

FEATURES OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

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Throughout my ministry, having headed up Christian communities which have known growth, visitors would sometimes ask “To what do you attribute the success of this church?”

- I remain uncomfortable with the word “success”.
- I, therefore, seek to reframe the question – “What makes for healthy churches?”

I refer you to the earliest church in the Acts of the Apostles, where we learn something of the inner-life in the early days, following Pentecost. These were exciting times of growth when the Christian community expressed its concern for all its members – and yet was sufficiently focused on the wider world to grow through the Holy Spirit.

From time to time, I hear people say, “What we need is a New Testament church.” I am sure I know what is meant, but equally sure it is not what we need. We wouldn’t want to be a church with huge internal divisions, as some in the New Testament were (even at Communion), that had widely different perspectives on money and even excluded people - let alone mentioning that the women had to be quiet!

However, we do need a church empowered by the same Spirit as the New Testament church, in a way that impacts upon the current situations and contexts in which we find ourselves – and this has never been more important.

A healthy church, like a good meal, requires the right ingredients to give it quality. One poor ingredient can make all the difference.

I recall being invited to preach at a city-wide mission in Scott City in Kansas in 1981. After a long flight from Manchester and a six hour car journey, I was greeted by a minister in his pyjamas. He was clearly ready for bed and he asked me if there was anything he could get me. I was up-front and said, “Some tea” and knowing Americans, I said, “A bowl of cereal would be great!” He sent me off to bed with a tray, milk and sugar. To cut a long story short, unfortunately he put salt in the bowl and not sugar. Both my cereal and tea were ruined. This was the wrong ingredient that did make the difference

I suggest to you six features of a healthy church.

A CHURCH THAT IS ENERGISED BY FAITH

So much church life feels like survival, rather than growth. We need a sea change, bringing us back to essentials.

Some kinds of energy are unhealthy –

- The energy to keep a church building open at all costs – or to maintain an institution.
- Energy can flow unhelpfully from a desire to keep control and we may all be guilty of this.

Real dynamic spiritual energy is motivated by a living community where devotion matters greatly.

- The desire to serve God and one another.
- A proper engagement with the Word of God.
- A faith nurtured in Christ, enabling a natural sharing of faith.

I cannot over-emphasise the place of devotion, because it lies at the centre of all living faith communities. However, it is discovered and expressed in a wide variety of ways.

This feature of a healthy church stands at the head of the list - and out of which all the other features will properly flow. A lack of internal energy was caricatured by one church member who said, “Our church is like a wheelbarrow - nothing moves unless you push it.”

A CHURCH POINTING TO THE WORLD

This really grows out of our priorities as a church. We are concerned about the struggle for justice and our identity with the hurt ... which must be deeply rooted in the local Christian community in its various settings.

- We must be prophetic about justice and peace. I can remember sitting in the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, held in Pretoria in 2001. They were discussing the issue of Aids and the need for specific drugs to be made available in a setting where many people were dying. The President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, had made a clear stand against this, based upon his own thinking. There was a vigorous debate and sitting not far away from me was Mrs Mbeki, supporting the church in its witness and call.
- Healthy intercessions in worship must get us beyond ourselves. I remember very clearly attending worship in what many would have called a very successful church – or even a mega-church – and during the intercessions there was no mention of a natural disaster which had taken thousands of lives that had occurred just a few days earlier.
- Whilst a minister in Wales, we were caught up in a major building scheme and I chaired the meeting when we took the decision to build a large glass front entrance to the church. The entrance led onto a street where thousands passed by. One member suggested this was a good idea, for it let people see into the church. My own perspective remains the same as it was then - that the glass should allow the church to see out on the world.

Do we need to rediscover that foundational scriptural teaching of the Good Samaritan? The question “Who is my neighbour?” is still relevant today.

In the context of your conference, allow me to suggest that pointing to the world does not mean that we embrace willingly everything we see in the world around us. Our distinctive features still need to be retained and indeed are best retained if we are to be an effective, dynamic witness.

A CHURCH DISCERNING THE SPIRIT OF GOD

This really does question our vocation as a church. If we are to have a vision for our society and community, then it will naturally grow out of our seeking God for promptings as to where we might be.

- A vibrant spiritual life is not merely internal.
- A clear sense of being called as a community.

I would want to say something here not only about the vision we have, but also about how we communicate it to others.

- We are not primarily about mission statements – they can be simply hoops to jump through. I once found myself in a queue in a bank where the person serving was dressing down a customer and, when I reached the counter, I noticed a mission statement on the wall, which prioritised treating “everyone with dignity”!
- Consciously developing priorities, which grow from a confessional faith, standing in stark relief to some of the practical and doctrinal incoherence that has dominated our church life in recent years.
- Making sacrifice for the vision. We need to be not only a vigorous confessing church, but also one that is costly to us, as we remember God’s eternal bias towards the poor and the marginalised, who are part of his vision for his church.

Our vision has to be placed into the total sum of things. In Colossians 3:1-14, we have a picture which raises questions about the sort of church God wants us to be. The difficulty is that much of the powerful teaching about dying and being raised to the new life in Christ has been so intensely personalised that we have forgotten that there is also a community and corporate dimension to this.

A CHURCH THAT DARES TO DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY

One of the reasons why we are not adventurous in our mission and ministry is because we fear failure. A feature of a healthy church is a willingness to face the cost of change and growth, rather than resisting and running from it.

- Embracing the past – but daring to do things differently.
- Admitting when things don’t work and learning from our errors.
- Responding to opportunities as and when they arise.
- Taking positive steps to bring meaningful change.

A personal reflection would be that, in our own church, we are very often addressing change in terms of structures – and I am very pleased when we can discern developing priorities for the medium- and long-term relates to changing our church culture. Michael Fullan in a book written in 1993 entitled *Change Forces*, wrote, “Changing formal structures is not the same as changing norms, habits, skills, beliefs.” Real change is about changing the atmosphere in which we operate.

David Ford, who is Emeritus Regius Professor of Divinity at Selwyn College, Cambridge University, wrote: “Our calling is to improvise in ways which surprise and delight and yet ring true with the past.”

How does that resonate with a vision of mission and our ministry at this point in time? When we think of the importance of the church plant movement, it must not be about transplanting a failing culture, but discovering a new one.

Our daring to do things differently requires us to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. Mutual respect and unity must be present, even alongside those who may malign our motives and misunderstand our actions. It is very important at this point in our history.

In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:17-20, we find Jesus opening up this whole area of change. Verse 20 – “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

A CHURCH THAT IS INCLUSIVE - NOT EXCLUSIVE

Healthy churches make room for all; newcomers soon become integrated.

- For many years I was minister of a holiday church which welcomed hundreds of visitors each summer Sunday. But the personal challenge for me was not welcoming visitors, but integrating them into the life of the church.
- A positive attitude to children and young people needs to be a priority, as we ensure discipleship is at the centre of our life and witness.
- Enquirers and diverse people of all kinds must be the norm for any local church community.

I have observed the error that can be present in conversations about marriage in our church – and that is to make the assumption that holding to a traditional view of human relationships, such as I do, does not preclude us from including people in, irrespective of who they are. This lies at the heart of our mission culture here in Sydney.

When I look at the New Testament and try to get a picture of what the church was like in terms of its constituency, I always return to 1 Corinthians 1:26–28.

Christianity, in many ways, began to lose some of its powerful vision and practice when it became institutionalised and, in the world’s eyes, influential.

The question of welcome is vital. We also have to be bold enough to learn the lessons of those who have studied both church growth and Christian development. It is a well-regarded fact that people are most effective in their Christian discipleship and witness during the first year of their commitment to Christ.

Any serious study of the gospels leaves you asking the question – “What on earth did Jesus see in these people?” One of our Methodist evangelists of another age, Samuel Chadwick, used to talk about ‘looking for a Lazarus’.

Those of us who belong, and have done so for a considerable time, have to face the challenge of this aspect of a healthy church. It is too easy to move into ‘us and them’ language, whoever we are talking about.

The vision of a new heaven and earth, such as in Isaiah 65:17-25, must sustain us as we look beyond church life in a hope that God has placed in our hearts. The vision of a new heaven and earth are expressed in Hebrew in just seven words. In reflecting upon this, Geoffrey Grogan concluded, “... yet its implications are staggering.”

A CHURCH THAT IS FOCUSED - NOT FRENETIC

This is such a defining feature of a healthy church. There is a misnomer around that healthy churches do almost everything in terms of activity after activity. One of the conclusions that people are coming to regarding growing and healthy churches is that they do the basic things well; they are good news as a community; and they are relaxed about what they don’t do!

- Does not mean that they are very ordinary.
- Does mean public worship, leadership, pastoral care and administration are done well.
- Does mean the call to proclaim the good news and to live out the gospel is taken seriously.
- Does mean we enjoy what we do, relaxed in the fact we don’t do everything, but there is a sense of joy at the heart of the community.

I am reluctant to appear to pass judgement on others in the church, but I sense that we have relegated the position of traditional ministry and values to the sidelines. I recall in the early 1980s a conversation with one of my former tutors, Rev Dr Arthur Skevington Wood, one of the great Methodist historians in the area of revival and renewal. One enthusiastic student asked him why he stayed in the denomination – and he simply said, “Because it’s our church!”

Evangelical faith is not an option for a few, but an essential for all. There are three aspects of God’s initiative which we must always keep in mind:-

- God revealing himself in Christ
- God redeeming the world through Christ
- God transforming the world through the Spirit

These truths lie at the heart of the biblical witness. We are not an eccentric deviation, but historic, mainline and Trinitarian in both our belief and practice.

To pull together these features of a healthy church, I would want to talk about real Christian community. The church is not only called to tell the good news of the coming of God's kingdom, but it is also called to embody the work of the kingdom here on earth.

The presence of God is often mediated through human agency, working, praying, supporting, encouraging, teaching and challenging.

- Interpreting the story of God's love for every community and every generation.
- Witnessing to what God can do in the lives of individuals and communities.
- Setting the claims of Jesus before people and challenging them to a response.
- Enabling a gracious encounter with God, whose redeeming love is for everyone.
- Creating and maintaining a welcoming community, where people can be nurtured in discipleship.

The greater part of the ministry of Jesus was spent in the small towns and communities around the Galilee. It was here that his public ministry began and it was in these communities that he told his stories. It would have been much easier to have begun that ministry in a place where he wasn't known. He set the pattern for us all.

Healthy churches take seriously that we need to be a gospel people in each and every setting; we are all engaged in mission, not just church. If we are to follow the pattern of Jesus, we must live out our discipleship where we are known, and where we can be held accountable to each other and to our neighbours for what we say and do.

Returning to the Acts of the Apostles, we notice that there was a sense of awe among the early believers. Authentic worship lifts us out of the ordinary and familiar into the mystery of God. The same passage indicates that the church of the Acts of the Apostles lived lives of integrity. Their life choices were determined by their faith.

These features of a healthy church have a powerful sense of attraction – and can make a difference in the world.

As you meet in this conference, you do so at a very significant time. My prayer is that God the Holy Spirit will grant you special measures of his grace. May we be given a new passion for Christ, a renewed vision for the church and above all else a fresh focus upon God's call to Christian holiness.

Our constant challenge is to be contemporary and yet, at the same time, we must hold true to God's word as we hear it in scripture. Styles and methods do change, but truth? This is the timeless element of our mission.

If you were to journey to Scotland and visit our Nicholson Square Methodist Church, which is home for many Methodist students linked to Edinburgh University, you will find a portrait of John Wesley and underneath some words.

If they were not penned by Wesley himself, then someone has surely captured his sentiments and sound judgement:

“The Methodists must take heed to their doctrine, their experience, their practice, and their discipline. If they attend to their doctrines only, they will make the people antinomians; if to the experimental part of religion only, they will make them enthusiasts; if to the practical part only, they will make them Pharisees; and if they do not attend to their discipline, they will be like persons who bestow much pains in cultivating their garden, and put no fence round it, to save it from the wild boar of the forest.”

We must be willing to leave the familiar in the adventure of mission and faith, without disturbing the essentials which hold us close to Christ? We affirm together the central nature of our conviction, confession and witness to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let us remind each other that we are a church that must remain grounded in the kingdom of God. We acknowledge that “the time has come” (Mark 1:15) and “the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28). Jesus’ challenge to his disciples was to “receive” or “enter” this kingdom (Mark 10:14-15).

Behind me here in the Wesley Church is a visual reminder of the importance of Jesus Christ as he took bread and wine and offered himself. We would have to unite that truth with the message of the cross that is intricately bound with our mission. When this happens, we are truly a healthy church.

The Opening Sermon at the 2018 Conference of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations held at Wesley Church, Wesley Mission: 17 September 2018