



THE HEALTHY CHURCH: THE VALUES OF TAKING THE PULSE OF THE CONGREGATION

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What you don't know can hurt you; what you do know can certainly help.

Avoiding learning information pertinent to the health of your church can be damaging and demoralizing. An unwillingness to listen to the joys and concerns of your congregation can in fact impede one's leadership and slow down the maturing of life together.

When one leader I observed shunned the idea of taking a pulse of the congregation, I couldn't help but wonder about his leadership. Insecure leaders have a hard time embracing this idea. They are afraid of the truth, or even the perceptions of truth, they will hear in the process.

Many leaders today consider church assessment a report card on their personal effectiveness as a pastor, preacher or leader. They have a hard time getting beyond their own feelings in order to embrace the exciting discoveries to be learned from the congregation and ministry leadership teams through such an exercise. Why is that so?

Leadership is tricky business today. The demands upon pastors and ministry leaders continue to escalate. Many people in the congregation have heightened expectations of their pastors: Some want personal attention, many desire programs specific to their needs, most want excellent preaching and worship, several want motivational service opportunities, others want to be trained in the development of their respective areas of ministry, still more want to be visited in the hospital, and the list goes on.

As the demands pile up, the effectiveness quotient diminishes the more a leader seeks to meet every growing demand of ministry. How is the leader to know where his attention should be focused? Assessment is the clear solution. Often, in fear of criticism, a leader will unwittingly choose passive deafness (preservation of the world as he perceives it) in lieu of active listening (offering a clearer view of reality). To take time and actually listen to how well others are engaging in their church experience is almost debilitating for the thin skinned, overworked leader to consider.

Yet members of today's congregations have a lot to say to pastors and leaders about their church experience. They are the best ones to survey, since they are the most important entity in the leader's orbit of influence. Each voice matters and every person possible should be listened to on a regular basis. To ignore this opportunity lacks good stewardship and strategic leadership sensibilities.

Should assessment be a part of your regular check on the culture

and temperature of your congregation?

For the healthiest of churches, under the leadership of secure pastors and leaders, this is an easy question to answer—yes! Church growth follows hand in glove with church health, since in the created order—and in the life of the church—healthy things are destined to grow. Therefore, in order to assess church health, a tried and true measurement instrument can be utilized with great results.

Ever since I wrote about these matters in *Becoming A Healthy Church* (Baker Books, 1999), I've had the privilege of overseeing health assessments for scores of congregations. For the past several years, the ministries I've led have been engaged in this practice with many who share this passion. Why? Because listening to others is a primary task of every effective leader, and assessments are the best way to do this congregation-wide.

In our online Church Health Assessment Tool (CHATSM) we've learned quite a bit from our experience in church assessment work.

First, the data collected in church assessments provides insight into the real needs of the congregation. Allowing members to give voice to their joys and concerns deepens their commitment to the church. When asked about how well the church is addressing their real and felt needs, congregants are included in defining the future of the church. Rather than fall into the trap of making key decisions based on limited anecdotal feedback, assessments keep leaders in touch with a larger percentage of active participants in the life of the church.

Second, effective assessments unite leadership teams around how best to pray for their local church and its ministries. Identifying strengths and weaknesses of church life will influence the way in which prayers can be offered in interceding for members and their families. In addition, praying for new service opportunities and corresponding obstacles to outreach will keep leaders on their knees, appropriately dependent upon the Lord for each new day of shared ministry.

Third, helpful assessments aid in training ministry leaders in important skills of leadership. Most healthy churches care deeply about leadership development. Modeling to young aspiring leaders the value of listening via assessments is critical to their ongoing growth. As you listen and begin to discern major themes together, God's unique thumbprint on your congregation can be celebrated and enhanced. What better way to groom others to step to the plate in designing ministry for the days ahead?

Fourth, quality assessments provide information for discerning and developing strategic initiatives for future ministry development. A natural outgrowth of dialogue around what's been discovered through assessment is planning. Unless the leaders first attend to the temperature and pulse of the congregation and community, they will not be able to adequately plan for the changes necessary in order to expand and deepen existing ministry effectiveness. Quality assessment leads to excellent strategy.

Fifth, church assessments offer benchmarks for evaluating ministry effectiveness one year later. If a church accesses assessment instruments one-time only, the ripple effect will be minimal. However, when a church sees assessment as an important aspect of ongoing ministry development, they will use what they've learned year after year in goal setting, evaluation and accountability.

Each year the church measures its growth toward a commonly shared agenda, the ownership of its witness is enhanced throughout the congregation. Celebrating accomplishments together coalesces leaders and members and inspires them toward even greater maturity in the future.

All in all, embracing the opportunities afforded congregations today through church assessment instruments will provide learning that will indeed impact the life of the church worldwide. Leaders who value listening attentively and carefully to others are blessed immeasurably as a result.