

SIGNS OF A GROWING CHURCH

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Introduction

In dealing with this topic it is important to understand what is meant by the word, church. The New Testament word, which is translated “church”, is *ekklesia*, which literally means, “a public assemblage summoned by a herald.”

In the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *ekklesia* translates the Hebrew word Qahal, “congregation” (Judges 20:1), especially when assembled before the Lord for religious or sacred purposes. Accordingly, in the New Testament, *ekklesia* assumed a technical expression for “the congregation,” which God assembled about the Messiah, Jesus.

“The theological implication here is that the Church points to the spiritual family of God, the fellowship of believers in Church created by the Holy Spirit through the testimony to the mighty acts of God in Christ Jesus.” It has been said that “wherever the Holy Spirit unites worshipping souls to Christ and to each other there is the mystery of the Church.”¹

The Church is Organic

So understood, the New Testament conceives of the church as an organic entity. Members of the church are knit together by a spiritual kinship as a result of their common faith in Christ. Consequently, the church has been described in such organic terms as, “a chosen race,” “a royal priesthood,” “a holy nation,” “God’s own people” or “a people of God’s possession.” (1 Peter 2:9).

The Church has a Purpose

The church has been created for a purpose. It has been observed that the church is a mission. The point is, “the church, in its totality and diverse organizational structures is God’s mission to the world.” So understood, the church practicalises the mission that she is, as it articulates and relates the Christian faith to the lives of individuals and groups and to communities that encompass both. In his best seller, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren observes that “a church without a purpose and mission eventually becomes a museum piece of yesterday’s traditions.”² On the same question of purpose and mission, Warren made the following point. “Nothing discourages a church more than not knowing why it exists. On the other hand, the quickest way to reinvigorate a plateaued or declining church is to reclaim God’s purpose for it and help the members understand the great tasks the church has been given by Christ.”³

The question is what are the signs of a growing church? To answer this question, it is important to understand that growth is the property of any healthy living organism. It means that it is normal for a living organism to grow, as it is abnormal for a living organism not to grow. Any living organism that suffers stunted growth is not healthy.

The church is a living organism. Be that as it may, and all things being equal, the church, by definition, is a *growing reality*. In other words, growth is not accidental to the church’s life. If a church is suffering from stunted growth, then the health of that church is in question. Rick Warren has rightly observed that, “if your church is genuinely healthy, you won’t have to worry about it growing.”⁴

In the light of this, we agree with Warren, who also observes that “the key issue for churches in the twenty-first century will be church health, not church growth.”⁵ Again, we cannot help but agree with Warren that “focusing on growth alone misses the point. When congregations are healthy, they grow the way God intends. Healthy churches don’t need gimmicks to grow—they grow naturally.”⁶

All of this is to say that “church growth is the natural result of church health.” In dealing with the topic in question, therefore, we cannot but reflect on the condition for the possibility of a healthy church. The questions are what constitute a healthy church? What are the characteristics of a healthy church? How do we facilitate a healthy church?

As an answer to these questions, we would, borrowing from Rick Warren, make the following statement:

Churches grow **warmer** through fellowship.
Churches grow **deeper** through discipleship.
Churches grow **stronger** through worship.
Churches grow **broader** through ministry.
Churches grow **larger** through evangelism.⁷

In other words a healthy church is characterized by the warmth of fellowship, far reaching discipleship drives, a vibrancy of worship, an all embracing diversity of ministry and a commitment to a depth, situation-centered evangelism. Let us consider these characteristics in a more elaborative way.

1. Fellowship, Church Health and Growth

Relationship, in the sense of a strong *sense of belonging* is becoming increasingly important, even in societies like the western ones, which tend to be individualistic. Writing in the context of the more individualistic America, Leith Anderson, in his book, *Leadership that Works: Hope and Direction for Church and Para Church Leaders in Today’s Complex World* observed as follows:

While acknowledging that individualism is still a powerful force in American culture, we can’t deny that relationships have become increasingly important. Isolated people want to get connected. Children of divorce want lasting marriages. Loners are deciding to become joiners. Yesterday’s ambitious executives on the way to the top are deciding to decline lucrative promotions and transfers in order to stay in their neighbourhoods and keep family and friendship intact. Companies are building with fewer closed offices and more modular designs; conference areas are popular and frequently

Insert, pg. 2 Contact, December 2009

used. Baseball, a sport that emphasizes individual skills, is declining in popularity, while soccer, a sport that emphasizes team skills, is increasing.⁸

All of this is to say that there is a strong sense of belonging among individuals. “No matter which segment of society we examine the increased importance of relationships shows up.”⁹

Anderson observed that “more and more unbelievers first come to church because of relationship, not religion.” People “are most likely to adopt the beliefs and faith of their friends.”¹⁰

This strong sense of belonging, which presupposes a basic human need, the need to belong, has profound implications in respect of the way we organize the church and its evangelism.

A warm fellowship, in the true sense of the word *koinonia*, which is hardly a parochial category, but indeed a category of participation, sharing, community of interest, friendliness, brotherliness, fraternity, service is a very basic index pointing to the health of the church. This is precisely because the basic perception of the church is the perception of it as *Koinonia*, a community informed and defined by the Holy Spirit, which (community) reaches out to those without it with the warm hand of fellowship, friendliness, brotherliness and service.

In the light of this, Leith Anderson observed that “we have switched from the old way when people came to church and then made friends to the new way when people make friends and then come to church.”¹¹

It means that we can no longer define fellowship in a parochial or exclusive way in the sense of a church or churches where “all the members are friends with one another but not with outsiders.” Churches with so many programmes targeting insiders but not outsiders are obviously not healthy churches. These churches serve themselves, are inward looking and fail to reach outsiders with the warm hand of friendliness, brotherliness and service and so they do not grow.¹²

A healthy church is characterized with warmth of fellowship, which, is defined inclusively in the sense of a community defined and informed by the Holy Spirit reaching out to those without with warm hands of friendliness, brotherliness and service.

A healthy church, characterized with warmth of fellowship is a relational church. Such a church is also an outward looking church.

2. Discipleship, Church Health and Growing

The operative word here, *discipleship*, derives from the word disciple (*discipulus*, Latin) which is translated pupil, trainee. A disciple is a learner of a master. The modern word for a disciple is an *apprentice*.

As we can see, the various definitions of the term disciple presuppose teaching and learning. In other words, teaching and learning are the conditions for the possibility of discipleship. A healthy church is a teaching and learning church. The question is what kind of teaching and learning facilitates discipleship?

This question can be simply answered as follows; a teaching centered on Christ and his redeeming love for humanity. “The church exists to edify, or educate, God’s people. Discipleship is the process of helping people become more like Christ in their thoughts, feelings and actions.”¹³ This process begins with conversion and continues throughout the life of the converted Christian. Acts 2:41f reads: “So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer.”

The church has the “responsibility to develop people to spiritual maturity.” The church exists among other things to develop people to Christ like maturity. This entails purposeful training of church members and commissioning them for evangelism. To reiterate what I have said, a healthy church is a teaching and learning church.

3. Worship Church Health and Growth

In his article, “Worship,” in the *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, Everett F. Harrison observes that the English word, worship, “means ‘worship’ denoting the worthiness of an individual to receive special honour in accordance with that worth.”¹⁴

The key biblical expressions that are translated *worship*, *saba* (in Hebrew) and *proskuneo* (in Greek) point to the act of prostration in the sense of total and reverential submission to the awe-inspiring presence of God.

Theologically speaking, worship bespeaks two things, namely, the recognition of the existence, the awe-inspiring presence, and the worthiness of God, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the acknowledgement of one’s creatureliness dependence upon, and unworthiness in the presence of God. Worship presupposes the recognition of one’s being as defined and informed by God’s pure generosity.

Worship also “institutes the relations between [the human] and God.” The initiative in respect of these relations springs from God, who in his self-transcendence reveals himself to the human. In response, the human in recognition of this awe-inspiring presence whose existence defines and informs his being, “adores God in worship which takes a communal form.”

Worship has a soul, which is faithfulness and obedience to the will of God. In respect of this *The Dictionary of Biblical Theology* observes as follows:

Israel’s worship will become spiritual insofar as the people listen to the prophets and recognize the interior nature of the covenant demands. It is this interior loyalty that is the condition of an authentic worship and the proof that Israel has no other God but Yahweh.¹⁵

All of this is to say that worship transcends prostration and cultic activities such as prayer, sacrifice, and singing, dancing and offering. Worship expresses our commitment to God. In that sense, worship involves righteous living. A healthy church worships God in word and deed, “in spirit and truth for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:24)

In his work already referred to, Rick Warren made the point that “*worship is a powerful witness to unbelievers if God’s presence is felt and if the message is understandable.*”¹⁶ He cites what happened on the day of Pentecost, when God’s presence was made so evident in the worship of the disciples that it attracted the attention of the thousands of unbelievers out of whom three thousand committed their lives to the Lord and were added to the number of the believing community to substantiate his point.

To Warren, “more people are won to Christ by feeling God’s presence than by all of our apologetic arguments combined.”¹⁷ He writes, “In genuine worship God’s presence is felt, God’s pardon is offered, God’s purposes are revealed, and God’s power is displayed.”¹⁸

There is indeed a close connection between genuine worship and evangelism. “Worship provides the motivation for evangelism. It produces a desire in us to tell others about Christ. Worship then provides the ideal context for evangelism in that it “is the task of recruiting worshippers of God.”¹⁹

The long and short of all is that a healthy church is a worshipping church. And since a healthy church is a growing church, it follows that a growing church is a worshipping church.

4. Ministry Church Health and Growth

The New Testament consistently teaches that ministry is intended for the “perfecting of the saints . . . for the edification of the body of Christ.” (Eph. 4:12) Ministry, in that sense, facilitates both the quantitative and qualitative growth of the church.

Ministry understood in the sense of *diakonia*, service points to responsibility rather than privilege. This is substantiated by the words which are translated ‘minister’ in the sense of one who performs ministry. The Greek word, *diakonos*, which is, translated ‘minister’ points to “a table waiter.” The following two other words which are also translated minister stress the responsibility of the minister: *hyperates*, “under-rower” in a large ship. *Hyperetes* refers to slaves who sat in the belly of the large ships and pulled at the great oars to carry the boat through the sea. These slaves in the belly of these ships were bound by chain. They could do no other thing but to row the ship as the master of the ship demanded. It means that being in ministry is being a bond slave of the Master, Christ Jesus. Ministers serve Christ and Christ alone in the various capacities Christ called them. Their greatest glory is God’s call and God’s work. The other word is *leitorgous*, which is, translated ‘servant’ usually of the state or temple. As we have noted, all these words point to one who has been called to service. Ministry, then, points to bound service to the Lord and humanity in the name of the Lord.

Ministry involves the church as a whole. In 1 Cor. 12, the church is presented as a charismatic community in the sense of a sacred community endowed with the gifts of the Spirit which are intended for service to God and humanity.

A healthy church exercises ministry of diverse kind. This diversity of ministry involves the whole church and not a select group called the clergy. Thomas F. Torrance articulated this position succinctly when he observed as follows:

Ministers of the church are wrongly set over the people. To lead . . . to have oversight, and therefore to exhort, does indeed belong to their genuine functions. . . . But this never means to ‘Lord over. . . . However popular misconception of special ordination tends to make ministers the accepted Christian type. They serve the Lord full-time! They are God’s men! This has led to a subtle clericalization not only of the church but of theology, of the concepts of mission, service and unity and even of the person of Christ²⁰

It must be made clear that the ordained ministry, as one of the diverse ministries of the church, can hardly be defined as a ‘caste’ located outside the church. Ministry understood as Christian bond service to the Lord and humanity, involves the specially ordained clergy and the generally ordained baptized believers.

The concept of the ‘people of God’ (*Laos tou theou*), which is one of the many definitions of the church, calls for a radical change in attitude and perception of the ministry. The basic ecclesiology today is *Koinonia*, fellowship, sharing and partnership. Baptism is a basic ordination of the Christian. “This basic ordination of baptism while not precluding subsequent ordination for special task is the foundation of the ministry of the church.”²¹

A healthy church, which by definition is a growing church, is characterized by both *clericalized* and *laicised* ministries. Such a church is “all hands on deck” church and it grows. In Ephesians 2:10 we read that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” In Ephesians 4:12 we read that specialized ministries have been given to the church “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. Ministry is hardly limited to the clergy. On this Rick Warren observes as follows:

The designation “active” member in most churches means those who attend regularly and financially supporting the church. Not much more is expected. But God has far greater expectation for every Christian. He expects every Christian to use his or her gifts and talents in ministry. If we can ever awaken and unleash the massive talent, resources, creativity and energy lying dormant in the typical local church, Christianity will explode with growth at an unprecedented rate.²²

It is important to understand that, though not every believer is a pastor, every believer has been called into ministry. We agree with Warren who says that, “God calls *all* believers to minister to the world and the church. Service in the body isn’t optional for Christians. In God’s army, there are no volunteers—he’s drafted all of us into service.”²³ A church where every individual member is involved in ministry is a healthy church, hence a growing church.

5. Evangelism, Church Health and Growth

In its broader sense, evangelism is “the total impact of the church upon the world.” By its very nature and by definition, the church is missionary. It is missionary because it has its origins in the mission of the Triune God, Father Son and the Holy Spirit.

By this missionary understanding of the church, the church is meant to be understood as God’s mission to the world, as the reality through which God in Christ is reconciling the alienated world to Himself. Indeed, the existence of a healthy church, and hence a growing church, is defined and informed

by evangelism. Thus in his article, “Biblical and Theological Foundation For Evangelism,” Kwesi A. Dickson observed that “it is of the very essence of the church that it should proclaim salvation in Christ—it is the *raison d’être* of the church that it should engage in evangelism.”²⁴

In a narrower sense, evangelism “is the concentration of effort designed to bring about a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.” At the heart of this definition is the understanding of evangelism as “the proclaiming of Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit that men should come to put their trust in God through accepting him as Saviour and serving him as Lord of personal life and in the corporate fellowship of the church.”²⁵

Kwesi Dickson’s definition gives a further elaboration on the definition of evangelism. According to Dickson, “evangelism is inviting persons and communities to accept Christ through the proclamation of salvation in his name and the forgiveness of sins, calling such to recognize the Kingdom which is coming in Christ, and teaching them to participate in the struggle to transform all those factors of life which cause alienation and dehumanization.”²⁶

Dickson to whom reference has just been made identifies three broad components of evangelism in his definition, namely, “preaching salvation in Christ and forgiveness of sins, teaching to enable converts serve God and his people, and working towards the realization of God’s Kingdom.”²⁷ Dickson elaborates on each of these components of evangelism. For the sake of time and space, however, we will not bother with Dickson’s elaboration on the three broad components of evangelism we have just referred to. We will simply dwell on the fact that evangelism has a socio-historical context.

The socio-historical context of evangelism means that evangelism is dynamic. Evangelism in the twenty-first century is, by all counts different from that of the centuries preceding the twenty-first century. Whereas the content of the evangelistic message will forever remain the same in all centuries, the method, approach and the physical tools that are used are subject to contextual variability.

Here, the key expression is “contextualization,” a concept which has attained indispensability in the contemporary missio-theological enterprise.

Contextualization of Christianity is nothing more than the process of interpreting Christian truth in terms of and applying it to the real life issues arising from the socio-cultural contexts within which the interpreters live. Contextualization entails taking into serious consideration everyday human life and God’s desire to be involved in it.

In the light of contextualization, evangelism calls for the consideration of the mindset of the people among whom the Gospel is proclaimed. This is precisely because it is the mindset of the people, which determines both their mode of understanding and interpretation of meaning received.

Evangelism demands the Gospel to be historically and culturally particularized in keeping with God’s readiness to meet people at the point of their greatest felt need.

This has implications for the messenger of the Gospel. It means that the messenger of the Gospel cannot lose sight of the fact that he or she is a product of his or her culture. The evangelist’s culture imposes certain limitations upon his or her Christian experience and for that matter, his or her presentation of the Gospel.

As we think about the role of evangelism and the health and growth of the church, we must do so in the context of our cultural particularities and for that matter, our cultural possibilities and limitations, open for the Spirit of God to do a new thing. In other words, we should allow the Spirit to bring into being the growth of the church, in the sense of indigenous Churches that will reflect the ethos of the people. In Colossians 4:5-6 we read: “Be tactful with those who are not Christian Talk to them agreeably and with a flavour of wit, and try to fit your answers to the needs of each one.”

A healthy church is, by definition, evangelistic. A healthy church defines its reason for being as evangelism. The church grows through effective evangelism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate a point we made at the beginning. It is this: *a healthy church is characterized by the warmth of fellowship, far-reaching discipleship drive, a vibrancy of worship, an all-embracing diversity of ministry and a commitment to an in-depth situation-centered evangelism.*

ENDNOTES

1. Emmanuel Asante, *Stewardship: Essays on Ethics of Stewardship* (Kumasi: Wilas, 1999), p.159
2. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995), p.87
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p.17
5. *Ibid.*, p.7
6. *Ibid.*, p.17
7. *Ibid.*, p.49
8. Leith Anderson, *Leadership that Works: Hope and Direction for Church and Para Church Leaders in Today’s Complex World*. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 1999), p.132
9. *Ibid.*, p.133
10. *Ibid.*, p.135
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Warren, p.106
14. Everett F. Harrison (ed.), *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1960), p.560
15. Xavier Leon-Dufour (ed.), *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1973), p.681
16. Warren, p.241
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, p.242
19. *Ibid.*
20. Ray Anderson (Ed) *Theological Foundation of Ministry* (London: Harper & Rowe, 1999), p.137
21. *Ibid.*, p.435
22. Warren, p.365
23. *Ibid.*, p.366
24. Kwesi A. Dickson, “The Biblical and Theological Foundation for Evangelism,” in *Africa Challenge: All Africa Journal of Theology*.1, 2 (June 2003), p.5
25. George Sweazey, *Effective Evangelism* (New York: Harper, 1953), p.13
26. Dickson, p.5
27. *Ibid.*