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# DISCERNING GOD'S SHAPING HAND

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## **Alliance Transitional Ministries Network**

*"The wisdom of the prudent is to discern his way, but the folly of fools is deceiving."* Proverbs 14:4

**I**t has been said that the first task of a leader is to describe reality. For pastoral leaders, that task requires spiritual discernment. The reality they are seeking to understand encompasses divine, as well as material and organizational concerns. When Jesus spoke to the seven churches in Asia, he spoke to matters of faith, belief, and practice. His call to the church in Ephesus was to remember, repent and return to their first love. Our Lord was concerned first, about the state of the church's corporate heart and its relationship to him.

Pastors who are seeking to lead churches through a process of revitalization must be aware of the spiritual dynamics in the church, as well as the organizational and corporate events that led to present circumstances. We proceed with the biblical assumption that the Spirit of God is now, and has been, at work in the church. The Church is the Body of Christ. Believers are indwelt by Holy Spirit. Thus, the first order of business is to discern what our Lord is doing or, as such may be, to uncover those elements in the life of the church that prevent Christ from using the church as He desires. Leaders must understand where "God's Shaping Hand"<sup>1</sup> can be seen if they are to understand how to move the church toward God's intended future. That requires prayerful discernment. In I Corinthians 2 Paul asks, *"For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God."* (1Co 2:11) At the end of that same chapter he goes on to say, *"The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.*" (1Co 2:15-16)

Shepherds must be aware of the current condition of the flock. It is not enough to understand how the success and failures of the past influence the present. Pastoral leaders, along with the elders of the church, must evaluate the congregation's present in view of Scripture. Efforts to revitalize and restore wellbeing to fading or troubled congregations that ignore the

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<sup>1</sup> Credit should be given to Richard Bush for this terminology.

legacy of once successful, idealized ministries, significant periods of conflict and struggle, or episodes of un-Christlike behavior and corporate sin may achieve short-term results, but they are doomed to eventual failure.

The dynamics of congregational life must be aligned with the Gospel. If the gospel is not taken seriously, if gospel perspectives are not deeply embedded in the DNA of church life, changes made to organization and structure, leadership patterns, or worship styles will prove to be superficial. More than one church has reverted to sinful patterns of relationship to one another and less than wholesome patterns of relationship with its Lord because root issues were not identified and brought under the Lordship of Christ.

## **Becoming Self-aware**

**T**he Word of God encourages believers to be self-aware. That need is no less pronounced in the church. In Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah writes, *"Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD!"* (Lam. 3:40). Paul urges the Corinthians to do so as well. In I Corinthians 11:28 he writes concerning the Lord's Supper, *"Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup."* Proverbs 14:8 offers this maxim: *"The wisdom of the prudent is to discern his way, but the folly of fools is deceiving."* And King David wrote, *"Prove me, O LORD, and try me; test my heart and my mind. For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in your faithfulness."* (Psalm 26:2-3).

No believer progresses in Christian living without intention. No congregation thrives without purposeful ministry and submission to the leading of God's Spirit. Those who wish to experience the blessing of God's Spirit at work among the congregation need to discern *"what the Spirit is saying to the churches."*

## **Measuring the Dynamics of Church Life**

**I**nstruments such as Natural Church Development (NCD), the Church Health Assessment Tool (CHAT) and the PEAK Profile are often used to assess church health. The Office of Church Ministries (C&MA) has endorsed the latter as its preferred instrument.<sup>2</sup> These resources are useful. They take a snapshot of the congregation's current state and to varying degrees, they may also trace relational patterns. The results can be quantified. The data they provide, allows leaders to identify issues related to ministry programming, and structural, as well as family systems. They are useful management tools by which leaders can trace patterns and progress. If the assessments are conducted on a regular basis, they may provide a baseline from which

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<sup>2</sup> The PEAK Profile was developed by the Metropolitan District. Though it is similar to other assessment instruments, PEAK has been specially tailored for Alliance churches.

progress can be measured.

Unfortunately, statistical surveys are less effective in measuring emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. The information church health surveys provide is not invalid. It is incomplete. In his book, *Diagnosing the Heart of your Church*, Mark Barnard observes,

Systemic corporate pain has less to do with our activities and programs and more to do with who we are and who we have been historically. Indicators of how well a church functions on a systemic level include healthy communication, spiritual growth and reproduction, trust in leadership, and whether a church's overall spirit is joyful or not. Interactions in these areas make up the process of healthy living in community. If things on a process level are not healthy, all the structural, organizational, or programmatic changes we implement will fall short of "fixing" anything. In effect, our unhealthy ways of relating within the body hinder the Holy Spirit's ability to produce the ministry fruit we long to see.

## **Our Goal is Church Health**

**H**ealing metaphors are often used to talk about church vitality and healing metaphors are found Scripture. Sin is often depicted as a spiritual disease. The Old Testament prophets speak of God's willingness to heal Israel's waywardness. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul compares the church to a human body. It is not improper then to apply the metaphor of health to church life, so long as its limitations are acknowledged. They must not be used to hide spiritual rebellion and sin under the guise of emotional woundedness and victimhood.

The word *health* describes the general state of something (organic or otherwise). It describes soundness, vitality, and proper functioning. A human being is said to be healthy when all bodily processes are operating as required to maintain optimal functional capacity. Organizations are considered healthy when institutional systems work together to achieve the organization's goals and purposes, and when relationships within the organization contribute to a wholesome atmosphere.

When health is understood in terms of wholeness, it appears obvious that church health requires more than properly functioning structures and strong leadership competencies. Relationships are key<sup>3</sup>. They sustain functional structures and the leadership dynamics important to the success or failure of ministry. When Jesus was questioned about the most important commandment, he answered by pointing to the Shema, *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with*

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is one reason why the New Testament authors feature many "one another" passages.

*all your might.*" (Deut. 6:4-5)<sup>4</sup> Love for God is the relational platform from which the gospel is proclaimed and upon which it stands. Love for one's neighbor is the evidence that love for God is genuine. As John writes, "Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling." (1 John 2:9-10) Both commands, the command to love God and to love one's neighbor, are relational commands. So the measurements of church health must not be restricted to the effectiveness of community outreach and evangelistic effectiveness. Our pursuit of the Great Commission must not eclipse our concern for the Greatest Commandment.

Unfortunately, although Jesus' command to love God and neighbor is universally recognized, there is no commonly accepted definition of church health. The essentials of wellbeing often reflect the analyst's presuppositions. For instance, Mark Dever approaches the issue from a theological perspective. He uses a narrow definition that emphasizes three characteristics: expositional preaching, biblical theology, and a right understanding of the gospel. Dever's proposal has value, but it ignores the relational dynamics present in any human organization. It lacks an emphasis upon relational wholeness as well as a clear focus upon the church's missional responsibilities. Of course, Dever may argue that both concerns are included in a right understanding of the gospel.

In an article published on the Church Law & Tax website, Karl Vators opts for a more detailed, data driven approach. Vators lists *23 Defining Factors of a Healthy Church*. Nearly all of them are matters of practice rather than belief. He does not ignore relational issues, but he fails to give real significance to the theological dimensions of church life. In his book *Comeback Churches*, Ed Stetzer also describes a healthy church primarily in terms of the factors determined to promote numerical growth, to the neglect of the theological and biblical concerns that were front and center for Dever.

The popularity of The Natural Church Development Survey has somewhat diminished. Nonetheless, it continues to be a valuable and often used diagnostic tool. NCD does consider growth to be the determinative indicator of congregational health. The survey is designed to measure relational dynamics as well. In the Preface to the American Edition of Christian Swartz' seminal book, Bob Logan writes, "The research results confirms what many leaders have known intuitively -- that healthy churches are growing churches, making more and better disciples in loving obedience to Christ."<sup>5</sup> Using a social research paradigm to examine the characteristics of growing churches (i.e., healthy churches), Swartz names eight quality characteristics necessary for church vitality. By effectively addressing the "minimum factor," that is, the area with least

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<sup>4</sup> See Matthew 22:37-38.

<sup>5</sup> Natural Church Development,

vitality, Swartz claims nearly every church can become a growing congregation. While NCD does include measurements of spiritual passion and inspiring worship as two important characteristics of a healthy church, Swartz himself asserts that theological orientation has little to do with church vitality. For NCD, doctrinal orthodoxy is unrelated to church vitality. The NCD definition of health is essentially institutional not spiritual.

Recently, the Office of Church Advance (C&MA) has offered this tentative definition of a healthy church. It begins with a preparatory descriptor now common in Alliance circles: "We are a Christ-centered, Acts 1:8 Family." The definition continues: "A healthy Alliance Church is a community of Christ followers, growing in their intimacy with God, multiplying disciple-makers, and transforming communities locally, regionally, and globally. That statement is followed with a descriptor that embraces the "nine essential elements for an advancing/healthy church" measured by the PEAK Profile.<sup>6</sup> The definition embraces an increasingly popular idea reflecting growing concerns for social justice in the evangelical church. Accordingly, healthy churches are transforming communities. The primary difficulty with this proposal lies with the assumption that the relational wellbeing of a local congregation to its Lord and to its members, depends upon the success of its efforts to address the social needs of the community. But the early church often found itself at odds with the unbelieving community. Congregations may (and should) pursue the welfare of the place where they are found but they have little control over how those efforts to address social conditions will be received.

## **Four Characteristics of Health**

**A** working definition of church health is needed to provide a common language for transitional ministry in the Alliance and to identify the objectives of intentional transitional ministry. A common definition will aid the assessment process since it provides a standard against which the dynamics of the church's life can be gauged. Of course, no assessment is value neutral. A clear biblically based standard is needed against which judgments relating to the wellbeing of the congregation's life with Christ can be measured. Orthodoxy does matter. Thus, the definition needs to include orthodox theological commitments and gospel understanding, as well as structural and organizational concerns. Simply put, a healthy congregation is one in which all functions, those that may be considered spiritual and relational, as well as institutional or systemic, operate to maintain the soundness of the community of faith in relationship to Christ who is the head of the church and in relationship to one another. Vital churches reflect the priorities of Christ to love God and to love one's neighbor.

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<sup>6</sup> The PEAK characteristics are: Spiritual leadership, Personal growth, Missions focus, Loving community, Worship gathering, Vision alignment, Alliance partnership, financial stewardship, and effective organization.

Each of the attempts to define church health have value. They serve a good purpose as working definitions. However, it seems beneficial to consider church health in relationship to Christ rather than institutional dynamics or activities. With that in mind, I believe there are four observable indicators of church health that can be used to gauge the vitality of local churches. They are stated with the understanding that the church is the body of Christ. It is the one place in our world where the locus of Christ's rule and authority must be visibly manifest.<sup>7</sup>

1. Christ's presence is manifest.

The community of faith is constituted by the Holy Spirit. In the absence of the Spirit, congregations are only religious assemblies. That is the significance of Pentecost (Acts 2). The church consists of those who have been born again by the Holy Spirit and who now live in union with Christ, through the indwelling Spirit. The presence of God is evident when people live in submission to Christ as Lord and pursue holiness, serving Christ and one another through the exercise of the Spirit's gifts. Thus, healthy congregations are churches where the Spirit of God is welcomed, and Christ is intentionally recognized and worshipped as Lord.

2. Christ's Word is observed

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Act 2:42)" To observe God's Word is to conform one's life to its precepts. It is to value it. To cherish it. To organize one's life around it. Congregations that observe God's Word, work to bring congregational life and practice, into conformity with Biblical standards of community life. They understand the gospel and seek to live by it. Their commitment to Christ is demonstrated relationally and it is reflected in the church's institutional structures. They are characterized by fervent worship and prayer. They strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The Alliance has always maintained a "Big tent" stance with respect to many controversial doctrinal issues. Nevertheless, we must address doctrinal weaknesses and/or error when they impact the health of a congregation and threaten its relationship to Christ. Doctrine does impact behavior. Belief shapes congregational life.

3. Christ's love is shared.

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to acknowledge the similarity between these principles, and those advanced by Dr. Harry Reeder in his book on church revitalization, Fanning the Flame as well as the revitalization conferences of the same name. Dr. Reeder has given me verbal permission to build upon his ideas.

Jesus' words in John 13:34-35 are well known: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Therefore, healthy congregations are intentionally structured to fulfill both the Great and second greatest commandments. Love, as described in I Corinthians 13, is the distinguishing feature of the healthy congregation. Love is the driver of the church's relationship to the Lord and to one another. It is also the motivating force behind evangelism and other outreach ministries.

#### 4. Christ's mission is owned.

In John 20:21-23 Jesus ties the mission of the church to the empowerment of the Holy Spirit as well as the forgiveness of sins. "Jesus said to them again," John writes, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

The community of faith is a Spirit-filled community on mission. As the Father sent the Son, so the Son sends the church. His mission is ours. Missional engagement is more than community involvement. It is characterized by a clear, persuasive presentation of the gospel as well as manifestations of the grace and mercy of God in various sorts of social ministries. The mission of the church is commended by its Lord. "And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:18-20 ESV) Thus, healthy churches are intentional about making disciples.

## **Discernment not Judgment**

**A**ssessment requires humility. Anyone who dares to examine someone else must keep Jesus' words in mind: "... first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." (Mat 7:5 ESV)

Assessing church health is not a dispassionate exercise. Neither should it be judgmental. It is an attempt at spiritual discernment. As such, those who presume to complete an assessment of a congregation's wellbeing, must cultivate intentional dependence upon the Holy Spirit. The data gleaned through various means; surveys as well as personal interviews and historical records, provides the clues to understanding God's work in the church and the congregation's response to Him. It does not depend solely upon human wisdom and understanding. Assessors

must acknowledge the possibility of human error and ignorance. Church assessment is a prayerful effort to understand what the Spirit of God is saying to the church. Spiritual discernment prayerfully considers data in the light of God's Word and the Spirit's leading.

In her book, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, Ruth Haley Barton defines discernment as "the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and activity of God – both in ordinary moments and in the larger decisions of our lives." (Barton, p. 10) Although Barton's immediate concern is how decisions are made, her definition points to the goal of church assessment. It is a humble and prayerful attempt to recognize and respond to the presence and activity of God in the life of a local church. David Miles who is the founding partner of VitalChurch Ministries, insists that the fundamental question to be answered by any transitional pastor or church leader is this one: "What does the Holy Spirit have to say to this church?" Once the Spirit's voice has been discerned and understood, the church's leadership team has only to embrace the Spirit's leading. The only remaining task is to do what God instructs.

Discernment requires careful, non-judgmental listening. Assessors listen to church members who are often hurting and confused. They must listen to one another and to the Word of God, giving prayerful attention to the voice of the Holy Spirit. The primary purpose in church assessment is to identify the cause of spiritual decline but we must not assume we can do so without paying attention to the concerns voiced by church members, even though perceptions and opinions may be inaccurate and heavily biased.

As every counselor knows, presenting issues are seldom the fundamental ones. Data-driven surveys help us to identify many concerns, but it takes listeners to uncover hidden problems. Current patterns are likely to have roots in the congregation's corporate past. The legacy of unresolved conflict, structural deficiencies, power struggles and misunderstandings, or other distortions of the gospel may not be immediately evident. Matters like these are often not the subject of conversation. Nonetheless, if left unresolved, they grieve the Holy Spirit. Jesus warned the churches in Asia that he was ready to remove their lampstand. He was prepared to withdraw His presence for their failure to respond to his word. It is perilous to assume that we have discerned the cause of a congregation's decline or turmoil without first having listened to the voice of the Spirit. That voice is detected in the voices of church members who often perceive that something is wrong, but who are often unable to identify what that may be.

## **Assessment Process**

**A**TMN is a network of Alliance pastors who feel called to serve churches in transition. It functions with the endorsement of Church Ministries, under the oversight of the Office of Church Advance but ATMN has neither the desire or the authority to mandate policy and procedures. Our recommendations concerning assessment come from accumulated years of experience in transitional pastoral ministry. District leaders must make judgments about the need



for a transitional pastor, as well as the level of training and expertise required. Superintendents must also decide upon the type of assessment needed in each church in transition. There are a variety of assessment tools available, and they must decide ultimately which is best. Nonetheless, ATMN strongly recommends a “hands on” assessment that includes listening.

ATMN is not alone in stressing the need for listening. We serve the Alliance uniquely in partnership with organizations like Interim Pastor Ministry (IPM) and VitalChurch Ministries (VCM). Both of these ministries also stress the need for assessment and listening. IPM instructs its pastors to devote the first 30 days or more to multiple interviews. VCM utilizes teams, usually in advance of placing a transitional pastor. Their extensive onsite assessment process is a precursor to interim pastoral ministry. This team approach is favored by the experienced members of ATMN’s Advisory Board. Of course, it is always wise to include the potential transitional pastor in the assessment process.

There are several reasons for the team approach. First, it provides multiple insights into the church’s circumstances. As Proverbs says, there is wisdom in many counselors. Perhaps of equal importance is the strength a group report adds to the results of the assessment. It relieves the transitional pastor of the entire burden of proof.

In some circumstances, it may be wiser to postpone the assessment until trust in the transitional pastors has been established. Congregations do not always welcome assessment and in our anti-authoritarian age, lay leaders sometimes suspect the district’s motives. Assessments that have been reported improperly or which appear to be harsh and judgmental rather than helpful, can aggravate already delicate relationships. Once again, discernment is needed. Members will seldom express opinions candidly until some level of trust has been established.

## **District Teams**

**A** TMN recommends district-based assessment teams be used to provide the “soft data” that compliments the information gained through online surveys. Our reasons follow.

1. It is cost effective.

In an ideal world, cost would not be a significant factor since the wellbeing of the congregation is ultimately more important. However, budget constraints are real, and costs must always be considered. This is especially true if the cost must be borne by a smaller congregation. Churches in need of transitional ministry often experience financial stress. The assessment cannot burden the local church unreasonably. Costs can be lowered by training and employing teams within the district to take part in church assessments.

2. It builds healthy relationships with the district.

If an assessment system is to be effective, it must be endorsed by the district. Assessment requires discernment rather than specialists with privileged knowledge. While ATMN members are willing to provide training, we are not marketing an assessment process. We are confident that experienced pastors and lay leaders can be empowered to conduct assessments with a modicum of training.

3. It is both valid and reliable.

Validity means the results are well-founded. They correspond to what the circumstances are. The validity of the assessment should be apparent in the agreement of the congregation that the Lord has spoken. Reliability means the assessment is trustworthy. This will also mean that the individuals conducting the assessment are viewed as trustworthy. Reliability is established by comparing the results with the goals. Does the process accomplish what it is intended to do?

## **The Process<sup>8</sup>**

**M**any congregations resist assessment either because they fail to understand its value or because they fear the results. Many of these fears can be laid aside by properly preparing the church for an assessment weekend and assuring worried church members that the purpose is to provide support and encouragement. Church leaders need to embrace the process if the assessment results are to be of value. They are key to the congregation's acceptance of what may be unpleasant conclusions nonetheless vital to restoring the wellbeing of the church.

The simple steps below have been implemented on many occasions in the Eastern Pennsylvania District. They were first outlined by Dr. Wayne Spriggs during his time as district superintendent of that district.

### ***Preparation***

1. *Meet with church leaders.*

The preparation phase begins with the district's decision to intervene on behalf of the church. District leaders need to meet with the congregation's key leaders to explain the process and its goals and objectives. Both district and church leaders must agree upon a date for the assessment, giving the congregation time to prepare for the assessment weekend.

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<sup>8</sup> This outline is based upon a document prepared by Wayne Spriggs during his tenure as interim district superintendent in the MidAmerica District.

2. Choose the assessment team.

District leaders must choose the assessment team. ATMN members can be recruited to serve on the team and/or lead an assessment team, but our desire is to train pastors and mature lay persons within the district. Care must be taken to avoid giving the impression of bias.

The size of the assessment team varies according to the size of the congregation and the number of people scheduled to meet with team members. In most instances, a team of five members is enough. Team members are appointed by the district superintendent. He should also designate the team leader. Every team should include at least one individual with pastoral experience. There should be no fewer than two lay members and no fewer than two women appointed to the team. Where possible the team leader's spouse may be asked to serve. Each team member is responsible to recruit intercessors who will continue to pray for the team as it prepares for the assessment weekend, during the assessment process and the congregational meeting when the results of the assessment are presented to the church.

3. Schedule interviews.

Church leaders should be given responsibility to schedule interviews 45 minutes long with 15-minute intervals, for church members who wish to participate in the interview process.

4. Logistics.

Responsibility for housing, meals, and local transportation rests with the church although in some circumstances the district may need to provide financial assistance. Private accommodations are recommended but when circumstances warrant, team members may be given housing in church members' homes<sup>9</sup>. Meals should be served at the church since time is a factor. Additional travel expenses may be covered by either the district or the church.

## ***The Assessment Weekend***

**A** typical Assessment Weekend begins on Thursday evening with a joint meeting of the church governing board and elders. The transitional pastor may be a part of the assessment team but if the congregation has a permanent pastor, arrangements should be made for the team leader to meet with the pastor and his spouse at another time during the weekend. Lay leaders may also sign up for individual interviews if they wish to do so.

Ideally, the team leader should arrive the day before the assessment is scheduled to begin. In any case, he/she should arrive in enough time on Thursday to make certain suitable arrangements have been made for group meeting rooms. Appropriate areas for individual

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<sup>9</sup> In highly conflicted environments it is generally better for team members to be housed in a hotel since it may be important to maintain an atmosphere of neutrality.

interviews are also needed. Team members should arrive in time for an evening meal at the church and an orientation. The team should be given the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the congregation's facilities. Time should be allowed for team members to seek the Lord's presence, guidance, and discernment during the assessment process.

Friday and Saturday (through noontime) are set aside for individual interviews. Some members of the team may be scheduled to meet with the church's young people<sup>10</sup> as a group to share pizza on Friday night. Other members of the team may also be asked to meet with designated groups during the assessment schedule.

Once the interviews have been completed and the leadership and youth forums, the members of the assessment team shall gather again for prayer. Following a time of prayer, the results of the interviews will be compared, insights shared, and tentative conclusions drawn concerning the congregation's health. A first draft of the team's assessment will be prepared following that meeting. The initial conclusions will be reported to the church's leadership team in preparation for a report to the congregation to be presented Sunday afternoon.

The team leader or another designated member of the assessment team will prepare a message from God's Word for the Sunday morning worship service. (The message is intended to encourage and challenge the congregation. It is not intended to replicate the team's Assessment Report).

Ordinarily, a congregational meeting will be convened on Sunday afternoon at which time a tentative summary of the team's conclusions will be presented to the congregation with time allotted for question and answer. The team leader should notify the congregation that a full report including recommendations will be sent to the district superintendent who will follow up on the recommendations.

## **Suggested Questions for interviews**

**A**lthough it is important to customize interview questions to fit circumstances, there are several questions that may be used frequently to discern trends in church member's experiences. These are in addition to basic data regarding the individual's participation in the church.

### *Data questions:*

Name, Age, Sex

How long have you attended the church?

How often do you attend worship services?

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<sup>10</sup> The perspectives of the church's youth are often insightful and important. In one highly conflicted church, the consensus of the teens was expressed by a young woman who said, "I just wish our parents would start acting like adults!"

Member of the church? How long?

Ministry involvement

What leadership positions do you presently occupy? In the past?

Do you regularly give for the support of the church's ministries?

Are you committed to support the overseas ministries of the Alliance?

### Opinion questions

What was it about \_\_\_\_\_ church that led you to become a part of the congregation?

If you encountered someone who is new to your community, why would you tell them they ought to become a part of \_\_\_\_\_ church?

What do you consider to be the biggest strength of the church?

What do you think are the areas in need of the greatest improvement?

How effective do you believe the church is in reaching the community?

What do you think should be the church's first, second, and third priorities in the next year?

What are the top three qualities you will look for in your next pastor?

Are there other concerns you would like to mention?

What do you believe the Holy Spirit is saying to \_\_\_\_\_ church<sup>11</sup>?

### Questions for Leadership Forums

The leadership forum (s) should be planned for approximately two hours in length. Encourage participants to bring their Bible. (It is always wise to have Bibles available for those who do not do so.) Write the questions for the group on a flip chart in advance but keep them covered until you are ready to use them. Following the discussion, post the charts in an area where they can be reviewed. This allows participants to see the flow of what it is believed God is saying! Participants should be given time to prayerfully

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<sup>11</sup> This question often takes people by surprise. When in conflict, people tend to focus upon the opposition rather than the Holy Spirit's voice. Some mature believers will have given the Spirit's leading careful thought. For others, it provides a key to reorienting their view. Occasionally, someone will make up an answer but that is usually easy to discern.

consider their responses to the questions. It is always appropriate to pause for prayer during the exercise. The forum leader gathers responses to the questions, writing them on the sheets.

1. How had God spoken to you as an individual through the Scriptures in recent days? (Participants are encouraged to make specific reference to their Bibles)
2. What is God speaking to us as a church through the Scriptures?
3. Examine the answers to the first two questions, looking for themes. What does this suggest God saying to us as a church?
4. If the congregation has stated values, ask participants to evaluate the congregation's ministries based upon those values. If there are no values, lead the group in a discussion to identify values. How is our church doing with the values? What barriers are keeping us from those values?
5. Strengths/Weaknesses of our church. Take sheet and draw line down middle for visual effect. One side of sheet are strengths, other side weaknesses.
6. Identify the top three things our church must do in the next 6-12 months.

## Reporting to the Church

**T**he preliminary team report is presented to the church leadership and the congregation at the conclusion of the assessment weekend. The report should include the following:

- Introduction:  
Summarize the reason for the assessment and the process. This need be no more than one paragraph.
- Strengths (no more than 8)
- Weaknesses (no more than 8)
- Areas that need to be addressed by the leadership
- Recommendations – Usually no more than five specific action steps. An additional recommendation may be related to securing an intentional transitional pastor if that is advised.

## Reporting to the District

**A** final report to the district should be prepared following the completion of the assessment. Like the *preliminary report* to the congregation, the final report should include an introduction explaining the purpose of the report, the goals and objectives of the assessment, the context in which the assessment was conducted, identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the church along with the specific recommendations. Additional recommendations to the district should also be noted.

Should the assessment team uncover evidence of sin, ethical or moral failure on the part of the former pastor or members of the church's leadership team, failures on the part of the district, or other similar matters, a separate management letter should be addressed to the district superintendent informing him of the issues.

## **Making use of the Assessment**

It is easy to lose sight of the reason church health assessments are conducted.

Assessments represent the beginning of transitional ministry. They are not an objective of it. Their results provide the information church leaders need to develop strategies and adjust the church's programs and ministries in advance of a successful pastoral search.

The information provided gives the pastoral search team important clues regarding the gifting and qualifications needed in the church's next pastor. Elders should make use of the report to evaluate the quality of shepherding the congregation. For transitional pastors, the assessments help define the goals and objectives to be accomplished during the transitional period.