

Becoming a Healthy Church

Ten Traits of a Vital Ministry

Foreword by Haddon Robinson

Afterword by Gordon MacDonald

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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Second printing, June 2005

Paperback edition published 2003

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

ISBN 0-8010-1177-9 (hardcover)
ISBN 0-8010-6503-8 (paperback)

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1

Essential Ingredients of a Healthy Ministry

What would you say constitutes the foundation of a healthy church ministry? Many slogans suggest ideas, but wouldn't you agree that the Word of God and prayer are fundamental? They are two of God's greatest gifts to us. In them we find comfort, direction, and hope. In them we discover God through his Spirit. In them we grow in our relationship with our Savior. In them we learn about where we have come from and who we are to become today.

This came home to me with new power when my beloved mother suffered a massive stroke. My father found her collapsed in her small bathroom across the hall from her bedroom. She had just had back surgery five days earlier and was feeling great now that the crippling pain was gone. The surgery was considered a success—until the blood clot that formed in her arteries was thrust to the right hemisphere of her brain.

My mother was admitted into the ICU, fully medicated yet somewhat alert, and my father, my sisters, and I gathered around her bed. Her roaming eyes showed that she knew who was there—the four people she loved the most. Before we had to leave, she made a request that startled all of us—she wanted to recite the Twenty-third Psalm and pray the Lord's Prayer. With glassy eyes, clammy hands, and stammering words, we gave it our best and were able to get out most of the words. While we were struggling to recite Scripture and pray our favorite prayer, my mother, even in her weakened state, was able to move her lips and didn't skip a word. And in the months that followed that infamous day in our lives, her greatest comfort was found in the reading of Scripture and in times of prayer.

Scripture and Prayer Are Essential

Yes, the Scriptures and prayer are the bedrock of our existence as Christ's followers, yesterday, today, and forever. Both the study of, reflection on, and obedience to the Word of God and the cultivation of our relationship with the Almighty One in prayer are to permeate our experience and expression as Christians.

When the Ten Characteristics of a Healthy Church was written, we decided not to give the Scriptures and prayer their own separate categories. We believed it would indicate that the Bible and prayer are distinct aspects of our individual and church experiences, separate from the wider context of our lives. Instead, you will see that the centrality of the Bible and prayer is in every one of the ten characteristics. They are essential ingredients for our personal lives and for our community worship, ministry, and life together.

In our recent survey of 1,899 Christians, most people strongly agreed that local churches should "be prayerful in all aspects of church life and ministry" as well as be "reliant upon God's power and the authority of his Word." With nine points being the highest, prayerfulness got a mean score of 8.71, and God's power and Word got a mean score of 8.84.

Strangely, though Scripture and prayer are highly valued, they are more often promoted than practiced. We not only need to reinvigorate our congregations toward greater biblical literacy, but we must reevaluate our traditional view of prayer meetings and introduce prayer into every context of the ministry.

Immanuel Baptist Church in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, has managed to do both. They see Scripture as the script for worship, and preaching as its main application. They place the highest priority on creatively integrating the Word of God into the morning worship services. Pastor Gary Moore says, "Our morning service is so permeated by the Word of God that it becomes for us a window to heaven. As we encounter the God of Scripture, in his holiness we are reminded of our sinfulness; in his mercy we find forgiveness; in his majesty we find cause for praise and adoration. We are empowered by the Word for life as we sing it, read it, and hear it preached in worship."

This priority of knowing and living the Word of God permeates every ministry of Immanuel Baptist, which offers a multitude of significant programs. Personally, Pastor Moore gives a great amount of time to helping individuals grow in Scripture knowledge and theology. On Wednesday mornings he meets with a small group of men for personal discipling. Every other Wednesday evening, he has been helping another group of men take a historical look at prayer, using a variety of books on the subject.

Scripture and prayer, we found, are at the heart of every truly healthy church.

Lessons from Healthy Churches

In addition to an emphasis on God's Word and prayer, the one hundred churches we visited revealed nine common indicators of health. (For more information on the questionnaire used in these visits and a report on the findings, see VNE's website. The address is listed on the last page of this book.) These churches represent a wide range of theological persuasions, ethnic diversity, congregation sizes, denominational affiliations, and settings.

1. *Love, acceptance, and forgiveness.* In every case, the first theme that surfaced was love, acceptance, and forgiveness. The healthiest churches we visited created an environment of acceptance. People could enter just the way they were, allowing the Holy Spirit to do the refining work within their hearts. No one had to measure up to unwritten codes of ethics. No one was subjected to judgmental attitudes. Instead, the ongoing celebration of the community experience fostered a genuine love for one another that permeated their life together. I found myself drawn in to each church by this one attribute. Such strong, supernatural power is released in churches that exhibit unconditional love—sounds a lot like Jesus, don't you think?

2. *Relational integrity.* The second theme feeds off the first: relational integrity. In the healthy churches we visited, broken people felt safe because these churches exhibited authenticity and transparency in their relationships. They believed firmly that in order for genuine community to be achieved, the attitude and atmosphere of love needed to be modeled first in their life as a family of God before anyone else would ever be drawn to their fellowship. In addition, the pastors and key leaders in these churches made a point of teaching on relational issues like integrity, honesty, communication, conflict resolution, building trust, and learning how to forgive. This teaching was done from the pulpits, in adult education, and in gathering places outside the context of a Sunday morning experience. The variety of small groups in these churches was genuinely staggering: couples' groups, midweek family groups, men's and women's groups, singles Bible studies, missions prayer groups, and more traditional Bible studies. Bottom line—come together on a regular basis for authentic, transparent relationship-building.

3. *Hunger for personal growth.* We discovered a consistent hunger for personal growth in both congregations and individuals. People showed

a strong desire to know God in an intimate manner. In fact, the most commonly mentioned study guide used in many of these churches was the best-selling work by Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God*. A strong adherence to biblical truth also characterized every setting. The experience of God is outweighing the knowledge of God and his Word in so many ministries that it was refreshing to see a genuine balance in the many churches we interviewed. It's important that we keep a copy of the Scriptures open to refer to along the way while at the same time experiencing his delight in us as his children.

4. *Shift from traditional to contemporary worship.* The fourth theme apparent in healthy churches was the shift in worship from the traditional to the contemporary. Worship teams and bands are being utilized more and more all the time. Church organs and large choirs are being replaced by a wide variety of instruments and up-front soloists and worship leaders. Larger congregations often offer both the traditional and the contemporary expressions of worship to suit the multigenerational style preferences represented in our churches today.

This is not big news; it merely emphasizes the consistent trend of healthy, vibrant congregations not only in our region but all across the country. In the description of God-Exalting Worship in chapter 2, we see that “the healthy church gathers regularly as the local expression of the body of Christ to worship God in ways that engage the heart, mind, soul, and strength of the people.” The operative word here is *engage*. Unless we plan worship opportunities that connect our people's hearts with the heart of the Almighty One, we need to evaluate the purpose of our worship. The shift from traditional to contemporary is an attempt to fully engage the worshiper in the experience of worship and in deep love and adoration for the God of the universe who receives the praise of his people.

5. *Prayer.* The fifth theme is prayer. In each healthy church, we were refreshed to observe that prayer is a high priority. The traditional mid-week prayer meetings of the past are being replaced by powerful experiences of united prayer throughout the week, such as concerts of prayer, solemn assemblies, pastors in the same city praying together, women and men in prayer within gender-separated groups, worship and prayer celebrations, youth prayer and praise gatherings, prayer retreats, prayer summits, prayer triads, healing prayer, early morning prayer. In many places churches have banded together to pray for every home in their community. In the city of Brockton, Massachusetts, more than a dozen churches have prayed for sixty thousand households in their city.

If there is going to be a revival in our land, it will be because of the quickly-growing movement of prayer that is captivating the hearts of God's people and bringing them to their knees for long, extended times of prayer. I hope I'm alive to see the fruit of this endeavor, which has grown at

the grassroots level and is spreading faster than anyone can comprehend. The healthiest ministry settings are the pacesetters, to be sure.

6. *Relationship-centered ministry.* The sixth theme revealed from our healthy church visits is the movement from program-based to relationship-centered ministry planning; in effect, a deprogramming of the church. Although many excellent programs and ministries are still being planned and administered on a weekly basis, the ineffective programs are being consolidated or eliminated. The healthiest churches are free to implement changes and are unencumbered by congregational political systems that discourage shifting and realigning programs according to need.

Healthy churches have switched their focus to relationship building within the local church and to developing relationships in the community they are seeking to reach with the gospel. By carving out those programs that are no longer relevant to the setting, need, calling, and gift mix of the congregation, they are freed to be and do all that God empowers them to accomplish for his glory.

7. *Use of personal stories.* The seventh theme could be described as the celebration of the power of story. Many of the churches we talked with understood the importance of ongoing reminders around the theme of life change. Often, the church would write stories of how people had come to faith within their church or community. On a regular basis they had opportunities for public sharing—giving testimony to what God had done in their lives in the past week or month. They celebrated their young people's accomplishments when they came back from a retreat, missions trip, VBS, or when they graduated high school or college, returned from military duty, or served God in a soup kitchen. Over and over again, stories received their rightful place in the context of the church—how wonderfully like Christ, the greatest storyteller of all.

8. *Service.* The eighth theme is a worthy reminder: volunteerism—serving God with all the talent, time, giftedness, passion, temperament, and energy one can muster. The healthiest ministries of New England emphasize the “priesthood of all believers.” Not only are people being trained for select ministries, they are taken through a self-evaluation process to assist them in discovering their spiritual gifts, their temperament and passion, their personal mission, and to deepen their insight into God's will and calling.

As the church defines its focus collectively through writing vision and mission statements that direct their planning, so individuals are also encouraged to define their personal vision and mission. This theme was not apparent in all the churches we visited, but it is definitely worth noting because of the growing trend in this direction. For those who have developed assimilation programs and have a structured approach for networking their congregation into ministry areas, the results are

phenomenal. People have a brand-new excitement for service when they know they are working from their God-given and directed strengths.

9. *Networking*. The ninth theme in these congregations is networking. The healthiest churches know that they cannot get the job done in their communities by themselves. The churches we visited understood this and were seeking ways to develop interdependent relationships within their city or county. For some, this means only that the pastor joins a local clergy prayer group. Others, however, share facilities, resources, programs, and even staff.

Does this sound too New Testament-like? Well, maybe we should reconsider whether we are called to be the First Church of Philippi or the whole church in Philippi. My vision is to see more pastors and ministry leaders claim a New Testament view of church ministry—dare I suggest a renewed “parish” mentality that goes beyond our immediate congregations and instead sees the entire community as one’s parish? Most communities have a number of different churches, but we can still embrace all of like mind and heart.

Most find this a hard concept to embrace. I am not proposing that we compromise the gospel or the essentials of our faith, but I am suggesting that we build relationships with all congregations within our reach and pray about ways we can serve the same parish together.