

Healthy Churches—what is the key?

By Bob Young

I frequently summarize the work of Latin American Mission Development by describing the goal to facilitate the development of healthy churches. I describe a healthy church as one capable of doing God's work in its own context with a minimum of outside help. Several important factors contribute to congregational (body) development—relationships and conflict management, spiritually mature members, worker and leadership development, evangelism training, and a capacity for church planting. No one of these factors alone is sufficient by itself to develop a healthy church.

A healthy church knows how to be self-sustaining, self-directing, self-edifying, and self-propagating. It can independently sustain its work based on the involvement and activity of its members; it has capable internal (indigenous) teachers and leaders; it is capable of building itself up and meeting a variety of typical problems and challenges, and it has a heart for duplicating itself.

The lists in the first two paragraphs suggest that a healthy church must learn the art of balance. In the local church context, balance means that the church has a vision, a mission, and a method to fulfill God's purposes in the local church. It has identified one or more goals; it has a strategy for reaching the goals, and it is capable and understands how to do the things necessary.

I have written about what I would do if I were starting over again in ministry—another list! I would focus on (1) developing internal connections within the church to support spiritual growth and discipleship—with both formal and informal activities; (2) a meaningful worship service with strong practical teaching; (3) an effective and organized evangelism effort; and (4) developing a prayerful, working church.

I was in Chile recently and spent time with two leaders in a church. We talked about things that would help the church move forward. As I spoke about church health and the things I have mentioned above, they wanted to start five or six new programs immediately. I suggested they develop a list of the most pressing needs in the church and then organize it and hone it down to a limited number of activities that corresponded to the needs. Then choose the one or two most important and spend sufficient time developing those areas so that within a year those first two areas would be largely self-sustaining requiring a minimum of attention and management. Then do the same with additional activities, so that over two to three years the church could be functioning in a healthy way near maximum capacity.

The truth is that most church leaders listen, read, attend seminars, and receive ideas from various sources. Before long they have a long "to do" list in the local church—every new activity identified as a key thing in the local church: meaningful worship, dynamic preaching, more fellowship, visitation programs, a better church education program, a new evangelism strategy, small groups, member involvement, understanding volunteers, more teachers, more leaders, better Bible study, more prayer... This quick list of a dozen items could easily be doubled with a little thought—seminars on spirituality, doctrine; family...the lists are seemingly endless.

Which of the items on the lists above is most important? The truth is that they all contribute to the edifying of the local church. But when the church focuses only on one, especially when that one is a small segment of the whole, the church becomes imbalanced. Such a church cannot function biblically; it becomes unhealthy because of its limited focus. It cannot do what God intends. A favorite professor in my undergraduate Bible studies was fond of saying, "Be careful that your overemphasis in one area does not lead to neglect in other equally important areas." Such can be applied to teaching, preaching, Bible study, church development, and in several other areas.

That is a long introduction to try to help us understand the concept of church health!

This article does two things. First I take the lists above and suggest a healthy way to summarize the basic work of a local church in four areas (with alliteration in both English and Spanish) that can help a local church find balance: membership, maturity, ministry, and mission. Focus on these four things—put all other items as sub-points under these four areas. Second, I suggest ways a local church can evaluate whether these four things are being done.

Here is an expansion of the four areas and a quick description of the desired results.

→Membership means that a local church is constantly developing its membership. Obviously this includes evangelism. Membership is also supported by developing strong families so that young people remain faithful in the church. Membership includes incorporating every member into the fellowship of the local church, establishing internal connections. The most obvious result when a church is effectively working in the area of membership is numerical growth with more and more people identifying with the church and present for worship and for church activities.

→Maturity suggests the need to build people up spiritually. This will be seen in many ways—increased levels of involvement, attendance, volunteering, personal prayer and personal Bible study, and concern for others.

→Ministry includes equipping and mentoring. Ephesians 4 speaks of preparing the members for the work of ministry. We should see that God's plan for a individual Christian integrates the areas we have identified. A mature member will be involved in ministry; a serving member will be growing and maturing spiritually. Basically, ministry is service. Many members want to serve but do not know what to do, do not know how to do it, or are uncertain of their skill set. One member involvement form I remember had two boxes that could be checked for each activity item: I am ready to do this; I need training to do this. The desired result is an active church whose service is driven by the membership, not by the leaders or staff. I know whether this is happening or not because I can observe whether more people are working in the ministry of the church now than last year.

→Mission suggests that mature members who are ready to serve must be commissioned, deployed, and held accountable for doing what God enables them to do. Mission takes the church outside itself. Mission includes evangelism, church planting, and external service designed to accomplish God's mission in this world.

Concluding words

A healthy church is not a perfect church. A church that is evangelizing consistently will have some newer, immature members who have just begun the spiritual growth process. Healthy Christians are not perfect. Remember the definition which can be applied both to churches and individuals: healthy means the ability to function as God intends in the current circumstances and situation.

A healthy church can have problems. It may have problems with relationships and conflicts between members, because we are dealing with human beings. It may have problems with the lifestyles of some members. Many newer members bring years of habits and hurts from our fallen world. Members, even members with several years of Christian experience, are not all-wise. All make mistakes.

Remember the goals: members—people brought to Jesus and integrated into the fellowship of the church; maturity—people with spiritual depth; ministry—people capable of serving; mission—people released into the world to fulfill God's eternal purpose.

Healthy! A baby that cannot walk and talk can be healthy; we would take a young child that cannot walk and talk to the doctor. An adult can get fat and flabby and unable to do normal things. Church size, age, organization—these are not the determinants. The point is church health. A healthy church balances its coordination, feeding, and exercise. Healthy churches grow just as healthy people grow.