



BECOMING A HEALTHY CHURCH

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A HOLY SPIRIT-DIRECTED PROCESS OF DISCOVERING GOD'S UNIQUE THUMBPRINT FOR YOUR CHURCH MUST INCLUDE HOPE FOR TOMORROW.

What will it take for your church to become a healthier church? Given the realities of your particular ministry setting, how will you begin that process? If you were to start that process today, what would it look like? Who would be included? What topics and issues would you explore? How would you define your anticipated results for the near and distant future? These are the questions effective leaders in the church are asking themselves.¹

For more than 2 decades, I have observed leadership teams wrestling with strategic issues and ideas in an exhilarating manner. Leaders love to talk about the latest trends affecting ministry. They enjoy discussing what others are discovering and implementing in local churches. The disconnect comes, though, when they start looking at their churches and try to determine which of the brightest and best ideas will apply.

When leadership teams select from the menu of offerings without first looking at their church, they, in essence, abort the planning process without really getting started. It's great to learn how others are leading their churches, what principles are guiding their thought processes, and what programs are emerging for ministry. But when you do that without first searching for God's unique agenda for your church, you are limiting what He has in mind for you and your congregation.

DISCOVER YOUR THUMBPRINT

Every local church has a unique thumbprint given by God. In your pursuit of church health and vitality, you need a discovery process that uncovers that uniqueness. When you discern this uniqueness, celebrate this distinctive. In response, develop plans, programs, and ministry opportunities that express the unique persona of your people.

Imagine there were no resources available for cloning programs from church A into your church. What if you were to wipe your library clean of every available resource that serves as a how-to guide for doing every imaginable area of ministry? Could you survive for a month or a year without attending another conference and collecting another new training manual for your already loaded shelves?

What do you think would happen if you could stop the conveyor belt of ideas from infiltrating your mailbox and cluttering your mind with every conceivable ministry's latest and greatest ideas for you to buy and implement in your local church? What if you chose

today to say no to another appointment with someone outside your church who needs a few minutes of your time to share his or her latest ministry resource with you? Is it possible for you to hop off your treadmill for a few months to assess your church's current health without considering anyone else's ideas for how you should be leading your church into greater health and vitality?

I guarantee that if you step away from the incredible demands biting at your ankles each day, and start asking the hard questions about your uniquely God-ordained thumbprint, your ministry will never be the same again.

WEIGH IN, PLEASE

The last time I went to my doctor for my annual physical, the nurse greeted me with a smile and politely invited me to weigh in. The last thing I wanted to do was divulge something as personal as my weight to a complete stranger. I reluctantly stepped on the scale (after taking off my shoes, watch, sport coat, and tie, and removing my wallet from my back pocket) and weighed in. The only consolation was the nurse was a complete stranger, unable to share such confidential information with anyone but my doctor.

It's not that I'm overweight. It's just that weighing in was the opening exercise of that less-than-pleasant annual drill of activities at my doctor's office, and I wasn't thrilled about it. But through the weighing-in procedure, I began a process that unveiled the true picture of my current health. The doctor needed this picture before he could tell me how to become a healthier person.

At the end of my physical exam, I had confidence I had been inspected from head to toe by an expert in his field. He gave me encouraging news about my physical condition, and he made specific suggestions about some follow-up tests he wanted me to take, explained a new medication he was prescribing, and mentioned another specialist he recommended I see. He didn't point at pictures of other people he wished I looked like, and he didn't compare me with other patients with different ailments. He focused on my health, and with great empathy, made some excellent suggestions for me to follow.

I followed my doctor's advice. As a result, I am feeling better than ever, with renewed energy for the days ahead. I was invigorated by the visit with my doctor and what he had to say. Even though it complicates life a bit, with some of my new discoveries and restrictions, I feel prepared to face the days ahead with a remarkable zest for life.

In a similar manner, by completing some basic team-enhancing planning exercises, you too will feel better about your church. As

you define your realities together, focus on discovering prescriptive measures best suited for your unique design as a church. The process of exploring topics that are relevant to your current ministry context and setting priorities for the months ahead will be exhilarating if you are willing to take that first step and weigh in.

DIAGNOSIS/PROGNOSIS

Weighing in is just the first step in the process. If you recall from your own physicals, there are also the blood pressure and temperature checks, blood and urine tests, and a multiplicity of other routine exam procedures designed to proactively address apparent or potential physical concerns. It is far better to be ahead of the curve on such matters than to be forced to react to crises and emergencies later.

Our son, Nathan, has been to Children's Hospital in Boston dozens of times over the past several years. He is routinely checked regarding his unique condition that has evidenced itself in a weak and sickly tibia in his right leg. The orthopedic surgeons have been wonderful for Nathan. They not only diagnosed his illness, but they provided prognoses for his future that offer hope and promise—despite his significant health challenges.

There is a huge difference between diagnosis and prognosis. Diagnosis is “the art or act of identifying a disease from its signs and symptoms; investigation or analysis of the cause or nature of a condition, situation, or problem.”² Whereas prognosis is “the act or art of foretelling the course of a disease; the prospect of survival and recovery from a disease as anticipated from the usual course of that disease or indicated by special features of the case in question.”³

Diagnosis focuses on the present facts; prognosis provides information about the future.

In southern Connecticut, along one of the major interstate highways, there are three billboards that express the difference between diagnosis and prognosis. These billboards not only describe the difference between these two terms, they give hope to each patient depicted on them. Regardless of the condition of the debilitating disease, the prognosis for their future is hope-filled. By going to the medical center being advertised on the billboards, you not only receive treatment for your diagnosed ailments, you also are given hope for your future. Even if the diagnosis is devastating, the medical personnel are committed to helping their patients by giving a prognosis that includes some sense of hope.

And so it is with your church. Regardless of the current health condition—the diagnosis—of your church, a healthy prognosis for your future that is filled with hope will give your congregation renewed energy for the future.

A Holy Spirit-directed process of discovering God's unique thumbprint for your church must include hope for tomorrow. He is the Great Physician in this process, overseeing your health checkup—with His eyes, ears, and heart wide open to your needs and aspirations. He will not leave you or forsake you throughout this process. He will hold you securely in the palms of His hands as He leads you every step of the way. By His strong, guiding hand, the journey will be made all the richer. Trust Him for a hope-filled prognosis, even when the diagnostic elements of dialogue and assessment become tiresome in unpackaging the truest picture of your current reality.

THE PROCESS

Once you have decided to begin the process of discovering God's unique thumbprint for your church, you will need to be cheered on to victory. I wish I could be there for you as you begin the process with your leadership team and congregation. If I were there, I would remind you of several important ingredients to the experience you are about to share.

A long-term process

Discovering God's unique thumbprint for your church is long-term. You will work at it intensively for the first 4 to 6 months, but it doesn't end there. The initial stages of this discovery process are critical to the success of the total experience, but they do not constitute the sum total of the process. What's essential for every leader involved is to embrace the magnitude of the process with growing excitement for the results that will be experienced along the way. Don't let seeds of discouragement, disappointment, or discord be planted in the hearts and minds of the key leaders involved. Even though the process is long-term, it is also:

1. Joy-filled
2. Faith-based
3. Vision-focused
4. Team-centered
5. Christ-honoring
6. Spirit-led

A Spirit-directed Initiative

The planning process can be described by a series of seven key questions that need to be answered by every leadership team. Getting your team to agree on the answers to these questions may or may not be simple, depending on the specific circumstances and the health of the relationships between the leaders in your church. The plans you agree on together—under the leadership of the Holy Spirit—will shape your church's effectiveness in the months ahead. The seven major questions that must be answered by you and your church leaders are:

1. Spiritual Needs Assessment. What are the greatest spiritual needs of our church and community?
2. Strengths and Weaknesses. What are the greatest strengths and weaknesses of our church?
3. Opportunities and Threats. What are the most significant ministry opportunities for and potential threats to our church, given the answers to the first two questions?
4. Ministry Options. What appear to be the most viable options for strengthening the ministry of our church?
5. Ministry Platform. What is the primary ministry platform on which our specific ministries should be built? Included in the ministry platform: statement of faith, vision, mission, philosophy, and ministries.
6. Ministry Goals. What are the goals the Holy Spirit is leading us to strive for to enhance our church's ministry over the next year? the next 2 to 3 years?
7. Action Steps. What action steps must we accomplish to achieve these goals?

A committed team

The more your team is involved in this journey of discovery, the more you will ultimately get out of this process. The more they own the process, the greater the impact will be as a result. Choose together to stop (at least for the time being) looking over your shoulder at other, more successful churches, and look instead to God for His design for your local church. As a result, find freedom in Christ to be and become all He intends for you in the fulfillment of His thumbprint within your church.

A discerning leader

After you discover your unique gifts and abilities as a congregation, the time will come to turn to books, attend conferences, consider ministry experts, and consult training manuals. At this time you will realize that every good idea will not necessarily be the best idea for you and your church. Become a discerning leader; pick and choose what best fits your ministry today and what will be most needed for the future. Don't assume that every resource will work until you first attempt to identify your greatest needs and priorities. Then, choose resources that meet these needs and solidify these priorities so your ministry effectiveness quotient increases significantly in the months ahead.

THE GOAL

All along the way, keep your goal in front of you—to become a healthier church. The healthy church is God's church, fit for worship, relationships, and service that honors Him and builds His kingdom. If changed lives are your bottom line in ministry, then take one step at a time as you think and act strategically—all for His glory and for the expansion of the church of Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

1. These questions are explored in *Becoming a Healthy Church* (Baker, 1999) and *Becoming a Healthy Church Workbook* (Baker, 2001) by Stephen A. Macchia. This excerpt is from *Becoming a Healthy Church Workbook*.
2. Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1963), 622.
3. *Ibid.*, 1812.