

*Today many Christians have gone into spiritual hibernation. The Lord longs to draw these disenfranchised people out of their dry wilderness back into a vital relationship with Him.*

# THE CHURCH OF DRY BONES

BY LEON VAN ROOYEN

## » REVIVING THE CHURCH

**I**n 1981, when I was still living in South Africa, I heard about a disease called AIDS. Although it sounded alarming, I didn't think much about it at the time because it didn't affect anyone I knew.

Little more than 20 years later the disease has reached pandemic proportions, with an estimated 40 million infected and more than 25 million dead from AIDS and HIV-related causes. When AIDS attacks, it decimates every aspect of society: education, financial stability, community and family structure. In short, AIDS kills far more than people; it kills the future.

Initially, inaction, indifference, apathy and even judgment kept much of the world from responding to the crisis in a timely fashion, allowing it to reach pandemic proportions. But there is hope.

I learned recently that in some African nations there are signs of fewer infections being recorded because of the efforts of people who have taken on the responsibility of combating the problem. The United Nations, nongovernmental organizations, ministries, churches, civic groups and government-sponsored programs are doing what they can to halt the spread of AIDS.

Some are educating, others are treating the sick and dying, and still others are caring for orphans. Organizations, corporations and philanthropic individuals

are joining together for the purpose of staying the human carnage, and their efforts are making a difference.

About 20 years ago, the church began experiencing a problem that led to its own form of "AIDS" pandemic: Absent Indifferent Disconnected Saints. It, too, has resulted in many "deaths"—spiritual deaths that have caused people to disconnect from the church. It is estimated that 13 million Christians (individuals who have been identified as having had a genuine salvation experience) have left the church in the U.S. since the early 1980s.

This crisis is of great importance to all of us because the church plays a major role in the life of the believer. It provides human lives with physical, spiritual, sociological, and even psychological structure and security.

When a person is born again, he is added to the universal church and, equally important, to the local church. As a social community and the foundation of our faith, the church is critical to our spiritual and physical well-being, and its health must be of paramount interest to us.

More important, we are commanded by

God to build and sustain the church. The church is God's means to communicate His salvation to the lost. As children of God, it is our responsibility and our privilege to be engaged in the building and maintenance of the church.

When we lose members, we all lose. Those who have left the church lose, and the church loses. Their pain and sense of separation is our loss. The only winner is the devil.

## *The Valley of Dry Bones*

In early 2005 I had an encounter with the Lord in which He showed me His plan for restoring the church. He was calling for powerful change, restoration and revival. I was drawn to the following Scripture passage, knowing that the God who raised the dry bones in Ezekiel's day could awaken a church of dry bones in our time.

**We need to focus on what we can do about the problem and trust that God will do what only He can do to restore life to the church.**

"The hand of the Lord came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and indeed they were very dry.

"And He said to me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' So I answered, 'O Lord God, You know.' Again He said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!' ... and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the Lord' (Ezek. 37:1-6, NKJV).

The prophet Ezekiel saw the Valley of Dry Bones through the Spirit. This valley depicted the nation of Israel, which was in a state of spiritual death from being defeated in battle. Israel had been promised conquest over her enemies, but the people had turned away from God and faced humiliation and defeat. The Israelites needed to be brought back to life.

What God showed Ezekiel was not only the spiritual state of Israel and their need for revival but also the role the prophet had to play in the process of revival. I believe there is a message here for us. How can we

apply this portion of Scripture to our lives and to the state of the church today?

It is important to note that Ezekiel did not act on his own initiative. It was only after he received a divine vision that he became involved and began to prophesy. His voice became the medium for God's Spirit to move over the dry bones.

The Bible tells us that without a vision people perish or are unrestrained, a law unto themselves (see Prov. 29:18). Without a vision, they are not committed to God's priority. It takes vision to mobilize a person to undertake what is seemingly impossible. But when man does his part, God will do His part.

God asked the prophet the question, "Can these bones live?" It was not a trick question but a prompt that would awaken involvement from the prophet.

It was as if Ezekiel was saying to God, "Lord, this is not something that man

can undertake, but with You all things are possible." God replied that the prophet needed to do what prophets do, and then He would do what only God can do. It is the same for us—we need to focus on the problem and what we can do about it, and trust that God will do what only He can do to breathe life back into the church.

## *Identifying the Problem*

When humanitarians and governments began their work to stem the tide of AIDS, they first studied the problem to identify contributing factors. Among the many they identified, four have particular relevance to the church's "AIDS" epidemic. Studying them, we can clearly see the parallels to our situation and begin to understand some of the underlying reasons why people leave the church.

**Poor organization.** Churches are often mismanaged, with unclear lines of communication and no specific vision or purpose. This prevents us not only from growing but also from maintaining existing membership. Examples of mismanagement include poor meeting planning, wrong

handling of finances, inaccessible pastors, uncooperative secretaries, and elders, deacons and other leaders who undermine the pastor's leadership. It is not difficult to see why Christians become disillusioned when faced with such disorganization.

**Inability to analyze problems and provide solutions.** Another weakness is that today's church is reactive, not proactive. Rather than confronting and resolving issues, we defer and deflect them, hoping they'll go away. We wait until things explode, and when they are not dealt with properly, we lose members.

**Insufficient biblical training and education.** Churches must take the time and effort to invest in the future rather than remaining caught up in the present. Instead of making members, the leadership should be making disciples (students). The Great Commission is a mandate not merely to reach people for Christ but also to raise them into spiritual maturity and effective ministry.

Paul chastised the believers of his day for neglecting this aspect of the commission: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food" (Heb. 5:12).

Churches are fragmented by immaturity in our ranks because we have sermons, rather than biblical training and the equipping of believers. In fact, making disciples is not enough; we need to raise disciples to become teachers, able to effectively communicate truth to others.

Sometimes the church is not as committed to growing leaders as it should be. Passionate individuals are stifled or discouraged, often because the current leadership is insecure. Leaders who are secure in their own calling are able to mentor others effectively and remain open to their ideas.

**Lack of teamwork.** In Africa, corruption and the inability of people to work together in some areas has slowed the progress on the AIDS front. The same is true for the church. Some among us are simply unkind and act in unchristian ways in our dealings with one another.

Churches are largely volunteer organizations that rely on the efforts and enthusiasm of those committed to the vision. If people have a sense of belonging and community, it is more difficult for

them to leave the church. The reason people leave en masse is often a lack of teamwork or community.

### **Restoration Plan**

The last part of the problem is perhaps the most fundamental: Believers need a new wave of commitment. Rather than attending meetings merely to get something, they should come to church out of a deep sense of loyalty and commitment. This commitment is born out of a love for the Lord and is evidenced by giving, praying, attending, participating and sharing the gospel.

Ezekiel was God's chosen vessel in the Valley of Dry Bones. Moses had his day of opportunity, Joshua had his day, Gideon and others played significant roles in bringing restoration in their days. Today God is seeking those He can use to bring change, restoration and revival.

God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy. When he obeyed, the Spirit began to move and the dry bones, symbolizing all

of Israel, came together until they all stood as a fully restored army of God.

What is God requiring of us today to restore our fallen in battle in this generation? Here are some things you can do.

» Pray daily for those you personally know who have left the church.

» Actively seek those who have left and share God's plan for His glorious church. Approach them with humility and love, and invite them to become a part of God's team again. Seek to understand what compelled them to disconnect and learn from their experiences. Refrain from judging them; instead carry in your heart God's tenderness and compassion for the brokenhearted.

» Welcome the returning saints with joy and acceptance. Treat them with dignity.

» Help get your local church in order. Build a church that is whole, healthy, well-run and accessible.

» Live a life of integrity.

» Encourage your pastor to raise up leaders who can continue the good work of the church and proactively approach

problems and opportunities.

» Request that your church provide a program for sound biblical training.

» Become involved in at least one area in your church. And remember: There is no place on the team for pettiness and unhealthy behavior; rather, the team should be connected through love.

Healthy spiritual lives and healthy churches will enable us to reconnect with our Absent Indifferent Disconnected Saints, the church's AIDS crisis. The disconnected can be restored if every Christian takes personal responsibility for the state of the church and seeks to reach and restore as many as he can.

As we all participate in the process of bringing life to the "dry bones," we will begin to see them take the shape of a mighty army once again. ♦

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