

Signs of a Healthy Church

Every pastor has great aspirations of leading a healthy church, especially before we take on the assignment. All too often unfortunately, the realisation of that possibility seems a remote dream. Others however persevere and sometimes see fruit for their labour. The New Testament Church was fraught with imperfections, just as churches always have been, but remember Jesus loved the church and died for it. His sacrifice was not in vain. Jesus said,

'I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.' Matthew 16:18

Some of the topics looked at here are studied in greater depth further on in this manual. These pointers mentioned are not always observed from a fleeting Sunday visit, as all churches have their special Sundays when things go extra well and others where the service seems uninspiring! Even healthy churches will go through rough spots because of spiritual conflict. The following subjects may give some indication of a healthy church.

Unity

The atmosphere of a healthy church is a strong sense of expectancy. The people must be united in purpose and love for Jesus and others for this expectancy to be realised. That is why Paul writes:

'Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.'
Ephesians 4:3.

In one of the first churches I pastored, I spent most of my time working among the fringe people of the church and evangelising the lost, but in this course of direction I lost a sense of oneness with some of my leaders. The church grew, people were saved, but an unresolved friction arose within leadership, that persisted for many years and eventually caused a drop in attendance. I have noticed that major divisions in churches normally arise through disunity among the elders and then transfers down to the next level of leadership. Therefore, above all else, consistently work closely with all your leaders. Let them catch your spirit and vision. Create a loving atmosphere where the leadership is free to express disagreement without a hidden agenda. Self-denial and self-control can be challenging but they play an essential role in preserving unity.

Unity in the Spirit takes time and much effort. It is not just a matter of getting together for meetings but must include social occasions for fun and laughter. Do not forget how to play!

Goal Setting

Jesus was a goal setter. Jerusalem was his destination, where he hung upon a cross and on the third day rose from the dead. The Apostle Paul was also a goal setter. He travelled widely, planted churches and returned to follow up.

Goal setting has led some people astray into empire building which is an unholy ambition. Others avoid it, as goal setting has the possibility of measuring failure. It is true though, as the Authorised Version puts it, 'Where there is no vision, the people perish'. The church is not a business; it is a spiritual organism. Keeping that in mind we need to recognise that even Jesus strategised when he chose the 12 disciples to spread the gospel of the kingdom by visiting the local towns.

Every Christian leader should be familiar with the term 'Mission statement' *and* the concept of 'Vision'. Unfortunately, some authors differ in how this is to be defined. The Mission statement refers to a philosophical understanding of where you are heading. For myself, it is the fulfilment of God's call on my life 'to be fruitful'. Yours will probably differ. The Vision statement refers to a practical outworking of the Mission statement. Where I am pastoring at present our church leaders coined the phrase 'Christ in the community, here, there and everywhere'. The activities we put energy into, are determined by whether they fall in line with our Mission statement or not. One Christian leader has for his Mission statement, 'To know Him and to make Him known'.

Goal setting and seeking the Lord for direction should be a spiritual exercise through prayer, time and discussion. Do not avoid it. Be prepared to take risks!

Releasing people into their giftings

Although the use of people's gifts is firmly grounded in Scripture (e.g. Epistle to the Ephesians 4:11), it requires courage for a pastor to train others and release them into ministry. Within any congregation, some pastors may recognise that others are more gifted in areas such as preaching, counselling, worship leading, or administration — and often this is true. Yet churches that are truly moving with God are marked by a congregation that is both motivated and actively involved. Pastors need not feel threatened by the growth, success, or promotion of others rather such empowerment develops respect and appreciation.

Failing to entrust people with meaningful responsibilities not only hinders the growth of the church but also leads to frustration among those who are gifted. While many pastors affirm the value of shared ministry comparatively few consistently put it into practice.

Prayer

The Early Church was a praying church. Prayer can be hard work, it may seem unproductive but eventually it always reaps fruit.

Prayer groups, either using formal or informal structures, are present in healthy churches. These groups may be large or small and are genuine, earnest, passionate and also know how to wait quietly upon the Lord for insight and revelation. These churches may have prayer chains where urgent requests are being prayed for around the clock to God.

Some churches put out monthly prayer calendars and constantly pray, not only for their own local situation, but for missionaries and countries around the world.

These churches often give direction for prayer and fasting with regular half nights of prayer. Prayer brings a deep joy into the church as nothing else can. It is a means of protecting the people from harm and conflict and seeing realistic faith goals come to fruition.

Worship

Healthy churches approach worship expectant of God's presence and open to change led by the Spirit. Try not to get trapped into one set style of worship as God moves in many ways.

These churches are normally contemporary in their expression of worship and build up the congregation's expectancy of God moving. They also experience something of the supernatural power of God through answers to prayer and miracles. It is common for people to regularly come to know the Lord through worship services.

People belonging to these churches who have missed a Sunday worship service, like to catch up not so much on what the pastor spoke about, but rather on what God did.

Preaching

Without a doubt preachers differ in style from one another due to their different backgrounds and personalities. However, in a healthy church the preacher imparts practical relevant teaching that the ordinary person can understand. He deals with life issues and equips the people to tackle the week ahead with confidence.

For those in the congregation who want more in depth study of the Word, opportunities for different levels of teaching come through Bible Schools, special seminars and home groups.

Missions

The backbone of any church is undoubtedly its involvement in missions. Churches that centre all their energy upon themselves may become introverted and divisive Those who give, pray and send out many of their best people to other towns and countries will experience God's blessing.

The Pastor

The pastor is a key to the ongoing success of any healthy church. He is the driving force that can make it or break it. Healthy churches recognise that someone needs to lead and the Senior Pastor is normally the leader. The pastors and leaders work together as a team seeking to complement each other for the ongoing work of the Kingdom.

Although the pastor is highly visible, without being authoritative, he should be free to minister elsewhere for short periods of time. The church will normally thrive during these occasions, and it will also enable other leaders to rise and mature with the extra responsibility thrust upon them. The absence of the pastor for short periods of time is also essential if he is to experience personal refreshment and vision for the ongoing work of the Local Church.