LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

Discipleship and a Healthy Church Paper

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Discipleship

by

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**Introduction**

It should be apparent to all men that healthy things grow. Really healthy things grow very quickly. This observation about growth can aid a believer as they consider their personal effectiveness and the effectiveness of the church they serve. If a church is healthy, it should grow. The Southern Baptist Convention has reported that Southern Baptist churches are experiencing declining attendance to Sunday worship services as well as declining numbers of baptisms.[[1]](#footnote-2) By the definition of health above, it can be argued that health is declining in Southern Baptist churches. The Southern Baptist denomination has been considered to be the largest evangelical denomination, so it is important to note these changes. Many other denominations have been in decline for decades and it is important that believers assess why the churches are experiencing decline.

This paper will assert that disciple-making is a key driver to church health. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus said “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” [[2]](#footnote-3) Creating disciples was meant to be a primary task of His disciples.

This paper will consider attributes of church health and recommend three areas where The Crossing Church can make improvements that will enhance the disciple-making culture of the church and thereby improve church health.

**Attributes of Church Health**

Dempsey discusses twenty attributes that can be analyzed to point out area within the church that need attention to enhance the health of the church.[[3]](#footnote-4) The attributes can be broadly grouped into actions that reach the lost, actions that build up new believers, and actions that continue to mature believers as well as engage them in Kingdom growing activities.

The actions that reach the lost include the on-going presentation of the gospel, the number of baptisms that occur at the church each year, the activity of the relational small groups to share their faith with the lost and intentional outreach locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.[[4]](#footnote-5)  The Crossing Church in Tampa, Florida has a strong focus on communicating the gospel message each week in its worship services. In view of that focus, the church averages over six hundred baptisms each year. Unfortunately, the church does not have a well-defined path for believers to follow to share their faith with the lost in a routine manner. The church is rebuilding its outreach efforts locally and has limited impact regionally, nationally, and internationally. The church is promoting the ideal to the small group leaders that they must lead their people to invite and involve those that they know outside of the church in their small groups with the hope to see their friends saved and discipled. In addition, the prayer ministry of the church has intercessors praying for the Spirit to draw the lost to the campuses of the church to hear the gospel. The church is also investing heavily in opening new campuses to reach communities with the gospel.

The next area of attributes focuses on assisting new believers begin their spiritual growth.[[5]](#footnote-6) The Crossing Church has a desire to build up new believers and is actively working to improve the effectiveness of the strategies to serve new believers. New believers are provided opportunities to study targeted information that helps them understand how to read the Bible and apply Christian doctrine to their daily lives. They are taught to surrender their lives in service to the Lord and to sacrifice their goals for Kingdom goals that God gives to them. The Worship team leads these new believers to worship the Lord enthusiastically and to recognize God’s worth to their lives. Other curriculum is being deployed to help the new believer apply the truths of God’s Word to their lives.

The third grouping of attributes relating to aiding believers to be become mature disciples.[[6]](#footnote-7) The Crossing Church has also developed a paradigm that seeks to engage believers in Kingdom work as they become willing to engage. The ministry teams offer opportunities to serve and training that equips volunteers to serve competently. Church leadership is holding the staff accountable to engage volunteers in in ministry and to create meaningful opportunities to serve. This equipping and empowering are key roles for the paid church staff. The teaching from the teaching pastors communicates to developing believers that they need to be obedient to the commandments of Jesus. This includes financial giving, demonstrating love and unity toward other believers, and engaging in service to those inside and outside the church. The believers in the church are encouraged to become aware of their spiritual gifts and to become adept at utilizing their gifts in service to others. The existing leaders in the church ministries are trained to identify believers who demonstrate Christian maturity and to invest in those individual’s development. The desire is to allow these mature believers to utilize their gifting and abilities to serve others and prepare others to become mature disciples as well.

**Areas Identified for Improvement**

Dempsey recommends evaluating the twenty health areas of a church and scoring them on a scale of one to five, with one being a low score of effectiveness and five being a high score of effectiveness. Overall, I scored The Crossing Church as forty points out of a possible one hundred points. While this score might sound very low, I believe the church is doing a good job and simply has a great deal of room to become even more effective.

I had grouped seven of the twenty areas under the “actions that reach the lost”. This group’s score was twenty points out of thirty-five possible points. The areas in most need of improvement was in targeting those who are poor in spirit and our outreach to the local, regional, national and international areas. I recommend that we continue to challenge our small group leaders to actively encourage their group members to invite their friends to their groups and to develop relationships with people outside of the church in order to have opportunities to share the gospel with those that are lost. Once we have seen that our small groups have become outward focused, we can devote more energy to promoting regional, national, and international outreach efforts. As we work to see our local efforts mature, we should highlight regional, national, and international needs so that people can develop a hunger for those types of ministries.

The next grouping of attributes related to those that aid new believers to begin the journey to spiritual maturity. Three of the twenty health attributes related to this area and I scored our ministries with a six out of a total 15 points available. Our worship ministry does a great job of pointing new believers toward meaningful worship of our Creator. The Church is developing curriculum and methodologies that any new believer can access as they learn doctrine and how to study the Bible. The church has raised awareness of the need for disciple-makers, but the congregation has not internalized that challenge and responded actively. The church staff has not yet setup a monitoring system to make sure that new believers are being intentionally and actively developed. I recommend that this system be developed and implemented in the next quarter of the year.

The final grouping of attributes related to developing believers into fully mature Christ followers. Six of the twenty attributes are related to this area and I scored our ministries at fourteen points out of the thirty points available. Church leadership recognized the need to empower and equip the saints for service in the ministries. The church’s growth has overwhelmed our existing leaders and the ministries are having to focus on leadership development while working to provide proper care to the ministries. Lack of unity had been a concern in prior years, but church leadership has focused on this this issue and observable change for the good has occurred. Church leadership has developed spiritual gift testing and are encouraging the people to engage with this testing. The small groups of the church have been a major focus for the church and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. Coleman professes that “small groups form the backbone of discipleship.”[[7]](#footnote-8) This is the key place that we see people being cared for, thus building unity and trust. From these groups, we can envision outreach and ministry growing in our community. I recommend that church leadership continue to challenge themselves to define and develop more roles that can be assigned to laity. I also recommend on-going training in developing leaders that can be prepared to lead small groups according to the standards that church leadership establishes.

**Conclusion**

This paper has recognized the need for churches to assess themselves in relation to the Great Commission given by Jesus Christ and determine what improvements are needed to deliver greater effectiveness. The ministries of the Crossing Church were scored according to a twenty factor test that Dempsey developed and recommendations were advanced to address deficiencies in effectiveness. Even though the overall score was forty points out of a potential one hundred points, The Crossing Church is still a highly effective church in comparison to many other churches. The Room to grow more effective is exciting to contemplate and will be fulfilling to work toward.

**Bibliography**

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1. Kate Shellnutt, “Hundreds of New Churches Not Enough to Satisfy Southern Baptists.” Retrieved from https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/june/southern-baptist-convention-churches-baptisms-sbc-acp.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Rod Dempsey & Dave Earley, *Disciple Making Is . .* (B&H Publishing Group, 2013). Retrieved from https://app.wordsearchbible.com, p. 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid., 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ibid., 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Jim Putman, Bobby Harrington, and Robert E. Coleman, Discipleshift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), Chapter 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)