

Important Qualities of Healthy Churches

As Christians, we believe that key areas of church life can be affected by our work and we are called by God to do this work. 1 Corinthians 14:12 says, "So with yourselves; since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church."

As we strive to follow the Great Commission of Jesus in Matthew 28:19, we often set quantitative growth goals for our churches. For various reasons, however, quantitative growth is not really our goal. We do not "make" the quantitative growth of churches, God does. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gives the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:6). We can only take steps to support the growth God gives.

So our real question is, "How we are to plant and water so as to help God grow our church?" Instead of just asking how we get more people to come to church, we need to ask, "In what type of church community is growth possible?" This turns out to be a qualitative, rather than a quantitative, question. What are the qualities our parish needs to have to become more a part of the body of Christ? What is the nature of a parish where people can come and see Jesus, come to know Jesus and come to serve Jesus?

A recent study of churches from all Christian denominations identifies eight qualities that healthy, growing Christian churches need and have in common. The study, conducted by the Institute for Natural Church Development, is described in *Natural Church Development* by Christian A. Schwarz. Imagine the fruits your parish might bear (Matthew 7:17) by becoming stronger in each of these areas:

Empowering leadership: Leaders of growing churches equip, support, motivate and mentor individuals, empowering them for ministry.

Gift-oriented ministry: Growing churches help their members identify their individual gifts and use them in appropriate ministries.

Inspiring worship: Members of growing churches attend worship because it is a joyous and inspiring experience, not just to fulfill their Christian duty. (This happens in churches with all different kinds of worship styles.)

Holistic small groups: Growing churches report that it is more important for individuals to be involved in small groups that apply Christian messages to daily life than to attend worship.

Need-oriented evangelism: In growing churches each individual is called to use his or her gifts in fulfilling the Great Commission, but only about 10% of individuals are identified as having the gift of evangelism and are directed to ministries in that area (mostly through existing relationships).

Loving relationships: In growing churches, people don't just talk about love; they experience how it really works with opportunities for laughter, hospitality and pastoral care.

Passionate spirituality: Members in growing churches learn to live their faith with "contagious enthusiasm" and to share it with others.

Functional structures: Growing churches have effective organizational structures that support and encourage their ministries.

Notice some things about these qualities of growing churches. First, some of the qualities are counter-intuitive and many qualities you might consider important are not even listed. Second, these qualities are not dependent on church size. In fact, in some of these areas smaller churches have better development opportunities than larger ones. Third, these qualities do not require any particular program or method. Churches can and must choose how to create these qualities within their own culture, context and gifts. Fourth, a church needs to work on each of these qualities and many churches focus too heavily on their particular "specialties." Fifth, these qualities are "intangibles" but the quality of their experience is measurable.

This research shows that most congregations that are working seriously on any of these qualities are healthier than those who are not. And the members of these congregations report a higher degree of satisfaction with parish life. That helps churches grow.