

HOW DO YOU GROW A CHURCH?

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I picked the last of our persimmons yesterday. It's a little, almost flimsy tree, but it was overloaded with large, beautiful fruit!

A fruit tree naturally requires three things to prosper: the right climate (sun and moisture), the right soil (nutrients and moisture), and the right care (the human element).

What begins as a mere green stalk grows and stiffens and begins to branch out and develop leaves. Yet, at this point it remains fruitless. For all its growth and change, it is still immature.

At last, blossoms form, then drop their petals and the fruit begins to swell. Finally, the fruit matures and drops its seeds.

Last week I read the story of the fig tree that Jesus cursed. He came to it looking for fruit, but there was none. It was full of branches and leaves, but no fruit. It was cursed for its immaturity.

How a Church Prospers

Similarly, a church requires three things to prosper: the right condition (spiritual health), the right expression (numerical increase), and the right extension (missional impact).

Jesus said, *"I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not [prevent it or] conquer it."* (Matthew 16:18)

The church, like fruit trees, may be planted by men and tended by men, but it is God who makes it grow.

Growth is Natural

Growth is a natural process. Seedlings grow. Babies grow. Churches grow. Unless there is some condition of ill health.

Seedlings and babies grow in a linear pattern; that is, over a certain period of time, we may expect them to reach maturity. In fact, they each have an expected life span.

Churches, however, grow in cycles. The length of time required to reach maturity varies, and once it reaches maturity it may bear much fruit for many years and then recycle itself and begin the process again. And, if each cycle builds on the previous one instead of collapsing to nothing first, the church may grow tremendously.

For a church to grow, it must have the right condition: spiritual health. Before I describe this condition in greater detail, let me say two things about its results.

- 1) The internal expression of spiritual health is numerical increase. Growth in size is natural, but in and of itself, immature.
- 2) The external extension of spiritual health is missional impact. Growth in influence is supernatural, and a sign of maturity.

Spiritual Health

What is spiritual health? What are its vital signs? And how can they be measured?

First, for a church to be healthy, it must be driven by God-given purposes—not by irrelevant traditions, or a strong personality, or its surrounding culture, or its internal economy. It may be shown that a healthy church may prevail in spite of any or all of those elements, if it is not driven by them.

Second, for a church to maintain its health, it must pursue a balance of its God-given purposes—not emphasizing one at the expense of another. Imbalance is a condition of ill health which, if not corrected, leads to further complications.

God-Given Purposes

What are the God-given purposes that lead to good spiritual health? A group of eleven people have joined me in a search for the answer to this very question. Our Defining Purpose Group has been studying and discussing dozens of Scripture passages and examining the life of our congregation over the last four months to discern God's purposes for this church. While we have not yet reached a detailed answer, we have already reached a general understanding.

We may say that there are five general purposes which contribute to a condition of spiritual health. They are summarized in two passages of Scripture, which are commonly known as the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

The Great Commandment

The Great Commandment was first delivered by Moses in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 and underscored by Jesus:

Mark 12:28 One of the teachers of religious law...asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"
29 Jesus replied, "The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord.'³⁰ And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.'³¹ The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."

This passage reveals two of the five purposes which God has given His people. To love God with everything that we are is what is meant by *worship*. To love others as ourselves is what is meant by *ministry*.

The Great Commission

The Great Commission is found in the final words of Jesus. Usually quoted from Matthew 28, it may actually be found in each of the four Gospels and the Book of Acts.

Matthew 28:18 "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth."¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.²⁰ Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

This passage reveals the other three purposes for the Church. The task of making disciples is what we call *evangelism*. Baptizing new believers in water is the act of joining them to the larger body of Christ, the beginning of what we know as *fellowship*. Teaching them to obey Jesus is the responsibility of *discipleship*.

Here they are:

- Worship
- Evangelism
- Fellowship
- Discipleship
- Ministry

In summary, these five purposes, given to us by God, when kept in a fluid, dynamic balance produce the condition known as spiritual health.

Maintaining Balance

Why is balance so important? Because imbalance (resulting from the lack or diminishing of one of these five essential elements) produces *un*health or *disease* or discontent.

Your physical frame is designed to operate in balance. When forced to function in imbalance, strain or injury is the result. Your bodily systems are designed to work together harmoniously. When one or more get out of balance, your health diminishes accordingly.

The sciences propose that good health requires: proper diet, sufficient exercise, adequate rest, social interaction, spiritual fulfillment. Lacking any one of these produces imbalance in life and corresponding health problems.

How can I achieve and maintain balance of the five purposes God has given me? Simply by incorporating all of them into my lifestyle; each day practicing each of them.

Worship

Corporate worship like we practice here on Sunday mornings is only one kind of worship. Most kinds of worship—and most occasions of worship—do not require a group, but can be practiced alone. Did you know that?

Worship is first your attitude toward God. The first act of worship in the Bible is bowing down with your face to the ground. Do you humble yourself in His presence?

Inwardly, worship is such things as awe and wonder, delight and joy, gratitude and sobriety. Outwardly, it may be expressed with singing, dancing, clapping, whirling, jumping, shouting, or absolute stillness and silence.

Evangelism

Evangelism is the process of leading people from atheism to agnosticism to seeking, and from seeking to surrender to following Jesus. Every step along that journey is evangelism or disciple-making. Sharing your story of growing faith informs and encourages others to let their own faith grow.

Fellowship

We are called not only to believe but also to belong. Fellowship is the unique intertwining of our lives in worship and service to God. It may take place over a meal or coffee, but it requires neither. It is sharing our real lives in ever-deepening ways. It is soul meeting soul and discovering the appreciable values and characteristics that make every one of us who we are. Working together, playing together, telling our experiences, rejoicing together, confessing our failures, praying for one another—these are the means of true fellowship.

Discipleship

The journey of learning, from Christ and other Christians, to trust and obey God in every instance, whether the situation seems good or bad, is the adventure of discipleship. Along the way, we get to know God far better than when we first met Him and we get to really know ourselves, too. Reading the Bible, studying its meaning and application, praying for wisdom and understanding, and practicing what we learn is the only way to develop disciples of Christ. It is the school of life with God.

Ministry

A life that is not involved in serving others is not a life that belongs to God. God lives to minister to people, and His people do the same. Inhaling without exhaling is not living. The body of water that receives fresh water but

does not let it out is called the Dead Sea. Nothing lives there. Your life with God is meant to be spent, not hoarded. God has saved you for service, not for idleness.

Ministry is the activity of discovering and meeting people's needs. From the widow who needs help to the orphan who needs a parent-figure, from the hungry who needs feeding to the thirsty who needs water, from the sick who needs caring and errands run to the prisoner who needs visiting and guidance—all of this (and more) is ministry.

Signs of Health

If any of these five components of spiritual health is missing or diminished, the church will be negatively affected.

Spiritual health (or the lack of it) affects the size of the church. Numerical growth is the internal expression or product of spiritual health.

However, this is not simply a matter of measuring one church's attendance or membership against another's. That's the manner of business competitors. Numerical growth is viewed through the lens of involvement trends over time, as compared with its surrounding community.

Gathering a crowd is relatively easy, but a crowd is not growth. Growth means connection, alignment, involvement, assimilation, and affection. Are we connecting people to Christ? Are we aligning them with His purposes? Are we involving them in ministry? Are we assimilating them with the mission of the church? Are we embracing one another with godly affection?

Spiritual health (or the lack of it) also affects the mission of the church. Missional impact is the external extension of spiritual health. *What is missional impact?*

Missional impact is the effect a church is having on the world around it—both near and far. Does the local community feel the impact of the church's presence? Does the church recognize and serve the needs of its community? Do those farthest from Christ—the unreached people of the local community and the world—feel the impact of the church? In a word, are we making a difference outside these four walls?

One of the first signs of declining health in a church is the decline of active missional impact, first evidenced by the decline of missional involvement. When the church's budget shifts from reaching and serving others to serving ourselves, it's a sign that something is wrong. When the people's energy and time shift away from reaching and serving others to caring for ourselves, it is a sign that something is wrong.

Making Adjustments

Even though it may be *necessary* to take better care of ourselves at times, it is still evidence of an imbalance that needs adjusting. If the adjustment leads beyond balance to self-serving, it only creates other problems. Beware the pendulum-swing that counters imbalance with alternate imbalance! Our task is to achieve fluid, dynamic balance—not alternating imbalance.

Fluid, dynamic balance is maintained by minor adjustments, like those necessary to keep a ship on course. Adjusting for wind and currents—even in a storm, when greater effort is required—is a matter of small adjustments, once a destination has been decided and a course has been charted.

If we agree that Christ in Heaven is our destination and God's five purposes are the course we are to follow, then we can achieve and maintain the necessary balance to keep us on course and prospering.

Ephesians 4:11 Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. ¹² Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. ¹³ This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth.

¹⁵ Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. ¹⁶ He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

Let this be true of Trinity Community Church! Will you commit yourself to it?