

So Just what is a “healthy church”?

By Jim Kitchens, October, 2017

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Every once in a while, one of us who serves as a consultant or coach at the Center for Healthy Churches is asked by a church leader, “Exactly what do you mean by a healthy church?”

That’s a fair question. Initially, you may be tempted to think, “Well, everyone knows what a healthy church is,” but upon further reflection you’d realize that is incorrect. There are many ways to define a healthy church, based largely on what metrics you use to think about the word “healthy.”

A couple of weeks ago, several of us from CHC were gathered for one of our semiannual gatherings. We decided to come up with a definition of “healthy church” that would help us articulate what our understanding of what lies at the heart of the Center’s work.

We spent several hours crafting a definition. We wanted it to reflect both our own long years of experience in creating healthy churches in congregations we had served as pastors as well as what we have learned from our years of working as consultants with church leaders from around the country.

We quickly came to a shared agreement about what metrics don’t inform our understanding of “healthy”

- how many members a church has
- how big its budget is
- how “successful” it has been.

We’ve seen too many large, “successful” churches who exhibit unhealthy behaviors. We’ve also worked with too many small churches that exhibit robust health and vital mission.

After many drafts, we came up with a statement we feel captures the heart of our work. It also mirrors our understanding of the church’s call to be the body of Christ in and for the world.

This definition emerged from our discernment:

A healthy church is a community of Jesus followers with shared vision, thriving ministry, and trusted leadership.

Notice that this is a qualitative definition as opposed to a quantitative one. We focus on who the community understands itself to be and how it exhibits that understanding in its shared life. Rather than looking at how much a church is doing or what it has accomplished, we look instead at how much that church follows in the way of Jesus.

A healthy church understands its most fundamental call is to be **a community of Jesus followers**. This understanding turns us away from institutional concerns and toward discipleship commitments. Such a church is clear that its core purpose is to incarnate Christ's healing and saving ministry in a hurting world, joining God in God's work in that world in the power of the Holy Spirit.

A healthy church has **a shared vision** that all of its members seek to embody. When a church's vision is fractured, its ministry's impact weakens, both in its members' lives and in the community God has given it to serve. Having a clear and focused vision invites us joyfully to align all our resources – spiritual, mental/emotional, physical, financial, and structural — toward shared Kingdom work.

A healthy church has **a thriving ministry**. There is a sense of excitement and passion among its members. People experience meaning and purpose as they are given the opportunity to share their gifts. They experience God's deep generosity and grace and are glad to give of themselves and their resources. They understand that their church has all it needs to accomplish the mission God has given it.

A healthy church has **trusted leadership** – both clergy and lay. A congregation that deeply trusts its leaders can face any adaptive challenge, respond with enthusiasm to any new call, and work faithfully through any conflict that may arise. Clear communication and encouraging words and actions by leaders embolden the congregation to step out in faith.

This way of thinking about a “healthy church” reminds us of Paul's metaphor of the church as a healthy body in Ephesians 4.

We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.(v. 15)