



Church Health Defined

The VisionTest consulting service is a Church Health Assessment. By definition, this type of assessment concerns itself with the health of a specific local church. However, what is a healthy church? By what standard can we measure the health of our local church? What is unhealthy, healthy, and very healthy?

I maintain that church leaders should consider four primary things in their definition of church health. These things are Scriptural Characteristics, Cultural Relevance, Resource Development, and a Church Growth Mentality.

Scriptural Characteristics

Most would agree that a healthy evangelical church is based upon the Great Commission of Christ in Matthew 28:18-20 where He tells the disciples, and in effect tells us, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

What does it mean to make disciples and what are we to teach them? We know that as the early church attempted to live under this Great Commission, they had certain practices that we see in Acts 2:41-47: *⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he 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.*

Upon closer inspection, we see that these things taught in the descriptive, historical genre of Acts are later reiterated and enhanced by the writers of the New Testament epistles where these writers, inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16) state them as prescriptive principles that the church should practice.

There have been many modern attempts to summarize these Scriptural Characteristics of Church Health. One expression of these purposes is in the *Church Health Survey* administered by The Lawless Group. This instrument summarizes the elements of church health as **worship, evangelism, discipleship, ministry, fellowship, and prayer.**

Rick Warren in his landmark work, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Zondervan: 1995) summarized these as Outreach (Evangelize), Worship (Exalt), Fellowship (Encourage), Discipleship (Edify), and Service (Equip). The one distinction between his list and that of the Church Health Survey is that he combines Prayer with Worship.

George Barna has also looked at this in his work, *The Habits of Highly Effective Churches: Being Strategic in Your God-Given Ministry* (Regal, 1999). He has other categories of effectiveness (health), but the content of Acts 2 is clearly represented in his list.

Thom Rainer and Ed Stetzer studied some 7000 churches recently and addressed the matter of church health in their joint effort, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (B&H Books, 2010). Central to their thesis is a return to and a reaffirmation of the need to make disciples. In the words of the Amazon book summary, *“Stetzer and Rainer clearly confirm the importance of disciple making for all through active biblical engagement and prayerful dependence on God alongside of ever-increasing, intentional participation in mission and ministry activities.”*

Each of these modern works and studies confirm that we must focus our church programs in the Scriptural priorities of worship, evangelism, discipleship, ministry, fellowship, and prayer.

Cultural Relevance

Another dimension of Church Health that we must consider is Cultural Relevance. External culture does not define the purpose and values of the church. Nevertheless, it should inform our methods and the expression of our purpose and values.

We see a good example of this by comparing Jesus’ communication with Nicodemus in John 3 and the woman at the well in John 4. With Nicodemus, a teacher of the law, he refers to Moses lifting up a snake in the desert (a reference to the historical incident recorded in Numbers 21) knowing that this was part of Nicodemus’ cultural experience not only as a Jew but also as a teacher. By contrast, he makes no such Old Testament references with the Samaritan woman. Instead, he takes her everyday cultural experience of drawing water at a well and turns the conversation to spiritual matters in that context. Even when she gives a historical reference to Jacob, Jesus stays on the track of the spiritual parallel of water and eternal life.

Paul’s behavior and communication style in Acts 17 is another example of why church health must include a discussion of cultural relevance. While Paul was quite adept at speaking from

the law to those whose cultural experience was the law, we see none of this in Acts 17. He is in a non-Jew environment and so he makes no appeal to the truth of the law. In fact, he commends them for being religious (17:22), he quotes from the words on an idolatrous altar (17:23), and he quotes from a Greek poet (17:28). The outcome was that, ³² *When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."* ³³ *At that, Paul left the Council.* ³⁴ *A few men became followers of Paul and believed."*

Paul wrote about the importance of culturally relevant ministry in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, ¹⁹ *though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.* ²⁰ *to the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.* ²¹ *To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.* ²² *To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.* ²³ *I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."*

Aubrey Malphurs, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and church consultant, included cultural relevance in the first edition of his model in *Advanced Strategic Planning: A New Model for Church and Lay Ministry Leaders* (Baker, 1999). His point was that in order to define your vision, you must look at your mission (Matthew 28:18-20) in the light of your environment. He goes on to define five aspects of our environment that we should consider: social, philosophical, political, economic, and technological. These will be different in each church setting and therefore our vision and programming must be different if we are going to follow Jesus and Paul's example.

The *Percept* demographic tool is just one sophisticated approach to getting in touch with our culture. A church defines what geographical area it would like to study. The *Percept* tool then uses statistical data from a number of sources to paint a very detailed picture of who lives in that area. This data gives the church insight into how to shape their programming to reach their culture.

Resource Development

When we try to build programs that have Scriptural characteristics and cultural relevance, we soon see that there are other dimensions to this. For example, as we seek to have a strong ministry, no matter what our church polity, we will usually have questions about the role of the church staff versus the board. Policies are also required to ensure that we work together and that we comply with the law.

In addition, as the church grows, we will need to add both ministry and operational or administrative staff. The staff requires coaching and encouragement so that they can see how their efforts fit the overall vision of the church. They also require administration of their wages and benefits

The ministries of the church will require equipment that is unique to their ministry. We will also have a growing need to invest in information systems. Eventually, we may also reach the limits of the capacity of our land and facility.

Most of these matters require the development of funding resources. Some of them require an understanding of how to attract, manage, and retain staff. All of them will compete for resources and will require that the church pay attention to resource development.

Kennon Callahan (Twelve Keys To An Effective Church, Jossey-Bass, 1987) has recognized the importance of Resource Development and referred to the importance of such things as Open Site Accessibility, High Visibility, Parking and Land, Space and Facilities, and Solid Financial Resources. Barna (The Habits of Highly Effective Churches), Warren (The Purpose Driven Church), and Schwarz (Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches, ChurchSmart Resources, 1996) also say that paying attention to organization structure is essential. Finally, Gary McIntosh (One Size Doesn't Fit All: Bringing Out the Best in Any Size Church, Revell, 1999) has stated better than most that as the church grows we must redefine the role of the pastor, the staff, the board, and the congregation.

An important part of Church Health is having an objective view of the resources we have for ministry and developing them.

Church Growth Mentality

Finally, Church growth is clearly one important aspect of Church Health. Numerical growth is a by-product of having the Scriptural characteristics of health, of being culturally relevant, and of developing the necessary resources for the church. Although it is a by-product, we can have a mentality biased toward growth or one that is ambivalent toward it.

Numerical growth is stated in Mt 28, "*make disciples of all nations*", which clearly means make **more** disciples. If you have this many disciples now, and you make more, your church should grow numerically. It is there in Acts 2, when 3,000 were added to the church in one day and the Lord added daily to their number. We also see attention paid to numbers and growth throughout the remainder of the book of Acts (2:47, 6:7, 11:21, 16:5, 17:12). Finally, it is there in Mt 9 when Jesus told us the harvest is plentiful. The church is supposed to grow numerically.

Against this obvious and compelling Scriptural early church example, and the charge to the church of all ages, the statistics today for the church in America are staggering. David T. Olson called our attention to this recently in his research of over 200,000 churches. In his book, The

American Church in Crisis (Zondervan, 2008), he maintains that on any given weekend in America between 2000 and 2005 there was a decline in the percentage of the population attending a Christian church in every state across the country. One can only ask what is wrong with the church in America. If it is not growing, what is missing?

These and other questions led Christian Schwarz in an earlier decade to write *Natural Church Development* based on a study of more than 1000 churches in 32 countries on all five continents. He sought to answer the question, “*What church growth principles are true regardless of culture and theological persuasion?*” While the church in America is not growing overall, some clearly are while others are declining even more than the national or statewide statistics. Not surprisingly, Schwarz’s Eight Essential Qualities contain many of the Acts 2 elements. Stated another way, the Scriptural Characteristics of Church Health, if practiced, generally lead to Church Growth.

One final thought on this topic is worth mentioning from Don Cousin’s recent work, *Experiencing LeaderShift: Letting Go of Leadership Heresies* (David C. Cook, 2008). Cousins defends the importance of an Ephesians 4 biblical church model that releases all believers to Holy Spirit empowered ministry and evangelism. To his credit, he emphasizes the underlying Acts 2 factors that will lead to health and growth and speaks against a prideful focus on numbers. If anything, in his effort to get leaders to keep these priorities and principles of health and growth straight, he slips into a false dichotomy by advocating for the qualitative factors of health and advocates merely noticing numbers. The false dilemma is the suggestion that focusing on the Acts 2 factors must be at the exclusion of focusing on making more disciples. In fact, our charge from Scripture is to exhibit the qualitative factors for health and growth while we ensure that our churches are also growing numerically. We need to do more than just notice that this is happening. We need to do all that we can to make more disciples.

We can measure and pursue numerical growth in a number of ways. For example, when we invest in missions efforts regionally and globally, we are investing in growth beyond our local context. However, locally we can also have different growth mechanisms. For some, the capacity of their facility and land will allow growth on site for many years. Others will need to or want to consider relocation or church planting when they are reaching their facility capacity or for philosophical reasons. Still others will consider multi-site ministry as an option for growth. Today’s technology and other factors offer innovative approaches to extending the reach of a church and fostering church growth.