

## THE LOCAL CHURCH

PROVERBS 29:18 says, “WHERE THERE IS NO VISION, THE PEOPLE PERISH.” Many churches are barely surviving today because they have no vision – they’ve lost sight of their purpose. Over the years I have had the opportunity to consult with a number of churches in varying degrees of dysfunction, and I am often reminded of the need for church leaders to keep their eye on the goal. The work of ministry can easily distract us from the priorities of ministry, and when it does it can overwhelm us. What each of us needs to do from time to time is “refocus” on the things that really matter. Pastor Rick Warren, of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, says, “A church without a purpose and mission eventually becomes a museum piece of yesterday’s traditions.” Nothing discourages a church more than not knowing why it exists. On the other hand, the quickest way to reinvigorate a church is to reclaim “God’s purpose” for it, and help the members understand the great tasks God has given to His church.

A PURPOSE STATEMENT reduces frustration because it allows us to forget about the things that don’t really matter. Isaiah 26:3 says that God “gives perfect peace to those who keep their purpose firm and put their trust in Him.” A clear purpose not only defines what we do, it defines what we don’t do. The filter must always be – “Does this activity fulfill one of the purposes for which God established this church?” In short, don’t let anything “distract” from God’s agenda for the church. Benjamin Disraeli correctly observed: “constancy to purpose is the secret of success.” Such a philosophy also applies to the church and our spiritual lives.

ONE OF THE COMMON PROBLEMS FOR CHURCHES TODAY is that they major on the minors. They become distracted by good, but less important agendas and purposes; thus, the energy of the church is diffused and dissipated. As many church growth leaders say, “You must major on the majors if you want your church to make an impact in the world.” Therefore the main thing is to keep the “main thing” the main thing! Every church is defined by those things to which they are committed. I strongly believe in the ministry paradigm espoused by Rick Warren –

***A Great Commitment  
to the Great Commandment  
and the Great Commission  
will grow a Great Church!***

IT IS CRITICAL THAT CHURCHES NOT FOCUS ON GROWING WITH PROGRAMS, but instead focus on growing people with a process. That means churches need to set up a process for developing disciples and stick with it. Remember, the church is about people not programs. The process used by many healthy churches involves four steps: Bring them in, Build them up, Train them, and Send them out – bring them in as members, build them up to maturity, train them for ministry, and send them out on mission – that’s it. Churches are in the “disciple-development” business, and their product is “changed lives” – developing Christ-like people! Therefore, if a church’s objective is to develop disciples, it must think through a process that will accomplish that goal. The Central Church of Seoul, Korea, was built on a cell-group system; First Baptist Dallas was built on a fully graded Sunday School system; Coral Ridge Presbyterian was built on a personal evangelism system called “*Evangelism Explosion*.” Churches must clearly define their purpose and then develop a process to fulfill that purpose.

THE THREE GREAT PURPOSES/PRIORITIES OF THE CHURCH ARE: (Matt 22:37; John 13:34)

1. **Love God** – Upreach
2. **Love the Church** – Inreach
3. **Love the World** – Outreach

I was first introduced to these three purposes by Dr. Ray Ortlund, the long-serving pastor of Lake Avenue Congregational Church in Pasadena. I was privileged to have grown up under his influence, and to this day treasure much of what he taught and preached both through his radio broadcasts and the books he wrote. These three primary purposes of the church all incorporate the word “love” – that is the qualifying trait that makes these traits so important. The truth of the matter is, when we really love God. . . and love the Church. . . and love the World, we will impact it in a phenomenal way – when we don’t love them, we won’t make anymore of an impact than a Rotary Club. The thing I really like about these three stated purposes, is that they encompass so much more than just an action, a program, or a behavior – hence, the need for the church to really understand and embrace what it means to “love.”

ANOTHER POPULAR CHURCH “MISSION STATEMENT” THAT MANY CHURCHES USE IS THIS –  
“We exist to glorify God through advancing His kingdom in our community and in the world.”  
They fulfill this purpose in the following four ways –

1. **Celebrating** the life of Christ – Eph 3:20, 21; Rev 1:5, 6; 4:11
2. **Cultivating** personal growth in Christ – Eph 4:11-13; Matt 28:20; 2 Tim 2:2
3. **Caring** about one another in Christ – Rom 12:4-6; 15:5-7; 1 Jn 1:3, 7
4. **Communicating** Christ to the world – Matt 28:18, 19; Acts 1:7, 8

THE FOUR MAIN “MINISTRY PRIORITIES” OF THE CHURCH CAN BE EXPLAINED AS FOLLOWS –

1. **Worship/Preaching** – some believe the most significant discipleship in the church takes place through the faithful preaching/teaching of God’s Word from the pulpit. The body needs a powerful proclamation of the Word that ministers to the believer’s soul. A corollary to good preaching is good worship, which is an expression of the soul.
2. **Small Groups/Equipping** – they are essential for developing relationships, caring communities, and for equipping believers for ministry. These include groups for children, youth, college, singles, couples, seniors, men, women. . . in Sunday School Classes, Community Groups, Discipleship and Ministry Groups.
3. **Serving** – generally, 35% of congregations averaging over 700 in attendance are actively involved in “servicing” in some capacity (choir, teaching, helping, ushering, nursery, etc.); it should be noted that the 35% figure includes “all attendees” – children, youth, and adults. The goal, obviously, is to have a church where “everyone” serves. One church I knew had about 800 active members – their moniker was: “We’re a church of 800 ministers!” Actually, they were not, but that was their goal. The word “minister” in Greek is the same word that is used for “servant” – as Christians, we’re all called to be servants/ministers; all believers are called to “serve one another.” Churches with an average attendance of more than 1,000, are considered to be fairly healthy churches when at least 35% of their attendees are involved in serving. It should be noted that healthy smaller churches (100-300 attendees) generally have about 40% actively involved in serving. . . and healthy churches with less than 100 attendees frequently will have 50% or more actively involved in serving.
4. **Outreach** – the world around us needs to be one of the “top four priorities” of the church. It has been rightly said of the church, “We’re not called to be keepers of the aquarium, we’re called to be fishers of men.” In this metaphor the church is being compared to an “aquarium” – the church is not to just be preoccupied with what goes on “inside of it,” it is also to be focused on the task of affecting and winning those “outside of it.” So, one of the church’s great tasks is to develop “strategies” of reaching the lost in the local community, and the world at large. This is a huge task to say the least, because we’ll never be “totally effective” in doing so. By the way, we’ll never become “totally sanctified” in our personal lives while we’re living here on earth either,

but that doesn't mean we don't strive to be all we can be by relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. As Paul wrote, "We press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (cf. Phil 3:14). The emphasis is on "direction," not destination.

THE INHERENT DYNAMIC OF THE CHURCH IS THAT IT SURVIVES BY REPRODUCTION. God has placed within the church those elements that cause her to grow – "Paul planted, Apollos watered, but GOD caused the growth" (1 Cor 3:6). We simply need to identify those principles or qualities that God uses to produce growth. Following are eight qualitative characteristics of Spirit-filled, growing, vibrant churches –

1. Empowering – leadership empowers others to do the work of ministry
2. Gift Oriented – it is God who sovereignly determines who should do what
3. Passionate – the people of God should practice their faith with joy and enthusiasm
4. Functional – the institution of the church has structure and form
5. Inspiring – worship must be an inspiring, uplifting, joyful experience
6. Holistic – small groups where people learn to care for and serve one another
7. Need-Oriented – focus evangelistic efforts on the questions and needs of people
8. Loving – genuine practical love is a divinely-generated spiritual power

EFFECTIVE CHURCHES HAVE THE FOLLOWING THREE ASPECTS IN COMMON:

1. Leadership is decentralized and becomes a gift-based partnership between the pastor, staff and lay persons. One of the important lessons learned from decades of hierarchical leadership is that it tends to immobilize people. Structures take precedence over mission and highly centralized leadership blocks the contribution of the gifts and talents of people throughout the church. There must be a conscious decision on the part of the existing leaders to give their leadership away – it results in the mutual empowerment of people in ministry. When this occurs in the church, the role of staff changes – rather than serving only as doers of ministry, they become equippers of others in ministry and facilitators of ministry teams.
2. The Pastor's abilities flow from an authentic relationship with God. One cannot be a truly effective leader in ministry without an authentic relationship with God. In our professionally credentialed, achievement-oriented culture, it is possible to confuse skills and competency with the inner qualities of character, trust and integrity. Spiritually effective leaders nurture their inner man.
3. The role of the pastor is determined by his calling, gifts, needs of the church, and the gifts of others on the leadership team. Leaders cannot be all things to all people, because no individual possesses every gift (shepherd, teacher, preacher, counselor, administrator, vision-caster, CEO, etc.). Effective churches recognize that pastoral roles are best determined by the calling and gifts of the Pastor in the context of the entire leadership team, as well as the leadership needs of the congregation.

CHARACTERISTICS OF DYSFUNCTIONAL CHURCHES: Dysfunctional churches are like dysfunctional families – both are social systems of interconnection and interdependence that adopted inappropriate patterns of relationships, dealing with conflict, and coping with reality. The church at Corinth was a prototype of a dysfunctional church. It was incapacitated by its abuse of spiritual gifts and failure to deal with sin in an effective Christian manner. It is not easy to know the percentage of healthy churches and sick churches in America, but conversations with pastors and laypersons reveal the presence of many dysfunctional churches. Characteristics of such churches include:

1. Specific sins are known to be consistently practiced by persons in the church. These sins often include sexual immorality, financial dishonesty, disharmony, feuding, bitterness, unforgiving spirit, gossip and resistance to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. What makes the church dysfunctional is not necessarily the existence of such sin, but the unwillingness of the church body to deal with it biblically. The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinth 1:10 – “I exhort you brethren, that you all agree, that there be no divisions among you, that you be made complete in the same mind.” Eugene Peterson (the Message) says it this way: “You must get along with each other... learn to be considerate of one another... cultivate a life in common... and stop picking sides.” The Living Bible reads like this: “Let there be real harmony so that there won’t be splits in the church... be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.”
2. Dominance by carnal leaders. In dysfunctional churches, leaders do not have the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3, yet they remain in office, controlling the direction and ministry of the church.
3. Isolation from the world around them. Some churches have so withdrawn from outside relationships that they have lost touch with reality, do not participate in the larger body of Christ, and lack ministry to the world outside the church. They are spiritually independent and isolated.
4. Practical heresy. Some churches are orthodox on paper but heterodox (contrary to the acknowledged standard) in practice. The most common expressions of this dysfunction are in the extremes of legalism and license. These extremes are essentially the result of an unbalanced doctrine of grace. The difficulty is that dysfunctional churches perpetuate their illnesses. They are closed systems in which wrong seems right and the healthy are diagnosed as sick.

The challenge for 21<sup>st</sup>-century pastors is to enter the church system and serve as God’s agents for healing and health. The problem for many dysfunctional churches is that the pastor is often drawn into the dysfunction. More often than not, pastors of these churches become discouraged and resign to escape the dysfunctional system. The best approach for the pastor is for him to seek to maintain personal health through an external support system while implementing a plan of intervention for the dysfunctional congregation.