

CORE ESSENTIALS: PROPOSING NEW CHURCH HEALTH METRICS

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Weekends in autumn are awesome. Childhood memories come flooding back – thoughts of jumping into piles of leaves, sandlot stickball games with the kids in the neighborhood, and cool nights that called for a jacket. This writer remembers riding a bicycle through the neighborhoods for hours with friends looking for the next adventure. Meetings around an apple tree on an empty lot often turned into spontaneous competitions of knocking over tin cans and bottles with the fallen apples. Those apples would become hand grenades, baseballs, bowling balls - they could transform into just about anything.

If the season was right and the tree had a good year, one could enjoy eating an apple snapped right off the branch. Nothing seemed to be better than stopping for a bite at the apple tree on a crisp afternoon, tasting the sweet crunch of one of those apples. Nothing was worse than seeing that an apple had a worm living inside it. Well, maybe there was something worse; finding that half a worm was in the apple after taking the first bite. Apples are sneaky. They can look delicious on the outside yet be wormy on the inside. Many unsuspecting kids experienced a sneaky apple hiding a wiggly surprise. Many more found their sneaky apple bruised, soft and rotten on the inside.

In many ways, churches can be compared to those apples. Many are bright, welcoming, shiny – so wonderful on the exterior, but are wormy, bruised and rotten to the core. Too many people have been tricked by the glossy gleam of facades and performances. In Georgia, an estimated four out of five Southern Baptist churches are in a state of decline. Some are downright wormy. The problem is ubiquitous; unless something changes, the American church will decline in health and vitality until its ultimate demise. Today's popular solutions for reviving local churches, partnerships, and denominations are simply polishing the peel of our ever-softening apple. The issues are really core issues not peel issues.

New Ministry Reality

The American church's new reality is throwing its followers into an existential crisis. Church leaders know this to be true. They point to evidence noticed in the seismic trends emerging in the American religious landscape. These trends may well represent the largest short-term shift of religious thought in our nation's history and is certainly producing a new ministry reality.¹ This shift is evidenced in the realization that the systems that we have become accustomed to and dependent upon are involved in mass organizational introspection. This existential crisis will continue to take shape over the next decades as generational Builders and Boomers fade from our churches and Millennials and Generation Z emerge. The differences between these generations in religious thought, preferences, values, and patterns are chasms apart in many ways. These differences are creating spiritual, logistical, and missional challenges and opportunities.

Research indicates that this new wave of believers is not staying to fight for their place in church life; they are moving on. Something deeper may be occurring in this sociological phenomenon. Over ten years ago, research reflected a sense of optimism. Thom Rainer suggested, "Although some young believers are moving away from church, many remain spiritually astute."² Too, Christian Smith observed, "The religion and spirituality of most teenagers actually strike us as very powerfully reflecting the contours, priorities, expectations and structures of the larger adult world into which adolescents are being socialized."³ Gabe Lyons and David Kinnaman found that young adults were interested in spirituality and Jesus specifically, but were having trouble seeing the connection to the modern church.⁴

In the nearly ten years since the research and writing of these experts, the teens they studied have become adults. Since their analysis, young adults are observed cutting the cord that tethered their culture to that of their parents, including the cultural ties of their faith to traditional expressions of their parents' faith. It seems that they are in some sort of deconstruction phase related to their personal perspectives about spirituality. The deconstruction manifests itself in some young Christians as a search for what they see as a purer expression of Christianity.

Phyllis Tickle has described this as a young adult's attempt at finding a spiritual center. She feels that Millennials are peeling away the externals of the church to discover the anchor that helps them live as they choose.⁵ It is as if they have bitten into a wormy apple and decided to cut down the apple tree - all in hope of discovering relevance. They are trying to see where faith applies to their lives. This search for a significant moment is in response to their perceptions of a church that is culturally and spiritually irrelevant, therefore opening the door to deconstruction of traditional praxis and, in some cases, orthodoxy.⁶

What does a pastor do? The first reaction is to polish the peel of the apple. Build a bigger building creating a local buzz that may attract local members from other churches? Polish up the peel with new music and better lighting? These quick fixes do not address the core issues. Consider the following exploration into various strategic considerations as we seek God for His direction in these times.

The Need for a New Metric

Why start with an evaluation tool? To arrive at any destination, one must begin the journey with the end in mind. Focus on desired results will help a church's journey to vitality. Just as a GPS app provides ongoing evaluation of one's position related to a desired location, a quality evaluation tool can assist a church in knowing how close or far it is from its goal. Churches should maintain a multilayered system of genuine evaluation leading to a corporate mindset of introspection. This general institutional mindset, combined with a focus on core essentials, can guide a church to be effective in the new ministry reality. The mindset will establish conditions necessary to develop strategies to move in the appropriate directions. This goal is accomplished through a system of corporate and personal introspection.

The atmosphere necessary to accomplish the spiritual state required to move in any direction is not realized in many congregations today. It has become elusive and rare – an anomaly that usually makes the state denominational newsletters and the pastors' luncheon table conversations. The fact that this atmosphere is rarely seen is heart breaking. New spiritual health metrics may be able to help cultivate the right atmosphere and may offer systematic opportunities for the type of introspection leading to healthy changes.

For Southern Baptists, the primary evaluation tool currently used is an annual church report called the Annual Church Profile (ACP). Church clerks, secretaries, or other leaders complete the report on an annual basis in order to share the statistics with their local associations, state conventions, and national convention. The ACP report has several problems. First, feelings toward the tool vary from apathy to antipathy and various levels of buy-in. Report completion percentages have declined precipitously in recent years as the value of the report has waned. SBC leaders are finding the information on the statistical portion of the ACP less reliable and of nearly no value, as was reported in a statistical representative meeting at LifeWay's corporate headquarters within the last ten years.

Second, the report has precision issues. Historically, SBC congregations have shared specific information through the use of the ACP since the ACP was known as the Church Letter. Certain assumptions were uniformly held as churches reported statistics. For example, when a SBC church reported Sunday School attendance, one could assume that certain functions were being performed as a part of the Sunday School. The functions were so uniform that in 1920 Arthur Flake could predict the growth and reach of a church based on the precision of the ratios. In those days, a Sunday School attendee average statistic held a precise meaning.

Today, the assumptions that were attached to Sunday School attendance no longer apply uniformly. Sunday Schools, or the version of small group ministry in the local church, do not function as

they did 100 years ago. Attendance statistics, counted in the same column as the old Sunday School attendance, can mean something different. One can no longer make precise observations of the health of a congregation based upon former assumptions attached to the statistics tracked by the ACP alone.

Third, there is an accuracy issue. The current ACP measures using metrics with unclear definitions. For example, if one were to examine an ACP from 1960 and observe the church training statistic, he should not consider the 1960 definition for the discipleship training statistic on the 2015 ACP. Nor should he consider the 1980 definition, the 1995 discipleship definition, or the recent 2010 definition. The definition of a disciple had changed and the number of times a disciple may be counted had changed. Thus the definition of the statistic became unclear and ultimately of little use. Consequently, the primary tool currently used in a vast majority of SBC churches (the ACP) does little to inspire, provide accountability, accurately measure, or motivate in the direction of church health.

Developing a New Church Health Metric

A new system is required to foster a mindset of genuine introspection leading to a spiritual atmosphere encouraging movement toward church health. Below is a summary of the specific effort that was made, and continues, to discover if a new tool or tools could be developed to address the needs of church leaders desiring to move toward church health.

A multifaceted study was performed that identified several themes related to new church health metrics. First, interviews, focus groups, and surveys were conducted to determine if a set of themes were prevalent in current church leader perspectives. During the interviews and focus group discussions, a biblical model was identified and adopted to frame the information found in the literature review and the interview phase of the study. The biblical framework focused on the Great Commission and the Great Commandment passages in the New Testament.

Leaders' opinions were drawn from a variety of settings and locations around the state of Georgia, including small rural settings, suburban settings, new church planters, and new structure church leaders. In addition, associational missionary leaders from three distinct regions of the state (northeast, south, and central Georgia) were polled and state missionaries were interviewed. The information was consolidated into a matrix identified as hypothesized core essentials for church health.

Second, a comprehensive study of the recent church health/growth literature was conducted, producing a similar matrix of hypothesized core essentials. The first two phases informed the development of a questionnaire. The third phase of the study included the deployment of a questionnaire to pastors in Georgia. The questionnaire was specifically used to measure for significant differences in the opinions, motivations and attitudes of pastors of healthier churches in Georgia.

The standard for health was established by the staff of the Georgia Baptist Mission Board and focused on the core essentials identified in phases one and two of the study. Churches were placed into two categories based upon the standard. An email deployment of the questionnaire was used for convenience. The study identified 1,832 pastor emails to be used for the study. Seventy-two churches were labeled as healthier, as they scored in the 98th percentile of all churches using a formula comprised of available statistics and qualitative evaluations from state convention staff. The instrument identified 1,762 churches as "other." Questionnaires were sent to 1,834 pastors in Georgia through survey monkey online delivery system. Of those, 417 participated in the study. Thirty-seven "healthier" pastors participated, while 370 "other" pastors participated.

The questionnaire focused on five core attitudes, opinions, and motivations related to the findings of the first two phases of the study. The results showed differences in the attitudes, opinions and motivations of the "healthier" church pastors and the "other" church pastors. While the results are important for understanding church health, they are only part of the picture.

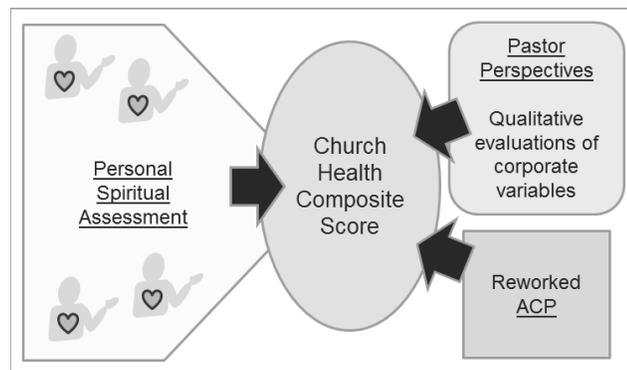
A problem with tools like the ACP and the pastor survey described above is the fact that alone they cannot measure corporate realities. The ACP can track quantitative shifts in corporate averages and net totals and the pastor's questionnaire can qualitatively evaluate some of the corporate attitudes and motivations, but the issues are down one level. The core challenges lie in the hearts of the membership

and attendees of the local church. For a pastor to assume his church is healthy based upon a few corporate statistics is unreasonable, yet many ministers currently make that assumption. A pastor may think if the crowd is getting larger, the offering plate is getting fuller and his salary is annually increased, then things are good. Concern and consideration of an individual's spiritual condition can become less and less important as long as the peel is shiny.

A third piece to this new system of evaluation is necessary to understand the health of the church more completely. In addition to a reworked ACP and a corporate qualitative review of the attitudes and motivations of the congregation, a pastor should lead his congregants to participate in regular personal spiritual assessment.

The fourth phase in the development process of new church health metrics is the development of a personal spiritual assessment. The goals of the assessment are, first, to establish a personal baseline for ongoing personal evaluation. Second, the assessment should encourage personal introspection and honest evaluation of one's current spiritual condition. Third, it should offer information to the individual that can be used in planning for personal spiritual growth. The personal spiritual assessment must remain confidential as it may encourage the honesty of the participant. The greatest percentage of the value of the personal spiritual assessment will be given to the participant as he/she will receive important information on his/her spiritual state with identified areas of focus for consideration.

The information can be averaged for a corporate spiritual assessment, allowing the pastor to see areas of strength and challenges that may be addressed through focused teaching and other strategies. The corporate spiritual assessment, combined with the information from the congregational qualitative evaluation and a reworked ACP, can produce a metric called the Church Health Composite Score.



Why a Church Health Composite Score?

As stated earlier, the current system does little to inspire, provide accountability, accurately measure, or motivate in the direction of church health. Consider how this new church health metric could address each of the issues.

A pastor may mentally snicker at the thought of a tool, in the genre of the ACP, described as inspirational or motivational. Ponder the arousal of emotions a church health composite score may produce. After participating in the personal spiritual assessment phase of the evaluation, individuals may be motivated to grow in their understanding of theology, their participation in mission, or their correction of a spiritual virtue. A congregation may feel inspired to undertake a ministry or engage in a new mission when considering the corporate evaluations. Feelings of guilt and conviction may be aroused in church leaders through a corporate evaluation of current ministry reach. The process of entering a time of introspection can lead to a sense of personal and corporate inspiration. This atmosphere can also be identified as the spirit of revival in a church.

Motivation is a challenging hurdle that any minister deals with on a weekly basis. Moving the people from the pew to the community is difficult. A pastor needs every advantage to encourage this type of movement. The system of assessments discussed here can offer substance to fuel motivation. The

specific areas identified in the composite score will help church leaders to set motivational goals. For example, a pastor may find that the church health composite score identifies evangelism as an area needing attention. He can use the score to select a specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely goal. The composite score may reveal deeper issues that may be addressed to help accomplish the selected goal.

Not every church has misused the ACP to make one believe that the numbers of a particular measurement imply a false level of health, but some have. The current ACP process opens the door for manipulation of numbers. For example, a pastor may under-report undesignated offerings to the association or state convention. This practice could produce an inflated mission giving percentage. These percentages have been used to debate the acceptability of a candidate for leadership on many levels. The accuracy of statistics used in the current evaluation system is flawed.

A new system of measures will assist leaders in having a more complete understanding of church health. With three main evaluation tools, triangulation can test the accuracy of one particular number. Pastors will be able to evaluate accurately the status of any of the core essentials based upon several information points placed in a way as to maintain a check and balance on the whole. A church could evaluate evangelism efforts by looking at the number of baptisms it has performed in the past year, as it has traditionally done. At the same time it could add the state of revival, average member drive to share faith, etc., to the corporate attitudes toward outreach assessment. The assessment becomes more accurate and usable for the pastor and his church.

Accountability has been removed from church life in the last few decades. Trends seem to point to a continued decrease in the emphasis on accountability as general church life becomes less central to culture. Today, a regular attendee may come to one worship service a week or two or three times a month. This standard is much lower than was the rule only twenty years ago. Church has become easy, safe, friendly, and sensitive. Member accountability has become difficult to manage and seems dangerous to some. Accountability is necessary for the health of the church.

The system being proposed here encourages annual and periodic evaluation. The idea is to cultivate an atmosphere of introspection leading to change. Beginning at the personal spiritual assessment level, church members are encouraged to rate their spiritual condition related to a variety of essentials. These evaluations can be maintained in an online system as scores used to compare to scores of future spiritual assessments. The corporate spiritual assessments may be stored and used as well. As leaders consider the identified issues, accountability is built into the system through the corporate achievement of specific goals. The system would increase the level of accountability in every setting.

Another interesting and important feature of the new church health metric system is the allowance of customization of the tool. This aspect is important in the Baptist enterprise in which it is being tested. As autonomous organizations implement pieces of the system, they will discover contextually related factors that may emphasize the importance of one part of the system compared to another part of the system. These factors may include ethno-linguistic and cultural factors not commonly realized in typical Anglo-American church settings.

In Georgia Baptist circles, a variety of levels of autonomy exist. The variety crosses into associational levels and other partnerships within the state convention. The ability to customize the tools to fit the multitude of needs and comfort levels will be the strength of the new process. A pastor may find that a part of the process is more inspiring at a certain time in his church's journey and later discover another part yielding greater impact. He would be able to use the system to meet the specific needs at the specific moment.

Why This, Why Now?

This effort is not the first attempt at tweaking the system. The history of the ACP is stout. It has seen a number of name changes, expansions, contractions, and more. In recent decades, adjustments have become frequent and centered on state convention. Consequently, the results gathered by the ACP are of very little help to Baptist agencies. The good news about the ACP is that the current gathering system is

not broken. It is a system that has been used and accepted in local church life for generations. Using the familiarity of the ACP process will add legitimacy to the new tools.

Technology has offered opportunity to accomplish the goals of the new church health measuring system. LifeWay Christian Resources, several state conventions, and other national entities have joined efforts to develop a standard data managing system. The system is robust enough to handle the information and the philosophy behind the system would welcome the participation of local church leaders and members.

Discipleship is the focus and goal of this new system. This concept of discipleship is not defined as a class at church, but discipleship as a relationship. Given recent church trends, biblical discipleship is more important than ever. Emphasis on discipleship must increase with Generation Z. We must prepare the younger generations to take the mantle of church and kingdom leadership. Currently, homes and churches are filled with children and teenagers that can be influenced now. Reversal of recent trends may be accomplished by equipping and releasing healthy, sincere, and committed young believers into the world. Every effort must be made now to impart a faith through an authentic relationship with the living God. The next generation must be prepared and empowered for a distinctly Christian and kingdom lifestyle as they go out into the world. In many churches this effort will require a completely different direction, tone, and approach in discipleship ministries. This kind of discipleship is typically personal, relational, and dynamic.

The church must be empowered as “the church scattered” due to current hostility towards Christians and possible future persecution. Paul Nyquist⁷ and John Dickerson⁸ have made responsible and significant observations regarding the larger cultural posture towards Christians and Christianity in America. Huge segments of the US population no longer resonate with conservative theism, exclusivity, and morality. Christian morality, in particular, is viewed by many people as antiquated and intolerant. Detractors (such as atheists and the LGBT community) have seized this opportunity to redefine the cross as a symbol of hate and the gospel as a message of intolerance. Recent court rulings have caused many evangelical leaders to fear pending litigation regarding discrimination and equal access issues. This litigation could result in the continued marginalization of evangelicals and possibly the elimination of the non-profit tax status for churches deemed discriminatory. The result would certainly financially cripple many Bible believing churches and hinder all. Due to fewer options for the church gathered, societal ignominy, and the prohibitive costs of coming together in large groups, many Christians will naturally seek more organic church expressions. If genuine believers are empowered to be “the church scattered” now, this transition can be smooth and natural.

The proposed new system is affordable, available and designed with a purpose. It will encourage development of habits of individual Christians and practices of local bodies to face a new reality. The American church is in crisis. Baptists have enjoyed a delay in the downward trends that other denominations have experienced, but that status quo is no longer the case. Efforts to find a solution to the problems are increasing and causing some degree of anxiety along the way. The timing is right to make a change in the system.

Conclusion

A new church health metric, church health composite score, is needed to navigate the church through the new ministry realities. The composite score would be compiled using a system of tools including both corporate and personal evaluations. The customizable tools could help inspire and motivate members to move toward church health. They would create an introspective atmosphere allowing for accountability. They would be more precise and accurate in diagnosing issues that need to be addressed.

¹ John Dickerson, *The Great Evangelical Recession: 6 Factors That Will Crash the American Church... and How to Prepare* (Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2013). This work contains a sobering account of the possible future of the church. Also see Calvin Miller, *The Vanishing Evangelical: Saving the Church from its Own Success by Restoring What Really Matters* (Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2013). In his last book, Miller passionately put his finger on the face of the problem with the American church.

² Thom Rainer, *The Bridger Generation: America's Second Largest Generation, What They Believe and How to Reach Them* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 169. Offers glimmers of hope.

³ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2005), 170.

⁴ Gabe Lyons & David Kinnaman, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).

⁵ David Kim, *20 and Something: Have the Time of Your Life (and Figure It Out Too)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 84.

⁶ Calvin Miller, *The Vanishing Evangelical*. Look particularly at the first two chapters.

⁷ Paul Nyquist, *Prepare: Living Your Faith in an Increasingly Hostile Culture* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015)

⁸ John Dickerson, *The Great Evangelical Recession*