

Diagnose Your Church's Health Is the Church Reaching Non-Believers?

By Chuck Lawless

This article is the fourth in a series dealing with questions to ask when consulting with a church. Previous questions were “Is the church’s teaching based on the Bible?” and “Is the church a praying church?” This month’s question, “Is the church reaching non-believers?” forces the church to look at its local outreach.

Church growth proponents typically speak of three different sources of church growth. The first, “transfer growth,” is simply churches transferring members—probably better known as “swapping sheep.” A church may get larger through transfer growth, but the kingdom of God is no richer. Definitions for the second source of growth, “biological growth,” vary, but biological growth is increased attendance numbers as church attenders and members have babies. This article focuses on the third source of growth, “conversion growth,” which is growth through reaching and keeping new believers.

Clearly, the early church was concerned about reaching non-believers. In fact, new believers were added to the church daily (Acts 2:47) as church members preached and lived their faith before others. How different that is from the 80-85 percent of North American churches that are plateaued or declining!

Trying to determine what is “effective” growth, though, is not easy. One attempt to do so is to evaluate the church’s baptismal ratio, which is the ratio of resident members or worship attenders—whichever is higher—per baptisms/conversions. For example, a church that has 400 members, 200 in attendance, and 20 baptisms/conversions reported would have a baptismal ratio of 20:1. A church with 50 members, 150 in worship attendance, and 15 baptisms/conversions would have a ratio of 10:1. Generally, a ratio of less than 20:1 is considered healthy. This formula is certainly not perfect, but it does offer one way to evaluate a church’s outreach health.

In my book, *Disciplined Warriors*, I compare “churches that talk about prayer” with “churches that really pray.” Perhaps this comparison is a starting point to evaluate whether a church is a praying church:

Churches that talk about prayer . . .

- *tell* people to pray.
- *announce* prayer meetings.
- *preach* about prayer.
- may have a *prayer list*.
- may have a *prayer ministry* as one

Churches that really pray . . .

- *teach* people to pray.
- *actually pray* at prayer meetings.
- *preach* about prayer and *pray* during preaching.
- *intentionally pray* through the list.
- have a *prayer ministry* that

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- ministry among many
have leaders who *talk* about prayer.
- covers every other ministry
have leaders who *model* prayer

Here are some other ways to determine whether a church is a praying church:

1. *Ask the pastor about his personal prayer life.* This question is often a difficult one to ask, as you are putting the pastor on the spot. Nevertheless, we know from our research and our consulting experience that a local church seldom prays more fervently than the pastor does. If the pastor struggles with prayer, encourage him to secure an accountability partner who will hold him faithful to this important task. If he does not already have Pastor's Prayer Partners who pray with him weekly, invite him to start now in enlisting some prayer warriors who intentionally cover his life and ministry in prayer.
2. *Conduct a church wide survey about prayer.* How will you know if the church is a praying church unless you ask the members about their own prayer lives? Two possible resources are the Church Health Survey (see the link above on this webpage) and *Serving in Your Church Prayer Ministry*, a small book that includes a reproducible prayer survey.
3. *Determine if the church has a prayer "point person."* The titles for this role differ (e.g., prayer director, minister of prayer, prayer leader, prayer coordinator), but churches that really pray typically have someone overseeing an intentional prayer ministry. If no one is in charge of keeping prayer on the church's agenda, prayer almost always gets pushed aside.
4. *Ask if the church has a prayer room.* Obviously, having a place for prayer is no guarantee that the church is a praying church. It might be that the church has a prayer room that few people use. Yet, churches that intentionally set aside a room for the purpose of prayer tend to be more committed to praying.
5. *See if the church's small groups have assigned prayer leaders for each group.* The small group is the place that most relationships develop, and it is in that context that many church members share their prayer needs. If, however, no one in the small group is responsible for recording those needs and encouraging members to pray, those needs often fall on inattentive ears. Each small group should have a prayer leader who takes responsibility for recording needs, inviting others to pray, and reporting the results when God answers those prayers.
6. *If the church has a membership class, ask how much attention is given to teaching new members how to pray.* Most membership classes are not long enough to do much in-depth teaching, but some time should nevertheless focus on helping new believers and members to develop their spiritual disciplines. Seldom are members more ready to take on these tasks than when they first become a believer or a new member.

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7. *Determine how often the church gathers solely for the purpose of prayer.* Every church I know prays together at some point, but those prayer times are often simply an expected part of a routine worship service. We pray simply because it is time to pray in the order of worship. A praying church, though, gathers often only to pray—focusing on God, the needs of the church, and the needs of non-believers in the community. Prayer is by no means just routine in these churches.

As you consult with churches, don't ignore this vital component of prayer. Instead, challenge churches to begin their work in prayer, support it through prayer, and praise God in prayer when He blesses their work! Keep in mind these other resources that might help you: *And the Place was Shaken* (John Franklin), *A House of Prayer* (John Franklin), *The Praying Church Sourcebook* (Alvin Vander Griend), and *The Praying Church Idea Book* (Douglas Kamstra).