

1. CHANGING LIVES: A CRUCIAL KEY TO HEALTHY GROWTH

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We first became aware of the importance of a church's potential to impact lives during orientation sessions for prospective new members. As staff members, four times a year we witnessed between 50 and 100 people share their stories of why they decided to become members. Many shared that their lives were changing in positive ways.

Sample comments included: "I feel like my life began when I started attending here." "I have grown beyond my expectations." "I feel alive here." "This church supports my spiritual growth in very loving ways." "This church has changed my life forever." "Learning about and using the teachings of Jesus Christ is making a wonderful difference in my life." "Coming here literally saved my life." This church grew from just under 500 people attending worship to almost 1,000 in three years.

In growing his church, Rick Warren found that "*What really attracts large numbers of people is changed lives.*" Our research confirms this. Seven out of 10 churches with high life changing impact are growing. In 95 percent of declining churches, life-changing scores are below average. It is extremely difficult to grow a church when most people are not experiencing positive life changes. Warren concluded that, "*Changed lives are a church's greatest advertisement.*" People become excited and tend to invite others when their own lives are changing. Newcomers who experience life-changing churches are more likely to return.

This curriculum includes:

- (1) Biblical Examples of Changed Lives.
- (2) How the Church Life Survey Measures Life Changing Impact.
- (3) A Tale of Two Ministries.
- (4) Ways to Create Strong Life Changing Church Communities.
- (5) Reflections.
- (6) Research Findings Regarding Life Changing Impact.

(1) Biblical Examples Of Changed Lives.

Shortly after Jesus' death, the disciples became filled with the Holy Spirit and began sharing with new confidence their excitement about the wonders of God (Acts 2:11). Those who accepted the message were baptized and some three thousand people were added (Acts 2:41). The numbers of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly (Acts 6:7).

When the world observed the first Christians, they saw something

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quite different. From reviewing first century writings, Elaine Pagels reported that early Christians:

- *Shocked their pagan neighbors by staying to care for the sick and dying from a highly contagious plague that killed one third of the population.*
- *Brought food, medicines and companionship to prisoners.*
- *Bought coffins and dug graves to bury the poor and criminals.*
- *Contributed to a common fund to support abandoned orphans.*
- *Practiced self control in sexual matters, unlike others around them.*

Pagels concluded, “*What attracted crowds of newcomers to early Christian groups was seeing such extraordinary behavior.*”

Searching for a word to describe these kinds of dramatic changes, someone in the first century chose an Indo-European word for “church” which meant, “*a swelling, to be strong, hero,*” (Webster’s Dictionary). This reflected the observation that many early Christians were indeed growing, becoming stronger and more heroic.

In his book, “*The Heart of Christianity,*” biblical scholar Marcus Borg points out that, “*transformation is at the center of Christian life.*” To be born again means dying to an old way and becoming a new being. For example, in the Nicodemus story, Jesus stated, “*Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God* (John 3:3).

Based on a review of many studies, Dr. Jeffrey Levin concluded that people who are active in religious communities tend to have:

- less hypertension (high blood pressure),
- less coronary-artery disease,
- longer lives,
- higher survival rates after coronary bypass surgery,
- less depression,
- lower suicide rates, and
- better psychological adjustment.

“*On this point,*” Levin concluded, “*there can be no argument. A positive association between religion and health has been observed in hundreds of studies, conducted by scores of researchers in different countries.*” These amazing findings confirm what Jesus stated, “*I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly*” (John 10:10).

Recently, after a recent review of many studies, Lynda Powell concluded that churchgoers live an average of *seven years longer* and have less cardiovascular disease than people who do not attend!

The story of Saul’s conversion represents one of the best-known biblical stories of a transformed life. In Acts, chapter 9, we read that Saul

was born in Tarsus (modern day Turkey). As a young man, he studied in Jerusalem under the well-known Rabbi Gamaliel. He persecuted the early “followers of the way” as heretics. He witnessed and approved the stoning to death of Stephan, a young leader chosen by the apostles for his Spirit and wisdom.

On the road to Damascus to persecute more early Christians, Saul experienced a profound life-changing encounter with Christ. Later, when Saul recovered, he was baptized as Paul and began preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God (Acts, chapter 9). He is given credit for writing nearly a quarter of what’s now in the New Testament. He founded and mentored several churches.

Paul described his own “dying and rising in Christ,” *“I have been crucified in Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me”* (Galatians 1:20).

(2) How The Church Life Survey Measures Life Changing Impact.

If a high percentage of congregants check *yes* to the five survey items below, we regard that church as strong life changing. The percentage checking *yes* to these items ranges from a low of 62 percent to a high of 94 percent:

- Coming to this church is making a positive difference in my life.
- I am becoming a more joyful person. (*Joy* is one of the fruits of the spirit.)
- This faith community plays a vital role in my spiritual well being.
- There is something special happening here that really matters.
- I feel enthusiastic when I talk to people about this church. (Note: *enthusiasm* comes from a root word meaning to be inspired, possessed by God.)

(3) A Tale Of Two Ministries.

(a) The church with the low life changing church score of 62.

From the pastor: “I came to a church with a history riddled by dysfunction. We have really struggled to be unified and choosing to go in the same direction. The board members are burned out and a few resent change and/or me. It’s not been real comfortable for a long time.

Survey results showed that in *Worship*, a low percentage of people reported: (1) hearing about the wonder and mystery of God, (2) finding the sermons inspiring and interesting, and (3) the music and congregational songs as uplifting or satisfying. On their survey, one congregant wrote: *“I need more enthusiasm in worship. I do not feel spiritually fed.”*

Survey results also revealed that *very few* people attended classes or found the teachings helpful in difficult times. Also, a very low percentage of people reported that their lives were changing in positive ways.

Neither the pastor nor leaders followed through on implementing any of the changes recommended from the survey results. Three years after the survey, this church closed its doors. The minister no longer serves in a pulpit ministry.

(b) A portrait of a high life changing church (score of 94).

From the minister: “When I was interviewed for the opening at this church, the board asked, ‘What plans would you have for growing this church?’ I replied that I wanted people to grow *deeper*, rather than finding ways to add new people.” Later, we developed our purpose statement, “*Empowering people, building community.*”

From congregants (comments written on the Church Life Survey): “I love the enthusiasm and acceptance here . . . Everyone is welcome, no matter what their beliefs . . . I usually feel God’s grace when I come . . . A community of people who have hope and positive beliefs Sharing joy, love and laughter . . . A caring, compassionate spiritual community that reaches out to all in love. . . Laughter, joy and openness to all . . . Very inclusive, everyone is welcome . . . I feel comfortable here. I am home . . . Change here is graceful, with a minimum of stress.”

Survey results revealed that this church community was *very* strong in the six ministry essentials listed below, as well as life changing impact.

(4) Ways to Create Strong Life Changing Church Communities.

The two portraits above suggest that the quality of certain ministry essentials plays a key role in creating a strong life-changing ministry. The five survey items listed on page three measure life changing impact.

Our research identifies *specifically* which ministry essentials have the greatest life changing impact. As seen below, Worship has the greatest potential for changing lives. You can also see which of the *items* in worship and other ministry essentials have the strongest impact.

#1. Worship (specific survey items also are listed in order of life changing impact):

- (a) Feeling and emotional release.
- (b) Feeling more uplifted than when I came.
- (c) Hearing about the wonder and mystery of God.
- (d) Finding the sermons inspiring and helpful in everyday life.

#2. **Empowering People** (items listed in order of importance):

- (a) This church helps me identify and use my spiritual gifts.
- (b) This church provides training for those who serve in special ways.
- (c) This community provides a safe place to explore and experiment.

#3. **Team Leadership** (in order of importance):

- (a) The leaders here (clergy, lay leaders, staff, etc.) are enthusiastic and positive.
- (b) There is a lot of joy and laughter in this church.
- (c) Leaders are willing to evaluate and use what works, and put aside what doesn't.
- (d) Our leaders frequently encourage and compliment people.

#4. **Teachings and Practices:**

- (a) This church stresses the importance of using spiritual teachings.
- (b) Spiritual teachings have helped me greatly to handle difficult times better.

#5. **Purpose:** Our leaders communicate clearly this church's purpose or mission.

#6. **Prayer:** This church really shows people how to pray through sermons and regular classes.

(5) Reflections

It amazed us to find that every one of the six ministry essentials plus life changing impact are referred to in Acts 1:12 to 6:7. This means that these ministry essentials were present 2,000 years ago, and are still present today! This includes: **worship** (speaking the word of God boldly), frequent **prayer**, spiritually **empowered** people, choosing **leaders** who were "full of Spirit and wisdom," **purpose** (salvation and changing lives), **teaching** "the word," and **healing** or **changing lives** (Acts 3:9 and 4:13).

These ministry elements, introduced by Jesus, became the DNA for creating life-changing church communities. The Apostles, observing how Jesus ministered, continued the essence of what they witnessed and heard.

Rick Warren believes that the gospel *message* stays the same but the *method* of delivery needs to change. Likewise, ministry *essentials* stay the same, but the *methods* in which they are expressed and experienced need to change to reach the greatest number of people. In worship, for example, many thriving churches now offer different kinds of music in order reach different generations.

Some churches place a great deal of emphasis on inner transformation. Some place more emphasis on outer activities, such as missionary work, helping people in the community and spreading the Word to the unchurched. All of these are important aspects of what Jesus taught and practiced. Finding the balance between the inner and outer is not easy. Before a church can claim to be life transforming, however, it's necessary for leaders to know whether or not their church is, in reality, strongly life transforming.

(6) Research Findings. Church Life Surveys from over 140 congregations show clearly that **it takes quality** of life changing ministry essentials **to grow churches**. Quality changes more lives. Quality attracts new people and tends to retain them. Quality helps keep regulars engaged.

#1. In our large sample of churches, 69% with strong life-changing scores were growing, and 28% were plateaued .

#2. Lower-than-normal quality of life-changing essentials loses people. Ninety-five percent of *declining* churches have a *low* life-changing impact.

#3. Worship has the strongest correlation with changing lives, yet only 56 percent of churches with strong worship scores are growing. How could this be, since changing lives is a primary key to growing a healthy church? We found that many plateaued churches place a great deal of emphasis on developing worship quality, but pay little attention to other essentials. *Excellent Worship alone is not enough to grow a church.*

In the mini chapters on Leadership, Empowerment, Purpose, Teachings and Prayer, you will learn which aspects of these essentials change lives and grow congregations, as well as ways to increase quality.

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