



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

# Pastor's Update

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

*"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).*

What is a healthy church? What is an unhealthy church? This perhaps is the key question today for congregations. Rick Warren says that the most important dynamic of the church today is not church growth but church health. He goes on to say that if a church is healthy, it will grow. Healthy organisms grow.

How do you measure church health? Is it wrapped up in numbers; worship attendance, financial receipts, membership trends? Or is it found in the quantity or quality of the programs? What makes for a healthy church?

A book came out in the late 1990's that addressed these questions, a book entitled Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches, written by Christian Schwarz. His basic approach was taken from both nature and theology, in which he concludes that God has placed in this world a propensity to grow. It is like the mustard seed, which is the smallest of the seeds, which grows to be the largest of the trees.

Schwarz says there is something within nature, something within the church which propels it toward growth, he calls this the "biotic potential." This biotic potential is the "inherent capacity of an organism to reproduce and survive." Technology knows nothing of this dynamic, computers do not multiply, but God has built this potential into the natural world.

God has also placed this potential in the church. Schwarz says that we cannot manufacture church growth, it is not our creation, but rather our task is to realize this biotic potential. The way we do this is to minimize obstacles to growth, both inside and outside the church, but especially inside. If we concentrate on the removal of these obstacles we will begin to realize the power of multiplication.

Undergirding his conclusions is a massive international research project, with many thousands of churches and pastors and lay leaders involved. No doubt this is the largest such project ever undertaken. The study utilizes the most current scientific standards, with all of the rigorous safeguards in place to ensure objectivity, reliability and validity. Congregations were studied on six different continents in thirty-two different nations.

In summary, they found that church health boiled down to eight very specific quality characteristics. I will try to condense this rather exhaustive study for this Update.

## 1. Quality Characteristic One. Empowering Leadership.

The most important aspect of a congregation is not the charisma or giftedness of the pastor, nor his or her age or sex or denominational heritage or seminary education. The core value of leadership is that of empowerment. Leaders of healthy churches focus primarily on empowering other Christians for ministry. They invert the pyramid of authority so that people do not focus on carrying out the pastor's vision, but rather the pastor and staff assist the people in attaining the spiritual potential God has for them. The role of leaders is to equip, support, motivate, mentor and encourage the believers, enabling them to be all that God wants them to be. Leaders who empower invest the majority of their time and energy in discipling, delegating, and multiplying.

## 2. Quality Characteristic Two. Gift-Oriented Ministry.

The role of church leaders is to help people identify their gifts and integrate them into appropriate ministries. When Christians serve in their areas of giftedness, they generally function less in their own strength and more in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus ordinary people can accomplish the extraordinary.

Schwarz goes on to say that none of the eight characteristics show as much influence as this one, both on personal life and congregational life. Those who are using their gifts are amazingly contented and fulfilled, those who are not using the gifts are frustrated and unhappy. This characteristic also helps to live out the important Reformation principle of "the priesthood of all believers."

Unfortunately, a survey of over 1600 Christians found that 80% could not even identify their gifts. How can we serve in our area of giftedness if we do not know what it is? This is the major reason why the priesthood of all believers is only a concept for most.

### 3. Quality Characteristic Three. Passionate Spirituality.

The research shows that church health and development is not dependent on what Schwarz calls "spiritual persuasion," meaning charismatic or non charismatic, nor on specific religious practices. The key dynamic which separates healthy and unhealthy churches is namely, "Are the Christians in this church on fire?" Do they exhibit committed lives and practice their faith with joy and enthusiasm. Is prayer for them an inspiring experience? In addition, enthusiasm for God and faith nearly always correlates with enthusiasm for one's congregation.

### 4. Quality Characteristic Four. Functional Structures.

Surprisingly, this characteristic turned out to be the most controversial of the eight. More traditional churches often see structure as the glue that holds them together, more free churches often see structure as limiting the Holy Spirit. How a church and the ministry are organized becomes a huge issue in many churches, especially when changes are recommended for the sake of growth and health. Incidentally, the research found that there was, to quote Schwarz, "an extremely negative relationship between traditionalism and both growth and quality within the church." Ouch! With most mainline congregations being quite traditional, that is not good news. No wonder we are declining.

### 5. Quality Characteristic Five. Inspiring Worship Services.

Congregations which have joyous, Spirit-filled, enthusiastic worship services are usually healthy and growing. Most people who attend such churches indicate that going to worship is "fun." How different this is from those who go to church to fulfill their Christian duty, who do not attend because of the joy and meaning it brings but to do God or the pastor a favor. The style of worship is much less important, what matters is if the worship is inspiring and uplifting.

### 6. Quality Characteristic Six. Holistic Small Groups.

The continuation and multiplication of small groups is a universal church growth principle. Research shows that the most important characteristic of a healthy church is demonstrated through the multiplication of small groups. Groups grow through cell division.

By holistic, it means that the groups deal with the whole of life, not just Bible passages, but how God and the Scriptures apply to real life. Such a group encourages questions and gives real answers. (Alpha is such a perfect model of such a ministry.) There is nothing which

connects people to God and to one another more effectively than holistic small groups.

### 7. Quality Characteristic Seven. Need-Oriented Evangelism.

A healthy church is concerned about meeting the needs of people beyond its own membership. Kennon Callahan talks about how the most effective churches are those which have two or three programs which are highly valued "not just by congregation members but by the community in which the church is located." A healthy congregation reaches out beyond itself, it shares its gifts and resources with people in need.

### 8. Quality Characteristic Eight. Loving Relationships.

Healthy congregations have a much higher love quotient than stagnant or declining churches. People really do love one another in such a setting, they don't just talk about love but actually demonstrate it. People get together during the week outside of church to nurture these loving relationships. There is joy and laughter in the church, there is a feeling of warmth and compassion.

Lutheran Church of Hope is addressing each of these eight characteristics in very specific and intentional ways. But like our own health, health for a congregation takes concentrated behavior and actions. The above characteristics give us some direction.