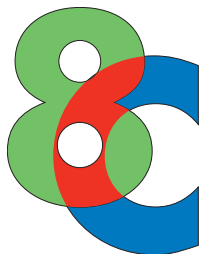


The Eight Characteristics of a Healthy Church

A Bible study
by the Rev. Walter Edwards



Forward

*The Rev. Kendall Taylor
Executive Director
The Office of Congregational Transformation*

Last year we provided a Bible study on the book of Mark designed to give scriptural underpinning to the efforts at transformation approved and directed by our Annual Conference. Now we continue in that tradition, presenting:

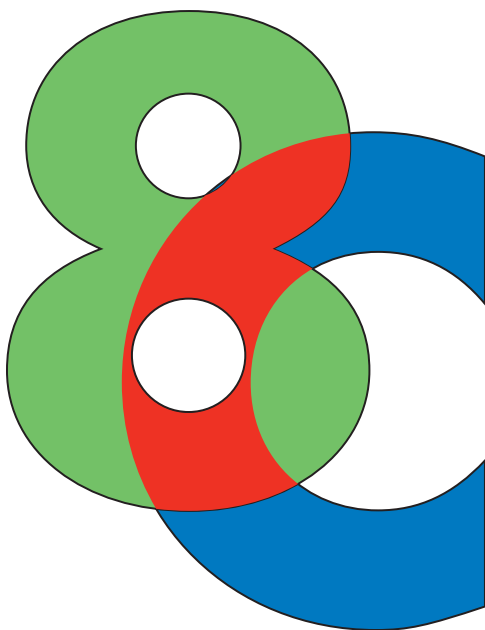
A BIBLE STUDY ON THE EIGHT CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

By the Rev. Walter Edwards

Walter, recently retired, has been a pastor in Florida for many years. His last active appointment was superintendent of the Leesburg District. He is known for his story telling, his knowledge of the scriptures and of John Wesley's writings. The study is linked to the materials of Natural Church Development which is being used by many to understand the things that make churches faithful to the Great Commission from Jesus. We are pleased and privileged to have this contribution from Walter to edify us who care deeply about our ministry of disciple making.

You have permission to download and copy the Study for use personally, in the church, or in a small group

See the Office of Congregational Transformation Web site for information about ordering a Study of Spiritual Formation by Dr. Steve Harper of Asbury Theological Seminary. The study, based on the book of Ephesians, is available on DVD or VHS. There are accompanying outlines and study helps.



**A BIBLE STUDY ON
THE EIGHT CHARACTERISTICS
OF A HEALTHY CHURCH**

Introduction

It is obvious that a congregation which is not growing is not healthy. Much could be said about what is being done or not done, about mistaken priorities, or even disobedience, but that is beside the point. What is needed is a clear vision of what a healthy church is, and a commitment to live the vision.

While a church that isn't growing isn't healthy, it is also true that a healthy church will naturally grow.

We turn to the scripture to get the vision of health. We pray that the Holy Spirit will inspire us to do whatever it takes to gain our health and begin to grow, or grow more deeply and vitally than ever before.

This study is intended to build upon and reinforce the concepts of Natural Church Development adopted by the 2003 session of the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The "eight characteristics of healthy churches" are here demonstrated to be scriptural, are illustrated from tradition, are further illustrated by the experience of contemporary congregations, and are therefore reasonable.

The first passage listed under each of the eight characteristics is the main one, having been identified by Christian Schwartz the originator of this concept. The others are those I find to be supportive of that characteristic.

This study is written with the conviction that the Bible is the "only and sufficient rule of faith and practice." Bible passages are meant to be looked up and read, indeed to be "read, marked, learned and inwardly digested." Tradition, experience and reason are appealed to as aids to understanding the Bible.

I have given my own brief summaries of what the passages mean. Examine them for yourself and see what you find.

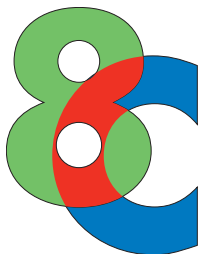
Suggestions for leading this study

Divide the material into sections according to the number of meetings planned for the study. Let the leader and all the students read the material, especially the Bible passages, making notes as you read. When all meet together let each share what the reading meant to her/him. We will trust the Holy Spirit to lead us into the truth.

Or for a different approach ask and answer the following questions about the main passages:

1. After comparing several different translations, how would you put the passage in your own words?
2. Is there a promise here?
3. Is there a warning here?
4. What are we being asked to do?

Share and discuss your answers when you meet together.



Characteristic 1 Empowering Leadership

Ephesians 4:11-13

The leaders of the church, especially the pastor-teachers, are given to the church by Jesus Christ to equip all the disciples for the work of ministry. Each of us is to do what we are enabled for by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, so that all of us will grow up to be like Jesus, “healthy in God, robust in love.”

Our tradition tells us that John Wesley chose “helpers” and “assistants” then later ordained superintendents (Bishops), who spread the Methodist movement. Otherwise it would have died when he did.

The experience of many congregations among us today shows that when the pastor(s) share with others the work of ministry, God’s work flourishes.

Reason says, “This cannot be spoken against.”

Acts 14:23

Paul and Barnabas teach, then select and appoint, elders to care for those who had become believers, so they could go on spreading the good news and establishing more congregations.

Acts 6:1-7

The problem of caring for thousands of new followers of Jesus made the twelve realize the need to empower additional leaders, so they chose seven deacons, two of whom became evangelists as well: Stephen (preached the longest sermon in the New Testament, next to the Sermon on the Mount), and Philip, who led the first Ethiopian to Christ.

I Timothy 3:1-13

Paul instructs Timothy in the work of selecting and empowering additional leaders in the expanding Christian community.

Matthew 10, Luke 9:1-6, Luke 10:1-24

Jesus shares His ministry, first with the twelve, then with 70. They are to deliver His message and do His works.

Exodus 18:14-26

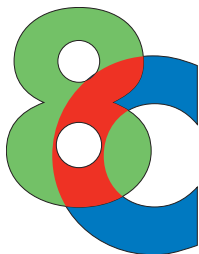
Advised by his father-in-law, Moses empowers others to share his ministry.

Numbers 11:16-30

Seventy elders, who share the leadership, experience the visitation of the Holy Spirit; empowered by God and man. Organization isn't enough; there must also be spiritual empowerment.

This leads naturally to Characteristic 2, Gift-oriented Ministry.

Notes:



Characteristic 2 Gift-Oriented Ministry

1 Peter 4:10

God gives spiritual gifts to every believer. All of us are different and the gifts we are given are different. We are to use whatever gift(s) we are given well so that God's generosity can flow through us.

The Methodist movement (our tradition) from the beginning asked people questions to disclose their gifts and gave them opportunities to test those gifts so they could expand the caring ministry of Christ. See Questions for discovering who is truly called to preach. (2000 United Methodist Book of Discipline, Pages 185-6, ¶ 305).

The experience of congregations and members who go through spiritual gift discernment and then are related to ministries that fit those gifts is a dramatic reversal of the old "find a warm body for every blank on the nomination form" style of leadership recruitment.

How reasonable to help people be fulfilled in their service, rather than just filling the slots!

Ephesians 4:1-13

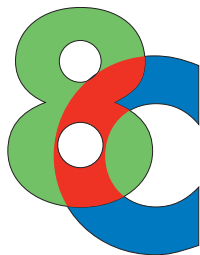
Each of us has a gift or gifts.

1 Timothy 4:14

Don't neglect your gift the way the faithless servant did who hid his. (Luke 19:20-24 and Matthew 25:24-30)

Romans 12:6-8

Use your gift, whatever it is, in the right way and with the right attitude.



Characteristic 3 Passionate Spirituality

Matthew 22:37

The first and greatest commandment. Obeying this commandment is letting God be your God. To know the absolute love of God for us is to understand that our love for God must also be absolute. Nothing less than all one's heart, soul, mind and strength will do.

History (tradition) shows how again and again the church has almost died when passionate spirituality declined or died. That is what caused John Wesley to start Methodism. He saw the absence of passionate spirituality around him and joined, then led the Holy Club at Oxford University, the forerunner of the Methodist movement.

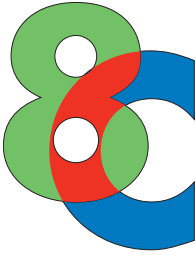
Experience shows that passionately spiritual people can fall into fanaticism. But it is easier to calm a fanatic than to resurrect a corpse.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

Live a holy life, the only appropriate lifestyle for Christians. Honor your leaders, live peaceably with each other, warn those who are lazy, encourage the timid, be tender with the weak, be patient with everyone. Do not repay evil with evil, do good to everyone. Always be joyful. Keep praying. Always be thankful. Do not stifle the Holy Spirit. Test everything. Hold onto what is good. Keep away from every kind of evil.

Romans 12:1-2

Make your whole self a living sacrifice to God. "When you think of what He has done for you, is this too much to ask?" (v. 1c) Do not let the world squeeze you into its mold, but be different because you think differently.



Characteristic 4 Functional Structures

Ephesians 4:15-16

Christ is the head. If we are well connected to Him the body works; if not we are spastic at best, paralyzed at worst. Joined to Christ every part works and builds up all the others.

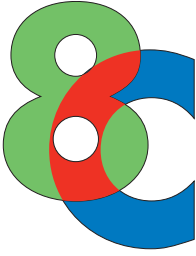
Acts 6:2-4

Caring for the things God wants done by his church, preaching the Word, and teaching the holy way of life, feeding widows and orphans is best done by adding others to ministry teams.

Exodus 18: 13-26

Moses deals with a bottleneck in the decision-making/community organization process—himself!

Notes:



Characteristic 5 Inspiring Worship

Psalm 122:1

*I was glad when they said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the LORD."*

"I was glad..." Are you? Do "they" come to your church services gladly? Do you come gladly? If not, why not? What do we need to do about it? Will we do what it takes?

Tradition tells us the hymns of Charles Wesley often had twenty or more verses because so many people came to Holy Communion during the early days of Methodism that the long hymns were needed to allow time for everyone to receive the bread and cup.

The worship services that today overflow with great crowds are evidence that whether they are well done "contemporary" or well done "traditional" inspiring worship feeds souls and attracts multitudes.

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep, and my lambs." Anything less is unreasonable.

Psalm 103

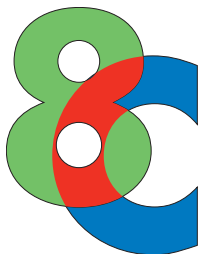
Praising God because we know what He does for us.

Psalm 23

The original shade and fresh water.

Psalm 150

The entire symphony plus all creation praising God, and we get to join in.



Characteristic 6 Holistic Small Groups

Hebrews 10:24-25

Keep together, encourage one another, and challenge each other to do good to people.

Tradition shows that the house churches of the New Testament, like the Class Meetings of the Wesleys, were the most powerful spiritual growth tools in the whole history of the church.

There are so many witnesses now to the power of small groups to transform lives that one can hardly choose which to name. Wesley Fellowship groups, Ten Brave Christians, Yoke Fellows, Disciple, Forty Days of Purpose, etc.

Reason says be sure they are truly holistic. See that they have a ministry and are not self-absorbed. But let them be what they are capable of being. Be sure they multiply!

Acts 2:46

Have the people you go to church with over for dinner.

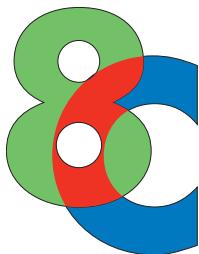
Romans 15:1-13

Harmony in the church through accepting each other as Christ accepts you.

James 5:16

Confess your sins to each other, pray for each other, be healed, and experience God's power.

In the transformed church we envision a deep relationship with a few people, rather than a superficial relationship with a lot of people.



Characteristic 7 Need-Oriented Evangelism

Philemon 6

Believe and therefore give, so you can discover all the good things we can do for Christ.

The Wesleys understood that they were to bring Christ to people while “doing all the good they could.” The doing good validates the word they and we preach.

The Salvation Army keeps alive this Wesleyan Christian truth very well, as do those congregations that seek to relieve human suffering in any way.

“Even a cup of cold water given in Jesus’ name...Still holds the freshness of thy grace.”

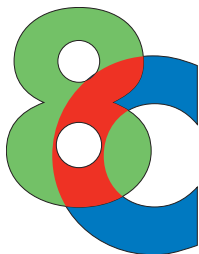
Matthew 25:31-46

What we do for “the least” we do for Jesus. When we say so we are telling the Good News.

Galatians 2:10

The first Ecumenical Council, reported in Acts 15, decrees that “remembering the poor” is essential.

Notes:



Characteristic 8 Loving Relationships

John 13:35

They'll know us by our love

Mr. Wesley held that the only worthy goal of the Christian life is to be "Perfect in love in this life." He saw that when people who were Christians stopped striving toward that ideal, they languished in their spiritual life and tended to become absorbed in triviality. That hasn't changed.

I once served as pastor of a congregation that had one couple as members, who told me even before I left annual conference to move to their church, how bad the church was and what a terrible job awaited me there. When I left there six years later, I told that couple they were wrong, it is a great church because it never stopped loving them.

Greatness in the sight of Jesus has nothing to do with size or wealth or growth, but a church that loves will grow.

Matthew 18:15-20

Speaking the truth in love.

Ephesians 4:25-32

How to deal with anger.

Galatians 3:28

Equality in Christ.



*This Bible study was produced by the
Office of Congregational Transformation
of the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church*

*Written by the Rev. Walter Edwards
The Forest
Epiphany 2004*