

Healthy Growing Churches

What are the issues in keeping a church healthy and growing?
Here are 13 essentials.

1. Settle the question of growth.

God wants His church to grow, and requires more than faithfulness from us, his followers. The biblical mandate includes fruitfulness. Mission is the primary purpose of the church and one of the key signs of a healthy church is growth and reproduction. Each church needs to create an outward-looking focus as its orientation. There are many practical things for a church to address that can help or hinder growth. (see list A. at end of paper)

2. Focus on the issue of health.

Growth is primarily an outcome. Not all growing churches are healthy, but all healthy churches will see growth of one kind or another. The major areas of health are: relationships with God and one another, vision and leadership, truth, culture, and mission. (see list B. at end of paper)

3. Establish a compelling biblical Kingdom vision.

Nothing short of God's intended purpose for this world is sufficient to inspire and motivate the church. God's vision is for transformation of lives, communities and nations, and His church is the agent. This vision must ignite our passion and grab out hearts, minds and bodies. Too many churches either lack vision or get fired up about the wrong things. Programmes and structure must serve the vision, not vice versa. This vision needs to be formed from both the dreams of the leaders and the reality of the people.

4. Shift ministry from the pastor to the people.

Our tradition has produced a one-man-band model of ministry. This is not culturally appropriate today, biblically correct, nor conducive to church growth. Pastors are far too thinly spread and people are sitting frustrated in leadership meetings discussing petty details. Releasing the gifts of the people will allow the church to focus on ministry, not maintenance or management. It also promotes creativity and allows for spontaneous growth. Decision-making becomes more effective while the structure grows more efficient.

5. Let leaders lead.

Congregational government should set the boundaries and affirm the leaders, not deal with the details. Appoint leaders and give them the room they need to move, matching authority with responsibility and accountability. Vision will come in proportion to the release of the leadership gift.

6. Address underlying values to align behaviour with talk.

Statements of vision, doctrine and strategy will come to nothing if they are not backed up by underlying values. Our real values are revealed in behaviour not talk, and when change is actioned. God's truth and appropriate cultural patterns should judge what values we seek to adopt.

7. Get mission into the DNA.

Our evangelical heritage means we say 'yes' to mission, but the reality is that it features poorly in our actual practice. The church must create an outward focussed mission. Mission must then become not only our first priority, but the very heartbeat of the church. It is not a department but our primary purpose and value. The

practice of mission is defined by the understanding of health and the Kingdom vision above.

8. Know how to implement both quantitative and qualitative growth

There are times to expand and times to improve. When the church hits a size plateau, the issue is quantitative – expand the staffing, the seating, the services and the groups. When the church is in a growth phase the issue is qualitative – improve the preaching, the worship, the ministries and the organisation.

9. Recognise the difference between unchanging truth and constantly changing culture.

Most of the things we fight over in church are not spiritual but cultural. We disagree over our preferences – of worship styles, of building upgrades and of dress codes. Identify these for what they really are. The goal is to create appropriate cultural forms that reflect both the people we are and those we are trying to reach.

10. Reproduce at every level.

Train individuals to share their faith and disciple others into the Kingdom. Create new groups of all sizes – small, midsize and congregational. Recognise the difference between division for internal growth of a group and giving birth for new groups. Church plant at a good birth weight.

11. Budget according to vision and priorities.

The budget of the church will reflect the true priorities and the direction of the church. Set vision first, then budget accordingly. Seek to align each ministry with the overall direction of where the church is heading. People will meet the financial challenges when they are inspired about the purpose and direction.

12. Make room for God.

The difference between building a church institution and building the Kingdom is the room we give to the spontaneous, creative, intuitive, charismatic promptings of the Holy Spirit. Every life needs structure, but a great structure can be lifeless and empty. Prayer and waiting on God are essential spiritual disciplines.

13. Recognise seasons and cycles.

God does not operate in one constant way for all time. Everything has a season and a cycle. The time to dream again for the next season is just before the current one reaches the top of its cycle.

Appendix:

A. Other factors affecting growth:

- Staffing ratios
- Multiple services
- Seating and parking
- Attendance barriers
- First impressions
- Special events/days
- Demographics

B. Criteria for measuring health and growth:

- Leadership health
 - Vision and purpose
 - Teaching and preaching
 - Empowerment and teamwork
- Church health
 - Community life
 - Structures and systems
 - Spirituality
 - Change and culture
 - All ages
- Mission health
 - Outward direction
 - Whole of life
 - Proclamation
- Church growth
 - Attendances
 - Baptisms
 - Giving
 - Reproduction