THE HEALTHY CHURCH LOGBOOK

DIAGNOSING THE CHURCH

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HOW HEALTHY IS YOUR CHURCH?

In the years I've been working with small churches, there's one question I get asked more than any other. "If numbers aren't the only way to tell if a church is healthy, what else is there?"

There's no shrug-of-the-shoulders dismissiveness when they ask it. They truly don't know the answer. Isn't that...I don't know...a little *troubling* to anyone? Have we really become so obsessed with statistics that many pastors don't know what a healthy church looks like outside of crunching the numbers?

It's not that I'm opposed to taking church attendance or tracking our numbers. I'm in favor of it. Accurate, relevant statistics can help us see things objectively that might otherwise remain hidden from view. But just like a lack of numbers can blind us to some critical facts, an obsession with numbers can blind us to essential truths. Not only are numbers not the *only* way to determine church health, in many situations they're not even the best way. As I wrote in **DE-SIZING THE CHURCH**, numbers may inform us, but they don't define us.

So, what non-numerical criteria can we use to determine church health? Using decades of feedback from thousands of pastors and other church leaders, I started compiling a list. It started at six or seven. But it keeps growing. As of today, it has dozens of elements. But I've narrowed those down to sixteen essential principles in four important categories (Theology, Leadership, Mission, and Attitude). I've taken those non-numerical principles and put them into a simple survey that can help you start to quantify your congregation's strengths and weaknesses in what are otherwise non-numerical ways.

HOW TO USE THE CHURCH HEALTH SURVEY

This survey is not designed to fix problems, but it is a good way to start identifying the strengths and weaknesses of a church, non-numerically. The hope is that this survey will allow you to celebrate and build on your strengths, while adjusting and correcting your weaknesses.

The four key categories are simple, and they each include four principles.

1. **Theology**: Bible, Worship, Salvation, and Discipleship
2. **Leadership**: Teamwork, Unity, Alignment, and Contextualization
3. **Mission**: First Impressions, Outreach, Demographics, and Impact
4. **Attitude**: Creativity, Resilience, Enthusiasm, and Anticipation

You'll find the survey at karlvaters.com/church-health-assessment. There's also a printed version on the following pages.

HOW TO USE THE HEALTHY CHURCH LOG

I introduced the idea of the Healthy Church Log in my books, *100 Days to a Healthier Church* and *De-sizing the Church*. The concept is simple. If you're a pastor or church leader, use this logbook to keep track of every event, system, and accomplishment for the next six months to one year, giving each one a grade. Your assessment should not include how many people attended the events, just how well the event itself was executed compared to what you expected.

The first time, you may want to do it by yourself, or with one or two others. But it's even better to choose several people in the church to complete their own logbooks. Getting input from individuals of various ages, backgrounds, and levels of spiritual growth will give you some much-needed perspective. A group of five or six is ideal.

Then, assess the following:

- Events: This includes church services, Bible studies, board meetings, and more. You can even assess the aspects of your Sunday service, giving separate grades to the worship, the sermon, and so on.
- Systems: These are functions of the church that don't necessarily have events attached to them, including your system for receiving, counting, and tracking finances, how decisions are made, your organizational structures for Sunday set-up and tear-down, keeping track of members, campus security, and so on.
- Accomplishments: So much of what happens in a church is unquantifiable, but it's helpful to acknowledge and assess it. In *100 Days to a Healthier Church*, I shared this example: "If someone in the church tells you they shared their faith with a friend for the first time, write that in the log. Was there a couple on the verge of divorce whose relationship was restored into a stronger marriage? Write that down. Was there someone who was resisting necessary change in the church but has decided maybe some changes aren't so bad after all? Write that down."

After six months to a year (I recommend a full year, allowing you to assess all the church's seasonal events), the group should review their Healthy Church Logs, setting

aside any events, systems, or meetings that didn't score well. This is not about fixing problems; it's about discovering strengths.

The pages are blank, so you can use them as a journal, a scoresheet, a list of accomplishments and failures, whatever works for you. There are simple prompts of the four main categories and subcategories from the Church Health Assessment Tool along the bottom of each page spread to remind you of what you're assessing.

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THE CHURCH HEALTH ASSESSMENT TOOL

It's free, it's fast, and it's not about attendance.

Also available at KarlVaters.com/Church-Health-Assessment

In your congregation right now, how true are the following statements?

0 – Not at all
1 – Almost never
2 – Seldom
3 – Somewhat
4 – Very
5 – Always

Enter a score in the blank for each statement.

THEOLOGY

Bible

___ The eternal truths of the Bible are taught well and applied to our lives in practical ways.

Worship

___ Worship through song, prayer, and action is an essential focus of our congregation.

Salvation

___ People are coming to faith in Jesus through the ministry of our church.

Discipleship

___ Church members are growing in their faith, volunteering for ministry, and discipling others.

Theology Subtotal _____

LEADERSHIP

Teamwork

___There are more teams than committees because church members care more about doing ministry than having a title.

Unity

___There is a strong sense of love, cooperation, and friendship among church members.

Alignment

___There is a high degree of communication, cooperation, and respect among department and ministry leaders.

Contextualization

___The language and methods we use to communicate the gospel can be easily grasped by an unchurched person.

Leadership Subtotal _____

MISSION

First Impressions

___There is an effective process in place to help first-time guests feel welcome and get connected.

Outreach

___Congregation members feel good about telling their friends about the church and inviting them to attend.

Demographics

___The demographic mix of our congregation (race, gender, age, etc.) is at least as diverse as our neighborhood.

Impact

___If our church closed tomorrow, people outside our congregation would miss us.

Mission Subtotal _____

ATTITUDE

Creativity

___When church members have new ministry ideas, they feel comfortable expressing them because they are heard, respected, and embraced.

Resilience

___Our church is a good place to ask hard questions because doubts aren't deadly, and failure isn't fatal.

Enthusiasm

___It's not unusual to see church members come early, stay late, sit up front and volunteer when needed.

Anticipation

___We are more excited about the future than the past.

Attitude Subtotal _____

TOTAL SCORE _____

Who Are You?

Gender

☐ Female ☐ Male

Age

☐ Under 20 ☐ 20s ☐ 30s ☐ 40s ☐ 50s ☐ 60s ☐ 70s+

How would you describe your role at the church?

☐ Lead Pastor ☐ Staff Pastor ☐ Volunteer Leader ☐ Volunteer
☐ Church Member ☐ Occasional Attender ☐ New/Non attender

How long have you been attending your current congregation?

☐ Less than 1 year ☐ 1-5 years ☐ 5-10 years ☐ 10-20 years
☐ Over 20 years

How Did You Do?

Above 70: **Spectacular!** This is a very healthy church. If your low scores are concentrated in one of the subtotal areas, work on that. Otherwise, keep building on your strengths.

50s-60s: **Good.** You have some work to do, but there's probably no emergency. If most of your low scores come from one or two subtotals, deal with those areas first.

30s-40s: **Trouble.** You need outside help from a denominational team or church leadership adviser. If you don't get help soon, your church is in danger of collapse.

Below 40: You may be in The Big Rut or The Death Rattle (Read more about this in chapter 7 of *De-sizing the Church*). If your church has physical assets, this may be the time to sell them and make them available to a ministry that is strong. There's some helpful and hopeful information about how to start doing that in *The Church Recovery Guide*, chapter 8: "Closing a Congregation: Proactive Options for Dying Churches."

What's Next?

Congratulations on taking the Church Health Assessment! Now, you have a template for keeping track of your progress. Here are three ways the assessment can help you, depending on how deeply you would like to pursue this:

Level 1: Awareness

For a lot of pastors and church leaders, simply seeing church health unpacked into four categories and sixteen principles helps to clarify a lot. It can clarify aspects of church life that you may not have taken into account, and remind you of principles you may normally take for granted.

Level 2: Resources

Now that you know what you need to work on, you can narrow your search for resources that meet those needs. We're constantly creating small-church-specific resources at KarlVaters.com to meet all these needs, and over the coming years we'll be adding more.

Level 3: Survey Your Congregation

After you've taken the survey yourself, it would be great to encourage everyone in your church to participate, either through printing and distributing the PDF (also available at karlvaters.com/church-health-assessment), or by taking the online survey and printing the results page.

As with any survey, the more participants you have, the more accurate your results will be. So, it would be great to encourage everyone in your church to participate. The "Who Are You?" section will also help you understand how different people perceive your congregation. For instance, long-time regular members may consider the church to be friendly and united, but newer folks may not.

In Six Months to a Year . . .

After six months to a year of assessing your church's events, take a day or so of downtime to follow these simple steps:

1. **Prayerfully read through the entire logbook**

   This should not be done quickly or thoughtlessly. Take some quiet time, ideally a retreat day from all other work, to sit with the logbook and your Bible open. Read slowly through the logbook, noting the events of the past six months. Recall how you felt when you graded each of them. Don't give in to the temptation to change them after the fact. Your first reaction will be the most accurate and honest assessment.

   Be ready for some strong emotions, especially if you or the church are in a low place, emotionally, spiritually, or relationally. Pause when needed. Go to the Lord in prayer, pausing to read Scriptures of support and comfort.

2. **Highlight what you did well, forget the rest**

   After the initial read-through, go through it again, but this time, ignore anything that received a low grade. Instead, highlight what you did well. Then take those and transfer them to a separate page so you can see them all together.

3. **Assess what your wins have in common**

   This is where it starts to get fun. Hopefully. Once you have all the positives in one place, ask yourself, "What do these have in common?" You're looking for trends and common threads—anything that might give you clues as to what your church's

underlying strengths might be. And don't be afraid to think differently. One church might discover that they work well with at-risk youth, another might notice that they're great at hospitality, while another might uncover a hidden skill for encouraging and supporting artistic expression.

4. Combine the results with others

If others did this with you, get together to compare everyone's scores, and how they assessed them. If everyone is assessing it honestly, the combined results can give you something accurate and objective, without defaulting to attendance figures.

5. Take the survey again

Have everyone retake the assessment tool to discover where your church is now. You may be surprised in two ways: First, some items will already be doing better than before. The simple act of identifying the categories often has a positive effect on the way we approach them. Second, you might find some categories getting a lower score. Don't let that discourage you. Unless there's been a radical change, like a department leader who left the church in the past few months, it's likely that you've learned enough about that item to take a more intense look at it than you did the first time.

6. Do the positives more intentionally

Now that you have an idea of what your strengths are, what would happen if you narrowed more time, resources, prayer, and finances toward them and away from things that don't work very well? There's a set of questions I have asked thousands of pastors to consider in conferences and workshops for over a decade:

- **What does your church do well that you'd like to do more of?**
- **What does your church do poorly that you'd like to do less of?**

You can now answer those questions better than ever, including the transfer of our limited resources toward the items you do better.

7. Repeat as needed

Regular assessment and adjustment can now be central to your church's culture. Everything can be assessed regularly and improved constantly. If you want to tackle specific issues with intentionality, I wrote *100 Days to a Healthier Church* with this in mind.

The Healthy Church

Using this the assessment and this logbook will not guarantee a healthy church. But knowing where you can get started, combined with applying the underlying biblical principles can be helpful. More than being a tool for improvement, this assessment reminds all of us that a healthy church is not about increased numbers, but about worshiping Jesus, discipling believers, serving others, and sharing our faith.