

Mapping the Journey: Directions for a Healthy Church

by Bob Young

Many metaphors have been used to describe the church. At least two metaphors suggest movement or development—the concepts of life cycle and journey. Many times, students of church life cycles suggest that the eventual death of a church is inevitable. Since I currently minister with a church whose history goes back over a century, I prefer the metaphor of journey. Churches on a journey face the same challenges that are part of any trip—losing one’s way, getting lost, failing to plan, insufficient resources, inadequate transportation, not enough rest, too much rest, too much “down time”, arguing along the way, forgetting the destination, not taking advantage of available resources...the list could be expanded. All of us could likely share personal stories that illustrate our own experiences in taking trips or vacations where one or more of these things went wrong.

One of the most important factors in a successful journey is staying well. I remember a family vacation to Florida when, during an overnight stay in Kentucky on the return trip, our entire family got sick. The last leg of the trip home (from Kentucky to Michigan) was miserable!

For a church to make the journey successfully, it must be and remain healthy. And, church health is a journey. How are we doing? What are the challenges? What could go wrong? What has gone wrong? What can we do to make sure we know...

where we are going,
why we are taking the journey,
that we are traveling together, and
of others whom we can invite to journey with us?

Remember where we are going

If you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll get there every time. How many churches have started toward a worthy goal with a compelling vision, only to sacrifice what could be for the ease of what is easily attained? Because churches, as other travelers, are easily distracted by the things along the way, churches must be called continually to the original vision. An important step is to describe the destination with clear, compelling words that can be adopted, accepted, and applied by all.

It is easy for churches to fall into the trap of taking a journey for the sake of the journey. This is somewhat like “Sunday drivers” who are not going anywhere but are just out driving for the sake of driving. What does such a church look like—this church that is on the journey solely for the sake of being able to claim to be on the journey? On the outside, such churches are hard to distinguish from other churches unless you know what to look for—lack of fruit. Such churches recruit volunteers, raise money and host activities, but it seems as if the goal in going through these motions is to make sure that they will be able to go through the motions again the next time. In other words, their purpose in Christian activity is to further the cause of the church, not to further the cause of the Kingdom and bring glory to God and Christ through fulfilling the Great Commission.

When I write about remembering where the church is going, I hasten to say that while a correct answer is “heaven”, that answer is insufficient to help the church find health on the journey. The vision I am writing about is not a template of activities and ministries borrowed from some other (successful) church. The question of where we are going is one that each local church must answer by evaluating its opportunities, resources, strengths, weaknesses, and challenges. Of course, the question of where God wants the church to go will also be answered by Scripture. In the final analysis, it takes lots of energy and effort to revitalize the vision and destination of a tired local church. The result is worth the effort, however, because knowing where the church is going will revitalize the members of the church and transform them into a lighthouse in the Kingdom to bring glory to God.

Remember why you are taking the journey

This point expands the previous one. Where we are going helps define why we are going. In organizational management, this is the difference between vision and purpose. The healthy church knows its purpose. If the purpose is forgotten, or becomes blurry, that which is needed is to rediscover the purpose. Redefining the specific purpose Christ has for the church counters the tendency to move toward spiritual entropy.

The law of entropy says that things left alone degenerate and become useless. Scientists tell us the sun is cooling. Toy tops quit spinning. Unfortunately, the church is often a reliable place to observe the law of entropy in action. Old Testament Israel frequently suffered from spiritual entropy. They forgot God and failed on the journey. In the time of King Josiah, we find the Temple in disrepair—falling apart so that the young king imports new stones and timber for its restoration. In the midst of rebuilding, an amazing discovery is made—the Book of the Law. The religious leaders had kept the day-to-day activities of the Temple running while the Word of God was forgotten. They had continued to observe the ceremonies and traditions without knowing why they were doing it. They had lost their purpose.

Many churches today experience similar situations. No longer rooted in a clear vision and purpose, they succumb to the distractions of the journey and fall into the rut of useless and meaningless repetition. What are some of these distractions?

Tradition. Some churches fail to maintain health on the journey because nothing can change. They are like folks taking a trip in a covered wagon or on horseback while shiny new cars zip by at 70 mph, because they cannot accept new means of transportation.

Programs. Churches begin programs because they sound good or look good at some other church. Programs often promise success without effort. In reality, most programs take a lot of effort and yield limited results.

Outside opposition. Sometimes churches fail to advance on the journey because of opposition. Certainly, churches face difficult challenges, even as did Israel on its journey out of Egypt to the Promised Land. One of the greatest modern-day opponents is Satan and his forces and temptations.

Division. The interests, experiences and views of individual members may keep a church from moving ahead. While differences may be a positive for a congregation in terms of diversity, division will decimate a church if there is no unifying purpose.

Sin. When it is not dealt with biblically, sin will hinder and even stop the people of God. Sin will hold the church back.

These and other factors that hindered the nation of Israel are still at work today. However, the good news is that these forces are not insurmountable. The discovery of the Book of the Law

led to a renewed sense of purpose and a nationwide revival. And a reinvigorated focus on the Great Commission can provide any church with a worthwhile purpose.

Remember who is traveling with you

When our three sons were growing up, my wife and I lived about 1000 miles from our parents. One of the things I learned in the annual trips to see family was the need to acknowledge the needs of the other travelers and to honor those needs. In the case of my wife, it was more frequent restroom stops. In the case of my sons, it was anything to escape boredom—more frequent stops, counting cars, seeking letters of the alphabet, doling out “Smarties” according to the miles traveled. In the case of the church, the members must agree to work together before the church can be healthy and move ahead on its journey with positive steps taken and momentum established.

No church experiences spiritual integrity and health without vision, purpose, and fellowship. Many churches have a blurred vision and as a result they struggle to return to the original vision because it forces members out of comfort zones. Some churches have the wrong purpose; others have little or no sense of purpose. Many churches fail in one of the basic definitions of what it means to be church—assembly, fellowship, family. When the church is distracted from its vision, purpose, or its sharing, it tends toward what is most convenient and enjoyable.

How can this happen? Why doesn't someone realize what is going on and throw up a red flag? There are two reasons. First, the Bible says that Christians are like sheep, and sheep follow their leaders. Second, churches have antagonists within—an older member, a strong personality, a large donor. These tend to provide false leadership. Churches must identify and deal with these types because others will follow. Another challenge is convincing the members that the healthy church which keeps vision, purpose, and fellowship alive is going to change. This process can be difficult, but the rewards that come to a church which is dedicated to all of its members are immeasurable in terms of the joy that is generated when the church moves ahead in unison and brings glory to Christ.

Invite others to join you on the journey

The church which is not encouraging as many as possible to join it on the journey is missing an essential element of church health. Just as the physical body continually renews itself with replacement cells, the local church finds health and vitality for the journey through those who become part of the journey—sharing the vision, purpose, fellowship, and outreach. To do this effectively, the church must take an honest look at the community and world around it, eliminate any blind spots, and carefully evaluate how to approach and invite others on the journey.

Often the local church has a serious blind spot when it comes to the community or world surrounding it, causing a glaring omission in the church's present and future plans, both in ministry and in missions. Such churches may wonder why they do not have more visitors and why those who do visit choose not to return. They assume that the community will know about and even appreciate their church's existence because it has a steeple, a sign, or an ad in the phone book, but that simply isn't the case. Such churches may believe they are doing all they can to encourage evangelism, but they have a blind spot. They cannot see what is missing.

Such churches need to rethink their approach to the community. Many churches have a similar blind spot with regard to missions. Churches often tend toward benevolent work because the need is so obvious and heart-touching. Yet mission work that meets physical needs without a major and intentional focus on spiritual needs will see little eternal results in those mission efforts. It is one thing to help people we meet on the journey—it is another thing to invite them to join us on the journey to eternity. Healthy churches are aware of those they have opportunity to invite along on the journey. Churches who desire a greater eternal impact must reorganize their approach to the community and the world so that people know that we care, how much we care, and that we care about eternity. If that doesn't happen, our communities and world will not care about us.

Conclusion

These four concepts provide direction for the journey of the local church—(1) where we are going (vision), (2) why we are going (purpose), (3) who is going with us (fellowship), and (4) whom we can invite to join us on the journey (evangelism).

Continually remembering, rethinking, and redoing the vision of the church is essential for vitality. After we are reminded of the vision, we must adjust what we are currently doing to match God's purpose for us, and in order to do that, we must repent (change). Many churches need to experience a corporate repentance. Churches that have failed in the past do not have to continue in failure. The journey toward becoming a healthy church is possible; the journey is possible. The journey demands that we see and honor one another, and that we see those about us whom God wishes to save.

May God bless your church in the journey!