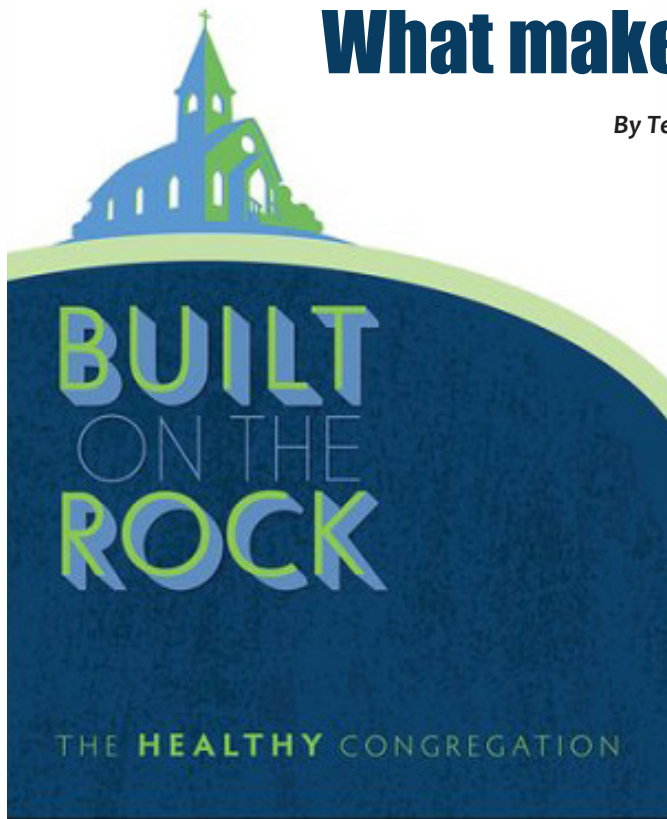


What makes a church healthy?

By Ted Kober, Senior Ambassador for Ambassadors of Reconciliation (AoR)



"So, Ted, do you know of any healthy churches?"

Someone recently asked me that after hearing about my new book, *Built on the Rock: The Healthy Congregation*. Before I answered, I first described what I believe makes a church healthy.

Some describe a healthy church from a psychological viewpoint. They evaluate how well the congregation works together as a family system. This can be a useful way to evaluate any group of people in a system.

Others might describe a healthy church by its organizational characteristics. Does it have a visionary leader? Are worship services inspirational? Has the church identified its mission statement? Is it growing numerically? One might assess a church's health based on how many "healthy" characteristics it possesses.

Rather than defining health from a psychological or organizational approach, I identify congregational health from a spiritual perspective. **Healthy churches are those whose leadership and membership are solidly grounded in Christ, nourished by God's Word, and apply the Word to their lives.** Their spiritual maturity

evidences itself when they practice confession and forgiveness in their relationships with one another.

As a reconciliation consultant, I have seen many churches ranging from very unhealthy to healthy. And yes, I know of churches that are spiritually healthy.

How did you arrive at your conclusions?

My initial conclusions were based on what the Scriptures teach and my observations from reconciliation work. But for my book, *Built on the Rock: The Healthy Congregation*, I wanted to also test my theories against research.

In the book, I draw conclusions based on four factors:

- What the Bible says (e.g., Matthew 7:24-27; John 15:5-8; Colossians 3:16).
- 25 years of reconciliation consulting with church leaders from around the world.
- A qualitative study of 11 churches deemed healthy by ecclesiastical supervisors.
- A quantitative survey of 157,000 people from 500 churches on what most helped them mature spiritually.

What leads to spiritual illness?

Biblical illiteracy has become epidemic in the American 21st century church. Here is a sample of what our reconciliation teams have experienced in Lutheran congregations:

- In a meeting with a board of elders, four of the twelve could not find the Gospel of John.
- In one of the most notable churches in its district, not one of ten elders could locate the book of Romans.
- In a council meeting with 13 lay leaders, only 1 person could generally describe any of the Ten Commandments.
- A couple who worshiped regularly for 20 years did not realize that the Bible was divided by chapter and verse.
- Many in our seminars were unfamiliar with biblical stories about well-known biblical characters.

When the majority in a church are unfamiliar with God’s Word, especially the leadership, the congregation tends to develop idols – false gods that become more important than God Himself. These idols often lay hidden until revealed in conflict. A church’s organizational idols weaken its health and discredit its witness. If left unchecked, they can actually destroy a church.

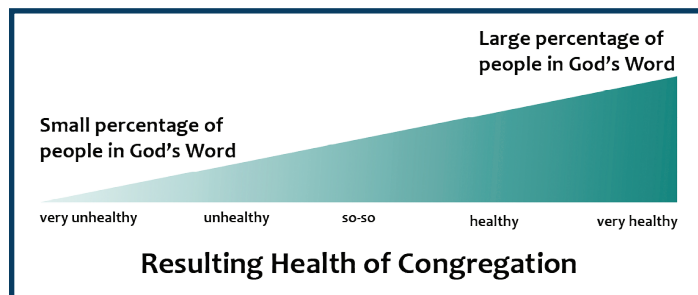
How can I assess the spiritual health of my church?

In one article, I can’t share everything from the book (you gotta read it for more!).

But I have developed a “rule of thumb” for an initial assessment of a church’s health. I divide the total number of adults who attend Bible study by the average worship attendance to come up with a comparative percentage. When churches have less than 20% of their average worship attendance in adult Bible study, I know that I will find a church that is spiritually immature as a group. If less than half of their elected leaders are in Bible study, I anticipate that their leaders will demonstrate sinful responses to conflict.

The result? When major disagreements arise, many fight with power plays, name-calling, polarizing, attacking, and running away. Gossip will be a major force undermining the health and witness of the church.

On the other hand, churches who have more than 20% of their average worship in Bible study, and especially those that have more than 75% of their leadership in Bible study, will respond more quickly to reconciliation consultation. There will still be some sinful responses to conflict, but as a whole, they will exhibit more spiritual health than weakness.



I conducted a qualitative survey of eleven churches deemed healthy by their district presidents. I asked



them eleven questions to assess what makes their church healthy. You can ask yourselves the same questions about your church. Compare your answers to those from healthy churches in Chapter 2 of the book for your own assessment. Then, discuss what you observed with other leaders of your church.

Is spiritual illness curable?

Great news – spiritual illness caused by biblical illiteracy is curable!

Healing begins with repenting of idolatry and neglect of God’s Word (1 John 1:9). Getting people involved in the Bible more often than just during worship provides a cure for biblical illiteracy. Through this means of grace, God’s people become equipped for Christian service (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Next, people need to be encouraged and taught how to confess and forgive, empowered by Christ’s forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32; 1 Peter 2:24). Emphasizing God’s grace through Christ compels us to live not just for ourselves, but for Him who died and rose again (2 Corinthians 5:14–15).

The last section of the book includes practical ideas for improving spiritual wellness – many from the healthy churches I have encountered over the years. This book was written to encourage church leaders to reflect on what really makes a church healthy and to challenge them to improve the spiritual health of their churches.

So, my friend, do you know of a healthy congregation?