

What does it mean to be a healthy church? One of our values at Faithbridge is to be a healthy church, but what determines if a church is healthy or not?

Dr. Christian Schwarz wondered that very same question as he wrestled with growing and declining churches throughout the world. What Schwarz discovered, through his investigation of 1000 churches both big and small in five different continents and from 32 countries, was that growing churches shared eight characteristics. If these characteristics were active and given attention in a local church that church began to grow naturally. What are these eight characteristics?

The Eight Characteristics:

1. *Empowering Leadership*: Notice it doesn't say "empowered" leadership but "empowering" leadership. Healthy churches do not rely on a "Superstar" pastor, but rather the church becomes a safe place for people to develop and utilize their leadership skills.
2. *Gift-Oriented Ministry*: Ephesians 4, tells us that God as "equipped the saints for ministry" the role of church leadership is to help its members identify their gifts and to integrate them into ministries that match their gifts.
3. *Passionate Spirituality*: Our faith is to be lived out with commitment, fire and enthusiasm. This passion is birthed when we spend time with God. Passionate spirituality is not something we "have" per se as much as it is something we are continuing to do and become. Spiritual intimacy leads to a strong conviction that God will act in powerful ways.
4. *Functional Structures*: Luke 5:37-38, states, "And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins." Similarly, new ministries require new structures. Churches that are serious about church health evaluate to what extent their church structures enhance the self-organization of the church.
5. *Inspiring Worship Services*: The issue is not whether the service is traditional or contemporary, but is it inspiring to the participant. As Schwarz says, "People who attend inspiring worship services unanimously declare that the church service is – and for some Christians this is almost a heretical word – fun." Schwarz continues, "It is now quite evident where most of the opposition to this quality comes from: Christians who attend a worship service to fulfill a Christian duty. They do not attend church because it is such a wonderful experience that they would not miss it for anything, but to do God (or the pastor, or somebody else) a favor."

6. *Small Groups*: Schwarz states, “Growing churches have developed a system of small groups where individual Christians can find intimate community, practical help and intensive spiritual interaction.” Inherent within humanity is a need to belong. People want to be connected to other people.
7. *Evangelism*: According to Stan Toler and Alan Nelson, more than 80% of churches in the United States have plateau or are declining. When the church starts to design its programming and evangelistic efforts around the needs of people, growth occurs.
8. *Loving Relationships*: Do we spend time together as a congregation? Do we eat, play, and pray together. Do we get together for coffee, or compliment one another? The world is thirsty for the kind of love Christians have to offer. People do not want to hear us talking about love; they want to experience how Christian love really works.

What Schwarz found was that these characteristics were universal in churches regardless of culture or theology; therefore, they were transferable to any congregation. He also found that the eight characteristics had a natural relationship with one another which brought about a qualitative as well as quantitative growth within the churches. This research places the emphasis on health, which manifests itself through growth. The alternative to trying to manipulate growth, which manifests itself in stressed out churches.

In Mark 4:26-29, we read Jesus’ words, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts, and grows; though he does not know how. *All by itself* the soil produces grain – first stalk, then the head, and then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

The phrase “all by itself” stems from the Greek term “automate” – literally it translates automatically.” The premise of being a healthy church is that healthy churches will grow, but not all growing churches are healthy.

There is a standard objective measurement that determines whether a church is engaging in these characteristics. **We have participated in these evaluations and Faithbridge’s score rates as a healthy church!** Now what does that mean for our congregation on a practical level?

First, we will continue to grow as long as we maintain our church health. This means that we must continue to focus on the above mentioned characteristics and this will be an ongoing process.

Second, we can grow as a church by the Holy Spirit's power and not simply by stressing ourselves out! The pressure is off. We understand that we don't grow the church God does, but we must work in conjunction with God's Spirit to provide an environment (i.e. the Eight Characteristics) in which Faithbridge's health can develop.

As we prepare ourselves for the new year I encourage you to ponder the following questions:

- Am I positioning myself to be trained as a leader at Faithbridge?
- Am I involved in a ministry based upon my passions, and giftedness?
- Am I passionate about relationship with God?
- Do I go to church prepared to worship?
- Am I involved in a small group?
- Am I finding natural ways (not forced) to share Jesus with those around me?
- Am I taking the time to get to know other church members?

I believe that God has great plans for our healthy spiritual futures.

Blessings,

Pastor Creighton