

Benchmark of Thriving Churches

Background

The Benchmark Project has been one of several initiatives in which Nazarene ministers/leaders representing various social groups in the church have had the goal of helping ministerial colleagues think and strategize to more effectively reach and serve in their particular social settings. This project began as a contribution to the K-Church Advanced strategy initiative. Therefore, the pastor participants were selected from the pastors of churches in this size. Their responsibilities and experience probably prepared them to understand suburban, white, English speaking settings better than other social groups to which the church is called. They were selected on the basis of additions of new Nazarenes in the churches they pastor.

Participating pastors included Gene Grate, Colorado Springs, Colorado First Church of the Nazarene, Mark L. Fuller, Chandler, Arizona Crossroads Church of the Nazarene, Bob D. Huffaker, Grove City, Ohio Church of the Nazarene, Jerry Morris, Lompoc, California Trinity Church of the Nazarene, David M. Ralph, Denver, Colorado Westminster Church of the Nazarene, B.H. (Bud) Reedy, York, Pennsylvania Stillmeadow Church of the Nazarene, David R. Rodes, Grandview, Washington First Church of the Nazarene, David W. Sharpes, Lima, Ohio Community Church of the Nazarene, and Wesley Smith, Riverside, California Arlington Avenue. Support personnel included Bill M. Sullivan, Evangelism and Church Growth Division, John Vaughn, *Church Growth Today*, Chuck Parish, Evangelism and Church Growth Division, and Kenneth Crow, Nazarene Bible College.

Vital Signs of Healthy Churches

In a series of meetings the Benchmark pastors drew on the insights of the various models of healthy churches. They identified eleven areas that are particularly important for churches like the ones they serve. They described significant components of those areas for churches like theirs. They also developed a questionnaire that pastors, and perhaps their staffs, might use to help the process of thinking carefully about ways to improve their ministry.

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These eleven areas with components were: 1) Effectual, Fervent Prayer, 2) Healthy Pastoral Leadership, 3) Dynamic People Attraction, 4) Systematic Discipleship Development, 5) Significant Relational Groups, 6) Inspiring Worship Events, 7) Committed, Widespread Stewardship, 8) Need Oriented Ministry, 9) Mobilized Lay Leadership, 10) Christlike Congregational Mindset, and 11) Effective Preaching.

Vital Signs in Other Social Contexts

The Benchmarks committee talked about the possibility of adapting their work for use in other contexts (Christian Schwartz, Kennon L. Callahan, Stan Toler and others). They recognized that the needs of larger, suburban, white, middle or upper-middle class churches differ somewhat from those of other social groups.

Some areas are obviously essential in every context. For example, prayer ministry is essential regardless of social group, although the nature of effective ministry will probably differ. Others areas may be more specific to particular contexts. A list of vital areas essential in every social setting might be somewhat shorter.

1. **Effectual, Fervent Prayer** including issues like scheduled opportunities, intentionality with conviction, identifying intercessors, pastor's prayer life/commitment, dedicated place to pray, communicating answered prayer, prayer networking, teaching/preaching on prayer, and spiritual warfare.
2. **Healthy Pastoral Leadership** including such issues as the internal security of the pastor, life long learner with a personal development plan, teachable spirit, team player / builder / developer, leadership style, congregational fit and commitment, visionary, effective communicator - public / personal, management / administrative awareness, calculated risk taker / decision maker, humor, caring relationships, genuine humility / servant attitude, authenticity, and spouse, if married.
3. **Kingdom Community Relationships** including visitor flow, commitment to the great commission, culturally connected, mission worldview, events, lay member enthusiasm, and welcome strategies.
4. **Inspiring Worship Events** including inspiring in whatever style, people connecting with God, participant mentality, God focused celebration, life changing decisions made, and excellence with joy.
5. **Committed Lay Disciples** including issues like purposeful Bible instruction, lifelong plan, integrated departmentally, target oriented, discipleship, community, accountability, commitment to the great commandment (relationships), outreach, a Christian view of stewardship, kingdom builders - building up other churches as well as this one, creating leadership opportunities, called out, gifted people, elevating the role of the lay ministry, empowering people for ministry, train and equip leaders, structures conducive to lay ministry, enlist, equip, empower, engage, encourage, time for ministry, strong, committed lay leadership, and synergism - how together are they working?
6. **Need Oriented Ministry** including a willingness to assess and identify the felt needs, focus ministry on personal felt needs that we can meet with excellence, functionality development, preaching that meets needs, and in-reaching and out-reaching ministries
7. **Christlike, Missional Mindset** including such issues as attitude of generosity, pastoral expectations, attitude toward the lost and new members, openness to God, attitude toward traditionalism, culturally / socially relevant, distinguish between method / message, paradigm change - small church mentality vs. large church mentality, multiple services / ministries and self esteem / morale.
8. **Effective Preaching** including prioritizing sermon preparation, opportunity for public response, motivation by challenge rather than guilt, not accusing, harsh, or negative, fervency and passion, God's message rather than just a well-crafted sermon, illustrations protect confidential information, intentional relevancy, response of people being saved, response of people being sanctified, and desire for God's anointing.

Cultural Distinctives

The church is always located in a particular social as well as geographical location. Indeed, when Jesus became flesh and lived among us, it was in a particular social and cultural setting.

From the beginning, the Christian church has wrestled with the problem of some leaders expecting that potential converts must become part of the social group in order to become Christian. The Apostle Paul resisted the idea that Gentiles must become Jews before they could be Christians.

This is a continuing question for the church. We may trivialize the significance of people,s culture either by excluding them from our church or by assuming they should easily give up their culture to be assimilated into the host culture of the church. However, if we adjust ministry to fit their social group, we raise questions like, "Is this not simply the accommodation of the gospel to the lifestyles of contemporary life? What about the prophetic word of God?" Tex Sample raises these questions and then reminds us of three things: (1) the gospel always begins with people where they are. It does not stop there, with anyone. (2) The Apostle Paul said, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (I Corinthians 9:22). (3) "The task of the church is to search out the presence and the work of the Spirit of Christ in the midst of the [culture]... . One can be confident that Christ is already there." "The challenge ... [is] to discover where the Spirit of Christ is at work; that is, find where the liberating and saving currents are and join in" (*U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990: 42-43).

Missionaries, have understood that if they were to effectively communicate the gospel within the cultures to which they were sent, they must understand and appreciate those cultures. This sensitivity is also important in the American setting. The *Ugly American* is just as repulsive when he/she is an ugly professional, Nebraskan, yuppie, or redneck.

In fact, the eight areas of healthy churches may have significant differences in the benchmarks of effectiveness. All authentically Christian, healthy congregations no doubt have an effectual, fervent prayer ministry. However, specific nature of that prayer ministry will be different in structure and approach. For example, the benchmarks committee observed that in larger, suburban congregations one prayer ministry benchmark strength may be a specified means for communicating answers to prayer. In smaller, rural churches the same benchmark area may be informal communication of prayer answers. Effectual, fervent prayer will be essential regardless of the social situation. However, healthy prayer ministry will vary depending on the nature of the church and the people to whom it is called.

In his book, *U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches*, Tex Sample wrestles with this reality. Drawing on the work of Arnold Mitchell (*The Nine American Lifestyles: Who We Are and Where We Are Going*, New York: Warner Books, 1983) he says the 180 million adults in the United States are distributed in three distinct groups: (1) Cultural Left, (2) Cultural Right, and (3) Cultural Middle.

Cultural Groups and Vital Areas of Ministry

Sample's three cultural groups have the advantage that they remind us that there is not a single context of ministry in the United States. While American culture is too complex to be adequately described by three, or even the nine subgroups he uses, the three groups are a good reminder that one size does not fit all. Effective pastoral leadership will be different in some groups. One style of worship is not appropriate for all groups, not even all Generation X groups.

A worksheet might be constructed to strategize about ministry in the eight vital areas in the three cultural groups.

Benchmark Ministry Area	Cultural Left	Cultural Middle	Cultural Right
Effectual, Fervent Prayer	Informal, need oriented opportunities Intentionality with conviction Identifying gifted intercessors Allocating space dedicated to prayer	Structured into the schedule of the church Intentionality with conviction Identifying gifted intercessors Allocating space dedicated to prayer	Informal, pervasive scheduling Intentionality with conviction Recognizing Prayer Warriors Multiple Use Space Convenient for Prayer
Healthy Pastoral Leadership			
Kingdom Community Relationships			
Inspiring Worship Events			
Discipleship			
Need Oriented Ministry			
Christlike, Missional Mindset			
Effective Preaching			

Conclusion

It is not easy to contemplate the interface between culture and ministry. However, the people to whom God has called us deserve our best ministry. Unless we sympathetically understand their culture, we may fail to effectively communicate the gospel and demonstrate the Christian way. Therefore, the exercise of working with the implications of cultural groups for benchmark areas of ministry is a worthy challenge.