

TURNING TODAY'S CHURCH TRENDS INTO
TOMORROW'S OPPORTUNITIES

INTO THE FUTURE

ELMER TOWNS
& WARREN BIRD

FOREWORD BY LEITH ANDERSON

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***INTO THE FUTURE: TURNING
TODAY'S CHURCH TRENDS
INTO TOMORROW'S
OPPORTUNITIES***

By

Elmer Towns and Warren Bird

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Other books authored or co-authored by Elmer Towns

My Angel Named Herman, Tommy Books, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN, a children's book.

Biblical Meditation for Spiritual Breakthrough, Regal Books, a textbook for Bible study groups.

Developing a Giving Church, Beacon Hill Press, a journey of teaching stewardship to the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Everychurch Growth Book: How To Break Growth Barriers, Broadman & Holman (Southern Baptist Publishers).

Fasting Can Change Your Life, Regal Books, thirty-four testimonies of leading American Christian experiences with fasting, i.e., Bill Bright, Jerry Falwell, D. James Kennedy, etc.

Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough, Regal Books, a very clear biblical understanding of the value of fasting.

Other books edited or collaboratively authored by Warren Bird

The Coming Church Revolution (Carl George)

The Comprehensive Guide to Cassette Ministry (Johnny Berguson)

How to Break Growth Barriers (Carl George)

Nine Keys to Effective Small-Group Leadership (Carl George)

Prepare your Church for the Future (Carl George)

Real Followers: Beyond Virtual Christianity (Michael Slaughter)

Into the Future: Turning Today's Church Trends into Tomorrow's Opportunities by Elmer Towns and Warren Bird.

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Section Headline: Churches Move Toward Church Health and Quality



Trend #1. Christians are moving away from a numbers-driven or “church growth” emphasis and instead are putting more priority on growing healthy churches.

Chapter One

Get Help in Becoming More Healthy

Baseball’s Mark McGwire, who made home-run history in 1998, wasn’t born as a natural hitter. For example, McGwire’s eyesight is 20/500, “which means that without his contacts he is Mr. Magoo,” according to *Sports Illustrated*. “His glasses have lenses that could have been pilfered from the Hubble telescope.”ⁱ Poor eyesight is just one of many obstacles he had to overcome in order to achieve such a tremendous season for the St. Louis Cardinals.

Your church can likewise have a championship season for Jesus, even if it too has noticeable handicaps. Your congregation can reach its maximum potential in being everything God is calling it to be.

“But McGwire took drugs that I wouldn’t want to use,” you say. Good point. How about if we limit your church’s journey toward maximum health to methods and strategies you feel are firmly based in God’s Word? For instance: Hard work? yes. Steroids? no. Contact lenses? yes. Sports instead of church on Sunday mornings? no. You get the idea.

Haddon Robinson, author of *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, has devoted his life to helping pastors preach better. He points to the obvious when he says, “If you want to learn to hit a baseball, it is better to study one .300 hitter than three .100 hittersⁱⁱ.” Is your church hitting closer to .100 or to .300 in its effectiveness? This chapter is designed to expose you to developments that can help you identify values that contribute to the health of your congregation. Then it will guide you in evaluating what your wisest steps might be toward optimal church health in the context of tomorrow’s world.

1. Begin by focusing on a healthy relationship with God

Steve Macchia, a pastor who now heads an organization called Vision New England (formerly the Evangelistic Association of New England), once flew to a town in Canada named St. John’s. He had been invited to speak to a church group, and they had given him instructions to look for a Howard Johnson’s eye-catching sign in the baggage claim area. He had been told there would be a courtesy phone near the bright blue and orange sign. From there, he was to call the hotel shuttle, get a good night’s sleep, and then meet the group he was to address first thing in the morning.

He looked in vain for the HoJo's sign. Finally, when he asked for help, an airline official politely informed him there was no Howard Johnson's in their town. Macchia waved his reservation sheet in her face and insisted that she was wrong.

Studying the correspondence together, he reached a surprising conclusion. He was not only in the wrong airport, but in the wrong city, and even more significantly, in the wrong province of Canada. He had gone to St. John's, Newfoundland, and needed to be in St. John (no s), New Brunswick.

That experience became a picture of his life. He had been figuratively hopping on one wrong airplane after another, landing in one wrong town after another. "They were all good planes and good locations," he says, "but they were the wrong planes and destinations for me."ⁱⁱⁱ He was going everywhere and nowhere, lacking an awareness of what was really most important.

For the next several months he sought to realign his life as never before according to God's principles. Even though he had been in pastoral ministry for over a decade, he had not previously gone through such an intensive self-evaluation. He emerged with a stronger sense of where he needed to place his energy and priority to really make a difference for Christ.

These assessments led Macchia on a larger journey. In his role with Vision New England, he spent years trying to figure out what a truly healthy church looks like today. Not just the one he serves, but any church in any context – could he identify principles and values that have application across New England, and presumably across the continent?

He talked with scores of people, from theologians to pastors to longtime lay leaders, hoping to pinpoint the primary emphases of a healthy church. Is it one with strong preaching? A great choir? Lots of wealthy executives in the pews? An effective Sunday school? A thriving missions program? Something else, like simply that the leadership is healthy?

Through the organization he heads, he did an extensive study that included two major surveys. Their overall findings were consistent across race, gender, denomination, age of the respondent. No single factor alone significantly outpaced others as the mark of a healthy church. However, the top factors all had a common denominator: a church must be God-centered to be healthy.

SIDEBAR

Spiritual Health Cannot Happen without Being God-Centered

Steven Macchia's survey used a scale with rankings of 1 (lowest) to 9 (highest). Notice the

common thread in the five top-ranking values (italicized):

8.84 *Reliance upon God's power and the authority of His Word*

8.78 *God's empowering presence*

8.71 *Pervasive prayerfulness*

8.43 *God-exalting worship*

8.31 *Spiritual disciplines*

8.21 Learning and growing in community

8.19 A commitment to loving and caring relationships

8.02 Servant-leadership development

- 7.90 An outward focus
- 7.56 Wise administration and accountability
- 7.03 Networking with the Body of Christ
- 6.94 Stewardship and accountability^{iv}

According to God’s people across many denominations, the first mark of spiritual health is a congregation’s reliance on God’s power and the authority of His Word. Likewise, experiencing God’s presence is of utmost importance.

A healthy church actively seeks the Holy Spirit’s direction and empowerment for daily life and ministry. A healthy church gathers regularly as the local expression of the Body of Christ to worship God in ways that engage the heart, mind, soul, and strength of the people. The healthy church provides training, models, and resources for members of all ages to develop daily spiritual disciplines in their life in Christ.

Macchia finds great reassurance in these principles and values. “If a church is to be healthy and vital, it needs to be led by a pastor and leadership team who are themselves pursuing health in their personal lives and in their shared leadership capacity. Only then will a local church become the vibrant, healthy entity God intends,”^v he says. As Henry Blackaby and the Church Growth movement have both affirmed: Find and join what God is doing. Know Him. Experience Him. Find His agenda for your church and life, and get plugged into it.

SIDEBAR

How to Experience God

#1: God is always at work around you.

#2: God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.

#3: God invites you to become involved with Him in his work.

#4: God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances and the church to reveal Himself, His purpose, and His ways.

#5: God's invitation for you to work with Him always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.

#6: You must make major adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing.

#7: You come to know God by experience as you obey Him and he accomplishes His work through you.^{vi}

2. Don't assume that size indicates health.

In perhaps the world's most comprehensive study of church health, German researchers Christian Schwarz and Christoph Schalk have processed more than 4 million survey responses from several thousand churches across more than 30 countries covering all 5 continents. Like Steve Macchia, they found that not one but many essential qualities are required for a church to be healthy. Schwarz's *Natural Church Development* outlines the leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, effective structures, inspiring worship services, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships that characterize a church that is naturally healthy.^{vii}

What finding surprised these researchers the most? "On average, the smaller churches are the better churches," say Schwarz and Schalk. In terms of church health: "The

larger, the worse.”^{viii} (See Chapter Twelve, “Look Underneath the Mega-Church Movement.)

What does he mean? While there are many notable exceptions, the larger a church becomes, the less involved most of its laity are. People in bigger churches can fall through the cracks if they are not involved in a small service team, fellowship group, or Sunday school class. In public ministry “professionalism” can replace passionate spirituality. Evangelism can also wane. As a church continues to grow, most of its newcomers tend to be transfer Christians, not new converts unless the congregation’s leadership continually challenges the church to remain outward focused.

Whatever its size or history, your congregation can become more healthy. You don’t have to reach a certain size first.

3. Gain new health by developing a passion to reach lost people.

Dale Galloway is perhaps best known for his role as founding pastor of New Hope Community Church, Portland, Oregon. For its first two decades, 80% of the new members identified themselves as previously unchurched. As a result, this innovative church experienced minimal sheep swapping and minimal re-shuffling of the saints from area churches to New Hope.

Galloway’s observation is that underneath every breakthrough church is a strong priority on evangelism. He says, “Cutting-edge churches have different styles and looks, but their senior pastors all share one common characteristic: passion for reaching the lost. When I listen to them, I get big tears in my eyes for the lost. I like to hang around passionate people because it builds my excitement. The same thing happens for the

people of those churches!”^{ix} Evangelist Luis Palau takes the same perspective. “Jesus made His mission very plain: ‘For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost’ (Luke 19:10). We know His final command to ‘go and make disciples of all nations’ (Matthew 28:19) as the Great Commission, not the great suggestion.” Yet Palau believes Jesus’ commission is “largely ignored” in churches today. “There are pockets of action, thank God, but evangelism isn’t a priority, let alone the priority, for thousands of churches and Christians in America.”^x Pollster George Barna confirms Palau’s observation. His video “Ten Myths about Evangelism”^{xi} tallies the differences between what churches say and what we do. For example, a church may score 100% in verbally affirming that evangelism is essential. Yet when asked to list its top goals or to itemize its budget, its claims about evangelism often becomes noticeably hollow. Through ten different measuring points, Barna emphasizes that most congregations struggle with church health issues because they lack evangelistic vitality.

Barna further observes that during the opening years of the new century, if trends continue unchecked, some 250 million unchurched people will live in North America. “To complete such a task of sharing the gospel with those people is going to consume every ounce of energy and every resource we can muster.”^{xii} According to evangelist Billy Graham, the mobilization of the whole church for evangelism—including both the clergy and the laity—is something Christians today must focus more intently if churches are to be healthy. “It means we repent of our compromises and our failure to demonstrate the transforming power and love of Christ in our lives, and we learn afresh what it means to be salt and light in a decaying and dark world.”^{xiii} Professor Michael Green has rightly said that “whenever Christianity has been at its most healthy, evangelism has stemmed

from the local church and has had a noticeable impact on the surrounding area.”^{xiv}

Without new life, any church will eventually stagnate and die. A passion for evangelism contributes to church health.

4. Gain new health by following the ministry model of Jesus.

As a youth pastor, Dann Spader spent almost a decade analyzing the gospels to learn how Jesus developed His ministry. His study ended with the conclusion that “Christ gave us not only a message of reconciliation, but also the method.”^{xv} Spader, along with Gary Mayes, mapped out four phases in Jesus’ ministry that can provide a guideline for ministry today:

1. BUILD: Build an environment for growth.

2. EQUIP: Train a team for ministry.

3. WIN: Mobilize for evangelism.

4. MULTIPLY: Multiply your leadership base.^{xvi} These four stages of spiritual growth lead to optimal health in a church. An awareness of these stages helps eliminate the mistakes of forcing new Christians into service that may overwhelm them or leaving the mature Christian unchallenged. The focus is on life-change at each point—“Doing everything possible to help every person possible pursue Christ more completely and consistently.”^{xvii} As Spader and Mayes say, “Our culture measures success by educational degrees, statistical gains, big buildings, and hefty bank accounts. God measures success by changed lives and leaders who are producing them.”^{xviii} A healthy church, according to Spader and Mayes, is one characterized by Ephesians 4:13—where “we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the

whole measure of the fullness of Christ’ (NIV). The best route to increased health, they believe, is for a church to saturate itself with Jesus’ example of ministry training.

5. Gain new health by identifying your purpose.

When he was in seminary, Rick Warren had no idea that God would use him to lead the fastest-growing Baptist church in the history of North America. He was in school because God had called him to serve as a pastor. While there, he sensed God directing him to discover “the principles—biblical, cultural, and leadership principles—that produce healthy, growing churches. It was the beginning of a lifelong study.”^{xix} Upon graduation, Warren and his wife Kay moved to southern California where he planted and grew a church designed to reach unbelievers. About the time Saddleback Community Church passed an attendance of 10,000, with 80% of the growth consistently coming from unchurched newcomers, Warren put his learnings in a book.

The publisher had modest expectations for it. To their great surprise, it climbed to the “top 20” listing for religious books and remained there, crossing the 100,000 “bestseller” status within months, with no sign of letup for almost two years.

The emphasis of the book, evidenced by its title, demonstrates how every congregation is a *Purpose-Driven Church*. Clearly the idea of identifying one’s purpose hit a felt need with pastors and lay leaders across the land.

Some churches are driven by the phrase, “We’ve always done it this way.” Others follow a financial purpose, with the watchword being “How much will it cost?” or “How much will we save?” Others let their buildings drive them, in keeping with Winston Churchill’s observation, “We shape our buildings, and then they shape us.”

Instead, Rick Warren teaches that Christ has five purposes for his church.

Drawing from Jesus' Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) and Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40), Saddleback organizes itself around these five purposes:

Membership: "Baptizing them" (incorporating into fellowship)

Maturity: "Teaching them to obey" (discipleship)

Ministry: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (service)

Mission: "Go and make disciples" (evangelism)

Magnification: "Love the Lord with all your heart" (worship)

Saddleback's purpose statement puts these purposes all together: "to bring people to Jesus and *membership* in his family, to develop them to Christlike *maturity*, and equip them for their *ministry* in the church and life *mission* in the world, in order to *magnify* God's name."^{xx}

How do you lead *your* church to identify its purpose? According to Warren, you study what the Bible says. Then you seek to answer four questions—why do we exist? what are we to be as a church? what are we to do as a church? and how are we to do it? Finally, you put your findings in writing and summarize your conclusions in a single sentence.

This ongoing process will lead your congregation to greater health as a result. As Warren says, "The key issue for churches in the twenty-first century will be church health, not church growth ... When congregations are healthy, they grow the way God intends."^{xxi}

SIDEBAR

Saddleback's Summary of Christ's Five Purposes for the Church^{xxii}

Purpose	Task	Acts 2:42-47	Objective	Target	Life Component	Basic Human Need	The Church Provides	Emotional Benefit
Outreach	Evan-	"added ... those being saved"	Mission	Commun-ity	My Witness	Purpose to live for	A focus for living	Signifi-cance
Worship	Exalt	"devoted themselves to ... praisin g God"	Magnify	Crowd	My Worship	Power to live on	A force for living	Stimu-lation
Fellow-ship	Encour-	"devoted to the fellow-ship"	Member-ship	Congre- g at ion	My Relation- s hips	People to live with	A family for living	Support
Disciple- s hip	Edify	"devoted ... to the apostles' teaching"	Maturity	Commit- ted	My Walk	Principles to live by	A founda- tion for living	Stability
Service	Equip	"they gave to anyone as he had need"	Ministry	Core	My Work	Profession to live out	A function for living	Self- expres- sion

6. Stay healthy by determining to remain culturally relevant.

If you lined up 100 people in front of a certain church building on bustling Fifth Avenue in lower Manhattan, and asked them why a cast iron fence was built around the church, the majority might guess that it's to protect the building from vandals. Or to keep people from coming in when the building is not open. Or to match an architectural style.

They'd be wrong. Probably no one would guess the real reason: it was originally designed to keep cattle out of this New York City worship site.

America's oldest Protestant church with a continuous ministry was organized in 1628 under a charter from the King of England. At the time it was a rural area where livestock grazed and farmers came to worship.

Marble Collegiate Church, as it is known today, hasn't had a cow near it in decades, and perhaps centuries. Yet this gorgeous facility has kept its fence through several renovations, and enters the twenty-first century well protected from any invading herd of cows that might amble across the industrial corridors of West Twenty-Ninth Street at Fifth Avenue.

Our intention is not to poke fun at this congregation or any other church body. In reality, every single congregation across North America faces the same dilemma: making sure its words and actions speak meaningfully to us today. As author and radio Bible teacher R. C. Sproul says, "The gospel is news to each generation, and we must seek new ways to address our times."^{xxiii} Rick Warren says it this way: "Jesus never lowered His standards, but He always started where people are."^{xxiv} and "the message must never change, but the methods *must* change with each new generation."^{xxv}

George Hunter, a theologian at Asbury Theological Seminary who authored several chapters in a book entitled *Making Church Relevant*^{xxvi} looks for one overriding motivation in a church. If the church is to remain healthy, this motivation must be there, he asserts. At issue is the level of a church's love and concern for people who are different, both because they don't know Christ and because they dress, talk, or behave in ways that make church people uncomfortable. Such people are often "searching in all the wrong places for something upon which to base their lives," according to Hunter.

“The ultimate test facing the twenty-first century church will be whether we really believe the ‘new barbarians’ matter to God,” he says. “If we lift up our eyes, see the harvest, and enter it in appropriate terms, Christianity in the twenty-first century has a magnificent future. But if we continue looking only for people who are like the people we already have, we probably do not have much of a future. We probably do not deserve one.”

SIDEBAR

Top Ten Insights about Culturally Relevant Ministry

10. Cultural relevance is the rationale for why worship should be contemporary.
9. All church ministries are contemporary to *some* generation, but most are “contemporary” to an era other than the 1990s.
8. Cultural relevance is one way we extend incarnational, indigenous Christianity.
7. Employing culturally relevant forms is desirable because God’s revelation takes place through culture.
6. When the gospel is expressed in a people’s indigenous cultural forms, then and only then do most of them perceive that Christianity is for “people like us.”
5. Many churches have come a long way in agreeing that ministry in the people’s language is necessary to reach them.
4. However, for many churches in whom the battle for language has been substantially won have not yet discovered that “culture is the silent language” (E. T. Hall).

3. Furthermore, traditional churches do not yet perceive how deeply culture shapes personality and the way people view life and the world – that “culture is the software of the mind.”^{xxvii}
2. Consequently, the leaders and people of certain churches resist making the changes needed to become culturally relevant. Why?
 - (a) Most people have not learned to distinguish between the gospel and the cultural forms in which they received it.
 - (b) They assume that to be faithful requires following the forms in which they received the gospel.
1. Most culturally irrelevant churches cannot engage pre-Christian people meaningfully, nor do they plan to in significant numbers.^{xxviii}

APPLICATION POINTS

For Individual Response or Group Discussion

1. The chapter opened by stating that “Christians today put more priority on becoming a healthy church than in achieving numerical growth.” Is this a step forward or backward? Why?
2. What are the healthiest qualities about the church you serve? What could you do to help lead your congregation (or one of its ministries) to greater health?
3. Just how different is the “old” emphasis on church growth and numbers from the “new” emphasis on church health that leads to growth?
4. Especially for pastors: Many of the books cited in this chapter contain or offer a “health-assessment” tool. For example, *Natural Church Development* supports an easily

conducted congregational survey designed to rank different areas of church health. Why not track down one of these tools, present it to your membership or board, and then use the results to identify next steps needed in your journey toward congregational health.

NOTES

Chapter One – *Get Help in Becoming More Healthy*

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- ⁱ Sports Illustrated, November 1998, 26. (needs date of publications and article title)
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- ^{iv} Ibid., 14-26.
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- ^{vi} Henry Blackaby, Claude V. King, Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 50.
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- ^{xvii} Ibid., 19.
- ^{xviii} Ibid., 180.
- ^{xix} Rick Warren, The Purpose-Driven Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 30.
- ^{xx} Ibid., 102, 107.
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- ^{xxviii} George Hunter, "The Culturally Relevant Congregation," November 1996, audiocassette.