

Church Wellness

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In psychiatry, researchers study the manifestations and causes of mental dysfunction and illness, but they also study “wellness.” They seek to identify things that will help the patient become “more well.” In education and business, increasingly the emphasis is on exploring and developing strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses. In analyzing developing countries, financial and relief agencies include positive attributes in assessments rather than only focusing on and measuring the negative factors.

What are the applications for church consultants or church leaders? How should we study and analyze church health? In whatever system one works with, one should not ignore glaring weaknesses and inherent problems, but the focus should not be exclusively on what is wrong. There is a value in asking what is right. A parallel from the field of medicine is that medical doctors recognize that referring a patient to a pathologist does not in and of itself lead to good health.

We have at times made a parallel mistake in church assessments. We are too often pathological. We look at current forms and factors in the church, we look at the history of the church, with the hope of identifying the causes of ill health, the problems, and the negatives. Then we construct a recommendation for the church in reaction to the illnesses diagnosed. The result is that church effectiveness is defined by what we are not and what we should not do. The goal of the church is mostly defined by “not.” The diet is focused on what to avoid rather than on the healthy foods to be eaten. The church is about not being. We measure who we are by what we do not do, and by what we are not. Is it any wonder that we have so little understanding of the nature of the church described in the New Testament? Is it any wonder that we have so little idea of what church health or wellness looks like?

The situation of the churches in Europe is revealing. The churches have ceased to have a meaningful impact. In some places only 1-2% of the population is connected to a local church community. A focus on what is wrong exacerbates the problem. The U.S. is not far behind with no more than 15-20% of the population truly involved in local churches. First, a negative focus gives more and more reasons or excuses for the general population to avoid church altogether. Second, a negative focus causes God’s people to define church negatively. Third, a negative focus keeps God’s people from defining church in any missional sense. Fourth, a negative focus leads to an almost insurmountable pessimism about the church with little confidence that the church can change and hope shattered almost beyond restoration.

How can we avoid a negative focus and help with the very real problems of a local church? How can we speak prophetically, idealistically and passionately about church health, and at the same time clearly set for the why and what of necessary actions? How can we be practical in our analysis without undermining confidence? How do we find the best of the church that can take us forward into the future without a sentimentalism that lives in the past? How do we avoid a negative cynicism that invalidates everything that has happened before us? How do we

navigate these dilemmas and arrive at a positive and enabling vision of church that leads to church health and wellness?

It is time to direct our reflections and actions toward cultivating the characteristics of wellness, just as doctors help us learn about the habits that maintain well bodies physically. It is time to value and affirm what God through his Spirit is doing with the church in our times. It is time to ask what God is doing in our world, sometimes outside the existing church structures. It is time for the church to ask what relationship it has or should develop with the world around it. It is time for those who have inherited church, and for all who are a part of existing churches, to seeking renewal that speaks honestly and candidly in meaningful words and connections to the cultural changes around us while maintaining deep and meaningful connection with God through Christ and His Word.

Let our focus change so that we are not about what is wrong. Let us recover a confidence in the gospel and scripture, align ourselves with the work of the Holy Spirit, and participate in forming communities that are living faithfully as disciples of Jesus.