

Illawarra Pastors' Network Helpful Article:

How to tell if your church is healthy

(even though it still looks sick)

By Gil Cann

No! This is not a repeat of an article you may have read on CLM earlier this year (CLM-1-065). It was called 'How To Tell If Your Church Is Sick (while it still looks healthy)!

This sequel is written for two reasons. First, the response to that article indicates that the issues raised are of great concern to many church members and pastors. Secondly, I wrote then, 'Churches in missionary mode must make the utmost use of every gift and ministry of every member. To do this, a major change of thinking and practice will be necessary on the part of members and ministers alike. It is not possible, (because of limitations of space), to consider here what that would mean...' hence the need to 'complete the picture'.

Is it possible for a church to be healthy when it looks sick? Yes, indeed. The reason we doubt this is because we have become accustomed to assessing the 'health' of our churches by certain signs. Common criteria include good numbers, high quality music, buildings in excellent condition, a long history (preferably one hundred years or more,) creative use of technology, a substantial bank balance, numerous groups and programs and a multi-gifted pastor.

Some of these are often found in healthy churches, but, as the old songs says, 'it ain't necessarily so!' A church may have all these attributes yet amount to little more than-a-once-a-week sacred concert. Others may lack most, perhaps all of them, and yet be wonderfully productive in the things which matter most to God. I, and many others, trusted Christ and grew in our faith and ministries in just such a church.

The Basis of Our Priorities

It is disturbingly easy for our priorities to become the things which matter most to us. I came across a church recently whose aging members were asked to describe the vision they held for their church. They replied, 'our primary concern in this church is to keep it going long enough so that each of us can be buried from here'. For others the priorities are survival, financial viability, 'keeping the doors open', flying the flag for their denomination, maintaining a tradition, affording a minister, or avoiding the 'shame' of having to close down.

What a tragedy all this is! These concerns are unimportant to God. Making them priorities, or attempting to achieve the commonly believed signs of church health, is the primary sources of stress, conflict, discouragement, pressure on marriage and family, ill health, and resignation from office of both ministers and members alike. No wonder then, when burdened with such concerns, we wonder wistfully about Jesus' words - 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Matt 11:30). I am not suggesting there is no hardship, difficulty, perplexity and opposition involved in serving the Lord. There certainly is! But Jesus did say that when the yoke we wear is of His making the burden is not heavy.

Perhaps many things we regard as 'occupational hazards' of church involvement are of our own making. This is never more likely than when, even inadvertently, we replace the things that matter to God with the things that matter to us. The most haunting prayer I have ever heard reminds us of this danger - 'Lord,' prayed a faithful, long-serving elder, 'deliver us from church-craft!' He meant, I think, the mindset which sees a church as an end in itself, and our primary work as 'running the church'.

Taking Your Church's Pulse

What is the true indicator of health in a church? Paul describes a healthy church in Eph 4 v 11-16. Your church is healthy, irrespective of all else, when each part is working properly. Is this our priority? What are the signs?

a) When the daily sphere of influence of every member is known, acknowledged and taken seriously, and

b) when every gift and every ministry of every member has been identified, developed, and fully employed.

Irrespective of all other outward signs to the contrary, anything less is sickness. Most churches, including many regarded as successful, are by these criteria in very poor health indeed.

The ministry of a church is not primarily what the minister does, nor is it mainly the church's organised programs. The primary ministry of a church is twofold:

* first, in the total effect of every attitude, word and action of every member in every situation in which they find themselves on every day of every week;

* second, in the impact of every member's God given gifts employed both within and beyond the congregation.

Seen like this, every church has a twenty-four-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week ministry! Yet despite all this, I am continually meeting Christians whose pastors and church leaders show little interest, in terms of active support, in what their members do day by day.

Even a small church already has potentially a vastly wider ministry than it imagines. Because of the many different spheres of influence of its members, through their workplace, study, neighborhood, recreational and community involvement, every church has an influence far more extensive and diverse than any program could ever provide. And all of this is already 'in place', with not another dollar spent and not another late night committee meeting!

A Layman Speaks

Gordon Preece, in his paper, 'Everyday Spirituality', a Zadok publication, quotes former vice-president of Bethlehem Steel in USA, Bill Diehl. 'In the almost 30 years of my professional career my church has never once suggested to me that there be any type of accounting of my on-the-job ministry to others. My church has never offered to help me improve those skills which could make me a better minister, nor has it ever asked if I needed any kind of support in what I was doing. There has never been an enquiry into the ethical decisions I face, or whether I seek to communicate my faith to my fellow-workers. I

have never been in a church where there has been any type of public affirmation of the ministry I fulfil through my career. In short, I must conclude that my church couldn't care less as to whether or how I minister in my daily work'!

This is a devastating indictment of many church leaders' attitudes towards their members' workplaces. This tragic situation is true in churches of all kinds.

A Life Support System

And notice this businessman's terminology - 'my on-the-job ministry to others', 'a better minister', 'my ministry in my daily work', 'the ministry I fulfil through my career'. These are not the words of a clergy person. They are the words of a 'layman', a manager, a church member who rubs shoulders with many unchurched people every day. This is not a man whose major Christian activity, like thousands of his peers, needs to be supported by his church and minister. This is a man, who like thousands of his peers, needs to be supported by his church and minister.

And likewise, by a public recognition that what they do and how they live in their community are vital ministries of their church. To this end, Sunday by Sunday, we should commission individuals, couples or families to their sphere of daily influence just as we would commission missionaries going overseas. Those so commissioned would be greatly encouraged and every member who witnesses this would begin to see their own daily situations in a new light. Such a mindset, and such support are signs of a healthy church. They display a commitment, for the kingdom's sake, to ensure that 'each part is working properly'.

Missionary Mode

This change of thinking and practice is necessary for a church to move from maintenance to missionary mode. This shift is absolutely crucial in this post-Christendom era.

When a church is in maintenance mode most prayer is for the sick, most counselling is for those with problems, most exhorting is to the half-hearted, and most visiting is to those who have called for help. When a church is in missionary mode most prayer is for the well, most advice is to those who are seeking to help others, most support is to the committed and most visiting is of those who have not called for help.

This does not mean that members in need are neglected, but that priorities are completely different. It is the difference in motor-racing terms, between a garage for repairs and a mobile support unit. It is the difference between being reactive and proactive.

Pastors, or others to whom pastoral support has been entrusted, must not wait in their office for people with problems to come. They need 'to show up', where and when appropriate, at places of work, residence and study! To support those who never call! Many a promising new church has been neutralised by the 'squeaky wheel' syndrome.

On the other hand I know from my own experience how members' perceptions of their workplaces and daily situations, and of how God can use them there, can be transformed by an occasional supportive 'on-the-job' visit or call.

Gifts and Groans

Another sign of true concern that 'each part is working properly' is when a church gives priority to developing and fully employing the gifts and accompanying ministries of every one of its members.

The generally increased interest in spiritual gifts in recent years is welcome. Literature, questionnaires and profiles have been developed to help Christians identify their gifts. But two great needs remain.

The first need is for a better way to identify members' ministries. The best way is to encourage them to put into words the things they feel most strongly, urgently, burdened or concerned about; the issues, causes or needs that, to them personally, matter more than anything else in the world. Something I call a 'God-given groan'. You will then discover that almost always the 'gift and the groan' go together. When God calls His people to do something He usually equips them with the gifts required to do it.

The 'groan in the heart' and the 'gift in the hand' go together. Often the gift does not become apparent until the 'groan' has been sought, heard, taken seriously and affirmed by a pastor or other leaders. In a very small church or a church which has no pastor members can encourage each other to bring to light these God-given concerns, and to act upon them.

Many older peoples' experience of church involvement is the result of being persuaded to fill vacancies in administrative roles or existing ministries. Therefore, time and encouragement, often for weeks or months, is sometimes needed before they can describe their God-given 'groan' in words. It is all so new to them. Most of them have never been asked this question before! But when they do name that deep down burden about something that God has implanted in their hearts, and realise their church wants to support them in pursuing it, their understanding and experience of Christian service will be transformed.

Employers Or Facilitators?

Thus, the second need is for local church leaders to see themselves not as 'employers' but as facilitators. Even churches positive about members' gifts still work on the 'situations vacant' approach. I have actually heard pastors say - 'I am sure you will find a place to use your gifts among the many programs run by our church!' No doubt this will be true for some. But it seems that many churches' primary concern is not the facilitating of members' gifts but the staffing of existing programs. Such churches are more in maintenance than missionary mode. To be in maintenance mode in today's world means to be sick while appearing to be healthy.

What about the members God is calling into ministry for which the church has no 'department', for which, therefore, there are no 'vacancies'? God is burdened to restore to himself every person for whom Christ died. He is always the God of 'new things'. No doubt he has many new ways and needs by which his people might share his love with others. He is not primarily concerned with staffing programs but furthering his kingdom by every possible means.

Situations Vacant

The 'situations vacant' approach to the involvement of church members has produced countless people who, having 'served their term', resign, as soon as possible, from 'church work'. Thereafter, often for several decades, they are passive spectators, at the very time when their truly God-given ministries, if recognized and supported, would have been most fruitful.

There is an inherent contradiction between this approach and the biblical pattern in which God calls and gifts believers for ministries which He has chosen. These ministries may or may not correspond to ministries already in place in their church. But whether they do or not, pastors and local church leaders are responsible to welcome and facilitate them for the Kingdom's sake, even if some existing ministries must be discontinued for lack of volunteers, or conscripts!

A New Way

From my own twenty years of pastoring, plus twenty more working closely with ministers, I fully understand that this is a difficult matter. For generations ministers have been concerned to involve members in, and thus maintain, programs and activities which already exist. But the issue in this 'post-Christendom' era is this. If ministers do not take members' God-given gifts and callings seriously, members will not take their ministers and churches seriously. The emphasis of Scripture, that ministers are primarily called to equip and facilitate, supports their view. Neglecting this, in these days, drastically disables a church and inevitably leads to its decline.

This fact requires us to comprehend 'church' in a way very different to the way we have in the past. In essence, not what we are doing for God but what he wants to do through us. And irrespec-tive of how 'inconvenient' this may be, is this not totally reasonable? Are not 'our churches' his churches? Is not Christ the head of this body? Is he not the Lord of today's harvest?

The Real Issue

The reason we need to change the way we go about being church is not for the sake of novelty, 'relevance', or a new image. It's because the massive changes sweeping the world today are changing the very people God wants to reach through us! Changing the way they hear, think, and choose. God's concern is their eternal destiny, not the preservation of our familiar forms of church. Are not churches merely means to an end, the end being nothing less than the kingdom of God? As the first generation of Christians to serve God in the post-Christendom era we will experience, much more than our predecessors, what it means to lay down our preferences and familiar ways for the sake of the kingdom. If we are not willing for this he will leave us maintaining churches while he goes marching on! But I am sure this is not his preference. God wants to use churches that have served him well in the past to serve him well now. And his grace is sufficient for us!

I once visited a church whose many different ministries had all arisen in the hearts and minds of the members. The vision of the leaders was not to establish certain ministries, but to assist the members in pursuing ministries God had called and gifted them to fulfil. Even a small church can have many such 'ministries'! Who knows how a God of such infinite

creativity and imagination might choose to gift and lead His people in times like these? Amongst other things He may be calling and gifting some in the areas of

- ecology, cosmology, genetic engineering, cyberspace and ethics, as well as
- politics, local government, social action and community enrichment, as well as
- care of the needy, of refugees, of people from broken families, as well as
- prayer, prophecy, leadership, helping, giving, preaching, teaching, and creating very different, new forms of church.

In a post-Christendom era, so different from the time which produced most of our present churches, it is more than likely that we do not have 'departments' for some of the things that are high on God's agenda!

Can a church be healthy even when it looks sick?

Yes indeed. Building or no building, and not withstanding small numbers, 'ordinary' music, zero technology, peeling paint, a short history, an uncertain, fragile future, minimal finances, few if any programs, and pastor or no pastor - all these things, ultimately, are neither here nor there to God. What matters most to Him is that 'each part is working properly!' This must matter most to us. This produces health. It results Paul says, in a church making 'bodily growth and building itself up in love' (Eph 4v16).

This growth in love, in learning to live out, in practical terms, what it means to love God with our whole hearts, one another as Christ loves us, and our neighbor as ourselves, enables us to do what, matters most to God.

Such a church is a healthy church. Healthy churches are crucial to the glory of God and the furthering of His kingdom. And of course growth results from health as surely as night follows day.

Our concern should be not how our church can look healthy, but be healthy. The crucial question is this - 'how can we best invest, for the sake of the kingdom of God, the live gifts and callings of the people whom God has entrusted to us?' Not the people we wish we had, or once had, or might have, but the people we do have, now!

And as for anything else which may be needed, we can be immensely encouraged by Him to whom all churches belong, 'Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness' Jesus said, 'and all these things' (i.e., everything you need) shall be yours as well' (Matt 6:33).

Published in Working Together, the journal of the Australian Evangelical Alliance Inc., Issue 2, 2001

Gil Cann is Minister at Large for the Australian Evangelical Alliance and edits their quarterly journal 'Working Together'. Gil is involved in a ministry of church renewal and leadership training in Australia and overseas. The author of 'Liberating Leadership', he is currently writing a book about crucial issues for churches in the 21st Century.