

PASTOR AND PARISHIONER HEALTH Indicators for Effective Ministry

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Models for Ministry in small membership churches are occasional publications of the Hinton Rural Life Center and demonstrate examples of programs, organization or procedures that have provided effective ministry and mission in small membership church settings. The models are suggestions by which a local church may gain insights for strengthening their own ministry and mission.

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At Hinton Rural Life Center we have developed a list of questions which helps establish some biblical/theological/faith/leadership style reference points. While we have used these for critiquing the pastor's and/or the congregation's readiness for a cooperative relationship ("Hinton Model for Ministry: Essential Characteristics for Strengthening during the Preliminary and Probe Phases of Parish Development"), these same reference points expose the spiritual health both of a pastor's style of ministry and of a local church's life.

The theological understandings reflected in answering these questions indicate something about the pastor and/or local church's life and ministry in relationship to servanthood, reconciliation, hope, liberation, the Word, the body of Christ, and the new creation.

These relationships can point toward a spiritually healthy openness or infectious individualism, either in the congregation and/or in the pastor. Peter Wagner of Fuller Theological Seminary provides important insights in Lyle Schaller's Creative Leadership Series (Abingdon, 1979), "Your Church Can Be Healthy." His focus is on church growth, but the implications are the same for effective ministry in a total sense.

There is also an interesting matrix or chart that provides ten indicators of a "rapid healer" or a "non-healer." This is used by some surgeons to guide their preoperative consultations with patients. The non-healer is a poor risk for surgery. Many have read Norman Cousins' testimony. A surgeon once refused to operate on him, and he had to struggle to recapture a healing attitude in order to have a lifesaving operation. Most of the same indicators of rapid healing or non-healing can be applied to local congregations and clergy. When one talks with a pastor and lay members of a congregation, these indicators help determine rather clearly the potential for an effective ministry.

In this paper we sketch an outline of some of the indicator questions for determining spiritual health or sickness as they may be addressed to a pastor and/or a local congregation. Obviously the pastor and local church cannot be neatly separated; they are closely related and at times indistinguishable. The response to these questions, however, can provide an important qualitative guide to the annual conference, the district, and to the local setting when planning for a stronger ministry.

INDICATORS OF A HEALTHY/UNHEALTHY CHURCH
Form for Laity

Rate your local church on the Acceptance-----Rejection scale for each of the following questions:

1. How does your local church react to the community which surrounds it?
Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*
2. How does your local church react to its pastor?
Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*
3. How does your local church relate to other churches in the community?
Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*
4. How does your local church relate to the district superintendent/the connectional system?
Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*
5. What self image does the congregation project about itself?
Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*
6. Is the God worshipped in your congregation a God of "Good News"?
Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*
7. Does your local church take initiative and project action plans for ministry?
Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*
8. How would members of your congregation react to the statement, "Our church is part of the Body of Christ"?
Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*
9. What is your local church's outlook toward the future?
Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*
10. How would members of your congregation react to the statement, "Conflict is natural in the life of the church?"
Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*
11. Do celebration and humor have a place in the life of the congregation?
Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*
12. How does your pastor feel about his/her appointment to your congregation?
Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*

INDICATORS OF A HEALTHY/UNHEALTHY CHURCH
Form for Pastors

Rate your local church on the Acceptance-----Rejection scale for each of the following questions:

1. How does your local church react to the community which surrounds it?

Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*

2. How does your local church react to you as its pastor?

Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*

3. How does your local church relate to other churches in the community?

Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*

4. How does your local church relate to the district superintendent/the connectional system?

Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*

5. What self image does the congregation project about itself?

Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*

6. Is the God worshipped in your congregation a God of "Good News"?

Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*

7. Does your local church take initiative and project action plans for ministry?

Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*

8. How would members of your congregation react to the statement, "Our church is part of the Body of Christ"?

Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*

9. What is your local church's outlook toward the future?

Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*

10. How would members of your congregation react to the statement, "Conflict is natural in the life of the church"?

Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*

11. Do celebration and humor have a place in the life of the congregation?

Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*

12. How do you feel about your appointment to this congregation?

Acceptance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Rejection*

1. How does the local church or pastor react to the situation in which the pastor or the local congregation is living?

Reactions to the local realities can range anywhere from a complete rejection (a "back-to-the-wall" or negative response) to a capacity for confronting the situation and affirming it as "OK." A United Methodist superintendent, for example, will often encounter a pastor or congregation communicating a kind of fatalism ("What can I do?" or "I refuse to do anything."). As the District Superintendent, I once visited an area in our annual conference where two pastors were appointed to a cooperative ministry serving in the same community. Each served their own pastoral charge. One pastor had a firm budget and ample lay leadership, yet both pastor and parishioners felt the whole world was working against them, particularly the bishop. This pastor was also the coordinator of the parish. The other pastor saw only the possibilities in the churches, in spite of extreme financial and leadership limitations. As you might expect, the second pastor and churches had the more effective ministry. When the realities are accepted in a healthy way, a church or pastor is most likely to minister effectively.

2. What is the self-image which the pastor or local congregation displays?

These images may range in attitudes from self-pity to self-confidence, from negative self-detachment to a positive self-affirmation. One can enter a church a stranger and encounter some immediate hints. Are you greeted indifferently, or with inquiries and comments related to what you can do for them? Or are you greeted pleasantly, on equal terms, and with interest in you as a person? The sick or unhealthy self-image in a pastor or a congregation is suggested by the presence of leadership and traditions that cannot or will neither change nor include the "outsider." This is too often present in our smaller congregations. The healthy ministry manifests and encourages that diversity in the church which Paul taught is necessary to be the body of Christ. The healthy church and pastor anticipate

that through diversity, a new creation will take place in their midst. When the strengths of God-given gifts from the "outsider" can be allowed to modify a church's ministry, there is a whole new effectiveness. Such a local congregation or pastor will relate socially with full confidence in themselves and with the freedom to fully accept the stranger. In this attitude there exists strength and potential for future ministry.

3. How does a pastor or local congregation react to the district superintendent and other denominational leaders?

Suspicion and submissiveness or praise, dialogue and trust? I would much rather work with a church where the members speak well of the cabinet than with one where only doubt and anger can be expressed. I have presided over a good many charge conferences where either the pastor or officials of the local church inappropriately cast hostilities (some justified and some not) against the "system." This ministry has far less potential for effectiveness than the one that can affirm the connectional system in spite of its imperfections. Healthy congregations and pastors generally demonstrate a patient and forgiving confidence in their systemic relationships.

4. What kind of "God" does the pastor or congregation announce?

Spiritual health in a local ministry will be threatened when the pastor or laity communicate an angry or hostile God. Attitudes such as, "It is God's will," or "God has punished me," are often key indicators of non-health. In contrast, health is registered when there is an open wondering about good and evil, trusting God to work His will in the midst of both. The healthy congregation and pastor provide windows to the truth about God known in Christ. They announce the "Good News" of a God of love and justice, a God of grace. Forgiveness is something that flows naturally from this pastor and congregation. Through them God's grace for all is revealed to all. The effective ministry

faithfully witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ right there in that corner of God's world.

5. What action, what works are revealed by the pastor and the parishioners?

Where health prevails, there is a struggle to do for themselves and to help others. Sickness in a church or pastor demands help for itself and presents a life of helplessness. There is little or no concern for the world beyond.

The Duke Endowment makes grants to strengthen small rural United Methodist churches in the State of North Carolina. Some of the receiving churches act as though the financial assistance available to them from the Endowment represents a God-given right. This attitude is often the first clear sign of the decline or absence of effectiveness in their ministry. In contrast, the healthy pastor and local church will express what Jesus taught: "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give up his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The healthy church or pastor invests much energy in serving others. There is a willingness to risk and suffer, if necessary, to "preach good news to the poor." Such churches and their pastors know that they have been called "to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19). In health, a first priority will be "decisions and actions for Christ." The effective ministry always demonstrates this healthy commitment to the mission of Christ's Church.

6. What is the congregation or pastor's outlook towards the future?

Pessimism breeds sickness and failure. Optimism generates health and development.... this is "the rule of thumb." It takes but a few moments and two or three questions in conversations with parishioners or pastors of local churches to find out how they perceive the future. A pastor who sees only clouds ahead will never lead a local church to many victories for Christ.

where God has called a particular congregation and pastor to gather as the Church of Christ.

Theologically, this indicator manifests itself in the role which the pastor or local church assumes in a time of crisis, of personal and social need. Is there a witness to the presence of Christ in the midst of suffering, injustice and sin? Does the life of the pastor or the congregation communicate Jesus' promise, "I am with you always, to the end of time" (Matthew 28:20)? When a pastor or a local church brings a Christ-centered hope for the future into their part of the world, there is effective ministry.

7. What are the signs of humor?

An early indicator of sickness in a congregation may be its response, or lack of response, to a joke given from the pulpit or in a church setting. The ineffectiveness of a local church or a pastor may also be revealed in their self-centered humor. These are all clear signs which either the pastor, the local church or both are not very healthy. Ineffective ministry can be anticipated where there is no sense of humor in the congregation. In contrast, effective ministry is usually present when a church and pastor can both respond to and initiate humor.

Conclusion

The basic concern of Hinton Rural Life Center is the building up of healthy congregations and pastors, especially among small membership churches and churches in rural settings. There are some important indicators of health or sickness in both pastors and parishioners. We all need to identify these, take a measure of where we are personally and corporately, and then act to treat the points of sickness and to strengthen the points of spiritual health for the sake of Christ's ministry.

Indicators of where the congregation and the pastor carry on their ministry from a stance of health will include the following:

- a. They confront and cope with the situation in which they are with confidence and purposefulness.

- b. They rejoice in relating to different types of persons and experiences, knowing that in this Jesus Christ can make a new creation in His Church.
- c. They trust the connectional system, in spite of the imperfections.
- d. They bear witness to God as revealed through Jesus Christ in the midst of the world where they are.
- e. They risk the commitment and suffering necessary for the mission of Christ and His Church.
- f. They have a hopeful and optimistic view of the future which grows out of their assurance of God's presence known to them in Jesus Christ.
- g. They laugh and cause others to laugh.

Most Christians are concerned for the effectiveness of Christ's Church today. Unfortunately, even where the differences between healthy clergy or congregations and unhealthy clergy or congregations are very clear, we fail to act accordingly. No one is totally healthy or totally unhealthy in this sense. We are all "on the way," but the areas of major concern can be identified. They represent indicators which can guide a pastor, lay leadership, district council, conference staff members, cabinets, and the United Methodist bishops in strengthening the total body of Christ for effective ministry.

Greater sensitivity is needed to these indicators of health or sickness. They can provide important aids for bringing about an effective ministry in the church. For instance:

Where can missional resources best be invested with some promise that a strong ministry and mission will result?

What should be the approach of a pastor to his or her new appointment?

What leadership style is needed?

What are realistic expectations of a congregation and/or its pastor?

Which churches should be considering closing? merging? a cooperative ministry?

What combination of churches might produce the most effective charge alignment?

Which pastor should be appointed to which charge?

When can Parish Development move successfully from the preliminary and probe stages to the structuring phase?

These are some of the "effectiveness" issues that can be addressed by considering the "health" of pastors and parishioners.

In his book, The Bible in the Wesleyan Heritage, Bishop Mack B. Stokes wrote convincingly about the role of the church in helping the Christian to grow in grace. If one were to attempt to write a definition of an effective ministry, it would be that which enables the God-given means of grace, "joining others in worship, prayer, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, study and service together." To strengthen such ministry, it is both right and necessary to ask specific questions about pastoral and parishioner health.

Rev. Rene Bideaux, deceased, was a retired member of the North Carolina Conference. A former District Superintendent and former Deputy General Secretary of the National Program Division, General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. He previously served as Director of Hinton Rural Life Center.