

CHURCH HEALTH INDICATORS: A RESEARCH REVIEW

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Background

There is little hard research on indicators of church health.¹ However, there have been a few studies of indicators for church closure: thresholds levels which if churches cannot attain they are likely to fail.

There are two studies on this subject that are worthy of note. They can be found in the following books or articles:

- *Turn-Around Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring New Life to an Established Church*, by George Barna of the Barna Research Group.²
- *When to Close a Church*, by Gary L. McIntosh, Director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Talbot School of Theology at Biola University.³

It would seem reasonable, therefore, to “reverse engineer” the results of these studies to establish minimum indicators that would indicate church health. The indicators listed below are my attempt restating the results of these studies as church health indicators.

Research Summary

The results of these studies are both encouraging and sobering. On the encouraging side, they go along way toward establishing benchmarks for what constitutes a health church, as well as early warning signs of impending decline. On the sobering side, they make clear that once successful doesn’t mean always successful, that even large churches can decline rapidly, and that the majority of churches which enter decline either close or stabilize at much lower numbers, never to grow again. Yet some churches do break the cycle of decline and the study of these churches can provide insights for others.

Both studies also indicate that it should not be surprising to us that churches fail. After all, while they are in many way different than business (as one would hope), they are human organizations, and as such they are not immune from the “organizational cycle” that effects all human organizations. For example, one of the largest categories of churches that close is New Church Plants. But this should come as no surprise, since in the business world nine out of ten start-up businesses fail, and start-up churches have a much better success record than that. Yet the same volatility enables them to grow faster than any other category as well. And churches that make it past their third year of existence are likely to last at least 60 more years.

¹ On the other hand, several qualitative studies have been done, which can be excellent program planning resources. For one such study see: Bass, Diane Butler (2004). The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church. Washington, DC: The Alban Institute.

² Barna, George (1993). Turn-Around Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring New Life to an Established Church. Ventura, CA: Regal.

³ McIntosh, Gary L. (December, 1990). “When to Close a Church,” in The McIntosh Church Growth Network Newsletter (2:12).

Key Indicators for Church Health

The following indicators, taken as a whole, can provide church leaders with helpful insights as to the health and future potential of a church.

1. **Public Worship Attendance.** A church needs at least 50 adults to have a public worship service that is celebrative and attractive to new people. 20 to 40 adults at worship puts a church in an unhealthy situation. Less than 20 adults is a strong indication the church should be closed.
2. **Total Giving Units.** A church must have greater than 25 giving units to be considered minimally healthy (e.g., financially self-sustaining); 35 giving units to achieve sustained growth. It usually takes a minimum of 10 - 12 faithful giving units to provide for a full time pastor. It takes another 10 - 12 units to provide for the ministry of a church in terms of supplies, advertising, etc. To staff for growth, a church may need 10-12 additional giving units for other necessary support staff on at least a part time basis (parish administrator, music director, etc.).
3. **Lay Leadership Pool.** As a rule of thumb, a church needs one leader for every 10 adult members (junior high and up), 1 leader for every 6 elementary children and 1 leader for every 2 children below school age. Less leadership than this will make it difficult to provide for the needs of a growth ministry.
4. **An Effective Ministry.** A church needs at least one ministry for which it is known in the community. For example, some churches may be known as the church with the great Sunday school, others for their children's program. Still others may be known for their ministry to senior citizens.
5. **Past Growth Rate.** A growth rate that has been declining for 5 to 10 years should serve as a warning signal. If a church is only about one-fourth or less of its original size it is likely to be facing hard times which may result in eventual closure. Therefore, a church must have at least replacement level growth to be considered over a five year period to be considered minimally healthy. 3-5 years of growth would be an indicator of continued steady growth.
6. **Congregation's Spiritual Health.** A church's spiritual climate is another factor to be considered. Is a church characterized as one of peace, happiness, and love? Or, is it found to be one of anger, bitterness and discouragement? This does not mean the absence of conflict, but a church is sufficiently committed to spiritual community that it can engage in honest disagreement without splintering.
7. **Average Membership Tenure.** How long have people been attending church? If the average tenure is longer than 20 years, it is a sign that a church is having difficulty reaching and assimilating new people. Therefore, a church would need to have an average membership of less than 20 years to be considered minimally healthy (i.e., self-sustaining), and perhaps less than 15 years to have growth potential.
8. **Focus of Church Goals.** Is the focus of a church on itself or outward to new people? Do leaders talk about ministry, mission and purpose? Or, do they talk about paying the bills, hanging on, real estate, the past and membership care? A clear, outwardly-focused statement of vision and mission, clearly understood by all leaders and a majority of the congregation is necessary for a church to be considered minimally healthy.
9. **Budget Expenditures.** Where is the money spent? Is it spent on outreach, advertising and ministry? Or, are these areas the first to be cut when the budget gets tight? A church should be maintaining a

steady spending level of at least 10% of its budget on such outwardly-oriented activities to be considered minimally healthy.

10. **Church Rumors.** Is there positive talk about God and His work in the church? Are there people who believe God can renew the church in the days ahead? Or, do people talk about the past, respond pessimistically to visionary statements and fail to recognize that God is at work in their church? A random sampling of community opinion should be majority favorable for a church to be considered minimally healthy.