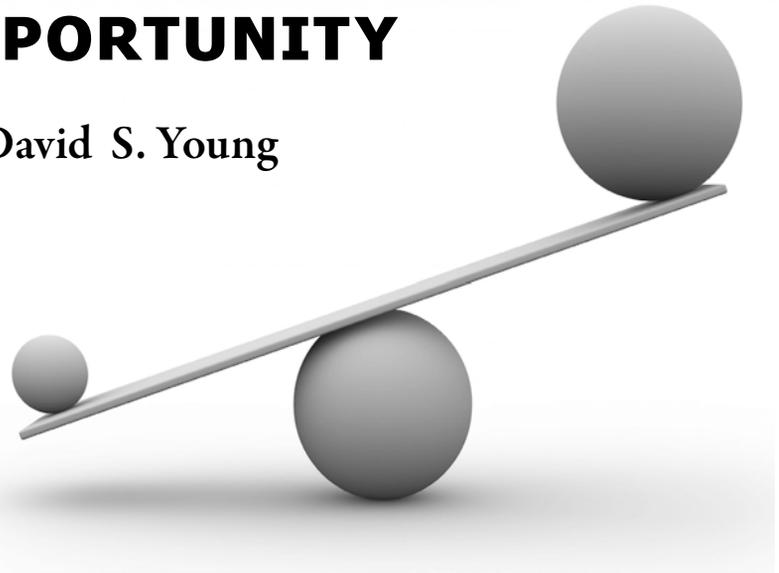


# SEVEN TIPPING POINTS OF CHURCH RENEWAL IN TIMES OF FEAR AND OPPORTUNITY

By David S. Young



**T**he times in which we live are critically important for the church. While economic challenges and cultural factors could tax the church beyond its limits, these times can be openings for discovering a fresh movement of God. Church renewal points to how times of fear can become opportunities to spread the good news of the gospel and minister to people. Hope can be real and the church can experience new life.

Seeing the response to the spiritually oriented, servant led church renewal initiative called *Springs of Living Water*, Glenda Machia of our Advisory Committee said we seem to be at a tipping point where things are breaking open for renewal. A tipping point is when momentum shifts from one direction to a new orientation. No longer are we just facing headwinds. Churches can capture a fresh wind of God's spirit in full sail.

This article focuses on a path for the church to grow and how renewal equips congregations for such times. When 9/11 struck, our executives said churches involved in renewal were more equipped for the times. They have a spiritual focus, a sense of direction, and are more ready for ministry to people in times of need. Christ is our center of hope today, and new life within and readiness for mission is what renewal promises.

What is renewal? In 2 Corinthians 4: 16 the Apostle Paul says that while our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. Writing in the passive voice, Paul infers that renewal is a gift of God. The presence of Christ renews us as we participate in corporate spiritual disciplines and transformational growth

experiences. Renewal is a continuous process, something ongoing and ever present.

Discerning a theme for renewal in prayer, I felt led to the woman at the well who discovered the life giving water of Jesus, was transformed, and told others. Rather than being one big experience, renewal is more like a spring that bubbles up and waters surrounding vegetation. From my observation in church renewal, I see critical junctures where a ripple like effect happens. The presence of Christ makes these "tipping points." One thing leads to another. Any of them aborted means the process is short changed.

Christ's love makes these "tipping points" of new life.

In and of itself, a tipping point may seem relatively small, in fact hardly big enough to make an impact. Added together, one upon another, they release a compelling force. These tipping points have been observed over and over again in churches where the renewal process takes hold and new energy is discovered. Against all odds, fear, and our outer nature wearing away, Christ becomes real and the church dynamic.

## ***Tipping Point # 1***

### ***When Someone Responds to the Thirst for Renewal***

A lay leader of a church in a class I taught in church renewal at Eastern, the American Baptist Seminary in Philadelphia, said he felt a sense that more was possible in his church. Furthermore, he said that if he responded

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to this thirst, it would make it much easier for his pastor to take up the work of renewal. There would not be the pressure on a pastor to have to stand alone working for renewal.

The first tipping point is when one person responds to the thirst for more. The circumstances of people who respond are different. People are saying that hard times show that we are not in control which leads them to search for the Almighty. In fact, God gives us the thirst and invites us to new life. As we deal with inertia of decline, unless we do something, nothing happens. The church can move from fear to opportunity.

In the renewal process we recognize the power of one. It just takes one person to respond to thirst, to move from sensing a need to taking the first step. This principle of one is found in scripture and the work of servant leadership. In calling unfaithful Israel to be a light to the nation, God calls out the least likely one. Jesus called disciples of many walks of life, occupations and temperaments to follow. When someone responds to this call in a church, the climate begins to change. Someone takes the risk to say “yes!”

### ***Tipping Point #2*** ***When a Church Decides to Enter a Path of Renewal***

A spiritual process is entailed for a church to enter into renewal and discern a pattern for ongoing growth and development of its life. Churches don't automatically say “yes,” nor should they, because renewal entails a willing spirit and much hard work. Saying “yes” means giving affirmation that renewal is possible. Churches can feel defeated, that renewal is impossible, that there are too many barriers, competing forces, and too much to do for all that to happen. How do you overcome the inertia of decline?

There is a journey entailed in this tipping point and it will probably take at least a number of months from when one person responds until a church decides to enter renewal. Rather than a decision just by a leadership team, for renewal to be effective, the entire congregation needs to give their “yes.” This takes a lot of interpretation. What is all this going to mean? What will it lead us to? We tried that before; what is to say anything will happen now? We are tired. Many questions, many concerns rear their heads.

A major initiative in church renewal is vital here. Districts were created to plant new churches and encourage existing churches and can facilitate renewal work today. In the *Springs of Living Water* Initiative a district sees itself as a servant of the church. They call a prayer team and a leadership group and begin to enlist churches. They help local churches go through the decision making process and assure them that they will stick with them for four years. Districts set up training for local church renewal teams. Clusters of churches with a coordinator are formed to encourage one another in renewal.

### ***Tipping Point #3*** ***When Churches Take Up Corporate Spiritual Disciplines***

The next step is for persons to meet Christ more deeply through spiritual disciplines that begin with reading scripture, praying, other classic disciplines. In church renewal we began using spiritual disciplines folders that look like a church bulletin. Written for a season of the year, they have a theme highlighting Sunday texts. Inside

***The effect of the tipping point comes when persons practice the disciplines.***

is an explanation of the theme and how to use the folders. Sunday services are listed along with daily scripture texts. An insert welcomes persons to commit to their next personal discipline they feel God is inviting them to in order to grow in their faith. <sup>1</sup>

Bob and Lisa Smith, chimney sweeps, typify persons who take on disciplines. The Green Tree Church of the Brethren in suburbia Philadelphia used folders. Four Sunday School classes, junior high, senior high, young adult, and elective classes studied *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster on twelve classic disciplines. My sermons were on the disciplines and were introduced by a small chancel dialogue on a discipline of the week. Bob and Lisa read the daily passages and entered into the total experience of prayer. Bob would listen to tapes on the disciplines in his truck. Bob felt so close to God up in chimneys. When he came down, he said he met the owner of the house not as a customer, but as a child of

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<sup>1</sup> For a sample disciplines folder in both English and Spanish you can turn to Appendix 10 in *Springs of Living Water, Christ-centered Church Renewal* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2008).

God. Often the family shared with Bob about life and faith.

The effect of the tipping point comes when persons practice the disciplines. We learn to pray by praying. We can read books on prayer, go to seminars, and hear sermons. All this is good. But we need to start. This tipping point in renewal comes by taking up regular spiritual practices, facing obstacles and distractions, and then discovering the rewards of prayer and worship. This is how renewal becomes Christ-centered. People begin to discover a closer relationship with Christ. Relationships within the church become transformed through Christ. Churches discover Christ's mission for them.

### ***Tipping Point #4***

#### ***When a Servant Leader is Born***

Tommie Jackson, pastor of Calvary Baptist in Chester, Pennsylvania where Dr. Martin Luther King served as a student pastor, said in a class in church renewal, "It is not that my spiritual life is all that bad, but if I want my church to be renewed, I need to be renewed. I need to go deeper into the Word, deeper in prayer." Going deeper spiritually defines leadership foot tub style – points the way, models behavior, does what renewal entails.

This tipping point is servant leadership in the church. Because of the trust gained, servants are lifted to be leaders. Serving entails going with people to the springs sharing in spiritual refreshment. Servants serve and are then are called to lead. Servant leaders respect congregations. They do not force people to do things but learn how to serve. With the woman at the well we see Jesus asks the women for a drink. As a servant, Jesus empowers people, calls out their best, and helps them become servants. Jesus does that today inviting us to give him a drink.

To learn the traits of the servant we study scriptures. In the servant songs in Isaiah, servants feel a call and are strengthened by God. Servants are gentle. Not only do they listen, but find the Lord opens the ear of the servant every morning. The more you practice the more you learn what servant leadership entails. In the *Springs of Living Water* we use a process of dialogue, a pattern for communication by spiritually centering, listening deeply, speaking in love, and discerning together. Even small, seemingly insignificant conversations become opportunities to demonstrate faith in action.

Furthermore, servant leaders do not lead alone. In the renewal work, a church calls and trains a renewal team. As a facilitating committee, the renewal team gets the entire church involved. The renewal team uses servant leadership to call forth the gifts of others, convey that what is happening is important, and models the renewal they are working to call forth. And servant leaders lead. They get down on the floor with people so to speak, work together with them, and draw forth their creativity and gifts.

### ***Tipping Point #5***

#### ***When a Church Begins to Focus On Its Strengths***

"Rather than find out what is wrong and fix it; find out what is right and build upon it." That may seem like a small change in orientation, but it yields a huge impact. When participants in classes in seminary went home

***“Rather than find out what is wrong and fix it; find out what is right and build upon it.”***

overnight and shared with two or three others about the strengths of their church, they came back the next day with a new orientation. Some said after one experience that their ministry assignment was "doable."

In the self study in the renewal process done with congregational gatherings, we look at the strengths of the church. Churches name them, claim them, and design their ministries using them. The first congregational gathering is on strengths. At a carry in meal after worship, group leaders help persons to name their strengths which are God-given gifts. A composite is made. Energy goes up. As strengths are named, the entire group celebrates them singing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

What a message for a time of fear and uncertainty. Churches have much to offer. At one congregation the leadership team named seventy strengths. When the entire church did the exercise, they named almost four times that many: 270 strengths! Then in a second congregational gathering people share spiritual appreciation and how they felt touched by others in faith. As they hear untold stories, people can be tearful. Then they

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develop a spiritual profile of the church of how they are nurtured spiritually and can touch others.

### ***Tipping Point #6***

#### ***Discerning a Biblical Vision and a Plan***

The sixth tipping point has a series of tipping points within it. First is discerning a biblical text. Going through renewal often churches gravitate to a biblical text. Like in personal spiritual direction, where a person finds a text and lives out of it, so churches can identify where they are in the biblical story, gain a sense of direction and live out of that passage. Dynamics of renewal found right in the text tell how transformation can occur. The text gives a rightful authority and makes a vision crisp and focused.

This tipping point also entails a church discerning a biblical vision. Placing the biblical text at the apex of a triangle, the strengths on the lower left corner and needs at the lower right corner, persons can peer down the center to discern where God is leading.

Often three to five words emerge express what a church feels called to be. Again the least likely person may say it most crisply. Some say a vision should be able to be painted on the side of a bus. Often it is short. A few words capture the essence of a clear vision.

Upland Baptist Church included the faculty families of Crozer Seminary before it moved illustrates how these factors come together. Their glory days were the high mark of programs. Dale Miller, pastor, attended the church renewal classes at Eastern and saw that the church needed to assess its strengths. They went into gifts discernment and had Bible study. For a biblical text, the church decided on Abraham and discerned a crisp vision, "Blessed to be a Blessing." This resulted in focused new ministries for youth, a men's group, and continuation of the gifts group. Other programs were trimmed.

A further part of this tipping point is not only having a vision, but a workable plan to implement it. Using foresight from servant leadership, a church sees things whole and looks at what is required to get to the next step and following step. What things need to wait so other things can be put into place? Getting our head, heart and faith journey together, spiritual discernment is used as we ask, "Where is God leading us next?"

### ***Tipping Point # 7***

#### ***When a Church Puts a Plan Into Action***

Putting a plan into action is challenging, not because it is that difficult, but because often visions are discerned and plans laid, but nothing happens. While renewal can seem like a goal setting process, this tipping point indicates a deeper reality that takes place. Spiritual transformation happens all the along the way from responding to the thirst to taking up spiritual disciplines to having significant sharing in congregational gatherings to seeing what churches have to offer and doing it.

Another part of this tipping point happens as each person finds their own ministry. Renewal teams work to strengthen existing ministries and perhaps add a new one. They explore models, call out leaders, train them, mentor them, and set up ongoing support of the entire church. It gets exciting when the senior's class sends pizza for youth returning from a work camp. It gets exciting when a mission's fair is held after worship featuring ministries like Sunday School. It gets very exciting as churches reach out to new people and establish discipling efforts and assimilate new people into the church.

In developing a ministry plan, various churches discern having a Wednesday evening family night emphasis for all ages. In such an experience, young people come to the church after school and have recreation. The family joins at mealtime followed by Bible or topical classes for all ages and choir. One principle that has met with resounding success is that every youth has a sponsor who does something in the program. In one such endeavor, a fifth-sixth grade teacher brought in a wire model of Paul kneeling and had the youth apply paper machè while they listened to a recording on Paul. Painting it, the youth placed it in the chancel for Sunday's service on "Paul, Such a Different Man."

This article has explored seven things we have observed in congregations in response in their thirst for more. In response to God's invitation, these become tipping points for renewal. None of these factors in and of themselves are big, but do create a path for persons to grow in Christian faith and establish life-long spiritual disciplines. None of these factors copy something that promises success, but do create an ongoing process to grow healthy, vibrant churches with an urgent sense of mission.

And there is joy. Christ becomes pre-eminent as the spiritual journey becomes a fuller part of people's lives. The

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church becomes a vibrant place. The witness of the congregation becomes clearer. Times of fear can become ones of opportunity for Christian ministry. Problems are dealt with in the gentle but proactive nature of the servant. Creativity flows. Spiritual formation happens. You step back and say this is not a program; this movement is of the nature of God. In humility and in thanksgiving we say this is not what we have done. New life is so exciting and is a gift of God.

### Small Group Study Questions

1. What is your understanding of renewal? When have you discovered it as a gift and what were the factors that were at work? In those moments, can you speak of how it was beyond yourself and of God and your need for daily replenishment?
2. What is your understanding of a tipping point? Has your experience either personally or as a church been of dramatic change or small factors that build upon one another? Have you ever found yourself trying to hurry the process?
3. Was there any one of the tipping points that particularly caught your attention? Can you see where you are now in the process in your church? Is there one that you would like to work on in your congregation?
4. In this article there are three tipping points that serve as a constellation of renewal: the spiritual, servant leadership and building on strengths. Can you say how you see them as interconnected?
5. The article clearly states that spiritual formation happens not just in all the coming to faith and a church entering renewal and finding a vision and a plan but as a plan is put into action. Can you see how renewal takes this even deeper route?
6. Where do you feel God is inviting you and your church to your next tipping point for renewal? What is God's grace inviting you to do now? How might this be a tipping point of challenge? How can that be a tipping point of joy? 

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