

A MISSIONAL CHURCH EMPHASIZES HEALTH NOT GROWTH **MARK 4:26-29; 1 CORINTHIANS 3:6-9**

Earlier this month five of us went to a one day seminar on the Externally Focused Church. The leaders provided some sobering information about the health of the American church. For instance, church attendance has dropped from 18.7% in 2000 to 17.7% by 2004. In the last fifteen years, the Church has spent \$500 billion on itself with no statistical influence in church attendance let alone conversions. In the United States, only 1 in 10 people who come to faith in Jesus do so in the local church. Roughly half of or all churches in America did not add one new person through conversion growth last year. In the next year in the United States, 1300 churches will be started and 3750 churches will close. These next statistics were downright scary for me. 65% of people in our country aged 53 and above are Christians. 35% of folk between the ages of 35-53 are believers. 15% of our population between the ages of 24-35 are Jesus followers. Only 4% of Americans between the ages of 6-23 are Christians. It's clear that we are losing ground spiritually. It's clear that if we keep on doing the same things the same way we are going to keep getting the same results.

If you've recently read a book about the local church or glanced at a magazine article about what churches should be doing these days, chances are you've come across a new word to describe the church: "missional." What does that mean? What is a "missional" church? I'd like to explore some answers to that question with you over the next four Sundays. The author of one of the books our Long Range Planning Committee has been reading defines "missional" about as well as anyone. Here's how he puts it: "[A] *missional* church: a reproducing community of authentic disciples, being equipped as missionaries sent by God, to live and proclaim His Kingdom in their world." (Milfred Minatrea).

Here's my own very simple definition: a missional church is both biblical and effective. First, a missional church is biblical. In other words, a missional congregation is being the Body of Christ and doing ministry in ways God intends and wants it to be done as revealed in the Bible. Secondly, a missional church is effective. I know of churches who think they're very biblical, but they have little impact. Nothing of spiritual or eternal value results from either their existence or ministry. In other words, they're ineffective. How do I define "effective"? It's accomplishing what God wants every local church to accomplish: help people outside the church find Jesus as Lord and Savior and help people inside the church grow in the knowledge, experience and practice of their faith.

Some of you are saying, "Rick, I'm starting to get bored. Why do I need to hear about this for four weeks?" First, if you're a follower of Jesus today – member, friend, visitor, in between churches - the Bible suggests that you should be an active part of a local church. Frankly, not every church deserves your involvement. Why? Some churches aren't even trying to be missional. In other words, they have little interest in being either biblical or effective.

Second, next Sunday our congregation will vote on a new constitution. Some folk think that God doesn't much care about how an organization functions, operates or governs itself. They say, "God isn't into structures!" I beg to differ. My study of God's Word leads me to believe God loves efficiency and effectiveness. Now the proposed constitution is a very human, imperfect document, to be sure. If it passes, I fully expect it will need to be changed or updated down the road. The only document I know of that shouldn't be changed and updated is the Bible! But I support it; I will vote for it; I encourage you to do so. I sincerely believe it will help us become more biblical and effective. In other words, it will help us become more missional. By no means am I suggesting that it's the only thing we need to do or that it's even the most important thing to do. It's simply an important part of what we need to do. Anyway, back to our theme today. A missional church emphasizes health not growth. What's that about? Let me suggest three actions you and I need to take in order to help our church become more missional. Here's the first one:

REJECT UNBIBLICAL MYTHS ABOUT THE CHURCH.

I only want to highlight a couple of myths. I will confess right up front that I have personally struggled with buying into these myths myself in my own life and ministry. You know the old saying, don't you? "Every good lie has a little bit of truth in it." Here's the first one: numerically big churches are biblical and effective. There are many variations of this myth. Good churches are big churches. A mega-church is a healthy church. If you are a healthy church, you will eventually be enormous in size. It's a deeply entrenched myth in the American church, but it can't be supported biblically. Since when does size matter to God? Isn't the Bible full of stories of how God prefers to use the little instead of the big, the insignificant instead of the important, and the few instead of the many to accomplish His will? I could point to more than one huge local church that is anything but spiritually healthy. For whatever reason, it may have gotten big numerically, but it can still be a very unhealthy environment spiritually.

Interestingly, even recent church growth research is exposing this myth. Many fast growing churches are deliberately trying to birth new congregations and spin them off instead of just getting bigger and bigger numerically. Why would they do that? The research reveals that the bigger a church get numerically, the less spiritual impact it has proportionately. For instance, more people accept Christ in smaller churches as a percentage of their size than in bigger churches. So, if you want to be missional, getting big just to get big is a bad idea.

Here's another powerful myth: your church will grow numerically if you adopt a specific program, approach or model. Again, notice that getting large in numbers is the all important objective. We need to question whether that should be the objective at all. There are many variations of this myth, too. If you offer seeker-sensitive or seeker-driven worship services, growth is certain. If you emphasize

small groups that deliberately multiply, “mega-church-dome” is just around the corner. If you spend X% on missions or offer Evangelism Explosion (which is a program I love, by the way), growth must occur. I appreciate Rick Warren and all he’s done through the Purpose Driven Church and the Purpose Driven Life materials, but when people start suggesting that any church will grow huge if you just do this or that, it’s a myth!

In all fairness to many of these large churches or ministries who market their materials, they’re only trying sincerely to help other churches. I thank the Lord for them. We *can* learn from them. We *should* learn from them. They’re probably onto something important that we should figure out how to adapt to our church. But getting spiritually healthy, becoming biblical and effective and being missional, is something different than just trying to copy what some other church has done. As important as it is to expose and reject unbiblical myths about the church, may I suggest it’s even more important to...

EMBRACE BIBLICAL TRUTHS ABOUT THE CHURCH.

First, whatever is healthy, grows. If a plant is healthy, it grows all by itself. If a child is healthy, he or she grows all by himself or herself. Not only is this true in the physical realm, it’s just as true in the spiritual realm. As a result, if a church is healthy spiritually, it will grow. Let’s look at the Bible. Jesus loved to use examples from nature to point to spiritual truths. Once, He said, “And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don’t work or make their clothing,” (Matthew 6:28 NLT) Those words “look at” in the original language actually mean “learn, observe, study, research” and do it with diligence. In other words, Jesus is suggesting that nature has something to teach us about God and life. Jesus believes studying, examining and meditating on how lilies grow can teach you something about how to live in the Kingdom of God. Specifically, lilies don’t work to grow. God gives them the inherent ability to grow. And when a lily is healthy, it just grows because God enables it to do so.

Here’s another example Jesus Himself provides. “... ‘This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4:26-29 NIV)

Notice, Jesus says here that there is parallel between the spiritual and the physical: “this is what the Kingdom of God is like....” Jesus’ story shows what people can and cannot do. They can sow and harvest. They can sleep and get up. But they can’t make crops grow. Jesus says that the earth produces fruit “all by itself.” The Greek term in the original language is *automate* – literally translated as “automatic”. When living things grow, it appears to be automatic – “all by itself.” But we know that God has given to living things an inherent

capacity to reproduce and survive; in other words, to grow! That's only true of living things. A coffee machine can't make another coffee machine, but a coffee plant can produce a coffee bean which produces new coffee plants all by itself.

Now, notice how the Bible just assumes that what is true in the natural, physical world in this regard is also true in the spiritual world. Paul is writing about ministry – about church development ministry to be exact - and he says, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor.” (1 Corinthians 3:6-8 NIV) A church is a living thing – not physically, of course, but spiritually. We shouldn't try to “manufacture” church growth, but instead try to release the spiritual potential in every church. If a church is healthy, it will grow. God will see to it. So our job as pastors, as leaders or as members is not to make Karl Road Baptist Church grow! Instead, it is to make sure that we create healthy conditions and a healthy environment that will enable our church to grow.

That's lead to a second truth and, frankly, I find it liberating. God wants our church to focus on spiritual health not numerical growth. Now, right here, let's be sure we don't “throw the baby out with the bath water.” Numerical growth can be an indicator of spiritual health. If a church is spiritually healthy, one kind of evidence is numerical growth. I'm not saying it has to become a mega-church, but there should be some kind of positive movement upwards in numbers. We shouldn't ignore numerical growth, but neither should we make it our primary focus. Let's focus on what we can and should do and let God do what God does. Instead of asking, “How can we attract more people to our worship services?” we should be asking, “Where is our church unhealthy and what do we need to do to get it healthy there?” Let's put our focus on the quality of what we do here. Do we care about what God cares about? That's the beginning of spiritual health. Are we doing what God wants us to do? That's the demonstration of spiritual health. Ultimately, we know that quality will have a positive effect on quantity.

All this leads to obvious questions: “What makes a church healthy? What are the criteria for spiritual health? What does a healthy church look like?” Those questions underline the need for you and me to...

IDENTIFY WHAT MAKES A CHURCH HEALTHY.

Let me suggest eight marks of spiritual health for a church. These aren't original with me. Nor are they meant to be comprehensive. But, I believe you'll agree that if a church can get and stay healthy in these eight areas, it would be doing well. Number one is empowering leadership. In other words, the leaders of healthy, growing churches concentrate on empowering other Christians for ministry. That can be done in a variety of ways effectively, so we're free to find out how best to do it at Karl Road. Number two is gift-oriented ministry. Healthy,

growing churches help members identify their spiritual gifts and integrate them into appropriate ministries. Again, there's many effective ways to do that. What matters is not how you do it, but that you do it... and do it well.

Number three is passionate spirituality. This has to do with how much prayer, how much authentic enthusiasm and how much being on fire for the Lord is present in our church. The more passionate a church's spirituality, the healthier it is and the more it grows. Number four is functional structures. This mark has to do with the development of an organizational structure which promotes the multiplication of ministry. It's not that every church has to have the same structure. It's just that a healthy, growing church makes sure that its structure promotes ministry and doesn't hinder it.

Mark number five is an inspiring worship service. Inspiring to whom? Inspiring to the people who go to the church! If they're inspired by what happens on a Sunday morning, it affects their passion for the Lord and their desire to invite someone else to come to church with them. Mark number six is holistic small groups. What's that about? A healthy, growing church is intentional about creating, offering and maintaining groups where the Bible is discussed and applied, to be sure, but also groups where folk can be known, loved and served as well as groups where they can know, love and serve others.

Mark number seven is need-oriented evangelism. A healthy, growing church is working hard at meeting the needs of non-Christians in some way, shape or form and allowing that to build a relational bridge to people who aren't following Jesus yet. The final mark – number eight – is loving relationships. A healthy, growing church is marked by caring relationships among those who attend the church, true enjoyment of one another as people and the ability to be there for one another in times of need.

How do you think Karl Road Baptist Church would measure up in those eight areas? I'm glad you asked. Last year, I personally interviewed about 50 members of the church who were recognized as leaders and asked them to give our church a grade in those eight areas – A, B, C, D or F. I then asked another 30 to fill out a standardized questionnaire that dealt with the same eight marks. Can you guess which of those eight marks of spiritual health came in highest? The leadership group of 50 said it was loving relationships. The group of 30 who filled out the questionnaire said it was empowering leadership. So, there was an interesting difference of opinion at that point. But both groups agreed on what was our weakest area. Can you guess what it was? Functional structures. How we govern ourselves, how we're organized, how we get things done or don't get things done is immensely frustrating to many of our people. Many of them feel as if it's having a negative effect on our ministry as a church.

Now I subscribe to the school of thought that says, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." If another of these eight marks had emerged as the lowest, I would have gone after

that one instead of functional structures. But, since it was clearly identified by the church's leaders as the weakest area of our church right now, I recommended to Church Council last year that we get intentional about trying to improve the effectiveness of our structures. They responded by creating a Constitution and By-Laws Committee to research the issue and come back with recommendations. Over the last year, that committee - under the able leadership of Paul Baldrige - has met together often, read a book as well as other church constitutions, spoken to leaders from other churches, spent time thinking and discussing together as well as praying together seeking God's guidance. The result is the proposed constitution that you will vote on next Sunday.

I could point out several good attributes in this new document, but let me focus in on one and only one as I close. It's sort of the bottom line for me. The new constitution tries to put the emphasis on ministry not meetings. In my opinion, we - meaning local churches in general - have unintentionally taught people that you serve God by getting elected to a committee or a board for three years. Once a month you get together, sit around a table, talk about ministry and then you go home. A growing number of people neither have the time, energy or patience for that kind of ministry. Does that mean people are lazy, uncommitted and don't love God? Absolutely not! They just want to do something hands on. They want to make a difference somewhere or in someone's life. They want to help build the Kingdom of God in some tangible way. We saw a great example of this desire back on October 12 when the church left the building. Did our people want to serve? Absolutely, and they did it enthusiastically!

So, this constitution seeks to put the emphasis on going out and doing ministry tasks rather than just holding meetings to talk about ministry. Now planning, administrating and organizing ministry is important. No doubt about it! Somebody needs to do it and it needs to be done well. But the new constitution tries to put administration into fewer hands so that more hands can be released for ministry that touches lives. Why's that important? I believe the more actual ministry we do as a church - not how many meetings we hold - makes us missional. In other words, it makes us more biblical and effective. The more ministry we do, the healthier we are as a church. And the healthier we are, the more we will experience the kind of growth that God intends us to have.

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and they went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station. It became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time, money and effort for the support of its work. Boats were bought and new crews were trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Now some of the members of the lifesaving station became unhappy, however, because the building was so crude and so poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable, suitable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. And so they replaced the emergency cots with beds, and they put better furniture in the now enlarged building, so that now the lifesaving station actually became a popular gathering place for its members. They took great care in decorating it beautifully and furnishing it exquisitely, because it gradually became a sort of club. But fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, and so they hired lifesaving crews to do this work for them. Now, don't misunderstand! The lifesaving motif still prevailed in the club's decoration and symbols — there was a liturgical, symbolic lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held, for example.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet and half-drowned people. They were dirty, sick people. Some of them had black skin, others had yellow skin. The beautiful new club, as you might imagine, was thrown into chaos, so that the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where these recent victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside the main clubhouse.

At the very next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities for being so unpleasant, as well as for being a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose, pointing out that, indeed, they were still called a lifesaving station. But these few were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. And so, they did just that.

Now as the years passed, the new station down the coast came to experience the very same changes that had occurred in the older, initial station. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station had to be founded to restore the original purpose. Well, history continued to repeat itself, so that if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a great number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are still very frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown!