's move on to the second question. What are the signs that a church is in need of revitalization? It's a fundamental question, isn't it? Because we ask ourselves, well, you know, churches are like people. There are good churches, bad churches.

There are toxic churches. There are healthy churches. There are growing churches. There are declining churches. Churches have got a characteristic. Churches have got a mindset and a mentality. And you can tell that often within a few minutes of just entering into the worship environment, whether a church is healthy or it's unhealthy. So what are the specific signs that a church requires revitalization? I've got a few of them. Number one, numbers. Numbers.

What do you feel about that? Is there too much emphasis on numbers? Is it rather superficial?

[18:15] Would you not agree that when you examine the New Testament, there is actually quite an interest in numbers? And if you read the Acts of the Apostles, you notice again and again that numbers are mentioned. Acts 2.41. About 3,000 were added to the church that day. Later on, Acts 2.47.

The Lord added to their number. So numbers, I suggest, are important. Now, it's not the whole story, but if you had 200 folk in your church four years ago, now you have 50, that's a problem. Now, it's a matter of some complexity. What is the cause of that problem? But the numbers are an indicator that there is, shall we say, an issue with the congregation? My American friends taught a Scottish revival.

You know, a Scottish revival, they say, is when you go to a church of 1,000, and five years later, you've got 200. They simply call that a Scottish revival because they think there's a pessimistic people. But I'm sure that's absolutely not true. So, we're looking at the numbers.

Not only are we looking at the numbers in terms of counting the people, but we're also looking at the demography. Does the church, does your congregation reflect the gender, the age profile of the background community? Now, what we are seeing increasingly in the free church, we are seeing a move in mindset here. And this is what we're trying to develop. We're trying to move away from a sectarian model to a parish model. In other words, a sectarian model is a church that you go to because it has certain things that you agree with, certain boxes, certain characteristics that you like. A community church is one which ministers into the surrounding church and into the parish where your church is located. Now, no church has a right to call itself the parish church. Because every church has a calling into a particular community.

If you go to parts of Lanarkshire, you know, folk will talk about the parish church. But in real terms, you know, the Catholic church is probably the de facto parish church. The folk will go there. If you live in back, there's only, you know, one church there. So it becomes the parish church. But every church has to have this desire to reach out to its particular community.

[21 : 18] And so, if a church is not doing that, and also if a church is kind of not able to attract into a greater ethnic mix, then there is a problem. So I'm asking the, you know, in some despair, folks say to me, the village is full of outsiders. Never, ever use that expression to do with the church of Christ. It's also when you're giving a welcome, say we welcome strangers here today.

That's why saying, we notice there are one or two two-headed aliens in the congregation today. You are very welcome. Everyone. We are talking about inclusion.

My name is David Meredith. Now, when I was a teenager, I wished that my name was David McDonald, or David Nicholson, David McLeod, or David Smith, and Meredith.

Remember someone said to me, what sort of a name is that? And I felt a kind of odd character. Again, is that the kind of mentality that we have? If someone has got a kind of slightly off-piste name or background, and so I had to overcompensate, and I did overcompensate by, you know, I sounded like the Apostle Paul giving them my genealogy, you know, I was baptized in the free church, I was baptized by the Reverend Alistair McFarlane, who was in Shabbos.

[23 : 17] Not only was I free church, my mother was a free Presbyterian. And, you know, I sounded like the Apostle Paul justifying his, you know, credentials before an unbelieving people.

Basically, I was trying to say, I'm not an outsider, I'm one of you. A revitalized church looks at its numbers and everybody is welcome.

And so, in the village, the new age kind of Buddhist thinker, the wacky new morality person, the gay couple, they're all welcome.

Because we are inclusive and the gospel is for all. So the signs of requiring revitalization is dropping numbers, a demography that is out of kilter with the background population of your community.

A second problem is another sign that a church is in need of revitalization is what I've called, secondly, the search for the silver bullet. A silver bullet is that one idea that's going to solve everything.

[24 : 39] You know, there's nobody overweight in this building except the guy behind the podium, but you know, you're always looking for the diet. You know, years ago it was the Atkins diet.

it. You know, they're always coming up with this one thing that's going to make you lose weight. I'm just waiting for the gook-a-dike or something, you know, that's going to put Lewis on the map.

The one thing that's going to boost your health, make you lose weight. I remember getting a phone call from a congregation once.

They were desperate. They had to be desperate to phone me. They were going down and down and down. He says, will you come along and talk to us? They wanted the silver bullet.

But one thing, that one person, that one program, and so what they do is they buy into the latest program or idea that's going to turn their church round.

[25 : 35] Now, it might be Christianity Explored, it might be CAP, it might be Road to Recovery.

You know, there's nothing wrong with all these things that are great things, but if you are relying on one particular program or person to turn the church round, there is something wrong.

And, you know, as a mission director, one of my jobs is to coach and help leaders in congregations and we are only helpful, we can only be of help when someone doesn't use us as a line of last resort.

it's so bad, I think we've got to even phone the mission director to come and try and sort it. It's not going to happen, the search of the silver bullet.

Because we're not looking for something new. Here's the irony. We're looking at something old. We're rediscovering something old and revitalization.

radicalism, I believe, is formed and found in an older stream. And I'll come to that a little bit later. So what are the signs of need of revitalization?

[26 : 49] Number one, numbers. Number two, the search for the silver bullet. The one thing that's going to turn our congregation around.

The third thing is the way we treat nostalgia and tradition. Now, nostalgia itself is not what it used to be, but so many folk rely on nostalgia and tradition.

This is the role of almost all dying churches. They're living in the past. they don't want the church to move forward.

They want it to move backwards to the glory days. So they will talk about a particular minister.

Oh, I remember in Reverend Baba's day there were hundreds of folk came to hear. I remember when there were times there were queues waiting to become new members.

[28 : 03] And you go into vestries of churches and all of a sudden you see all these old guys, pictures in the vestry.

And you look round and you hear the story, yes, yes, yes, the story of all these men. people. And you know, that's the problem.

This reliance on the past. Now, tradition is holding on to things merely because they have always been.

And there was a good reason for them once, but things change. I don't have an ounce of Louis blood in me.

I'm sorry for it. That's just the way it is. I can't help it. I wish it was different, but that's the way things are. I was raised half my life in Paisley, half my upbringing was in the Island of Sky.

[29 : 05] I was a member in the Free Church of Sky. And we used to have these evangelistic services, the Ordy and Bickett. And as a teenager, I would go along to them.

And even then, slowly through my thick skull, I thought, these are evangelistic services. I've been coming to them for ten years years, and I've never seen someone who's not a Christian at them. But yet, they kept on doing them. Now, they were started for a reason, and that reason I wouldn't bore you with tonight.

But you can take the idea, the Ordy Bickett, a way of reaching out to the community. evangelistic outreach, but maybe instead of getting some pulpit prints over from a neighbouring island to preach eloquent sermons to the Lord's people for five nights, house.

What about renting a room in the local hotel and getting a guy to talk about how do bad things have to be?

[30 : 36] people for the air ground. And just open, be vulnerable.

That's outreach. It's a revitalisation. That's going where people are. You don't even have to have a religious element to it.

Nostalgia and tradition. The fourth thing is what I call a maintenance mentality. The vision is if we can just hang on.

Now, a lot of behind these things, I'm conscious that sometimes I appear to be mocking good people and please, I hope I am not doing that.

I want us all to engage in a conversation and not mock good people. But have this, ask these questions, what is a maintenance mentality?

[31 : 43] Phrases are used like, we've got to keep the doors open. We've got to keep the lights on. If you want to keep the lights on, buy a timer.

surely the church is bigger than that. Surely the church for whom Christ died, surely his blood bought people.

A call to do something more than keeping two bits of wood open, surely a church in a community is a lot more than simply keeping the light on in a Victorian building.

And so there is this maintenance mentality. And our vision is limited to simply keeping the number of people that we lost last year, keeping the numbers the same.

There's a fifth thing. Now called this a culture of victimhood and excuses. Now, a culture of victimhood and excuses.

[33 : 07] There is a profound irony, and the irony is this, that in meetings like this where we discuss these issues, the folk who would really, really benefit, are probably not here.

Because, I don't know, they don't agree, well how do they not agree if they're not here, they don't think it's for them, they think it's for other people, you know.

And one of the things that we have is a culture of victimhood and excuses. Now, it goes like this, we tried this but it failed. Or, the area has changed, the island is changing, our building is in the wrong place.

A culture of victimhood and excuses. Now, there are certain situations I really, really regret. Looking back, certainly in free church culture, we used to have a church in a place called Drum Chapel in Glasgow.

We closed it down 20 years ago. Now, the big thing is ministry and schemes. So, it's a kind of big thing, you know, recognising the need of our big schemes of the gospel.

[34 : 35] And so, just when that's entering into the consciousness of the wider church, we close our work down. We've got a great church plant in Govan, we call it G51.

Norman Mackay is doing a fantastic job. Govan, a G51, is screaming for money. It needs resources. What have we done with the three, four hundred thousand pound resources that we had tied up there years ago?

It's gone. We have a property in Shettleston, east end of Glasgow. The most deprived postcode in Scotland.

And our assets are locked up because of some internal church feud. Now, it's important because we often say that the reason from Chapel didn't grow, the reason Shettleston didn't grow, the reason Govan didn't grow, are out there.

the excuses revealed that we often think that there are factors outside the church which caused the problem.

[35 : 52] The solemn question for us tonight is, are there factors inside the church that caused the problem? Now, it's rarely binary, it's rarely simple.

It's rarely simple to say that it is all the causes inside, not the causes outside. But we're asking in humility, have we divested ourselves of this culture of victimhood and excuses and do we have the humility to say, is the church the cause of this problem?

Now, we can't allow ourselves to be dominated by negative circumstances. Kiltarity feature, is a little village outside Inverness.

The church is in the wrong place. You probably couldn't find it. The brand of the denomination in the area was tarnished. Kiltarity.

Who's there? What? Building in the wrong place, terrible reputation in the community. Church there is booming. Vital, alive, strong, really, really healthy.

[37 : 14] Numbers up, commitment to Jesus up, love of the gospel up. and all because the leadership ignored the external circumstances, or at least engaged with the external circumstances, and did not use them as an excuse for non-growth.

The population is declining, there is more non-native folk in the island, hey, let's engage with that. Let's not blame them for the decline in our churches.

It is not as simple as that. Another reason a church requires revitalizing this is, the sixth reason is a bad reputation.

Sometimes a church has just got a bad reputation. It's just toxic. It's a hive of division. it's an unsafe place.

The brand is not good. Maybe it had a dysfunctional minister in the past. I'm thinking of one particular area in the free church and the minister, folks said he was, oh, you mention his name and folks smile and say, he was a character.

[38 : 42] homophobic, racist, sexist, horrible person. And if he said what he said today, he would probably be in court and rightly so.

He wasn't a character at all. He was a man who left a mark in the community and a legacy that is there even until today.

A bad reputation. We need to work on the free church brand. He's reading an interesting book, James Hunter's book on the high end clearances.

Phenomenal. He's got a really interesting insight there into, he's comparing the free church of the disruption and its radical edge.

to the free church of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Very incisive. There is a problem of branding. Now, that's a solemn thing.

[39 : 52] Sometimes in communities there's a call for an elm of public repentance. I have very close ties with an American denomination called the Presbyterian Church in America.

And it came out of the old Southern Presbyterian Church. And it was influenced by men like Thornwell and Dabney. And a lot of these men were incredibly racist.

And they had their hands somewhat soiled over the slavery issue. And racism was endemic within the PCA. I was attending the last General Assembly of the PCA in Mobile, Alabama, where there was a public repentance of racism.

Is there a place for us in humility to publicly repent of the ways in which we were wrong in society? Now, I don't mean go soft on the gospel. Those of you who know me, know me well enough for that. But there were certain elements, largely perceived and largely unfair, but sometimes legitimate.

[41 : 19] A church I was involved in, the leadership thought actually about writing a letter in a local paper, owning up to bad things in the past. I was talking to a lady three weeks ago.

She told me this story. She went to a country church, and she was about 12 years of age when her mother had a baby.

And this was in the 1940s. And she was thrilled. One Sunday afternoon she was out with the baby in the pram, and she said, the lady's now in her 70s, she says, David, it was the happiest day of my life.

It was a sunny day, and I was pushing my little baby sister along in the pram. And all of a sudden, a free church minister came up in his car, Sunday's breaks.

How dare you desecrate God's day and get back with that child? She said, the knife went into my heart.

[42 : 42] And she says, it is only by God's grace that I saw beyond him to a saviour that I'm a believer today.

I think that story can be repeated again and again. You know stories you could tell. Now, there is a sense in which we move on.

Of course we do. But there is also a sense in which we must address, especially in the Hylenton Islands, people who were wounded through that philosophy.

A philosophy of a minority because most of the old men and women that I knew were nothing like that. Most of the old men and women that I knew were lovely people whose hearts sang with love for Jesus, whose lives were full of grace and who exuded joy in their lives.

Most people that I met were like that and most ministers I met were like that also. But there were some and that's how we need revitalisation because of the bad reputation.

[43 : 57] Another reason for revitalisation is what I call distractions. A church needs revitalisation when it's distracted. Now it can be distracted by many things.

It can go down a liberal path. It can go down a battle front. The pre-church of Scotland did not grow in the 90s because it was engaged in a battle. There was a civil war there was a fight among us.

And nobody's going to join where there's going to be a fight. The spirit is grieved. And when you grieve the Holy Spirit there is a sense in which the felt presence of the Holy Spirit leaves.

And isn't that awful? A church without the presence of the Holy Spirit. Look at an engine without oil. It burns and it destroys itself. In a congregation there can be distractions.

Now all these things lead to a need for revitalisation. Can all this be fixed? So we're talking here about a congregation that's got a bad reputation, numbers will go down, there's no sense of the spirit, there's a depression, there's all these things, there's distractions, there's a culture of victimhood.

[45 : 23] You know, not all congregations needing revitalisation will have all of these elements, but there may be some, one, six, maybe there are others. Can it be fixed?

What is the difference between a revitalisation and a church plant? Well, there is hope in revitalisation. Once you realise it's a thing, and once you intentionally say, we're going to tackle this, what does one do?

What makes a difference to a church plant? Number one is that there are mature believers. So when a church needs revitalisation, at least you have this one thing that you don't have in a church plant often, is that you've got a group of mature believers.

Now, the stats in the USA, the USA stats may be a little bit different, but in the USA stats, 90% of members in a church plant, they say, have moved on after three years, including the pastor, Don McNair, a writer in church planting, says that.

But in revitalisation, you've got a group of believers who are committed to the church. They've been there. They've been there in its ups, they've been there in its downs, they've been there when its reputation has been trashed.

[46 : 51] They still believe in it. Maybe they have their weaknesses, but they are still there. There are believers there. There is hope. There are two or three in that place, so you've got mature believers.

Secondly, you've got existing resources. Church plants cost a lot of money. Ministers need paid. Eventually, we need buildings. Talk about that again, but you need money. But revitalisation, at least have existing resources. I was in a last weekend, I was in Dornoch Free Church. And I've not been in Dornoch for 10 years. And I walked in and I thought, wow, what a change. The building was super, it was stunning.

It was remodelled inside, it was creative, there was lovely design features, there was just a warmth in the congregation, a palpable sense of togetherness, there was a real sense of unity, the worship, the praise, what was lively.

[48 : 11] My good friend, Duncan MacLeod, the minister, was making a real intentional effort to change his normal, the style in which he had preached all his years.

In the last few years, Duncan has changed his style, he's changing his vocabulary to reach the folk who are in front of him. And I just thought afterwards, wow, all these resources, building worth probably over a million pounds, and yet it's been used for the kingdom.

So, there is hope. A revitalisation has got existing people, a revitalisation has got existing resources, there's money there, a lot of the new churches that we are building these days come in about a million pounds, the Smithing extension was 1.6 million, Kilmally was near 800,000, we're looking at one per pre just now, just over a million, buildings are expensive, revitalise you, you've got old buildings, now, sometimes you would pay a local arsonist to put them in fire, but they're an asset that can be used.

What practical steps can we take for revitalisation? Okay, we're in a church that requires revitalisation, you've had the horror stories up until now, the good news is it gets a little bit more cheery from now on, okay, we've turned the corner, we've equipped ourselves to death and we've seen that our church needs revitalised, so what can we do?

Here are one or two practical steps, number one, use the past as a lever, not as a break, okay, the past is important, Joshua 4, 20, the stones in the river, what do they mean?

[50 : 12] We don't live in the past, but we certainly don't disconnect to the past, but I would say be honest about the past. I know not everybody here at Free Church is gone, but we're a conference organised by the Free Church of Scotland.

I find the Free Church of Scotland fascinating. I have a free church probably not just because I was born within it, but it's a fascinating denomination.

You look to 1843 and the various factors, it was such a radical church. It had missionary radicalism, it had evangelistic radicalism, it had political radicalism.

Why is the Free Church of Scotland so strong and the Highlands and Islands? Why did folk like the Duke of Sutherland hate it with a perfect pattern? Because it didn't peddle to the elite.

It had a social conscience and a radicalism and it was prepared with Amos and the prophets to stand with the people. That's how the great political movement, like the Land League and over the sky there, folk like the Glendale Martyrs, they were men and women who were steeped in the theology of the Bible and social justice.

[51 : 31] They were men and women who were steeped in the radical call of Jesus. They were leaders in theology, Chalmers, Candleys, Guthrie, and even any local church.

It has a history, men and women of the past who planted that church. Your church was once a church plant. Your church was once the seed of the idea of a group of folk who said, let's plant a church here.

So the past is a lever. There's great ideas for revitalization. Some of them you know more than I do. Carly. Okay, Carly 3 church. An old traditional church. Doesn't get much more traditional than Carly.

You know the psalm, the very dust to them is dear. You know, there it is, an old church building. So what did they do a couple of summers ago? They open up and what did folk like?

[52 : 35] Folk like heritage, folk like the past. So they have a little exhibition photos of folk from old days in the Sunday school. Folk would come in and we couple to, ah, there's my granny, you know, 1930, oh, there I am at the Sunday school, 1964.

Ah, look at the weight I put on. Ah, it's because, you know, all that stuff. Heritage, the past. This is part of our community, this is who we were.

here. So then Inverness, you know, the Free North, that big building beside the river, they opened it up last summer, tourists and heritage, look at this building, what does it speak to you?

Chemistry, I did that last summer with the cruise aligners. Heritage, it's not a break, it's a lever, it is part of what we are. This great idea for the Tongue Meeting House being the Donald Trump Heritage Centre.

But I received the shocking news today that Donald Trump people were not actually free church, which gives a little relief to me, actually.

[53 : 51] Forget about the Donald Trump Heritage Centre. In ministry, you don't demean, you do not demean past ministries, but you don't duplicate them.

If you build a bridge to the past, it's important. It's not going to change everything. And it's like even our worship style, and I'm not talking about the debate about exclusive psalmody, hymnody here, that's irrelevant.

But our worship, which does have this look to the past, but also this sense of the future. So how is our church revitalized?

We use the past as a lever, not a break. We take the good things, we remember the place where we started, we remember the radicalism of our church, we remember the church planting mentality. Number two is ensure that your ministry is Christ-centered and gospel orientated. Now that almost should have been first, second, third and fourth. And we say, well, in a free church, that's ridiculous.

[54 : 59] ensure that your ministry is gospel-centered. Paul said, I deliver to you as of first importance the gospel. Now the gospel is not just Sunday night at a communion, turn or burn.

That's a reductionist gospel. gospel. That is not the whole gospel. The gospel is not simply escape from hell, get to heaven.

The gospel is simply not just that empty point of the new bar. The gospel permeates everything we say and everything we do.

We are the Christ obsessives. student I went to, Partick Highland. I remember the sermon that Don MacLeod preached.

The Christians were first, the believers were first called Christians at Antioch. And he went on for like 45 minutes of the distinctive nature of the Christians.

[56 : 08] And he defined it, and I can hear his voice still, the people with the Christ obsession. That's what the gospel is, this Christ center, this gospel orientated atmosphere.

Where Jesus is there, you can go deeper into the gospel, but you can't go beyond it. And many people are discouraged because they've forgotten the foundations of the gospel in their own life.

The foundations of the sheer grace of God. Instead, we're beaten up by the need to perform all the time. Now, there is a need to perform, and don't get me, you know, wrong.

I'm not negating the place of the law here. But there is also the wonder of the gospel. Maybe we've lost our first love.

We focus on the hero of the gospel, and revitalized churches have got this, just captured this vision of the beauty of Jesus. I've said this two times before, and I think this will be the last time I say it, because it's depressing me a little bit.

[57 : 17] I was in a free church congregation some months ago, and Jesus was mentioned twice, at the end of the prayer, and at the benediction. It's wrong, beloved, it's wrong.

When I go to a service, and you go to a service, and their beloved saviour is not mentioned, the gospel is not swarming, the wonder of the grace of God does not revere the majesty of God and the gift of his son.

How is a church revitalized? Past, a leave or not a break, the ministry and the whole atmosphere is gospel centred and Christ saturated.

thirdly, prayer is vital, and it's more than the prayer meeting. Now, it's difficult to get a fire going without a match. Look at Acts, the church of Jerusalem, it was born in a prayer meeting, Acts

chapter one.

There's a prayer meeting in Acts chapter four, shoot the room. Now, what about a revitalized, you cannot have a revitalized church without a prayer meeting.

[58 : 34] A prayer meeting is just not a Wednesday version of a Sunday service. The clue is in the name, it's a prayer meeting. The emphasis is on prayer.

And in a congregation, the culture of prayer is a prayer meeting, but it's bigger than the prayer meeting. Okay? And so we come to the prayer meeting, and how can you foster prayer in a church? Well, there's lots of ways we can do that. prayer triplets, prayer partners, prayer lines, something, you know, we've got a real, in our circle of friends, just now we've got a real need.

We had a youth worker, a member of our church staff at Smithton, 15 years ago, called Danny and Bell. I just got a note, before I came into the meeting, his wife of 41, has had a massive heart attack, and she's expected to die.

We need a prayer team. Pray for Iona, right down the line. That's the spirit of prayer. I'm not talking about you changing your traditional prayer meeting, I don't know what I'm talking about.

[59 : 50] That may be appropriate in some places, not in others, but there's this culture of prayer. that yes, your prayer meeting is well attended, but you've got your prayer crickets, you've got your prayer chains.

I remember afterwards in Smithton often, you know, again, our tradition was very, very different. Folk would stay in their seats after the service, we'd have tea, and I'd often see folk with their arm around someone just praying with them, praying with them through their divorce, praying with them through their cancer, praying with them through their conviction of sin, praying with them through their wayward child.

That's a picture of a revitalised church, praying that God would come again in power, spirit of prayer. Another thing we can do is, work at and demand compelling preaching.

Work at and demand compelling preaching. A good preacher requires two things, he requires a gift of preaching, preaching, and he requires a congregation that demands good preaching.

You will never get a good preacher from a poor congregation, it's impossible. You'll see the guy's gifts going down and down and down, and the bounce of the ball will diminish.

[61 : 09] But when you've got the two things together, Harry Reader has got a great book on church revitalisation, says this, the church in Jerusalem was conceived in prayer ministry and birthed in a sermon.

The apostles were grounded in the ministry of word and prayer. Now, preaching. Levi applies to preaching as part of worship.

Preaching is doxology. Preaching is that place where we elevate Jesus and where the amens ring and the hallelujahs are there. preaching is just part of this whole worship experience.

So it's preaching as part of worship, evangelism, as we present the gospel in preaching. And as we present the gospel, a good gospel sermon, a sermon that's saturated with the gospel, and every sermon is saturated with the gospel, we pick it up and we pass it on.

Apologetics and public engagement. A revitalised church connects people. There are things that preachers call apologetic sidebars. Let me give you an example.

[62 : 24] One of my last series at Smithland was Joshua. And we had lots of different types of folk coming in. So, you know, Joshua, destruction of Jericho and destruction of Ai.

God says, go into that city, destroy every man, woman and child. Okay? So I'm thinking of Jim from next door, he's just come to my church, and he's just heard a guy talking about God that says, go into a city and kill every man, woman and child.

Now that deserves an apologetic sidebar. What I mean is that we clock as we preach, that there are some issues that folk will say, hmm, what's going on here?

And so we know that, and we deal with it, and we recognise that people have problems. We don't dismiss the problems that people have with God as if they were flipping, as if they didn't matter, they are elephants in the room, and we need to deal with them.

Which is one example. Compelling preaching. Times going on, you've all been very, very good, I've gone far over my time, but just two things very, very quickly.

[63 : 40] strategy is not a bad word. The congregation will never be revitalised without a strategy. There are no areas of life where people don't have strategies.

Mince and potatoes. You all have different strategies about eating mince and potatoes. Some of you are mixers. You mix and do things together.

Some of you are sequential. You go for the mince and the potatoes. even Mars bars. There are some perverted souls that bite it, carry a little thought.

First, there's a strategy. So everything's got a strategy. I love strategy. The more I'm into, the more I really enjoy it. Strategy's not a bad word. Ask the questions.

Get others to help you ask a question. What does it mean to be a rural church? What does it mean to be a church in the western islands today?

[64 : 46] What's the culture like? How are we distinctive? How are we not distinctive? Culture is fascinating. I'll be talking a little bit more tomorrow. I'm really looking forward to tomorrow.

I'm going to talk about creating an evangelistic culture within our congregations. Culture is, I wear glasses and some of you wear glasses. culture is, I can see your glasses but I'm not aware of mine. Often we're that in churches, we're not aware of our own culture. It's what I call the thing. The thing is what free church people do and everybody from outside notices it but we're not aware of it.

now the thing is sometimes just the way we speak. You know Mrs. Macdonald is coming out.

My friends think she's now a lesbian. You know she's coming to the prayer meeting. You know Sorley's I'm not going to do that especially.

[66 : 03] True. But you know sometimes we say things that we know that's natural to us. We don't see our glasses. Other people notice it.

Some are sentence construction. Just the way we do that. We'll be talking more about that tomorrow. So we're just asking this question. Sometimes we need people, friends to act as mirrors. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. This vision, this structure, this strategy, strategy is so important and a vision.

There's a, again, a management guru called, I forget the guy's name, I'm tired, it'll come back to me. It's not all that important. His first name's Jim.

He talks about a BHAG, a big, Jim Collins, a big, hairy, audacious goal. A big, hairy, audacious goal.

[67 : 08] What's the BHAG of the Western Islands Presby? Survive? No. It's got to be bigger than that. It's got to be bigger than that.

We need a God-sized vision and a strategy together. Two minutes for the last point. Leaders must lead. This is probably one of our most serious issues.

I suspect that most of the leaders in our Presby are not here tonight. Leaders must lead. Elders and ministers must be able to have a judicious use of accelerator and brake.

If you use accelerator and brake in sequence, the car will move on. Leaders who teach and encourage. Leaders who know their people.

Relationships. Revitalization is all about relationships. There's a great expression. Rules without relationship lead to rebellion. Rules without relationship lead to rebellion.

[68 : 17] If leadership among high speak to things without engaging with people, there will never be an engagement. I've spoken for over an hour, you've been very, very patient.

Please, first of all, I hope my first half was not unduly negative, but we've got to ask this question, are we in need revitalization? Again, I'm assuming that God and sovereign power will move, but I'm appealing to us to use our gardening skills.

Amen. Any questions? Weinstein Kommun prends Do Has energy