

Metrics for a healthy church

By Bob Young

To set forth measurements for evaluating healthy churches is not an easy task, and it is not a foolproof process. Some churches may meet the metrics and remain less than healthy. Others may reach a level of reasonable or acceptable health without meeting all of the metrics. Nonetheless, metrics are helpful as a generalization, and can be useful to churches that want to set a goal for members.

How can a local church measure member involvement?

This is really the question, “What represents a ‘mature member’?” What does a spiritually mature member look like? What does a spiritually mature church look like? Let me summarize some of the essential dynamics with seven points—Seven Measures for Mature Members. I have tried to make these memorable with alliteration.

- **Make disciples.** When we talk about members, the first step is to make certain that those we are considering are in fact disciples of Christ. Churches must begin by asking questions, “Who are the Christians? Who are the members?” Making disciples involves baptism and continued teaching. Members are baptized believers. Churches must know who are the disciples (members) and how many members there are.
- **Members.** Once the church has identified who are the members, one must consider what is considered “normal activity.” What are the expectations with regard to general activity? In most churches, this includes things such as regular attendance, prayer, and Bible reading. Mature members are actively involved and regularly present for worship and other spiritual growth activities. We live in a mobile society, but a minimal expectation for member involvement would likely be in the 80-90% range. Churches must know what is the involvement level of the members.
- **Membership.** This refers to the members considered corporately, as a body. This point includes things like fellowship, interaction, and small groups. Some initial levels of fellowship could be accomplished through Bible classes; small groups are even more likely to build genuine fellowship. I like to talk about “spontaneous fellowship” opportunities, encouraging members to be involved in at least one such interaction every month. Churches must be aware of and manage the interactions of the members. The more friendships and groups a person has in the church, the more likely they are to remain faithful. A good goal is that every person be a part of seven groups in the church.
- **Ministry.** This is another word for service. The goal is that every member is involved in a ministry. The local church must provide opportunities and make clear how the members can serve. Local churches must also be open to letting members develop their own ministries. An excellent way to provide ministry opportunities beyond the local level is through domestic mission trips. Most domestic mission trips are in reality ministries more than missions, given that there is no “mission” that is overtly evangelistic, seeking to identify, reach, and teach new people. Ministry is driven by an attitude of giving, sharing, and sacrifice. The point is that every member is involved in advancing the local work by sharing resources, for example, time, abilities, money, and influence. A church that provides an adequate number of ministry opportunities, to touch the maximum number of people, will seldom lack for volunteers or for resources.
- **Mission.** Primarily, this relates to evangelism and outreach. Mission has the purpose of reaching out with and teaching the gospel. Some activities may support mission, but caution is necessary to avoid the tendency to substitute ministry activities for mission. The church must manage its outreach, both on the local front, and in domestic and foreign missions, thinking constantly about how to reach more people and establish more churches.
- **Mentoring.** The goal is that every member is mentoring or coaching someone else in the faith. This is seldom done with a program, but churches must nonetheless be aware of the need for mentoring, especially for those on the fringes of the church, and most proactively work toward great levels of involvement, interaction, and relationship.

- Multiplication. I mentioned the need for planting new churches under mission, but church planting is an intentional part of the work of a healthy church and deserves to be included as a metric for healthy churches and healthy members. A healthy and well-developed church can set the goal of planting at least one new church per year.

Seven steps that can move your members and your church forward....

What if your church could work with less frenzy and more focus? Most churches want their members involved in ministries, events, and activities. But constant motion doesn't always mean advancement. Without a clear path, people simply won't move. Here are seven memorable steps to move people forward in their faith. These are related to the metrics listed above, but are not an identical list. These are goals that are attainable for every Christian. My goal in ministry was that every member could click off this list—these are seven things that are part of my spiritual life continually.

- Baptism. Christians are baptized believers, those who have made an initial commitment to Christ as Lord in baptism.
- Worship. Christians worship. Christians are part of a body of believers who share the spiritual life. Christians are present for worship.
- Fellowship. Christians share life. I often substituted the phrase “small groups” for fellowship. The goal is that every Christian participates in multiple groups, and at least one small group.
- Service. Every Christians is involved in a ministry. There is a clear path to service, a clear way to use gifts.
- Sacrifice. This often relates to giving, but it really has multiple dimensions. This is sacrificial stewardship of one's 'stuff,' situation, and self. This is a commitment to use our resources to the maximum for God's glory. A good summary is this: Christians live sacrificially.
- Sharing faith. This is the involvement of every Christian in evangelism. The body of believers functions together to share the Good News. Everyone can be involved in sharing faith—inviting to activities, establishing new contacts, identifying prospects, and participating in evangelistic activities according to gifts and skills.
- Discipling. This relates to mentoring. Some people call it coaching. This is every member looking for someone to coach or mentor. This is the process of establishing relationships that help all toward faithful discipleship.

Measuring the demographics in your church....

Many times, churches do not really understand the faith journey of their members, and have not taken time to think about the demographics of the local church. Following are a few simple demographic exercises to help you begin to measure your church.

Draw a “church tree” by plotting the membership (and families) on a chart. Determine the number for each age group, divided according to male and female. To simplify the exercise, suggested age groups are preschool through secondary school, 18-39, 40-60, 60+. In this way, each age group encompasses approximately 20 years. Draw a vertical center line, plot each age group beginning at the bottom, one gender to the left of the center line, the other to the right. A healthy church will plot something like a triangle or a Christmas tree.

How long you have been a member at this church?

25+ 10-25 <10 <5

Smaller numbers represent recent evangelism and outreach, generally considered healthier

How long you or your family have been members at this church?

25+ 10-25 <10 <5

Smaller numbers represent recent evangelism and outreach, generally considered healthier

Where were you baptized?

Baptized in this church as first-generation Christian

Baptized in this church as second-generation Christian

Baptized in this church as a third-generation Christian

Baptized in another church before I came to this church, placed membership, moved in

Your baptism

My parents or other family members were Christians before me

I was the first person in my family baptized into Christ

Analyzing the demographics--what is the "mix" in a healthy church?

The two questions about membership tenure help measure the inflow and outflow in your church. All churches experience turnover; the goal is that there is a continual inflow of new members.

Attendance is increased in three ways—physical births, baptisms, and move-ins; attendance is decreased in three ways--by deaths, drop-outs, and move-outs. (Baptisms that do not related to the local church should not be counted in these calculations—prison ministry, camp, etc.) Every church will glean helpful information by plotting these six items annually. If statistics are available, it will be helpful to go back a few years to see any trends.

The last two questions help measure local evangelism--people who became Christians in the local church not as a result of family heritage. The goal is at least 25% (or more) of first generation Christians, anything less than 15% is cause for concern.

A healthy church can set the goal to have a 10% annual conversion rate, that is, each year newly baptized Christians represent 10% of membership. (A church of 200 has 20 baptisms, a church of 1000 has 100 baptisms, etc.) Assimilation becomes difficult when the number of newly baptized members exceeds 10% annually (not counting family members baptized). A church without a strong evangelism program will seldom reach this level. (Note: this calculation also excludes "mission" efforts like prison, special outreach, camp, and the baptism of those who cannot or will not attend the local church.)

Every church should strive for a growth of at least 5%--that means it takes 20 members to make one new member each year. If a church has a 5% annual growth rate, that will yield significant growth, 20-25% growth over 5 years and nearly 50% over 10 years, even taking into account mobility in our modern society.