



A SOMETIMES-OVERLOOKED DIMENSION OF CHURCH VITALITY

Much attention these days is being given to measuring how well churches and pastors are doing. We hear more about measuring disciple making and vitality. There are many challenges associated with this. Most notably, existing statistics do not directly capture either of these areas of interest. The usual membership, worship attendance, new members by profession of faith, and baptisms can give a sense of growth, plateau, or decline, but may be capturing numerous other factors in the process. They are, to some degree, indicators, but are not necessarily correlated to the two big outcomes we hope for these days.

Before something can be measured, it needs to be clearly defined. What we often tend to do in the church is to define something by known measurements. For example, we might say a vital church is one that is growing by a certain percentage, and has so many professions and baptisms. This misses the whole point. It is entirely possible that a church which has all these numerical qualities may not be vital at all, while a church which comes up lower on such a numerical scale may be highly vital, but have some circumstances impacting the statistics.

Dictionaries have many definitions of “vital,” most of which suggest that anything which is vital is alive. This is in contrast to being dead. There is a joke that one morning during worship in a UM church, a man died. Emergency Services were called and responded quickly. After hauling out half the church members, they finally got the right person. This is obviously overstatement, but it makes a point. The qualities of being alive and being dead in churches are elusive to define, but this subjective quality is often obvious to unchurched visitors. It is also especially

obvious to visitors who are accustomed to churches that are alive. Being alive in worship often has to do with energy and vigor, but is not ensured by lots of activity and trumped-up enthusiasm. The same is true for the overall ministry. Lots of programs and busyness do not necessarily mean life.

Jesus said in John 10:10 that “he came that they might have life and have it abundantly.” This abundant life may hold the key to understanding church vitality. The *Jesus in the Gospels* study (part of the Disciple Bible study series) notes that this passage uses the Greek word “Zoe” to mean life. This is to be distinguished from “bios.” Zoe, as noted in this study, means a different kind of life. In other words, when one attains the life Jesus offers, one’s life changes from the normal to something more. All sorts of biblical references note the change in the new disciple.

This new kind of life is also a transformed life. Noteworthy change occurs in the new disciple. Priorities change. Destructive behavioral patterns improve. Relationships heal. Commitments change. The fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22), as well as the gifts (1 Corinthians 12) become more apparent. Growth in stewardship, including giving, is observed. Conflict lessens. Marriages are renewed. Love is more apparent. Genuine concern for the needs of others increases. People become more mission minded and look beyond themselves, contributing to the church becoming increasingly less inward-focused overall. These churches have a real sense of God’s purpose for them, especially in relation to their context. All this happens in large part due to internal changes in people’s lives, and not just because they have become re-educated.

Furthermore, in churches that are alive with congregants who are experiencing this different kind of life, one often finds prayer being practiced by more people and with greater intensity. There are likely more prayer venues than the prayer chain and reading of printed prayers in worship. Part of this additional vigor around prayer is likely due to increasing faith in the practitioners. They are not just theologically convinced that prayer makes a difference, but have practiced it in that confidence, and have seen prayer answered. These answered prayers serve as feedback to further inspire more prayer. In increasing numbers these disciples find themselves telling others of their answers to prayer, and this serves to motivate others to deeper transformation in their lives.

In addition to prayer, accountability groups can be a great means of transformation for both experienced and new disciples. These were at the core of early Methodism, both in England and America. These are more than the garden-variety small groups and Bible studies, but really challenge participants to commit to personal and faith growth.

When churches are alive in this way, they will most likely experience growth in membership and worship attendance, as well as having more new members by profession of faith, and more baptisms, even adult baptisms. However, not all churches that have these kinds of numbers are alive. They may be highly functioning organizations that have achieved success in sound programming, marketing, visitor follow up, skilled fundraising, and member cultivation. They may have worship experiences with excellent music, accomplished oratory, multimedia offerings, fun children's options, and impressive welcoming of visitors. One might ask what kinds of disciples are really being made in this environment, however. While looking good statistically, there may not be much of the different kind of life happening. Please note that the ideal situation is one where both the new kind of life is present and the church is a highly functioning organization.

Vitality, as understood to be about congregants attaining a new kind of life, obviously is primarily a spiritual matter. A common observation by many who work with church revitalization or transformation is that we too often attempt to impose a technical solution on a spiritual problem. While both may be needed, it

is important to be able to distinguish between them and discern what is really needed in a given situation. The spiritual solution will often improve a technical problem, but the reverse is rare.

Since the current batch of collected statistics may or may not capture spiritual vitality, a new set of measuring tools may be needed. This is not easy to standardize for the denomination, so more local reporting may be in order. Given the subjective nature of spiritual vitality, it is more difficult to capture. While making no pretense at having derived the ultimate questions, the following are suggestive of the kind of measuring which may be helpful. How many hours of recorded prayer time happen monthly? What forms of prayer gatherings are there? How many demonstrable answers to prayer were observed last year? How many professions of faith were observed that did not lead to membership? How many folks have made deeper commitments to their faith walks? How many have felt God's call to ministry in some form? How many visitors comment on the sense of the presence of God in worship? How many developments have been observed that can only be explained by God's doing? How many new need-based community ministries were initiated?

Church vitality has many dimensions and approaches, often overlooking the new kind of life. Early Methodism exuded this expression of vitality and some current places, such as Vietnam, do as well. Whether or not we are able to measure the new kind of life, we can prayerfully hope that it becomes more characteristic in many more of our churches.

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