



Growing Healthy Fellowships at all levels

In this document we explain some of the Biblical thinking undergirding the ministry of the HCFI family globally. We do this by using what has been summarized in the book *From Embers to a Flame* by Harry Reeder¹.

After his first missionary journey, the Apostle Paul determined to revisit the churches that had been established during his first trip. His purpose and intention in doing so was to encourage and strengthen those congregations, “And he went through Syria and Cilicia, **strengthening** the churches” (Acts 15:41, ESV). This work of **strengthening** the churches was not completed with a single visit. It is the same today. Until Jesus returns, all churches (Fellowships) need regular, continuing strengthening **through renewal and revitalization**.

Renewal is part of God’s ongoing work in us both individually in our personal growth in godliness and corporately in our life and service together in the Body of Jesus Christ.

Revitalization is what Harry Reeder focuses on in his book, *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church*. He reminds us of 10 biblical principles that are critical both for revitalizing churches whose flames have become embers and as “preventive measures for currently healthy churches” to keep on fanning the flames of spiritual vitality and service.

Harry Reeder’s book begins with a discussion, reinterpreted for HCFI: should we shut down old National Fellowships and get rid of old leaders and start all over OR should we revitalize all National Fellowships/leaders? Reeder’s conclusion: Revitalize the old Fellowships and start new Fellowships where there are no Fellowships. Keep on revitalizing all of them in the future.

Reeder emphasizes that the aim for Fellowships should be health, not growth. Health automatically leads to growth, but growth on its own can be unhealthy (examples: cancer; taking large doses of steroids to build muscles whilst living an unhealthy life-style).

Symptoms of unhealthy Fellowships:

- Elderly membership with small numbers of young people
- Declining attendance in Fellowship activities
- Focus on Programs to draw people
- Nostalgia and Tradition: fondly remembering the good old days when things went well and trying more of the same activities that used to work in the past but with decreasing impact
- Personality dependence: looking for someone with a strong enough personality to pull the Fellowship out of trouble
- Maintenance mentality: Well, if we just persevere, things will get better eventually. Hopefully...
- Excuses and Victim mind-set: It will not work here. We have tried everything, nothing works. You do not understand how difficult things are here. The people are too busy. Their churches swallow them up. We do not have enough money. We have no staff. Our committee is too small.
- HCF has a bad name: people think we are a dusty old organization with people from conservative churches and so they do not want to be associated with us.

¹ Extracted from the book *From Embers to a Flame* by Harry Reeder. Source: <https://eopc.org/embers-flame-eopc/> Accessed 12 June 2019

Embers to a Flame is a ministry of Briarwood PCA in Birmingham, Alabama. <https://briarwood.org/>

Edited and adapted for HCFI use by Chris Steyn. Note: the concepts that Reeder applies to churches have been applied to Fellowships as both are part of the Body of Christ.



Why should we aim to revitalize National Fellowships and aim for their health?

1. The Heart of the Shepherd, Matthew 18:12-14; Revelation 3:18-20
2. The Heart of the Apostle, Acts 13, 15:36, 15:41

In *From Embers to a Flame* Harry Reeder summarizes the fruit of his study of Paul's ministry to the Ephesian church as described in Acts, in the letter to the Ephesians and from the messages of Jesus to the seven churches (including Ephesus) in Revelation. In Revelation 2:4-5, Jesus says to the church in Ephesus, "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. **Remember** therefore from where you have fallen; **repent** and **do the works you did at first**. If not, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place, unless you repent" (ESV). Here is a church that was established by the Apostle Paul and, if church tradition is accurate, was ministered to subsequently by the Apostle John—quite a pedigree for a church. Yet, even having experienced the ministry of two champions of the faith, already in its first decades this church showed signs of decay, of having taken a wrong turn. Jesus, in His grace, speaks to this group of early Christians and calls them back to Himself. In Jesus' exhortation, we find the basic principles of church revitalization: **remembrance**, **repentance**, and **renewal**. The call is to remember the good from the past, to repent for the errors of past and present, and to return to the love and good works that characterized the beginning of faith in Jesus.

From the study of the Scripture mentioned above, Reeder distilled ten principles for revitalization in the Body of Christ. These principles have been extensively put into practice in many different parts of the world with real and lasting fruit being produced by healthy local churches.

Important for us in HCFI is to note Reeder's emphasis that disciple making multiplication is an integral part of being a healthy part of the Body of Christ.

Here are the 10 principles subdivided into the three elements listed above:

Remember:

1. Connect with the Past

Repent:

2. Call to Repentance

Recover:

3. Gospel-Driven and Christ-Centred Ministry
4. Personal Gospel Formation – The Discipline of Grace
5. The Ministry of Prayer
6. The Ministry of the Word
7. Mission and Vision
8. The Leadership Dynamic
9. Small-Group Discipleship
10. The Great Commitment to the Great Commission

We need to aim for healthy Fellowships at all levels through ongoing revitalization processes. Just like the Apostle Paul returned to visit churches he had planted to strengthen them (Acts 15:41), so all Fellowships need ongoing tending to become and remain strong in the Lord.



REMEMBER

1) Connect with the Past

To connect with the past is not to linger nostalgically, but to “remember the many wonderful things He [God] has done for us and through us” (Harry Reeder, *Embers to a Flame*, p. 37). Just like God commanded Joshua to set up twelve stones taken from the floor of the Jordan river so that generations to come would be reminded how God caused the waters to part and the Israelites to enter the promised land, so we take time to recount the wonderful works of God in the history of our (inter)national Fellowship. We do this not to glory in people from the past or in ourselves, but to point to the blessings and say, “Look at what God did. Isn’t He wonderful?” Remembering is taking the time to thank God for all His glorious deeds.

REPENT

2) Repent

The reality is, however, as we reflect on the past and consider where we are in the present, we are likely to discover shortcomings and sins. Jesus pointed out to the Ephesian Christians that they had left their first love. As Reeder puts it, “As you investigate and contemplate the past, you will soon realize that some things in it are not worth celebrating” (*Embers to a Flame*, p. 47). After connecting with the past to praise and thank God, we continue on to confess all the ways we have strayed from Him. This is a call to repentance. Jesus doesn’t leave the Ephesians wallowing in their error. He calls them to turn away from it and to return to Him. So, we too, are called to confess our sin and repent of it before the Lord. As we do so, He assures us of His love and forgiveness because we have Jesus as our high priest through whom we boldly approach the throne of grace (Heb. 4:15-16). Encouraged by God’s forgiveness and empowered by his Spirit, we move forward to renewal in Christ.

RECOVER

As Jesus said to the church in Ephesus in Rev. 2, “Do the works you did at first,” so we seek to recover or renew first things. Strategies three and four are the first two steps in recovering first things: Gospel-Driven and Christ-Centered Ministry and Personal Gospel Formation.

3) Gospel-Driven and Christ-Centered Ministry is a call to make the gospel “the priority, the parameter, and the preeminent point of our ministry so that Christ will be exalted above all” (Harry Reeder, *From Embers to a Flame*, p. 64). Everything we do as a church and individual Christians, from preaching in the pulpit to sweeping the floors, is to be done with a view to the gospel. We serve because God has saved us by his grace. We show love to one another in word and deed because of that same grace. And, we seek to encourage one another through the gospel by preaching it to ourselves and each other every day. As we remind ourselves and one another of the gospel, we engage in every form of ministry with a view toward winning others to faith in Jesus. And, as we grasp the depth of God’s love for us expressed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we naturally want to draw nearer to Him and to please Him—the core of strategy four, personal gospel formation. We need to be passionate about the Gospel and about sharing it with others.



4) Personal Gospel Formation is another way of describing our own personal Christian life as disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus calls us to repent and believe the good news of the Kingdom, assuring us that the Father desires to give us that kingdom (Luke 12:32). As He showers this blessing upon us, He also calls us to follow Him as His disciples: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23 ESV). This is inseparable from the task he gives us in the Great Commission, the discipling of the nations. To fulfill that work, we first need ourselves to be discipled, growing day by day in our intimacy with and in our love for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Personal gospel formation is the continual rekindling of our own “first love” (Rev. 2:4), living a life of devotion to and sacrifice for the Lord. It is gospel formation because it flows out of God’s grace to us: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service” (Rom. 12:1 ESV). We present ourselves to God because He has first shown us mercy. Reeder reminds us, “As we speak of these grace-driven disciplines, it is important to remember that we are embracing the means of grace to accomplish this, not engaging in an activity that merits grace” (From Embers to a Flame, p. 84). In Peter’s words, “...grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18 ESV). Both individually and as a body, as the Spirit forms and molds us through the gospel, we become a strong and healthy part of the Body of Christ, useful in the Master’s service.

5) The Ministry of Prayer. Both in the Old Testament and the New, we see that when God’s people pray, God moves and acts and performs wonders. On the day of Pentecost, the disciples were gathered for prayer in the upper room when God sent the Holy Spirit. Elijah prayed, and the sky became like impermeable metal allowing no water to rain upon the earth. He prayed again and a small cloud like a man’s hand grew to pour out water in flood-bringing proportions. Prayer humbly acknowledges our human frailty, weakness, and inability to accomplish anything without God Himself at work. A healthy Fellowship is a praying Fellowship, passionately and consistently calling on the Lord to work in and through them to accomplish great things for His glory. Without prayer, a Fellowship will be weak and unable to serve.

6) The Ministry of the Word. Equally, a Fellowship that does not listen to the Word of God cannot grow in grace. In Acts 6, the Apostles explained that it would not be proper for them to neglect the Word of God and prayer to serve tables. The ministry of mercy is critical in the life of the church, but without **the Ministry of the Word** that equips for all good service, health will be lost. Not only must the ministry of proclaiming the Word be a central commitment of a healthy Fellowship, but so must listening to that Word as well. Acts 2:42 tells us the first Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” They didn’t take the ministry of the Word for granted but embraced it because it communicated to them the Word of Life, the Word of Christ. A healthy Fellowship will be committed to the ministry of the Word.

7) Mission and Vision: By listening to the Word of God, the Fellowship also comes to understand its mission and vision. We need to know clearly what God wants to accomplish through us and how He wants us to do it. You first must know what God is calling you to do. But then you must move on to ask: What will this look like in our situation? What do we want our Fellowship to be, if the Lord wills? What are our hopes and dreams for the next five years, the next ten years, the next twenty years, the next generation?” (From Embers to a Flame, p. 134). A healthy Fellowship knows its mission and has a vision to accomplish it.



8) The Leadership Dynamic (Servant Leadership Multiplication): Whether in the church, in school, in business, in Christian organizations, in society in general, good leaders are absolutely necessary. It's part and parcel of the way organizations and ministries function—and God has created us this way. So, leadership is always present in any organization including the Body of Christ. Whether for good or for ill, leaders lead. As Reeder puts it, "I know there are some bad leaders, but even bad leadership works—it just doesn't produce the right results. Good leadership leads people the right way, and bad leadership leads people the wrong way—but either way, people are being led" (From Embers to a Flame, p. 149). To be a healthy Fellowship, the Fellowship needs to produce well-equipped, godly, wise leaders. This means giving attention to the intentional training, instruction, and discipleship of members so that they become, in due course, servant-leaders. Leaders in the Fellowship include both those appointed as (associate)staff and leaders who take an active role in serving in the Fellowships. In other words, you don't have to be appointed as a staff worker to serve. And, when you serve, at some point you're engaged in the work of leadership because what you do and how you do it influences others. A healthy Fellowship will develop servant leaders in the Lord's service.

9) Small-group Discipleship: This provides a means both for growth in the faith and ministry as well as for the intentional multiplication of disciple makers. As we gather together in Discovery Groups, we learn from each other's insights and we spend extended time thinking through a portion of God's Word. This helps us learn how to apply it daily in our lives. At the same time, small groups provide intimate fellowship so that we can fulfill all the "one another" commands of Scripture—being careful all the while that our small groups don't become cliques or factions in the Fellowship! We don't participate in small groups simply to see what we can get out of them for ourselves, but we participate to be a blessing to others and to learn to be even more outward focused. Small groups should stimulate us to serve rather than to be served. Small groups are a venue for fostering more prayer for each other and for the spread of the gospel, too. All these together contribute to the ongoing health and vitality of the Fellowship as a whole. The fruit of intentional multiplication of disciple makers is an increasing number of maturing leaders and volunteers who can become involved in the Fellowship.

10) The Great Commitment to the Great Commission. As Reeder reminds us, "No Bible passage informs our mission, and shapes our vision, more than the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20" (From Embers to a Flame, p. 187). That also means we need to put our money where our mouths are – we need to support our Fellowships financially with our personal money and we need to disciple others to a place where they are faithful stewards of the money God has entrusted to them. The Great Commitment to the Great Commission is a call to a life-style of whole-hearted obedience to our Lord and Savior out of love for Him.

Since 1997 the leadership of HCFI sought the Lord's guidance about the global ministry of HCFI. This has resulted in a Strategic Consensus Plan 2025. In that document we seek to summarize our understanding of what the Lord has on His heart for us to do together as a global family.

Let us collaborate to build healthy Fellowships that produce much fruit to the glory of our Father in obedience to Christ's Great Commission, John 15:8.