

"Eight Qualities of a Healthy Church"
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Acts 2:42-47 (TNIV)

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

How do you measure the health of a church?

If you go to the doctor, they have several ways to measure your health – height, weight, blood pressure, blood tests, MRIs... You can get a thick report with dozens of your measurements.

Researcher Christian Schwarz believed there must be some common principles behind healthy, growing churches – principles that work in various cultures and generations. He and his team set out to discover those principles. He developed what he calls Natural Church Development - Eight Qualities of a Healthy Church. (<http://www.ncd-international.org/>)

Natural Church Development is based on comprehensive research on the causes of church growth. More than 1000 churches in 32 countries on all 5 continents took part in the study. NCD focuses on unlocking the potential that God has already put into every church. NCD has been used in 26,000 churches as of 2004.

These are transferable concepts – they work in every culture. We're talking about organic principles, not cosmetic or faddish ideas. These are time-enduring principles.

Eight Measuring Sticks for Evaluating the Church - Characteristics of Healthy Churches (See your sermon insert)

1. Empowering Leadership

2 Timothy 2:2

“You have heard me teach many things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Teach these great truths to trustworthy people who are able to pass them on to others.” (NLT)

Notice I did not say “empowered” leadership, but “*empowering*” leadership. A healthy church does not need a “guru leader,” but a leader who works with other leaders to empower new, developing leaders.

Jesus made disciples. The disciples made disciples. Those disciples made disciples and on and on through the centuries and here we are. So, what is it that we are to do?

Healthy churches are those where there is a **good match** of pastor and congregation. The vision of one is a close match with the vision of the other.

There is healthy delegation and sharing of ministry.

Healthy churches look for young leaders and we develop those leaders.

Paul did that with Timothy.

1 Timothy 4:12

“Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.”

Healthy churches develop leadership through mentoring and equipping. Long before the Nominating Committee meets to invite people to become elders and deacons, new leaders have already been given opportunities, training, feedback.

Leadership is expressed through casting vision for the church. Lofty, but attainable goals are shared. Some churches express their goals through regulations. If you’re often hearing things like, “Did that get approved by the Board?” the church is probably weak on “empowering leadership.”

Rather, ministries and ideas are evaluated by whether they match the vision and values of the church.

Healthy churches are churches that accept change. We don’t get to choose whether we will change. Members will move away, some will die, all with change. So, we can resist every change, or we can get out ahead of it.

Delegation is used to develop others not just to lighten a leader’s workload. Make sure that you help enhance personal growth through the ministry assignment. Delegation can be a wonderful way to disciple others. Delegation is more than giving someone else a job. It includes transferring authority, responsibility and accountability to another person or group.

Elders and ministry leaders: who have you delegated responsibility and authority to lately?

For Reflection:

How are people treated in our congregation who seem to continually have new/different ideas of how to do ministry?

Leaders: What training is available for people stepping into positions of ministry in the church? What positions of ministry have no training available?

2. Gift-oriented ministry

We are talking about spiritual gifts.

1 Peter 4:10

“Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.”

(also 1 Corinthians 12:28)

When people serve according to their giftedness, they find that they are fruitful – they find that the result is something wonderful– more than what can be accounted for by talking skills, talents and hard work – a God-thing. When we serve according to our giftedness, we find that

God is working through us. And when that happens, we are more fulfilled. At the end of the day we say, “that was time well spent.”

On the other hand, when we serve out of guilt – maybe somebody put pressure on us or shamed us into service, we serve alone, we feel drained and used and we become resentful and we end up burnt out.

When you’re serving God in the church according to your spiritual giftedness, you find your calling. All of us who serve are the ministers of the church – we are called into ministry by the Holy Spirit. That’s a far higher calling than to be “drafted” by some ministry coordinator.

So, what role does spiritual giftedness have in how we serve Christ?

For Reflection:

Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? Are you serving in a way that matches your spiritual gifts?

Leaders: How intentional are you in placing people in ministry assignments according to their spiritual gifts, and to what extent are people working outside their area of giftedness?

More: How well is the concept of spiritual gifts accepted? Is it mostly an intellectual acceptance, or do you see it accepted in a way that makes a difference in how the people function?

3. Passionate spirituality

Matthew 22:37

“Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’”

Acts 2:42-47

42They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

You don’t get the impression that they were doing these things if their work schedule allowed, or their kids’ soccer schedule was amenable to their church involvement. There is not much in their culture that encouraged the believers to worship, study the Bible and share with one another. No tax deductions for generous giving, no good neighbor awards. They did not enjoy majority status in Jerusalem. They did not live in a culture that had Judaeo-Christian principles woven throughout as we do. But they were devoted, passionate about their life together.

Passionate spirituality is not something you have, it is a path that you are on.

In a healthy church...People are engaged in personal spiritual disciplines – prayer, Bible reading and study, service. People are loved for who they are, but encouraged to not stay who they are. They are encouraged to grow.

How do you measure spiritual maturity?

Is it how much time and money a person gives to the church? Is it their tenure as a member? Is it how much Bible knowledge they have?

No, God measures our spiritual maturity by how much we hate what is evil, how much we love unlovable people. By our flexibility and teachability. Are we peaceable, content, joyful in every situation? That's spiritual maturity. (1 Timothy 3)

In a healthy church...We value and practice personal spiritual disciplines – also corporate spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, worship, giving.

In a healthy church, our faith is attractive to those outside our faith, contagious.

For Reflection:

What is the role of prayer in your life and ministry?

Leaders: What ministries do you have that encourage the practice of personal spiritual disciplines?

More: In what ways do you see your people practicing corporate spiritual disciplines such as celebration, worship, submission, accountability and intercession?

4. Functional structures

1 Corinthians 14:40

“But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.” (“decently and in order”)

Ephesians 4:15-16

“Instead, we will hold to the truth in love, becoming more and more in every way like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. Under his direction, the whole body is fitted together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.”

We're talking about how we make decisions, how we implement new ministries. Each church must have a polity, politics – the use of power together. Do we know who needs to be in on decisions – for example – the decision to take out pews and put in chairs, or the decisions involved in restoring our stained glass windows? Do we have an accepted protocol? Does it work effectively so that changes can be made when needed.

Functional structures encourage creativity and make necessary changes in appropriate ways.

Healthy churches find ways to solve problems when they occur. When something is broken, we find a way to fix it.

These days, for people to come to church – you need at least three very practical functional structures: 1) a place to park their car. 2) a place to park their – themselves – with ample space in between, and 3) if they have children, we have to have top-quality, energetic ministries for children and youth.

Experts say that when a church grows to the point where on average over 3 months you are at 75-80% of capacity – in any one area: the parking lot, the sanctuary or the children's space – you have hit your lid; your growth will slow and stop. Whichever limit you hit first, that's

where you are likely to stop growing. In other words you can have a parking lot adequate for 1000 people, but if you only have seating for 200, you won't grow past 200. And vice-versa.

We're there now. During our heavier seasons, we fill the sanctuary to about 75%. We can squeeze more in – and throughout our history we have for short periods of time – but our church keeps hitting a growth ceiling and bounces back.

Our parking lot is easily 80% full on average Sundays. If a visitor comes at 10:30 on one of those Sundays – which is when visitors are most likely to come, and they have trouble finding a parking space close by – they may very likely turn around and go to brunch. If the only seat they can find is the front row, they may not feel comfortable and safe here.

There are various options for solving the problem –which is really a wonderful opportunity. Do we have functional structures adequate for addressing the issue?

For Reflection:

Can you describe the decision-making process in our church for major decisions and minor decisions?

Leaders: What have you done in the last year to help people connect with your stated vision?

More: Which ministries have designated leaders and which don't? Do each of the leaders have someone they report to and from whom they receive oversight? How many report directly to the pastor?

5. Inspiring worship service

Acts 2:43, 46

“Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

v. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,

John 4:24

“God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

Psalms 122:1

“I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’”

In a healthy church...

- ? The worship is alive to the presence of God
- ? Worship is culturally appropriate and meaningful to the way we live.
- ? Worship is modeled by leaders. Worship is led by people who worship. It all begins with our individual worship life.

- ? There is a clear theme for each service.
- ? There are effective transitions and flow
- ? Maximum participation (Liturgy= “the work of the people”)
- ? Vital worship calls for a response. Worship is not something you watch or enjoy. Worship should be mind-altering, life-changing experience.

People leave church feeling inspired, energized, eager to practice their faith.

The music, no matter what style, is God-centered and celebrative at times, and, at times, soothing and contemplative.

The preaching is not just interesting or entertaining, but for the purpose of life transformation.

Worship services are well planned and part of that preparation is prayer. Visitors are welcomed and included – gently and lovingly. Children are welcomed and cared for with excellence.

For Reflection:

Tell of a time when you specifically felt the presence of the Lord touching you or others in the service. To what extent do you feel this experience of feeling the presence of the Lord is a regular occurrence in your church?

Leaders: Who are the intercessors you have mobilized to pray for the worship services? Do you have a significant pre-service prayer time?

More: How do we evaluate worship services for improvement?

Evaluate the flow of the worship service. Is the opening of the service inspiring, does it engage people? Do the transitions between segments happen well? Is there “dead space” between them?

How does our style of music relate to the kind of people you are reaching and those you want to reach? Is there a difference?

Would you characterize the people who lead the singing portion of your worship service as “song leaders” or “worship leaders” based on what they do, not on their title? i.e. Do they primarily lead the congregation in singing songs or do they facilitate worship in what they say, do and the way they conduct themselves?

What opportunities are provided for response to the sermon? For example: open sharing time, prayer – together or one-on-one, counseling, small group followup questions based on the sermon, devotional guidelines for the week based on the sermon, etc.

6. Holistic small groups

Acts 2:46

“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts...”

Acts 5:42

“Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

Hebrews 10:24-25

“Think of ways to encourage one another to outbursts of love and good deeds. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage and warn each other, especially now that the day of his coming back again is drawing near.”
(NLT)

In a healthy church...people are encouraged to meet together in smaller groups that are spiritually oriented. People have many opportunities to develop relationships in authentic community.

In a healthy church, small groups reproduce – new groups, new leaders.

For Reflection:

What does group life look like when “God shows up”? Does your group experience this on a regular basis?

Leaders: What evidence do you have that indicates our groups are actually meeting the needs of people in the groups?

More: To what extent is prayer an integral part of small group life? Do all small groups include times of prayer? How about music? How about non-musical forms of worship?

What roles or responsibilities are there for individuals in the group besides small group leader?

7. Need-oriented evangelism

Acts 2:47b

“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

Matthew 28:19-20

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

In a healthy church...

We have disciples in all stages of spiritual development, including the stage of new birth.

We are often bringing spiritual babies into the world. Like a family, we experience loss and death of members, but we also experience births and adoptions. If we want only to survive, we need many spiritual births and adoptions.

Carol and I found that when we brought our new lives into the world, the whole world changed right before our eyes. The world became more colorful, more wonderful than ever before. The simplest, most mundane activities of life became adventures – a baby’s first bite of real food, first steps, a successful trip to the bathroom, even garbage trucks – what a wonder! - a child’s successful report card. Becoming a grandparent is a similar kind of experience.

That is what evangelism does for a church. It brings an air of excitement. The words of God become more meaningful. Worship is more energizing.

I want our church to be a spiritual maternity ward – because God cares about people who are spiritually confused, lost and alone - and I care about people who do not have Jesus. But I want it for another reason – because I know how it will energize you and me – the spiritual senior citizens of the church.

There’s a third reason. Because I want to bring joy to God; I want to hear heaven rejoice. The Bible says that there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents and turns to God through Christ.

“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”
(Luke 15:7, repeated in verse 10)

So, in a healthy church, we are learning to share our faith with others. And we are planning strategies for corporate evangelism – sharing our faith together through worship experiences, outreach ministries.

For Reflection:

To what extent are you actively seeking to develop redemptive relationships with pre-Christians? Give examples.

Leaders: What percentage of our church programming is directed towards evangelistic ministries? What percentage of the church budget – staffing, program and mission- is directed towards evangelization?

To what extent do our worship services facilitate evangelism, or do you have special services that are more seeker oriented?

Is your home a disciple-making ministry?

Pollster George Barna:

Nearly half of all Americans who called themselves “born again” made their professions of faith before age 13 (43%), and two out of three born-again Christians did so before age 18 (64%). 13% received Christ between the ages of 18 and 21, and 23% after age 21.

Younger converts (before age 13) are more likely as adults to describe themselves as “deeply spiritual,” give more money to church, and engage in lifestyle evangelism.

Half of all Americans who describe themselves as “born-again,” say they were led to faith by a parent, another 20% by some other relative or friend; and 7% by a minister. (www.barna.org)

8. Loving relationships

Acts 2:44-46

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts...

One of the most remarkable aspects of that early church was the way people cared for each other. “My, how they love one another,” wrote one historian.

I suspect that if we asked each one of you why you come here to FPC, you would say something like, “my friends are here...we’ve been through some great times and some tough times together. These people have been there for me – and they need me to be there for them.”

In a healthy church...

- There is an atmosphere of joy and trust
- There are Interdependent relationships
- You receive affirmation and encouragement
- There is conflict – and Intentional conflict resolution

For Reflection:

To what extent do church members/regular attenders invite others into their homes?

How have you seen people supporting one another in your congregation?

Leaders: When people do something new or for the first time, is there affirmation expressed, criticism or silence? How does your church respond to people who try and fail at a new ministry or responsibility?

More: Using an example of conflict resolution in your church’s (recent) history, how would you evaluate the ability of the congregation and the pastor to face and deal with conflict in a healthy way?

So, how are we doing?

We need to be strong on all eight of these quality characteristics. We need to be strong in every area.

Are you doing your part? Are you ministering somewhere, using your spiritual gifts? Are you coming to worship prayerfully prepared to experience the miracle of God's presence? Are you developing redemptive relationships with people outside the faith? Are you seeking out the needs of others within the church?

We all have a part in the health and growth of the church. None of us can make the church grow. That is God's job.

1 Corinthians 3:5-6, 9

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ..

...For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

My dream for First Presbyterian Church is that we become a healthy church and a growing church.

We can plant the seeds, we can water the seeds – let each one of us be faithful to do our part to be a healthy church, and God will bring the growth.