

Kingdom Equip Network – Global Online Conference

Strategies for a Healthy Church by A.J. Mathieu

2020 has been quite a year. The world united, at least for a short time, around a common enemy, the COVID-19 virus. I like that our two primary conference themes today both connect to an idea of health – corporate church health, and individual spiritual health. I submit to you today, though, that COVID-19 is not the root cause of problems in the Church. The Church has been unhealthy in areas all over the world for a long time. What COVID did was expose them.

Don't get me wrong; in the last century, we have seen tremendous growth in the Church. A 20th-Century effort to bring the Gospel to the nations found great success! Millions have come to faith in Christ. Still today, we see the farthest reaches of the planet blossoming with new bible translations and Gospel expansion.

Many churches in this season have experienced low attendance both in-person, as mandated in many places, and also online. In North America, the Barna research group recently found that 30% of “committed Christians” (people who before the COVID crisis attended Church regularly) had not attended any online worship services since the start of the pandemic. This result speaks to the maturity level of those people. When it became easy not to attend, and therefore not be missed by anyone, they have chosen not to attend.

Are these results the fault of the person, or the fault of the church? Let's consider both.

What is our responsibility as Christians?

The Apostle Paul told the church at Philippi in Philippians 2:12 that, *“as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence but now much more in my absence--continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”* This was a case of separation. Paul had left the church and encouraged them to continue in the faith in his absence. Today we have the opposite. The church has been forced to leave its pastor and gathering place. Most of us have been given the opportunity to gather online, though many are not. Hebrews 10:25 tells us to *“not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”* We can see from these two verses alone, that we have a responsibility as believers to not only meet together, in whatever form that might be, but also to continue living out what we've been taught, and know to be right. The Bible is full of commands on right living, and how Christians should interact with one another. Let's shift now into a look at the church and what we find in Scripture.

What is the responsibility of the church?

I'll go through the responsibilities of the church in a series of four questions for you to consider.

1. What is our mandate? – The mission of the church question

Matthew 28:19-20 gives us The Great Commission of the Church. Let's look at it – *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”*

Let me first remind you that this mission spoken by Jesus was to the eleven disciples. Individual men. They were to build His church from that day forward, but the mission given is for each believer in all places for all time, as well as churches collectively.

Let's look closer at the two components of The Great Commission.

First, **“Go and make disciples.”** The first part of The Great Commission is evangelism. The church is designed to grow by bringing the Gospel to your neighbors and the nations.



Second, “**Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.**” If you share the Good News with someone, but never teach anyone to obey what Jesus commanded, have you fulfilled the Great Commission? Not every church gets the opportunity to teach everyone that hears the Gospel from them, but every church should always be teaching what Jesus taught. That way, no matter where someone hears the Gospel, they’ll be taught what Jesus commanded from your church.

Evangelism and Edification go hand in hand, and your church must put these things above all else. Develop a clear, Great Commission-focused mission statement for your church, and keep it in front of your people continuously, so that everyone knows it. Keep it short and memorable.

A clear mission statement will build unity in your church with everyone knowing what you’re there to do, and everyone must understand that they all play a roll in that mission.

2. What motivates us? – Our core values question

Every church has core values, but many have not thought about what they truly are. Some established a set of values in the past because they read somewhere that it is an important thing to do. Most churches, in my experience, do not understand how to use their values as a tool to guide and direct the actions of the church.

An honest look at the church’s **actual** core values must happen if the church is to understand what motivates it. Our values drive our actions. I’ve worked with many churches that discovered that they value keeping things the same. God’s Word is unchanging, but His church is designed for all people in all places for all time. All those things change, and so the church must change too. Most of the unhealthy churches that I work with can trace back the decline of their effectiveness to the point at which they stopped being relevant to the contemporary generation, and failed to make changes that would allow them to continue reaching their people, and their city. It’s a leadership failure that decides a point in time is the end of development, and the church should remain the same from that point forward. Staying the same is just one example of what we call “negative values” or anti-values.” The discovery of anti-values is helpful, so that the church leaders can hold each other accountable not to return to their old ways, but instead, press on to more healthy actions.

What the church needs are a set of biblical, unchanging values to motivate the functions of the church. Thankfully, God provided for us. Let’s look in the book of **Acts chapter 2** in verses 41-47. You all know these passages. Let me remind you that where we begin in verse 41, Peter has just preached the Gospel to the crowd in Jerusalem at Pentecost.

“⁴¹Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

These passages give us a glimpse into the first-century church. The actions described here came naturally to them by the Holy Spirit at the birth of the church. Let’s review:

1. **Evangelism** – Like bookends in this passage of Scripture, the Gospel was proclaimed, and the church grew. We see it in verses 41 and 47.

2. **Teaching** – What were the Apostles teaching in the first century? The holy Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament), but also what they were commissioned to teach - everything that Jesus had commanded. Do these first two things sound familiar? I just talked about the two parts of the Great Commission; evangelism and teaching, and here we see them in action.
3. **Fellowship** – The church was together and caring for one another. They were in deep biblical relationships.
4. **Prayer** – Jesus first taught the people how to pray with an example three years earlier at the Sermon on the Mount. His church knew how to pray on day one. They knew what to pray for, and they knew it was important.
5. **Worship** – Ascribing worth to someone or something. The people were in awe in verse 43 at the miracles they saw through the apostles. Did they ascribe this high worth to the Apostles? No! They ascribed worth to God. They praised Him in verse 47.
6. **Generosity** – They gave to anyone who had need. No qualifications. No questions asked. Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan? The Jews in the story passed by the hurt man, but the Jews that were filled with the Holy Spirit in the early church had new hearts of flesh and gave as they saw need.

The first-century church was motivated by these things. They lived out what they valued. These were the core values of the church then and should be now.

Make note that the six core values of the church were all action-oriented. Christ's church is not static. It is also to be moving forward.

- They proclaimed the Gospel
- They taught the scriptures
- They built deep relationships and cared for one another.
- They were thoughtful and intentional in prayer.
- They worshiped God for who He is, what he had done, and what he promised to do.
- They were generous with all those around them.

Friends, if your church holds these values, and I hope you do or will, you will be blessed and be a blessing.

3. How will we organize our ministries? – Discipleship Pathway

Let's go back to the Great Commission for a moment. Jesus said, "teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." He did not say, "teach them to learn," he said, "teach them to obey." What's the difference? To learn is to gain knowledge. To obey is to have our lives reflect the knowledge that we've learned. It's action. It's change.

There is a personal responsibility that all believers hold that I talked about at the beginning, and there is a responsibility on the side of the church. The church's responsibility is to provide opportunities for people to mature as believers in Jesus. An effective Discipleship Pathway in the church maximizes the time that the church has with an individual each week to best move them, step by step, to greater maturity. What do we seek in maturity? For disciples to become disciple-makers! I call the Acts 2 values "**characteristic actions of maturity**," because if someone is truly living out those values in their own lives, they likely are growing in maturity, and becoming more Christ-like daily.



So, where should we start in deciding what we should be doing in our churches? Remember, I told you that we live out what we value, and I just talked about what we should value in our churches. A well-constructed Discipleship Pathway allows the church to live out its values in a simple, organized way. In a few steps, you can organize your ministries to maximize their outputs and communicate to your people what their next best step is to take with your church. Don't forget that in 2020 whether you're in Accra, Ghana, or Fort Worth, Texas, or Berlin, Germany, people have busy lives, and jobs, and distractions, and challenges. It is unrealistic to expect them to be at church three or four of five times per week listening to you preach over and over again. We need to focus on equipping them as best can with as little time as possible, and then have them back in their daily lives living out what they learn. A good Discipleship Pathway will only be **three or four primary steps** that you want all your people to take.

Keep in mind **Ephesians chapter 4** – “¹¹So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

Your job is to equip the saints.

4. What is the BIG thing God has called us to do here? – The Vision of the church question

My final component of a healthy church is striving towards the God-sized Vision He has willed for your church.

Acts 17:26 *“From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.”*

God is sovereign in all things, and that includes placing your church where it is, installing you as a leader, and surrounding you with the people in your congregation. He makes no mistakes, and His purposes are always good. You should seek the vision that He has for your church to accomplish where you are today.

The mission is the journey, and vision is the destination. Picture in your mind what your city, or state, or country, or the world would be like if your church were living out all God has for you to do. Will you reach even one percent of your city each year with the Gospel? For many of you, that would be a significant number. Would homelessness be eradicated because you built housing? Would clean water be available for all who have need? Would orphans be given homes? Would people in hospitals be discharged without debt? Would you train pastors and missionaries?

God has a vision for your church, and you have a responsibility to discern it, present it, get your people excited about it, and work towards it.

Now let's circle back to the beginning. Whose fault is it if people lack the maturity to continue engaging in the Church during a time such as this? The church must make opportunities available for people to be trained up, “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the



knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” – Ephesians 4:13

If everyone in your church understood your mission, to make and mature Disciples of Jesus...

If they engaged in teaching that drew them into God’s Word...

If they fostered deep relationships with other believers, who modeled and encouraged generosity...

If they learned how to share their faith with others...

If they led committed prayer lives to discern God’s will, would they fall away when the church doors are closed, and the world is in need? I think not, and my prayer for you today is that you’ll make the changes in your church that need to be made, to be all that God has for you.