

THE HEALTHY CHURCH

practical ways to strengthen a church's heart

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Indianapolis, Indiana

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INTRODUCTION

WHY CHURCH HEART HEALTH IS IMPORTANT

Heart-shattered lives ready for love don't
for a moment escape God's notice.

—Psalm 51:17 MSG

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The Heart of St. Andrew

I thought I was the last to leave the room following the church council meeting. It had been a long and brutal evening, as fifteen aging and loyal leaders recalled with merriment and tears the eighty-year history of their congregation. “I guess we waited too long to do anything about it,” came a soft voice from a darkened corner of the room. In the shadows, I saw Margaret, the pastor’s wife.

St. Andrew Church was born in the early 1900s out of urban workers who immigrated to its factory town. Here they had

forged a new life and faith community. But now the congregants had moved farther from the center of town, miles away from their urban church facility.

“I remember growing up in this church,” Margaret continued. “It was full of life, full of love. But now it has the smell of death. Something happened over the years. The heart of our church just died. Programs replaced people. Pastors came, and once they had a little bit of success, they went. Most of our parishioners started coming just on Sundays. And fewer of us were left to do all the work. It was like a slow death. Our heart slowly got weaker. And now, I guess it’s gone. You’re too late Dr. Whitesel. We died years ago, and you’re just here for the wake.”¹

And so began my desire to learn how to strengthen the emotional heart of a church. What actions could this church have taken to fend off the heart deterioration that seems to affect so many congregations today? And what are healthy churches doing differently to remain vibrant, flexible, and healthy as culture and communities change? As a researcher and consultant, I set out to learn the answer.

Out of thoughts swirling in my head that night came the seeds for this book. Over the next two years, I investigated churches that had survived and thrived in today’s changing world. This book and its lessons are the result.

What Is the Heart of a Church?

The heart has long represented the place where emotions reside. As far back as Genesis, Moses described God as “heartbroken” over how his people had turned from him (Gen. 6:5–6 CEB).

Many other Scriptures (as well as poetry throughout the centuries) embrace the heart as a symbol of emotion.² Thus, the

“heart of a church” will serve as a metaphor in this book for the emotions, passions, loves, and enthusiasms of a congregation.

From Where Does Congregational Heart Health Come?

God Notices Your Dilemma and Wants to Help. King David, no stranger to elation or despondency, sang about how God grieved when his children were brokenhearted: “Heart-shattered lives ready for love don’t for a moment escape God’s notice” (Ps. 51:17 MSG). Since that is true, it doesn’t escape God’s notice or aid when congregation members’ hearts are shattered over their church’s health and future.

The common church in America may be less than half the size it needs to be to attain effectiveness and health.

Starting Over. Earlier in the psalm, David hinted at the treatment: “God, make a fresh start in me” (5:10 MSG). Like David, many churches must seek to start over and recapture some of the health and heartfelt enthusiasm they once experienced.

It Takes Time. To the phrase “God, make a fresh start in me,” David added, “shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life” (5:10 MSG). The term *genesis week* carries the idea of starting over. A genesis indicates a beginning. When you combine *genesis* with *week*, the implication is that it will take time. It is not a genesis day or hour, but a judicious process. This book suggests one such process.

And so it is God—not programs, books, or curricula—that creates healthy emotions in a church’s heart. This starting over begins with strengthening a congregation’s heartfelt intimacy with God and then its positive impact upon others. But before we proceed, it must be understood that such health cannot be manufactured or artificially conceived. Heart health starts by

deepening a congregation's experience with God. And in response God creates a fresh start that creates a new heart out of the common chaos of congregational life.

THE UNCOMMON CHURCH

What Is the Difference Between a Common and Uncommon Church?

It is common for churches to be in chaos, suffering from a congregational heart that is exhausted, ailing, and even barely functioning. For example, today the common church is attended by only about seventy-five people,³ but experience has led me to believe the minimum number of attendees should be around 175 if the church is to function effectively. That means that today the common church in America may be less than half the size it needs to be to reach effectiveness and health. This puts a great deal of strain on the leaders of a church and the church's heart.

A whopping 82 percent of Americans do not regularly attend any church.

With the common church in such a state of ill health, many people avoid it. Recent studies suggest that only about 18 percent of Americans actually attend church regularly.⁴ That means a whopping 82 percent of Americans *do not* regularly attend any church.

As a result, there is sizable segments of America to which churches can reach out, but most churches are too weak and too emotionally frail to do so. This heart-shattered church, in need of closeness to God and passion for his offspring, may be alienating sizable segments of the nonchurchgoer population. The

heart-shattered church may just be the most common church in America.

What Does the Uncommon Church Look Like?

A church that remains spiritually vibrant over many years, with intimacy with God and ministry impact, appears uncommon today. Still, uncommon churches are out there. I have come across many that enjoy long-term intimacy (with God and each other) and long-term impact (in reconnecting people to their loving heavenly Father⁵ and to one another). The key is to learn what they are doing to maintain their congregational heart health.⁶

The key is to learn from uncommon churches what they are doing to maintain their congregational heart health.

So what would it take to buck the trend toward commonality? What would it require for churches to start fresh and have a new beginning from the chaos of church life? And what would it look like if a new strategy brought churches closer to God and empowered them to have more impact in their communities? It is toward helping churches attain an uncommon health, growth, and partnership with God's mission that this book is dedicated.



ONE

THE KEY

A WONDER TREATMENT

Imagine that a new wonder drug has been created. It will help prevent illness and disease . . . [and] help you lose excess weight—and keep it off. It will slow the aging process . . . give you energy and increase your self-esteem . . . reduce stress, fight depression and anxiety. . . . Now imagine that this drug doesn't cost a penny.

—Mayo Clinic

THE TREATMENT BEGINS WITH SEEING THE CHURCH AS A BODY

The Church Functions Like a Human Body

For good reason, the New Testament writers often compared the growing, interrelated, and complex nature of the church to a human body. Writers such as Paul felt readers could better grasp what God wanted for the church by envisioning the church as a human body (see figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1

THE CHURCH AS A BODY (emphasis added)		
The church functions like a human body.	Romans 12:4–5 MSG	“In this way we are like the various parts of a human <i>body</i> . Each part gets its meaning from the <i>body</i> as a whole, not the other way around. The <i>body</i> we’re talking about is <i>Christ’s body</i> of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his <i>body</i> .”
	1 Corinthians 12:12 MSG	“You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own <i>body</i> . Your <i>body</i> has many parts—limbs, organs, cells—but no matter how many parts you can name, you’re still one <i>body</i> .”
	Ephesians 4:25 MSG	“No more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In <i>Christ’s body</i> we’re all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself.”
The church can be built like a body.	Ephesians 4:12 CEB	“His purpose was to equip God’s people for the work of serving and building up the <i>body</i> of Christ.”

But the Church Is Also Christ’s Body

Even more remarkably, the New Testament writers saw the church as analogous to Christ’s body. They sought to help a struggling yet growing church understand it was not just any body, but Christ’s body of testimony, life, and power upon the earth. New Testament writers also reminded the church that just as a body needs nourishment, the church also needs to get its strength from God (see figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2

THE CHURCH IS CHRIST'S BODY (emphasis added)		
The church is Christ's bodily presence on the earth.	Ephesians 1:23 MSG	"The church is <i>Christ's body</i> , in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence."
Spirit-empowered leaders lead this body.	Ephesians 4:11–13 MSG	"He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christ's followers in skilled servant work, working within <i>Christ's body</i> , the church, until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other."
Christ is the head and nourishes this body.	Colossians 2:19 MSG	"He is the Head and we are the <i>body</i> . We can grow up healthy in God only as he nourishes us."
The Holy Spirit nourishes the body.	1 Corinthians 12:13 MSG	"Each of us is now a part of his resurrection <i>body</i> , refreshed and sustained at one fountain—his Spirit—where we all come to drink."
Do not forget this analogy.	1 Corinthians 12:27 MSG	"You are <i>Christ's body</i> —that's who you are! You must never forget this."

The Wonder Treatment the Mayo Clinic Discovered

Since the writers to the early church used bodily analogies to explain church principles of leadership, presence, unity, and variety, then it would seem fitting this analogy could be extended to the health of the church as well.¹ Fuller Seminary's professor emeritus of church growth, Eddie Gibbs, once said, "Churches like people have died, because they refused treatment until it was too late."² Let's look at what wonder treatment researchers at the Mayo Clinic have uncovered. Notice its parallels with the church:

Imagine that a new wonder drug has been created. It will help prevent illness and disease . . . [and] help you lose excess

weight—and keep it off. It will slow the aging process . . . give you energy and increase your self-esteem . . . reduce stress, fight depression and anxiety, and put you in a better mood. It will make you stronger and healthier. . . . Now imagine that this drug doesn't cost a penny. . . . This miracle drug is available right now—and you can start taking it today. It's called exercise.³

What Motivates People to Exercise

With such a wonder drug available, why is America so infamously flabby? The answer lies in three reasons why people don't regularly exercise. And for the wonder treatment (exercises) in this book to be profitable, such exercise excuses must be addressed.

People Will Exercise if the Exercises Are Right for Them. Exercise becomes enjoyable when a person finds an exercise that is right for his or her age, health, and interests.⁴ But most

people fail to find suitable exercises because they don't know the wonderful variety that is available. This book will describe many exercises that can be the starting places for finding heart-

strengthening exercises that are right for your church.

People Will Exercise if the Exercises Are Productive. Everyone knows that exercise with little result is not very inspiring or motivating. Therefore, the exercises in this book have been taken from colleagues, researchers, students, and case studies to suggest exercises that yield real-world results.

People Will Exercise if the Exercises Are Fun. Exercise that is enjoyable is more likely to be repeated. Once people or churches

With such a wonder drug available, why is America so infamously flabby?

find exercises that are pleasant and enjoyable for them, they are likely to repeat them. The exercises in this book were selected not only because they are effective, but also because they incorporate enjoyable and fun congregational activities.

When the right exercises are discovered, when they are enjoyable to undertake, and when positive results are forthcoming, churches will exercise. This book investigates varying congregational exercises and the principles behind each so that the heart-shattered church can begin a treatment that will lead to health.

A CAVEAT: NOT ALL EXERCISE IS BENEFICIAL

Sometimes people hesitate at this point, recalling the King James admonition that “bodily exercise profiteth little” (1 Tim. 4:8 KJV). There is truth here. Bodily exercise—if done for the wrong reasons and in the wrong manner—will not achieve what God desires for a human body or for his church. So before we progress further, let’s look at two potentially harmful outcomes of exercising in the wrong manner.

Overdoing It

Everyone is aware of athletes who have pushed their bodies too far with deforming results. The same can be true of the exercises in this book. Some congregations focus so much on such exercises (and repeating them) that they forget the goal of their exercising. Just think about how churches conduct annual rallies, block parties, revivals, and other such events that have outlived their relevance to strengthening a church’s intimacy with God and impact on others. To offset this misstep, we will see that the

exercises in the following pages are neither the purpose nor the focus of this book. The mission of this book is something more eternal than physical or spiritual calisthenics. The purpose of this book is exemplified in the opening story drawn from a compilation of client interactions. The objective of this book is to help churches develop a carefully thought-out and appropriate exercise regimen that will increase the effectiveness of the church's ministry, deepen its intimacy with God, and as a bonus, increase the church's longevity.

Overconfidence

The media has made us aware of those who exercise their bodies for selfish rationale and arrogance. The church can succumb to similar pressures. I have written elsewhere how churches often become overly confident or intoxicated with their growth

Exercise that is undertaken for vain self-satisfaction will often mirror that vanity in disfigurement and deformity.

to the point of hubris and ruination.⁵ The most important thing to

remember is that an exercise treatment must have a proper goal.

Exercise that is undertaken for vain self-satisfaction will often

mirror that vanity in disfigurement and deformity.

To guard against church exercise becoming the focal point, let us take a brief look at God's purpose for church exercise.

BUILDING HEALTHY HEARTS FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

When 1 Timothy 4:8–9 is considered in a modern translation, a more robust admonition emerges: “Exercise daily in God—no spiritual flabbiness, please! Workouts in the gymnasium are useful,

but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever. You can count on this. Take it to heart” (MSG).

Do you as a church (and individually) want to be “fit both today and forever”? You can be. But it begins with the right reasons: *impact* and *intimacy*. Let’s explore each.

Impact: Perkins’s Three Rs

Almost everyone today agrees that churches should make a positive impact in their communities. But how do we measure such impact in today’s socially and spiritually divided world? I find the insights of John Perkins particularly helpful. Perkins was born in the segregated South of the 1930s. He ran away to California after his brother was shot by a policeman. Still, he couldn’t run from the One who pursued him. In California John Perkins met Christ, who compelled him to return to his native South. There Perkins set up urban cooperatives to share food, clothing, child care, medical facilities, and most importantly, Bible studies where attendees were given the opportunity to experience Christ’s salvation which had so profoundly changed Perkins.⁶ In response to his spiritual transformation,⁷ Perkins urged healthy churches to impact their world through what he called the three Rs.⁸

Redistribution. Perkins envisioned wealthy suburban churches not having lavish facilities, expensive decorations, and marble floors, and instead sending money to inner-city churches that were meeting the needs of the poor. He knew that per capita giving in urban churches was far below the surplus income that suburban churches enjoy. He envisioned the wealth of the middle-class churches being voluntarily and sacrificially shared with lower-income churches so that both churches could make a bigger impact. Far from an imposed redistribution of wealth, John

Perkins saw the church willingly and joyfully avoiding lavish spending in order to give more money to congregations that were making a difference among people of meager incomes.⁹

Relocation. Perkins also envisioned suburban churches that had left urban areas returning to deploy their volunteers into impoverished areas.¹⁰ Churches

John Perkins envisioned the wealth of the upper-class churches being voluntarily and sacrificially shared with lower-income churches so that both churches could make a bigger impact.

could plant indigenous venues and ministries in urban areas, then raise up local leaders to lead them. Rather than leaving the urban struggle behind when they moved to the suburbs, Perkins envisioned suburban churches

returning with viable and effective need-meeting ministries for urban locales.

Reconciliation. The most important R was reconciliation, both physical and spiritual.

- **Interpersonal (Physical) Reconciliation.** Across the social, ethnic, and economic divides that segregate a country, Perkins saw churches comprised of diverse cultures, working shoulder to shoulder. Perkins envisioned every church involved in cross-cultural partnerships and modeling the church of Revelation 7:9, where “Everyone was there—all nations and tribes, all races and languages” (MSG). What better way to prepare for the montage of peoples pictured in that verse than for the church to start to approximate that mosaic in its partnerships and its makeup?
- **Spiritual Reconciliation.** Perkins knew that it was not social reconciliation that was God’s endgame. God desires a more supernatural and eternal reconciliation. Perkins envisioned

churches as welcoming and nurturing salvation experiences. This was the ultimate reconciliation that only God could provide through his Son, and verses such as Romans 5:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:18 remind us of this.

Impact Exercises. The following chapters are packed with impact ideas, illustrations, and discussion starters that can help bring about the three Rs (and most importantly spiritual reconciliation) through the work of a local church. But the power for such exercise must come from somewhere. That strength can only arise from a deepening *intimacy* with our heavenly Father.

Intimacy: Prayer, Meditation, and Communion with God

Because the church has been given such a life-altering and world-changing ministry of reconciliation, it discharges its duties best if done in unity and grace.

Supernatural Unity. Regrettably, most readers have encountered churches filled with strife, petty disagreements, and social rifts. Yet it was Jesus' wish for his church to demonstrate a supernatural unity that amazes a watching world. Jesus said, "I'm not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me" (John 17:20–21 CEB).

Many things are striking about this passage, but two stand out for our present concern. First, Jesus willed that the church would be as united and harmonious as he and the Father. This was, in part, so a watching world would believe their message. Second, Jesus prayed that the church would be "in us," suggesting that such harmony emerges out of intimacy, closeness, and connection to God.

Jesus' prayer began to bear fruit in the early church which had been divided by religion, ethnicity, status, and tradition. The early church began what can only be described as a great journey toward cross-cultural integration, wrestling with ideas about tradition (Acts 11), outward signs of godliness (Rom. 2), and estranged cultures (Acts 15). The emerging dissonant harmony allowed the church to have an expanding impact upon its neighbors. Early church historian Tertullian famously said, "What marks us in the eyes of our enemies is our loving kindness. 'Only look,' they say, 'look how they love one another.'"¹¹

Intimacy Exercises. One purpose of the exercises in this book is to bring churches and individual Christians into a healthier relationship with God for greater intimacy. Each exercise list begins with intimacy ideas designed to bring the reader closer to God. Of all of the exercises in this book, these exercises of personal, spiritual health should be performed first. To undertake any church health regimen without attention to strengthening spiritual health would be fruitless. If the harried reader finds that he or she lacks time to fully digest the exercises in each chapter, I recommend that the personal intimacy exercises be your priority. Congregational health can emerge from the proper mental and emotional attitudes of the congregants, but the reverse usually never occurs.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE EXERCISES IN THIS BOOK

The following chapters are divided into seven exercise topics and a final chapter on how to make these exercises relevant, enjoyable, and productive. Each chapter offers exercises that people and congregations have utilized to maintain heart health

and vibrancy. As noted above, the first exercises in each list will deal with developing intimacy with God, which undergirds and creates the impact of the exercises that follow.

Chapter 2 examines how the church experience creates a closeness that fosters accountability, interdependence, and camaraderie. But a clannishness can also occur, fostering division and separateness. These exercises will foster both unity and purpose.

Chapter 3 tells of the church providing a unique haven and refuge for hurting people. This means that a church will always have hurting and damaged people coming into it. Taking care of these damaged people requires the church to practice exercises that create a safe environment where love, acceptance, and empowerment encourage people to overcome their ailments.

Chapter 4 discusses how today's growing mosaic of cultures (ethnic, generational, affinity-based, etc.) means today's society is constantly more fractured. These exercises strengthen a church's ability to bring together, unite, and reconcile diverse cultures.

Chapter 5 provides exercises that can create team building, acceptance, and accountable discipleship with insights drawn from John Wesley's band meetings. This will not only broaden the leadership base of a church, but also develop moral responsibility and discipleship.

Chapter 6 will help churches avoid the Sunday morning performance trap and instead create authentic worship experiences where encountering God becomes the focus.

Chapter 7 discusses how ever-increasing globalization requires the church to be the hands of Jesus Christ both locally and globally. But at the same time, the church must not forget its duty to strengthen congregants. A new term, *conglocal*, will be proposed and explained to help churches remember the three-fold emphasis on meeting congregational, local, and global

needs. The exercises in this chapter will foster Christlike living both within the congregation and in cross-cultural ministry locally and abroad.

Chapter 8 will help a church understand and foster the spiritual transformation that comes from a personal relationship with Jesus. These exercises will assist congregations in developing an environment where spiritual transformation is expected and central.

Chapter 9 may be one of the most important, for here you will discover how to adapt and modify the exercises to your specific church situation. By following three principles of customization (called *improvisation*) you will learn how to adapt the best aspects of an exercise or even combine multiple exercises to create a heart-strengthening regimen for your church.

ARE YOU READY TO BEGIN? THERE IS NO TIME TO WASTE!

Are you ready to explore exercises that can prevent your church from decline, weakness, and irrelevance? The exercises in this book fulfill the three elements for a successful treatment. First, they are flexible so that they can be customized, combined, or adapted to find an exercise that is right for your church. Second, they can produce intimacy and impact in churches of varying size, denominations, and locales. And third, in addition to leading to health and relevance, many of the exercises will be so enjoyable that your church will want to repeat them.

Don't let anything stop you now. Delve into the following pages with your church leaders, and you will find a treasure trove of creative, enjoyable, and spiritually healthy ideas that

will increase the longevity, vibrancy, impact, and intimacy of your church.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How do you feel about physical exercise? Do you practice it regularly? Have you in the past? What are the current results, and what do you wish you could do differently?

2. Does your church try new things, such as spiritual and ministry exercises to stretch itself and improve its health? What are the current results, and what do you wish you could do differently?

3. Where are you in your spiritual journey: stuck, moving ahead, slipping behind, or somewhere in-between? How is your intimacy with your heavenly Father? When have you been close to him in the past? And could you return there again? What will you do tomorrow to maintain or regain that closeness?

4. How have you been a force for reconciliation between people with strong disagreements? When have you been a force for reconciliation in the past? Could you recreate that again? What will you do tomorrow to better participate in a ministry of reconciliation between people?

5. How have you been a force for reconciliation between people and their heavenly Father? When have you been a force for reconciliation in the past? Could you recreate that again? What will you do tomorrow to better participate in a ministry of spiritual reconciliation between someone you know and their heavenly Father?