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CLOSING OUR DOORS: TEN REASONS TO CONSIDER WHY YOUR CHURCH MAY BE IN TROUBLE . . . AND WHAT TO DO

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Danny R. Von Kanel

abstract

1) Motivation/problem statement: Churches across America are in decline. This article points out ten possible reasons a person's church may be soon closing its doors and offers possible solutions.

2) Methods/procedure/approach: I used my experience and several recent research surveys by Barna Research, Faith Communities Today 2005 Survey, and the Leavell Church Growth Center to present a variety of church door slammers.

3) Results/findings/product: If churches will take note of these door slammers and use the suggested solutions listed, they can address each and turn their church around.

4) Conclusion/implications: If churches want to be healthy in the truest sense of the word, they must avoid closing their doors and implement turnaround solutions.

Consider this reality according to Win Arn, "Each year 3,500 to 4,000 churches close their doors forever; yet only 1,100 to 1,500 new churches are started."¹ Coming soon to the closing total are many others who are oblivious to their

¹ Win Arn, *The Pastor's Manual for Effective Ministry* (Monrovia, CA: Church Growth, 1988), 41.

ultimate demise. How do you know when your church is in imminent danger of shutting its doors for the last time?

I want to give you ten reasons to consider why your church may be in trouble—resting on the edge of collapse—and what you can do to stop the bleeding. They are:

- *Door Slammer 1:—We are losing more members than we are gaining.*

This is an immediate red flag. Common sense tells you that if you continue losing members, no one will be left. You can even pinpoint the date. Get an average of how many people you are losing in a year. Divide that into the number of active members. Add that number to 2011, and you will have an approximate year your doors will close if this trend continues.

Pastor Cho of the world's largest church says, "A church may appear to be successful if it has 5,000 members in attendance. But if that membership is not increasing, if it is the same next month, next year, then it is not a growing church."²

Dr. Richard Krejcir of the Schaefer Institute says, "One thing I learned as a church growth consultant is when a person leaves a church, there are only a few weeks (4 to 8 max) to bring them back before the hurt becomes too much and/or they get settled somewhere else (if they even go someplace else). When the hurt builds because it was not diffused by a simple effort of contact and care, these people may never come back to their home church—or any church. The statistics tell us; this is true in any church and why many are failing!"³ Whether remaining the same or losing members, you can stop this people drain.

- *Solution: Ask why, and then honestly address those reasons.*

Churches must truthfully look at what is causing people to leave the church. Ask why. Many of the other nine door slammers should occupy your questioning. If fewer babies are born compared to senior adults dying, then your numbers will be affected. If the community's population is in decline, most likely membership will decrease.

Declining population can impact church attendance. Consider the following: Shrinking population will mean shrinking attendance figures. In the United States, population continues to grow for now because of immigrants, who also tend to have high birth rates. But native-born Americans of all races and ethnicities are not currently replacing themselves.

So denominations that largely draw their membership from native-born Americans have been declining and are likely to continue to decline in

² Pastor Cho, "Seven Secrets of Church Growth," <http://www.abcog.org/7secrets.htm#gr2>.

³ Dr. Richard Krejcir, "Statistics and Reasons for Church Decline," http://www.intothyword.org/articles_view.asp?articleid=36557&columnid=

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membership and attendance—even absent the recognized factors. (Catholic membership, which has increased, includes a large number of immigrants.)⁴

Use the following nine solutions, for they directly affect membership gains.

- *Door Slammer 2: We are predominantly a senior adult church.*

Seniors are a precious group—some of the most faithful members. However, if they greatly outnumber other age groups, it is a sign membership will decrease in coming years as they go home to be with the Lord.

“The composition of the congregation plays a major role in church growth as well. Congregations that are most likely to grow are younger ones, consisting of those founded from 1975 to the present. The Faith Communities Today 2005 survey revealed that the older the congregation is, the less likely it is to experience growth. Additionally, the more older adults a congregation has, the more unlikely it is to grow. Additionally, a larger proportion of younger adults leads to growth opportunities.

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“The mere presence of older adults is not problematic in and of itself,” the report stated. “But a congregation where a large proportion of the members are older tends to have a cluster of characteristics that inhibit growth.”⁵

- *Solution: Change how you do worship, and begin an outreach to younger families.*

People enter our churches, according to the latest research, through our worship service. With the popularity of contemporary Christian and praise and worship music, young and middle-aged adults want music to which they can relate. Hymns will always be with us, but allowance of other genres in our worship is one way to reach this generation.

- *Door Slammer 3: We are a declining inner city church.*

Inner city churches struggle to maintain their identity when the population surrounding the church changes. If the new ethnic or socio-economic group does not filter into the church, decline will continue and church death will follow.

- *Solution: Make a decision to reach other ethnic groups or relocate.*

Churches have two choices: reach the new demographic groups in the area or relocate. Reaching other ethnic or socio-economic groups will challenge your willingness to follow the Great Commission. Expect resistance. The other option—relocating—will challenge your finances.

If planning to build, a smaller facility than what you are in should be built.

⁴ Michael Emerson, “Church Decline of Another Kind,” <http://faithandleadership.com/content/church-decline-another-kind>.

⁵ Audrey Barrick, “Survey: Why Some Churches Thrive and Others Decline,” <http://www.christianpost.com/news/survey-why-some-churches-thrive-and-others-decline-24794/>.

Rising cost of land and materials has skyrocketed since building your church's original facility.

Most churches frown on reaching other ethnic groups. Unfortunately, the sentiment still exists that is summed up in one prominent church woman's response, "My kids may have to go to school with them, but they don't have to go to church with them." Cultural architect Erwin McManus, lead pastor at Mosaic Church in Los Angeles, goes further when speaking about church decline in general, "I think the bottom line really is our own spiritual narcissism. There are methods and you can talk about style, structure, and music, but in the end it really comes down to your heart and what you care about."⁶

Terry Bascom of Church Change says,

To revive a church, maintenance has to be replaced by a new round of entrepreneurial, outwardly-focused activity that is intended to change the lives and care for the needs of people who are not church members. That is, the church has to reorient itself from serving members to *servicing others*.

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The mistake most churches make is to think that 'outreach' is anything trendy that gets people in the church doors. They expend enormous energy and scarce funds trying to bring people in, when what's needed is for the church membership to go out, as they did in the church's vital youth, when members couldn't wait to share their excitement about their new, dynamic, and growing church.⁷

- *Door Slammer 4: We are barely able to pay the bills.*

Financial issues are a secondary sign your church may be in trouble. Bills must be paid. Cutting programming or staff only weakens your efforts at growth. Unless corrected, it will contribute to a slow demise.

Churches who focus only on meeting their needs usually end up fighting over buildings and budgets. Money becomes an issue when those who want to reach our world for Christ see their church focused inward and choose to leave.

- *Solution: Focus outward in ministry to the community. Also, do a large stewardship emphasis, or reach more adults who tithe.*

StewardCAST,⁸ Make It Simple,⁹ or Celebrate Generosity¹⁰ are great tools to address stewardship needs. If your church has never done a church-wide stewardship emphasis, you'll need to sell the idea and then go all out in implementing the program.

⁶ Erwin McManus, "Cultural Architect: Why Churches are Declining in America," <http://www.christianpost.com/news/cultural-architect-why-churches-are-declining-in-america-30855/>.

⁷ Terry Bascom, "Church Change," <http://www.churchchange.org/author/tbascom>.

⁸ StewardCAST, <http://www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=4208>.

⁹ Keep It Simple, <http://www.augsburgfortress.org/store/item.jsp?isbn=ITEM000666&clsid=196747&productgroupid=0>.

¹⁰ Celebrate Generosity, <http://www.celebrategenerosity.com/Celebrate%20Generosity.pdf>.

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- *Door Slammer 5: We had large sums of money left in wills to the church, and people have quit giving.*

Tithing moves churches to action. When people quit giving because of large sums of money left to the church, they abandon their responsibility. Think about it—anything that lacks our investment, whether time, energy, or money, tends to take a back seat. A whole army of churchgoers forfeiting this biblical admonition is inclined to reap stagnation and decline. Over time, church demise is evident.

- *Solution: Give the money away to needy organizations, groups, or individuals; place money in a foundation; and/or stress the importance of tithing.*

A church in north Louisiana faced dealing with large sums of money. The Haynesville Shale oil discovery made people rich overnight. The churches reaped a financial windfall. Wisely, they began giving it away. The money did not destroy the church. Used meaningfully, it helped change our world.

- *Door Slammer 6: We have no teenagers or children in our church.*

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An absence of children and teenagers in any church is a church with no future. Children and youth bring life, vitality, and enthusiasm to the work of the church. The Faith Communities Today 2005 survey supports this door slammer by pointing out “no children are being born to members.”¹¹

- *Solution: Hire a youth or children’s minister, which removes obstacles to teens and youth coming to participate.*

A children and/or youth minister can offer programming to attract youth and children. Eliminate obstacles by accepting their music, dress, hairstyles, and removing any stringent requirements that they would see as extreme. Include them in decision making.

- *Door Slammer 7: Our membership has died off or moved, leaving no one to run the programming, pay bills, or take care of the facility.*

If you are down to only handfuls of senior adults, your church shutting down will be sooner rather than later. Small memberships stuck with large facilities risk sudden closure when finances and labor shrink.

- *Solution: Consider merging with another church, selling your present facility to build something smaller, or realistically evaluate your continued existence.*

A merger will give new life to the new church, offering a save-face for your church. A relocation to a smaller facility assures future life, using the funds from selling the old facility to build the new. As a last resort, if a merger or relocation is not possible, dissolve as a body.

¹¹ Barrick, “Survey: Why Some Churches Thrive and Others Decline.”

- *Door Slammer 8: No one has accepted Christ as Lord and Savior in a long time.*

New converts signal a church understands and fulfills the Great Commission. It speaks of a live and vibrant church. Absence of new believers suggests approaching death.

From a new study by Bill Day looking at growth and decline, President of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Chuck Kelley, said, “The Leavell Center’s study unearthed a problem with the current definition of a growing church. Just because a church records a growth in total membership does not necessarily mean that church is healthy. Here’s the reality: 1,409 churches in the growing category reported no baptisms in 2003.”¹²

Those churches account for eleven percent of all “growing” churches. After removing those churches from the growing category, there are still “growing” churches that have a member to baptism ratio of more than 1,100 to 1. Kelley’s interpretation of this statistic is as follows: “That’s shuffling Baptists from one church to another church.”¹³ Kelley adds, “And what we are seeing right now out on the field . . . is that the passion of Southern Baptists for reaching lost people for Christ is fading. That focus on the necessity of people to be born again through faith in Jesus Christ is fading in Southern Baptist life.”¹⁴

Kelley said every denomination in America has experienced what Southern Baptists are currently going through. Every denomination has grown, plateaued, and drifted into decline.¹⁵

“In a Breakpoint email titled ‘Rethinking Church,’ Chuck Colson noted that Hybels’ ‘example (admitting he and his church made a mistake) should challenge us all, especially pastors and those in positions of leadership, to take a long, hard look at what we are doing and ask whether it is really changing lives.’ Colson applauded Hybels and his leaders for their remarkable courage.”¹⁶

- *Solution: Hire an evangelistic pastor, or launch an evangelism emphasis, holding events in which the only purpose is to present the Gospel.*

Pastors who lead by example in sharing their faith produce congregations who follow suit. Saturating all you do with evangelism and offering key evangelistic events facilitates new converts.

¹² Bill Day, “Study Updates Stats on Health of Southern Baptist Churches,” <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=19542>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gordan Mercy, “Church Decline: Six Signs of Hope,” <http://www.churchcentral.com/blog/Church-Decline:-Six-Signs-Of-Hope>.

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- *Door Slammer 9: We are having worship wars.*

Music breeds many opinions on appropriateness of certain styles. One point to remember is, “It’s not about us. It’s all about Him.” Music wars encourage disunion, usually between older and younger members. Some conflicts have led to church splits. The Faith Communities Today 2005 survey “found that institutional change including change in worship services is necessary for a congregation to adapt to a changing environment.”¹⁷

Bryan Chapell in *Christianity Today* says,

If church leaders try to establish a style of worship based upon their preferences or based upon satisfying congregants’ competing preferences, then the church will inevitably be torn apart by the politics of preference. But if the leadership is asking the missional questions of “Who is here?” and “Who should be here?” in determining worship styles and practices, then the mission of the church will enable those leaders to unite around gospel goals that are more defensible and uniting than anyone’s personal preference. These gospel goals will never undermine the gospel contours of the worship service, but rather will ask how each gospel aspect can be expressed in ways that best minister to those present and those being reached for Christ’s glory.¹⁸

Types of services also add to church growth. The Faith Communities Today 2005 survey showed, “Additionally, the character of worship largely affects growth. Congregations that describe their worship as ‘joyful’ are more likely to experience substantial growth. At the same time, those that described their worship as ‘reverent’ were more likely to decline. And churches that more often use drums in their worship services have experienced substantial growth from 2000 to 2005. That also applied to the use of electric guitars.”¹⁹

- *Solution: Go to a blended service or to a church that offers two types of services, both a traditional and contemporary service.*

Though a blended service is easier and most popular, it doesn’t completely satisfy either disheartened group. Two services, though taxing on church staff, gives the chance for worshippers to unite around gospel goals.

- *Door Slammer 10: The Bible is not preached or taught in our church.*

A church without Bible preaching and teaching is a contradiction in terms. Indeed, what characterizes the church is its reliance on God’s Word. Without it we are no more than an organization.

¹⁷ Audrey Barrick, “Survey: Why Some Churches Thrive and Others Decline.”

¹⁸ Bryan Chapell, “Transcending the Worship Wars,” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/septemberweb-only/138.11.0.html?start=2>.

¹⁹ Audrey Barrick, “Survey: Why Some Churches Thrive and Others Decline.”

Dr. Jim Cogdill says, “There are church growth principles which will work for anyone . . . even cults and secular groups! Evangelistic church growth works by the power of the Holy Spirit and the authority of God’s Word.”²⁰ Pastor Steve Scoggins of First Baptist Church, Opelika, Alabama, says, “The kind of preaching that turns churches around is Biblical, relevant, understandable, and passionate.”²¹ The latter three are ignored if the messages are not grounded in God’s Word. Thom Rainer, in discussing the five warning signs of declining church health says, “Members are leaving for other churches in the community, or they are leaving the local church completely. A common exit interview theme we heard was a lack of deep biblical teaching and preaching in the church.”

○ *Solution: Return to God’s Word.*

In a business session, seek to get your church to affirm its adherence to God’s Word. Read it in your services. Set Bible study classes. Preach it. God’s Word is the only Book that God says “will not come back to me void” (Isaiah 55:11).

According to Thom Rainer,

The top three methods that evangelistic churches of all sizes use are preaching, prayer, and Sunday school. The top of the three methods is preaching. Not only does the Bible teach that preaching is to be primary, but practically speaking, the evidence shows that when preaching is primary the church experiences conversion growth. Some may assume that other methods are necessary in order to reach the lost. While other methods can be effective, the most effective method is strong Biblical preaching. If there is anything that a declining church needs it is a well-prepared, applicable, relevant, and powerful pulpit ministry. Research shows that nothing can take the place of a strong preaching ministry.²²

In addition, Rainer’s research shows, “The length of a pastor’s tenure was found to have a direct correlation to the health of a church. A church’s likelihood to be healthy was much greater when the pastor had served there between five and 20 years.”²³

Church doors are closing. However, we can have thriving churches. “The Bible tells us how,” Kelley said about evangelism. “The Lord has shown us the

²⁰ Dr. Jim Cogdill, “Evangelistic Church Growth,” <http://www.leavellcenter.com/html/Church%20Health%20and%20Evangelism/Evangelistic%20Church%20Growth.asp>.

²¹ Steve Scoggins, “How to Breathe New Life into a Declining Church,” http://www.baptiststart.com/print/new_life_into_church.html.

²² Jammie D. Vance, “The Role of Preaching in Turning Around Declining Churches,” <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1143&context=doctoral&sei-redir=1#search=declining+churches>”.

²³ Michael McCormick, “Study Updates Stats on Health of Southern Baptist Churches,” <http://bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=19542>.

Von Kanel: Closing Our Doors: Ten Reasons to Consider Why Your Church May Be possibilities. The cold reality is that the only hindrance to greatness is the hindrance of my heart and yours.”²⁴

If one or more of the above door slammers describes your church, begin now to implement a solution. Turn your church away from its tendency to decline and direct it towards rebirth. It’s a journey worth taking.

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Von Kanel has hundreds of articles appearing in more than forty-five magazines crossing many denominational lines, including: *Growth Points*, *The Great Commission Research Journal*, and *The Journal for the American Society of Church Growth*. In addition, he has two church growth books published by CSS Publishing: *Built By the Owner’s Design (The Positive Approach to Building Your Church God’s Way)*, 2003 and *Building Sunday School by the Owner’s Design (100 Tools for Successful Kingdom Growth)*, 2005. He can be reached at dannyvon@bellsouth.net.

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²⁴ Ibid.

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**IN SEARCH OF THE HEALTHY CHURCH:
A META-ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY**

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Russell L. Huizing

abstract

After a brief literature review, eight of the primary contemporary church health resources are subjected to a meta-ethnographic study. The resources' combined twenty-six health indicators are translated through the meta-themes of organizational structure, developing community, church characteristics, and personal characteristics. A discussion and visual synthesis of the translations point to the church literature developing community through organizational structure which in turn cultivates church and personal characteristics. Future research recommendations include expanding the study of church metaphors beyond "body" and identifying metaphor-specific characteristics through exegetical study.

Keywords: Meta-ethnography, church health, ecclesial leadership, organizational structure, developing community, church characteristics

Organizations are made up of individual people.¹ Each individual functions in a unique manner and relationship to all the other individuals within the organization. To the extent that the organization shares commitments and goals

¹ John M. Ivancevich, Robert Konopaske, and Michael T. Matteson, *Organizational Behavior and Management* (Boston: McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2008), 62.

Von Kanel: Closing Our Doors: Ten Reasons to Consider Why Your Church May Be amongst its individuals and is in a context in which those commitments and goals can be accomplished, it is likely to function in a manner that could be described as healthy. However, when things go wrong, it is not unusual for contemporary organizational theorists to suggest that an organizational diagnosis—much like a medical exam—is necessary.² Yet, this approach to organizational health is not a new concept. Over two millennia before the modern organizational theories, the apostle Paul was speaking of the church in similar terms. The people of God, according to Paul, were drawn together in a unique relationship that mirrored an organism (1 Cor. 12). To the extent that the church functions like an organism, it would be expected that certain indicators would exist that can be measured as markers of its general health regardless of context. The church health literature that has become prominent in the last forty years has attempted to identify the traits that must be measured in order to identify church health. This work will attempt to synthesize some of the primary resources available on church health to identify the characteristics that are being measured.

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literature review

Most of the academic literature written on church health is in the form of dissertations.³ A vast majority of this material is written to identify specific health characteristics of a particular ecclesial context. It is particularly interesting that a sampling of dissertations designed to measure a spectrum of health indicators in broad or global contexts have little or no peer-reviewed material included in their literature.⁴ Most of the theoretical foundation for these dissertations is drawn from popular press books or periodicals, which is not uncommon in ethnographic studies.⁵ Though this does not necessarily mean that the foundation is weak, it does suggest that there is a significant gap in the research of what constitutes a

² Gary Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 289–90.

³ A search using the term “church health” in ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database yielded 253 results.

⁴ Andrei E. Blinkov, “Church Health and Church Growth in Congregations of the Russian Church of Evangelical Christians” (D.Min., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2007); George Ray Cannon, Jr., “A Descriptive Study of the Additional Factors Needed to Transition a Troubled Church to Health” (D.Min., Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010); L. Thomas Crites, “Four Core Principles for Enhancing Ministry Effectiveness: A Factor Analysis Evaluating the Relationship between Select Variables and Church Health Observed in Churches of the Georgia Baptist Convention” (Ed.D., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009); Roger Alan De Noyelles, “How to Keep a Healthy Church Healthy: Developing an Educational Training Model for Pastors and Laity in Church Organizational Systems for Doing Congregational Pulse-Taking” (D.Min., Drew University, 2008); Mark Hopkins, “Toward Holistic Congregational Assessment of Church Health” (Ph.D., Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Intercultural Studies, 2006); Larry Richard Salsburey, “The Effect of the Healthy Church Initiative on Participating Congregations of the Missionary Church” (D.Min., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2009); Kichun Yoo, “A Strategy of Promoting Health in the Local Church” (D.Min., Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010).

⁵ George W. Noblit and R. Dwight Hare, *Meta-Ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies*, ed. John Van Maanen, Peter K. Manning, and Marc L. Miller, vol. 11, *Qualitative Research Methods* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988), 27.

healthy church. Two researchers provide the footings to bridge this gap. Nel has two peer-reviewed articles attempting to give a synopsis of the empirical work endeavoring to measure church health and a theological basis for assessing the health of a congregation.⁶ The second researcher is Day, whose lecture attempted to provide a definition of church health.⁷

The significant point that Day's lecture provided for those identifying healthy church characteristics is his simple, yet often overlooked, point that the metaphors for the church in Christian Scripture include not only a body but also a temple and family.⁸ Additionally, the church is commissioned by Christ with a mission that includes certain functions.⁹ Thus, any comprehensive measurement of church health ought to include constructs that measure it as an organism, place of worship, and family while measuring the accomplishment of its mission and functions. However, as Stevens pointed out in his response to Day's lecture, the development of these constructs and measurements must come from an inductive study of the relevant Scripture recognizing that the purpose of the original autographs was not to be a research study on the attributes of church health.¹⁰

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Nel, using a more creedal approach than Day, came to similar conclusions.¹¹ Nel rooted the measurement of church health in the theological concept of the incarnational nature of the church. As God reveals Himself to the church, He uses the church to reveal Himself to the world.¹² Thus, it is imperative to measure the health of a church since an unhealthy church is necessarily a skewed or outright sinful representation of the glory of God. Nel recommended using Calvin's description of the purposes of the church—the ministry of the Word, observation of the sacraments, and the faithful living as disciples of Christ—as the structure around which a measurement of church health could be developed.¹³

Nel's other article is the thread that ties the peer-reviewed material to the dissertation material.¹⁴ Nel listed a number of church health measurement approaches that supposedly included empirical support for constructs and measurements. Nel went on, however, to show how many, if not all, of these

⁶ Malan Nel, "Congregational Analysis: A Theological and Ministerial Approach," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 65, no. 1 (2009); Malan Nel, "Congregational Analysis Revisited: Empirical Approaches," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 65, no. 1 (2009).

⁷ William H. Day, Jr., "The Development of a Comprehensive Definition of Church Health," (The Ola Farmer Lenaz Lecture, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary: December 19, 2002), 48–50.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19–22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22–25.

¹⁰ Gerald L. Stevens, "Defining Church Health through Biblical Modeling: An Exploration of Rev. 2:1–7," (The Ola Farmer Lenaz Lecture, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary: December 19, 2002), 22.

¹¹ Nel, "Congregational Analysis: A Theological and Ministerial Approach," 13–14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13–14.

¹⁴ Nel, "Congregational Analysis Revisited: Empirical Approaches."

Von Kanel: Closing Our Doors: Ten Reasons to Consider Why Your Church May Be approaches lack strong exegetical and empirical support. However, it is some of these very empirical approaches that many of the dissertations are using as the foundation for their studies. Given the influence of these resources upon the development and understanding of church health indicators, it is appropriate to question if a prevalent meta-model exists across these resources.

meta-ethnography

The church has its own culture, if by culture is meant the “collection of behavior patterns and beliefs that constitute standards for deciding what is . . . what can be . . . how one feels about it . . . what to do about it . . . and how to go about doing it.”¹⁵ As such, the church health literature essentially constitutes ethnographic studies of the church and the author’s interpretations of those studies. The inclusion of any underlying exegetical study of Hebrew or Christian Scripture within the literature does not dilute its ultimate ethnographic nature since Scripture is recognized as one of, or even as the primary authority, for the behaviors and beliefs that constitute the culture.

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As such, the question becomes how to study multiple ethnographic studies in order to synthesize their interpretations. Meta-analysis of quantitative studies shows that convergence of results across multiple studies of similar data can assist in overcoming some “generalizability” issues.¹⁶ Meta-ethnography is a similar approach designed for the analysis of convergence of results generally in qualitative studies and specifically in ethnographic studies.¹⁷ However, meta-ethnography is not simply developing generalizations between the studies but rather interpreting the studies into each other.¹⁸ The analogy would be of taking several studies on the same topic written in different languages and translating them into one common language that captures the various cultural meanings contained in the symbols of the language. It is this primary focus on the translation of several interpretations of study that requires the meta-ethnographic approach to be limited to a small number of studies.¹⁹ Noblit and Hare identified seven phases to the meta-ethnography approach which will form the structure of the rest of this work.²⁰

¹⁵ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 81.

¹⁶ Fred N. Kerlinger and Howard B. Lee, *Foundations of Behavioral Research* (Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning, 2000), 615.

¹⁷ Noblit and Hare, *Meta-Ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies*, 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁹ Mike Weed, “‘Meta Interpretation’: A Method for the Interpretive Synthesis of Qualitative Research,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 6, no. 1 (2005): 4.

²⁰ Noblit and Hare, *Meta-Ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies*, 26–29.

phase 1: getting started

In this phase of the meta-ethnography, a topic of interest that may be informed by qualitative research is identified.²¹ Essentially, this should include a study that is worthy of synthesis either because of reciprocity, refutational results, or potential lines of argument that bridge differences in current qualitative research.²² The qualitative approach is especially useful when studying observable human experience, making qualitative studies on church health an especially rich place to mine data.²³ The primary research question to give the analysis structure is, “What are the primary characteristics of healthy churches in the prevalent church health literature?”

phase 2: deciding what is relevant to the initial interest

A review of the bibliographies in the reviewed literature reveals eight resources that are consistently referenced throughout.²⁴ The identification of these eight resources is not intended to suggest that the other literature referenced is secondary or of an inferior quality. Instead, the consistency of the use of these eight resources suggests that they have a significant impact on the direction that church health research is established on. Thus, these seem to represent the ‘prevalent church health literature’ foundational to church health research. The researcher throughout the course of this study remained attentive to the relevancy of the literature, prepared if necessary to remove it from the research if it did not meet the standards of prevalent church health literature. As the research progressed, it became apparent that all eight resources were relevant to the research.

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phase 3: reading the studies

Though it may seem superfluous to have a phase dedicated to reading the resources being studied, Noblit and Hare specifically added this phase in order to identify the importance of properly interpreting the text.²⁵ Returning to the analogy

²¹ Ibid., 26.

²² Ibid., 38.

²³ Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 4.

²⁴ Mark Dever, *What Is a Healthy Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007); Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: Ten Traits of a Vital Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003); Donald J. Macnair, *The Practices of a Healthy Church: Biblical Strategies for Vibrant Church Life and Ministry* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999); Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996); Ebbie C. Smith, *Growing Healthy Churches: New Directions for Church Growth in the 21st Century* (Fort Worth, TX: Church Starting Network, 2003); Dann Spader and Gary Mayes, *Growing a Healthy Church: Complete with Study Guide* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991); Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995); Waldo J. Werning, *12 Pillars of a Healthy Church: Be a Life-Giving Church and Center for Missionary Formation* (Saint Charles, IL: Churchsmart Resources, 2001).

²⁵ Noblit and Hare, *Meta-Ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies*, 28.

Von Kanel: *Closing Our Doors: Ten Reasons to Consider Why Your Church May Be* presented earlier of meta-ethnography being the translating of multiple languages into one common language, this phase of meta-ethnography is the process of learning each resource's 'language,' which is more comprehensive than simply comparing word meanings. Thus, this phase involved a careful reading of the resources in order to understand not only the church health characteristics in each resource but an understanding of what each characteristic meant within its particular context.

phase 4: determining how the studies are related

It is anticipated that resources analyzing the same type of topic would share related themes and concepts.²⁶ Each of the resources offers several characteristics or measurements of a healthy church with some that overlap and are related across resources. Table 1 lists the twenty-six distinct indicators with summarized definitions. Table 2 presents for comparison the relationships between the data sources by listing out the indicators by author. These twenty-six characteristics can be further categorized into four meta-themes: a) organizational structure, b) developing community, c) personal characteristics, and d) church characteristics. Table 3 presents the number of uses by an author of these categorized themes.

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As can be seen from Table 3, all the resources recognize organizational structure, developing community, personal characteristics, and church characteristics when considering the health of a church.

phase 5: translating the studies into one another

The four meta-themes then become a type of Rosetta Stone in translating the studies into one another. Noblit and Hare noted that this is one of the most important steps within the meta-ethnographical study since it is not simply a summary or a synthesis of the research but actually a retranslation of each of the studies into a language common to them all.²⁷ The following resources are analyzed chronologically. The first study is translated into the second, then those results into the third, and so on.

Spader and Mayes theorized that growing a healthy church depended on the ability of a church to progress through four stages of development: a) building, b) equipping, c) winning, and d) multiplying.²⁸ As healthy characteristics were built into the everyday function of the church community, those who respond to the church's message could be equipped to proclaim the Gospel to others, which would eventually result in growing numbers for the church. This in turn would require a

²⁶ Ibid., 28.

²⁷ Ibid., 28.

²⁸ Spader and Mayes, *Growing a Healthy Church: Complete with Study Guide*, 46.

Table 1

Definitions of Related Indicators in Church Health Literature

Indicators—Definitions

Evangelism—The activity of believers in proclaiming the Gospel to those who are not believers
Discipleship—Building maturity in Christ in thought, word, and deed through personal relationships
Gifted Ministry—Individuals knowing and using gifts supplied by God through personality or supernaturally
God's Word—A local church maintaining Bible-centered, faithful communication of Old and New Testaments
Leadership—Representing the qualifications and responsibilities of ecclesial oversight
Loving Relationships—Practical caring for others that promotes quality relationships
Worship—Representing the characteristics and activities that reveal God's glory
Mission/Vision—Leadership understanding God's goals for the church and how they will be accomplished
Membership—Maintaining the characteristics, goals, and activities of developing formal ecclesial commitment
Prayer—Humble reliance upon the empowerment of God
Spirituality—Practicing faith through spiritual disciplines
Structures—Functional organizational arrangement for administration and accountability
Church Planting—Actively multiplying ministry through starting new congregations
No Dysfunction—Free from teachings or activities that threaten the function of the church.
Small Groups—Practical application provided through group Bible discussion designed to multiply groups
Stewardship—Practicing biblical financial management and generosity
Adjust Methodologies—Modifying ministry functions to contextual changes while maintaining mission/vision
Church Life-phase—An understanding of the life-stage or phase of ministry that the church is in
Conversion—Repentance through faith, based upon conviction
Discipline—A church activity of removing unholiness from the presence of the church body
God's Presence—Praying for God's initiative and anticipating His supernatural empowerment for ministry
Gospel—The proclaimed message of the ministry of Jesus that requires a response from the hearer
Networking—Interacting and working together with other Bible-focused churches to complement ministries
Preaching—Corporate messages that explain and apply a passage from knowledge of its original context
Resource Leaders—Providing necessary means for those in authority to meet the mission/vision
Spiritual Warfare—Identifying false teachings, harmful influences, and areas of sin while encouraging holiness

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Table 2

Comparison of Related Indicators in Church Health Literature

Indicators	Spader/							
	Mayes	Warren	Schwarz	Macchia	MacNair	Werning	Smith	Dever
Evangelism	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Discipleship	X	X		X	X			X
Gifted Ministry		X	X		X	X	X	
God's Word	X			X	X	X		X
Leadership			X	X	X	X		X
Loving Relat.	X		X	X		X	X	
Worship		X	X	X	X	X		
Mission/Vision		X			X	X	X	
Membership	X	X						X
Prayer	X			X	X			
Spirituality			X	X		X		
Structures			X	X		X		
Church Planting						X	X	
No Dysfunction					X		X	
Small Groups			X			X		
Stewardship				X		X		
Adjust Methods							X	
Church Life-phase							X	
Conversion								X
Discipline								X
God's Presence				X				
Gospel								X
Networking				X				
Preaching								X
Resource Leaders							X	
Spiritual Warfare							X	

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Table 3

Number of Indicators in Related Meta-Themes in Church Health Literature

Meta-Themes	Spader/							
	Mayes	Warren	Schwarz	Macchia	MacNair	Werning	Smith	Dever
Org. Structure ^a	1	2	2	3	3	4	5	2
Community ^b	1	2	3	3	2	3	1	2
Personal Char. ^c	1	1	2	3	2	3	1	1
Church Char. ^d	3	1	1	3	2	2	2	4

^aIncludes: Leadership, Structures, Mission/Vision, Church Planting, Membership, Church Life-Phase, Resource Leaders, Adjust Methodologies, Networking

^bIncludes: Small Groups, Evangelism, Loving Relationships, Discipleship,

^cIncludes: Gifted Ministry, Spirituality, Stewardship, Prayer, Conversion

^dIncludes: Worship, God's Word, Preaching, Gospel, Discipline, No Dysfunction, Spiritual Warfare, God's Presence

multiplication of leadership who would assist in furthering the ministry. This whole process is seen as functioning under the lordship of Christ. Three of the six primary healthy characteristics identified by Spader and Mayes fall into the meta-theme of developing community (evangelism, loving relationships, and discipleship).²⁹ The other three are God's Word, prayer, and membership.³⁰ Though this indicates an emphasis on developing community, church characteristics, personal characteristics, and organizational structure are all represented. The least emphasized area is church characteristics.

One of the difficulties with Spader and Mayes' approach is that it sets out the starting point but then becomes somewhat unclear as to what the goal is. In their visual model, there is just ongoing growth. Warren adjusted this somewhat with his model of a healthy church ministry, which came to be known as the purpose driven model. In Warren's view, the foundation for healthy church ministry is a clear vision and mission.³¹ Much like modern structures, the church cannot grow larger than the foundation can handle.³² The purpose driven model then had a goal as its purpose and used a baseball diamond as its metaphor.³³ The purpose was to move people through the process of membership, discipleship, gifted ministry, and evangelism. All of this was done within the context of worship in which God's presence was felt and became a powerful message to non-believers.³⁴ Through mission/vision and membership, the emphasis within Warren's approach was on organizational structure, though, again, personal characteristics, church characteristics, and developing community are included through the other emphases.

Though Warren's goal-oriented model proved an enhancement on Spader and Mayes' open-ended model, still questions remained within Warren's model as to what happened when an individual got back to "home base." Schwarz's method of health assessment overcame this. Schwarz, likely the most referenced church health resource, developed eight quality characteristics. Three characteristics represented developing community (small groups, evangelism, and loving relationships), two represented personal characteristics (gifted ministry, spirituality), two characteristics represented organizational structure (leadership, structures), and one represented church characteristics (worship).³⁵ What was unique to Schwarz was that each of the eight characteristics was measured quantitatively in order to

²⁹ Ibid., 48–50.

³⁰ Ibid., 48–50.

³¹ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission*, 28.

³² Ibid., 86.

³³ Ibid., 144.

³⁴ Ibid., 241.

³⁵ Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, 22–37.

Von Kanel: Closing Our Doors: Ten Reasons to Consider Why Your Church May Be determine maximum (highest scoring indicators) and minimum factors (lowest scoring indicators). Churches would use maximum factors to strengthen the minimum factor.³⁶ In this manner, churches could continuously reanalyze their church health based on these eight factors and focus on the weakest measures. Schwarz's research suggested that following this process would increase a growth in attendance, which in turn was the measurement of church health since biotic entities naturally grow.³⁷

Starting with Scripture and prayer, Macchia provided a listing of ten essential traits of a healthy church.³⁸ Since both Scripture and prayer are indicators identified throughout the literature, they will be added to the other traits to say that Macchia identified twelve traits. Interestingly, Macchia saw the traits falling into similar meta-themes as developed in Table 3, dividing the traits into personal relationship with God, relationship with other believers, and ministry administration and management.³⁹ Macchia believed that if each church went through recurring periods of reflection, affirmation, evaluation, and application, that the twelve traits could be properly balanced within the ministry leading to health. Of the twelve traits, three are organizational structure (leadership, structures, and networking), three are personal characteristics (spirituality, stewardship, and prayer), three are church characteristics (worship, God's presence, and God's Word), and three are developing community (evangelism, loving relationships, and discipleship). This represented the most balanced representation of the meta-themes.

Using the metaphor of a medical exam more than any of the other resources, MacNair identified three vital signs and six practices of a healthy church. Vital signs of church health include discipleship, evangelism, and no dysfunction.⁴⁰ The basics of body health included gifted ministry, worship, God's Word, and prayer.⁴¹ Nearly half of the book, however, is devoted to leadership and mission/vision.⁴² To be sure, MacNair stated that the model of the church is Christ, and its manual is the Bible. However, the strong emphasis on organizational structure over church characteristics, personal characteristics, and community development tends to suggest less of an emphasis on a person and His Word.

Werning attempted to synthesize the two most popularly-known church health measurements. Adding four additional indicators (God's Word, mission/vision,

³⁶ Ibid., 57.

³⁷ Ibid., 41, 106–25.

³⁸ Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: Ten Traits of a Vital Ministry*, 23.

³⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁰ Macnair, *The Practices of a Healthy Church: Biblical Strategies for Vibrant Church Life and Ministry*, 9.

⁴¹ Ibid., 19–106.

⁴² Ibid., 107–230.