

## Essential Elements in a Healthy Church

### *Post-Seminar Integrative Paper*



*'I have always been fascinated by these wagon wheels with their wide rims, strong wooden spokes, and big hubs. These wheels help me understand the importance of a life lived from the centre. When I move along the rim, I can reach one spoke after the other, but when I stay at the hub, I am in touch with all the spokes at once.'*

Henri Nouwen, *Here and Now* (1994). Photo by L. Hjalmarson.

## Take Nothing for the Journey

### *Rethinking Church Health in a Purpose-Driven World*

Christopher Alexander is an architect who advocates building in process and not from a plan. He argues that this is the ancient way, and that the modern and mechanistic approach demonstrates our lack of spirituality. Alexander is not a believer.

Alexander relates that one of the fundamental problems in architecture arises when the building is going up and the designer must make simple choices. For example, should this column be 5" or 6" in diameter? He talked about how the designer's own ego could get in the way of constructing the right building. The question he would finally ask is: "which choice is a greater gift to God?" He continued,

"You can build a building that everyone says is wonderful.. a success.. but does that make it wonderful or a success? No... You can build a building that no one says is wonderful or a success.. but can it be wonderful and a success...? Yes.." <sup>1</sup>

When we reduce truth to formulas or success to size, we are far along the road of idolatry and the worship of technique.<sup>2</sup> We have sold out to the evil Empire, and forgotten that we are strangers and aliens here. Leonard Cohen opines,

*You can add up the parts  
But you won't have the sum  
You can strike up the march  
There is no drum  
Every heart  
To love will come  
But like a refugee ..* <sup>3</sup>

In this paper I am not going to spell out a taxonomy of health. I believe that health is not the sum of a set of measures,<sup>4</sup> but rather is a quality of relatedness to God and His people, both a

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Alexander, Interview on CBC Radio. IDEAS. Fall, 2002. Online <http://www.cbc.ca/ideas>

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Ellul. *The Technological System*. (France: Calman-Levy, 1977). viii.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Cohen, "Anthem," 1992.

state and a process. Neither is it primarily an individual quality, but rather the quality of a Jesus community. Instead of a taxonomy, I offer five essential movements which must be engaged in order for a community to find their place in God's kingdom purpose.

*Essential Rhythms:* inward and outward, to God and to one another, *kavanah*  
*Essential Mission:* both ascent and descent, engaging the powers, on a kingdom mission  
*Essential Character:* the ability to sacrifice temporal goals in view of citizenship in heaven, embracing the Cross  
*Essential Romance:* dancing and singing in the embrace of God's love  
*Essential Listening:* to our inward life, to the culture, to the broader community of the Spirit (local, extra-local and historical), and to the word.

My intention is not to spell out these movements systematically, but rather to paint a picture. The reader will be asked to do their own work of reflection to find the suggested movements.

## **The Crisis**

The organized church in North America is facing a crisis. David Bodine cites statistics from the World Evangelization Research Center: "Christians spend more on the annual audits of their churches and agencies (\$810 million) than on all their workers in the non-Christian world. The total cost of Christian outreach averages \$330,000 for each and every newly baptized person."<sup>5</sup>

The church has adopted worldly and temporal means to achieve eternal ends. We seem to believe that we can spend our way to a revitalized church, but we cannot. The crisis is taking shape as giving and attendance drop. George Barna sees a leadership crisis.<sup>6</sup> Barna reports that

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<sup>4</sup> Whether the eight essential qualities listed by NCD, or Barna's "nine habits possessed by all effective churches" (*The Habits of Highly Effective Churches*, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> David Bodine, "Crisis in the Church." May, 2004. Online <http://www.tribalchurch.org>

<sup>6</sup> Tim Stafford, "The Third Coming of George Barna," Christianity Today Magazine, September, 2002.

his ten year campaign to revitalize the church has failed. More recently he suggests that a revolution is underway outside inherited churches within “micro-movements.”<sup>7</sup>

The deeper crisis may be a crisis of spirituality. John O’Keefe at the popular postmodern magazine Ginkworld opines,

"Over the past 15 years we have spent over \$500 billion (that’s “billion” with a “b”), and for the most part the church in the USAmerica has not grown at all; it has not even kept up with the population growth. In fact, the average attendance in church has declined over a ten-year period.”<sup>8</sup>

The influx of cash hasn’t resulted in transformation. We may point to large buildings and large congregations with wonderful programs, but these aren’t indicators of health.

How do we quantify health? Toward what goal do we move people? Is “health” a useful category, and what worldview informs our answer? Are numbers important? Is permanence important? Is it enough to be purpose-driven?<sup>9</sup> Is it possible that the typical measures of health actually cause us to attend to the wrong things?

### **Health by the ABCs**

*“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”*

The currency in use for measuring church growth has been the ABCs.. attendance, buildings, and cash. If a church has these in measure and expanding, it has been considered fruitful. But these are entirely secular values, imported from the business world in a capitalist and consumer culture. A biblical set of ABCs would look different: perhaps *authenticity*,

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<sup>7</sup> George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, Ill: Tyndale House, 2005). For an explanation of the taxonomy of “inherited” versus “emergent” see Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (London: Paternoster Press, 2005)

<sup>8</sup> John O’Keefe, “*Church XP: The Upgrade.*” October, 2003. Online <http://www.ginkworld.net>

<sup>9</sup> See David Hopkins, “Rebooting the Purpose-Driven Church,” *Next Wave Magazine*, August, 2001. Online <http://www.next-wave.org>

*belonging, and cultivating Christ.*<sup>10</sup> If God's end goal is Jesus, if his purpose is to form people into the image of His Son, then *transformation*, formation resulting in new identity and new practices, must be at the core of *ekklesial* health.

In the past fifty years we have witnessed a number of movements directed toward production of healthy and growing churches. These movements have now been soundly critiqued (Craig van Gelder, Howard Snyder and others). Broadly speaking, church growth movements have been anthropocentric, while missional movements have been focused on God. Church growth movements tended to focus *on what humans do*. Missional movements tend to focus on *what God is doing*.

Naturally, where one begins makes a difference. Gailyn Van Rheenen argues that the seeds of syncretism were sown "in the very principles of cultural analysis and strategy formulation" within the church growth movement.<sup>11</sup> *Methods are not value neutral, but form an imaginative architecture which act back on the thinker and then shape practice.*

There are other problems with church *health*. Health connotes a bunch of shining faces, clean and well-clothed, happily chatting around a coffee table in a well furnished living room with mugs of Starbucks coffee. We need to consider the etymology of the word "health." Metaphors are rooted in story, and story assists us in developing an imaginative architecture that remains flexible and open. Metaphors invoke imagination, and what begins in the Holy imagination can be born of the Spirit. The dream can become reality, the Word can become

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<sup>10</sup> An interesting discussion of belonging occurs in Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (London: Paternoster Press:, 2005) 9

<sup>11</sup> Gailyn van Rheenen, "Contrasting Missional and Church Growth Perspectives," Dec.16, 2004. Online <http://www.missiology.org>

flesh. Brueggemann writes, "concrete change - attitude, action, behaviour, policy--of any serious, lasting kind arises only through an alternatively imagined world..."<sup>12</sup>

### **Health and Kavanah**

*"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."*

In March of 2005 Rachel posted at Velveteen Rabbi, echoing my own thoughts and journey...

"The Online Etymology dictionary has a lot to say about the English word "holy." At its heart, it may once have meant "that which must be kept whole" or "that which is inviolate." My first sense that holiness relates to wholeness came from Wendell Berry, who writes (in *The Art of the Commonplace*), "The word health belongs to a family of words, a listing of which will suggest how far the consideration of health must carry us: heal, whole, wholesome, hale, hallow, holy.

"For the last ten years we've belonged to a local community-supported farm. A couple of summers ago I ran into a minister friend there, who like me was picking his week's share of cherry tomatoes. "This is some of the holiest ground I know," he said. I agreed wholeheartedly. What makes the ground of Caretaker Farm holy? Not its tremendous spiritual/edible abundance, but the precursor to that abundance: the *kavanah* (intention) with which it is farmed. I wouldn't rule out that some places may be innately holy, but on the whole I think we make holy places together. Holiness is something we both make and find..."<sup>13</sup>

One of the problems with church health is that it aims to measure and secure a set of activities and results, without regard to the intention of the persons involved. But that is inconceivable to Paul or Jesus; the intention of the heart as we walk together is everything! Alternatively, we should be hiring unemployed people to plant churches and do outreach. Or is that what we have been doing? It's time to repent. Eugene Peterson reminds us that,

"The Christian community is interested in spirituality because it is interested in living. We give careful attention to spirituality because we know, from long experience, how easy it is to get interested in ideas of God and projects for God and gradually lose interest in God alive, deadening our lives with the ideas and projects. This happens a lot... [we] detach

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001) 42

<sup>13</sup> Rachel Zuckerman, "What is Holiness?" March, 2005. Online <http://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com>

from a relational obedience and adoration of God, substituting our selves, our godlike egos, in the place originally occupied by God.”<sup>14</sup>

How do we maintain our focus on God and His kingdom? How do we direct attention away from our false egos and puny self, even our distorted desire to be saviors for the world? In Judaism, there is a distinct activity called *kavanah*. It is cultivated in order to maximize the inwardness of our actions. It means to *pay attention*, to direct the mind and heart in order to maximize the levels of intentionality of our actions. This applies to actions/deeds as it does to the study of Scripture and to prayer but goes beyond these activities themselves to the notion of attentiveness to God Himself. It is not primarily an awareness of being commanded by God, but *an awareness of the God who commands*. Martin Buber writes, "He who does a good deed with complete *kavanah*, that is, completes an act in such a way that his whole existence is gathered in it and directed in it towards God, he works on the redemption of the world, on its conquest for God.”<sup>15</sup>

Directly related to the idea of direction-intention is the idea of the hallowing of the everyday. The Hebraic understanding is that there are only two realities in the world: the holy and the not-yet-holy, and the missional task of God's people is to make the not-yet-holy into that which is holy. This is done by the directing of the deed toward God and by the level of intentionality and holiness with which we perform our daily tasks.

### **Health, Strength and Weakness**

*“Blessed are those who merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”*

*“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”*

The real crisis is not one of church growth, but of spirituality and of faith. Spirituality values weakness and emptiness, while the world values knowledge, power and certainty. Spirituality is

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<sup>14</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005) 31

<sup>15</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) 130.

oriented first to the unseen world; science is oriented first to what we can measure. To the extent that the church has adopted worldly goals and ideals she has abandoned the way of Christ.<sup>16</sup> Jean Vanier comments,

Our society shuns weakness and glorifies strength. By embracing weakness, however, we learn new ways of living and discover greater compassion, trust and understanding.<sup>17</sup>

Metaphors and metanarratives -- the picture and the story. Maybe we need to rediscover Don Quixote, St. Francis, and the Celts. Church health has been mostly about ascent; maybe it's really about descent. Maybe that's why Jesus warned us against leadership cults (Matthew 23:10). The church of Christ is cruciform.

And that is why we can't think our way to a revitalized church. Knowledge seeks certainty and eschews faith. Knowledge seeks control, when we need more dependence. Rethinking the problem tends to result only in tweaking the system. The very foundation has to shift, and our patterns of living must change as we move from rationality to *relation*.

Strangely enough, the hope for a church that is relevant to our culture, a church that is ready to spend itself for the kingdom of God instead of seeking power, a church alive to compassion and the poor may be one result of the cultural shift we find ourselves in. It is only when we are insecure that we are open to change. Jean Vanier writes,

"When a community is born, its founders have to struggle to survive and announce their ideal. So they find themselves confronted with contradictions and sometimes even persecution. These oblige the members of the community to emphasize their commitment; they strengthen motivation and encourage people to go beyond themselves to rely totally on Providence. Sometimes only the direct intervention of God can save them.

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<sup>16</sup> See in particular the whole tenor of Pauls' argument in 1 Cor.1:18 and following.

<sup>17</sup> Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998) 54

"But when a community has enough members to do all the work, when it has enough material goods, it can relax. It has strong structures. It is fairly secure. It is then that there is danger."<sup>18</sup>

At the center of any Christian definition of health rises a Cross. It is difficult to integrate pain and suffering into a welcoming theology of wholeness and success. And when we wed our ideals of growth too closely to physical and psychological measures, when we are looking for mass appeal, we end up cultivating groups of "beautiful people" and excluding the ones Jesus seemed to prefer. Yet Jesus came among us as one who was poor. He emptied Himself of power and privilege and stepped down from a place of safety to a place of chaos and risk. He didn't hang out with the beautiful people. Dallas Willard writes,

So we must see from our heart that:  
Blessed are the physically repulsive,  
Blessed are those who smell bad,  
The twisted, misshapen, deformed,  
The too big, too little, too loud,  
The bald, the fat, and the old-  
For they are all riotously celebrated in the party of Jesus.<sup>19</sup>

*Health is both a state of being and a process:* a goal, a trajectory and not a point in time. A person with a useless leg can be more healthy than a person with two good legs, if the person with the useless leg has a wheelchair and good friends.

Picture again the coffee-clutch: twelve beautiful people sitting in a comfortable room talking about God. A group of twelve healthy persons who are only healthy because they purposely exclude any persons with messy lives is not a healthy community. The cliché is that "the dead sea is dead because it has no outlet."

"Many people are either unwilling or unable to suffer the pain of giving up the outgrown which needs to be forsaken. Consequently they cling, often forever, to their old patterns of thinking and behaving, thus failing to negotiate any crisis, to truly grow up and to

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<sup>18</sup> Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1971)

<sup>19</sup> Dallas Willard. *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: Harpercollins, 1998) 123

experience the joyful sense of rebirth that accompanies the successful transition into greater maturity.”<sup>20</sup>

We intuitively know that health involves growth and chaos: rhythms of ascent and descent, movement toward greater integration, and the ability to embrace both light and shadow. Homeostatic<sup>21</sup> mechanisms, the natural tendency of an organism to resist change, actually prevent the healthy stress that conditions growth. A certain amount of stress is important for healthy organisms. A tree that has no experience of windstorms tends to develop shallow roots. When the winds suddenly blow, that tree could topple to the ground -- unless, of course, it is sheltered by many other trees.

### **Health as A Quality of Relationship**

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

Health must ultimately be related to Spirit. *Health may be more a quality of relationship than an outwardly visible quantity.* Perhaps health is in the eye of the beholder. We are whole as we are beheld by Jesus: *“How beautiful you are, my sister, my bride.”*

*Health should be a communal measure, the loaf and not the grain of wheat; and a process, not a static image like a snapshot. Perhaps it is more like an AVI or MP3 video than a JPG or a BMP: a dynamic, changing, many hued image of process and growth.*

Furthermore, *diversity is crucial to health.* Biologists are discovering that homogeneity is dangerous. Loss of diversity makes organisms vulnerable. A single virus can wipe out an entire species, whereas diversity equals flexibility and adaptability and survival.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> M. Scott Peck, source unknown.

<sup>21</sup> **Homeostasis** is the property of an [open system](#), especially living [organisms](#), to regulate its internal environment to maintain a stable, constant condition, by means of multiple [dynamic equilibrium](#) adjustments, controlled by interrelated regulation mechanisms. Online <http://www.wikipedia.org>

<sup>22</sup> See “biodiversity.” The [1992 United Nations Earth Summit](#) in [Rio de Janeiro](#) defined “biodiversity” as “the variability among living organisms from all sources, including, ‘inter alia’, [terrestrial](#), [marine](#), and other [aquatic](#)

Church growth is *de-facto* a picture of expansion. But what if health really means something more like a natural rhythm, embracing the God-given cycle of birth and death? Recently Neil Cole was asked about the way we measure success. He responded..

“We don’t care if our churches live a year, twenty years, or a hundred years. We care that while they live, they give birth. We may start a church that lasts a year, but while it lives, it births two daughter churches. That is a success. We think that if every church reproduces in that way, then the Kingdom of God will continue and grow.

“But if we think that every church has to last forever, we will try to do everything we can to keep it alive artificially, and that’s not good. We find fruitfulness most often in the small, not the large. Growing larger does not seem to be the key. Massive attendance is not the key.”<sup>23</sup>

Embracing a paradigm of progress mirrors the secular myth of progress.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, we are sent. If there is an inward movement to community and belonging, there is also an outward mission to proclaim the presence of God’s kingdom. In the west the missional character of God’s people has been sorely neglected in favor of attractional and homogeneous models.

Reggie McNeal comments that “the North American church has lost its influence at this critical juncture. It has lost its influence because it lost its identity. It lost its identity because it lost its mission.”<sup>25</sup>



Finally, rhythms of practice are essential to health. Sabbath and work, study and prayer – the loss of rhythm produced by the fragmentation, individualism, and pace of western culture leaves many feeling both alone and rootless. And the multiplicity of choice produces an inability to

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ecosystems, and the ecological complexes of which they are part: this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems”.

<sup>23</sup> Neil Cole, “Organic Church.” Online <http://www.next-wave.org> Nov. 2005, #83

<sup>24</sup> See Tom Wessels, *The Myth of Progress* (University of Vermont, 2003)

<sup>25</sup> Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future* ( San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass) 115

choose anything. Unless a Christ community is well rooted in a particular tradition, where to begin?

We need communal practices. They must be *practices*, because only concrete practices root us in the concrete and continuing story of God's incarnation. They must be *communal* for two reasons. First, they must be communal because ongoing practices grows out of *shared commitment*. When we meet to pray it may not matter so much what we pray but that we pray together. In this way we are formed in a common rhythm and we discover we are not alone. Second, because shared practices form a *culture*, and it is only as we participate in a common culture that we know ourselves. Robert Bellah and associates write,

We find ourselves not independently of other people and institutions, but through them. We never get to the bottom of ourselves on our own. We discover who we are face to face and side by side with others in work, love, and learning. All of our activity goes on in relationships, groups, associations, and communities ordered by institutional structures and interpreted by cultural patterns of meaning. (*Habits of the Heart*, 30-31)

How do we decide which practices will help us? If we don't select a particular set of practices, then we elect to be formed in other ways, and likely our formation will be handed to us by those who have a vested interest in our identity as consumers.

When so many are leaving traditional communities, we experience both the loss of ritual and the loss of connection. We become isolated into Cartesian islands, and are subject to all the dangers of the desert, particularly loneliness and fear. Moving toward a deeper experience Jesus, and increased engagement in mission, will necessitate new discoveries and commitments.

## **Health, Mission and Purpose**

*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”*

Our *sent-ness* as a people expresses our unity with the Father, and our *rootedness* in culture expresses our identification with Jesus in His incarnation. We need the empowerment of the Spirit of God to establish a redemptive presence. We need an identity which is imaginatively rooted in people, and expressed in mobility and flexibility, and not in fixed and immobile buildings or temples. We need an architecture for exiles rather than for settled communities. We are a people on the move with God. As Darrel Guder put it, “We have the responsibility and the capacity, through the Holy Spirit, to shape ourselves for faithful witness. Our purpose defines our organizational structures - which means that our mission challenges us to re-form our structures so that we can be faithful in our witness.”<sup>26</sup>

Finally, as God’s pilgrim people we must be constantly attentive to what God is doing. This attention involves at least four dimensions of listening: to our inward life, to the culture, to the broader community of the Spirit (local, extra-local and historical), and to the word. Failing this attention we will fail in our shared life and in our mission in the world. Margaret Wheatley writes in “A Simpler Way,”

"There is an important humility associated with trying to direct our activities by setting goals or measures. Every act of observation loses more information than it gains. Whatever we decide to notice blinds us to other possibilities. In directing our attention to certain things, we lose awareness of everything else."<sup>27</sup>

It seems that a precondition of transformation is emptiness. Only the empty, the poor, the naked and the disenfranchised can really see clearly, because they have no vested interest and nothing left to lose. This is why Jesus says that we must become as children in order to enter the kingdom of God. We need more amateurs.. from the Latin root, *amati*, to love.

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<sup>26</sup> Darrel Guder. Ed. *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998) 240

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Wheatley, *A Simpler Way* (San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publications, 1996) 26

## Conclusion

*“Seek first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”*

*There is an age when one teaches what one knows.  
But there follows another when one teaches what one does not know;  
It comes.. maybe now..  
the age of unlearning.<sup>28</sup>*

The reader will notice that I have included a reference to the Sermon on the Mount at the opening of each section, primarily from the Beatitudes. I hope this has been understood as a cue to that we need to think differently about health. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus turns most of our thinking about life and spirituality upside down.

Likewise I haven't written a word about leadership. I simply note that for all our focus on leadership, and for the thousands of books and seminars on the subject, our current crisis remains.

Typical measures of health have limited use in understanding the shared *ekklesial* life of a people, but the risk of using them is that we attend more and more to a human dimension while neglecting a god-dimension.

We are easily drawn to what is visible and possible to define; we neglect at our peril what cannot be measured and quantified. Our most challenging task is to be formed as people of attention: attention to God. Community and mission are both about love and emptiness of our own agendas. Only those who "forsake all" for the sake of love can reach a city not built with hands.

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<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, quoted in Rubem Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* (London: SCM Press, 1990) 1

Simone Weil defined culture as “that which forms attention.” *The questions we ask are not neutral, but form our attention.* Our questions shape our lenses, and determine what information we regard, and what we *discard*. Perhaps we need to exchange the question of health for a different question: *how do we form a culture whose ears are attuned to the Spirit?* In a time when more and more voices demand our attention, in an age of burgeoning information and decreasing wisdom, where there is less time to reflect and increasing complexity with which to wrestle, we need more than ever to be a people who hear the voice of the Shepherd. May God grant us ears to hear!

*Veni, Sancte Spiritus,  
reple tuorum corda fidelium,  
et tui amoris in eis ignem accende.*

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