

North Wake Church
studyserve



Introduction

Seeker-sensitive. Traditional. Emerging. Mega. Expository. House. Contemporary. Liturgical. Multi-campus. Topical. Purpose-driven. Missional. Chances are simply reading that list of church qualifying adjectives stirred your emotions. No doubt those emotions were mixed – some positive, others not so positive. Why? Because each of the aforementioned words are emotionally charged. These words carry baggage – often misunderstood and wrongly applied baggage, but baggage nonetheless. What is one word that always gives a positive rise when describing a church? *Healthy*.

The adjective healthy describes someone or something enjoying a state of health, which Webster's defines as "the condition of being sound in body, mind, or spirit" or a "flourishing condition." No one objects to a church that is sound and in a flourishing condition. Whether a church is mega & seeker-sensitive or a traditional & small (or any other combination of the endless list of adjectives), it must strive to be a healthy church. Whatever other qualifiers we want before our church description, we all must long to have the one that matters most: *Healthy*.

More important than what we want, however, is what Christ wants for his body, the church. Christ died for the church for a very specific reason – "so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27). It is clearly evident Christ's blood was shed in order to have a body that is free from defect, a body that is *healthy*.

Others have laid out in detail what constitutes a healthy church¹, so that is not the intent here. The local church sits at the heart of God's redemptive plan of all peoples. For when a person is saved from their sinful rebellion it is not into a life of worldly escape or personal isolation, but into a body of believers that collectively display the transforming power of the gospel. The church is the people of God visibly displaying the restoring effects of the gospel for a lost and dying world to see. With that in mind, the purpose of this short article is to explore a model that aims to cultivate a healthy church by equipping their members to become mature and ministering worshippers of God.

First we must ask, is a new model potentially helpful? Statistics indicate the answer is "Yes!" You have probably heard of the 80/20 rule – 80 percent of the work is accomplished by 20 percent of the members. A body working at only 20 percent of its capacity deserves the diagnosis of unhealthy. And yet a recent article in *Rev!* magazine shows the 80/20 rule is optimistic for most congregations. Regardless of church size, the survey shows, only about 15 percent of members are actively serving at their church. From churches with 100 members to churches with 2000+, the average number of volunteers is fewer than 20 percent.²

Why is this lack of member involvement such an issue? Is it because people, specifically church members, are just downright lazy? We don't think so. Neither does researcher and missiologist Dr. Ed Stetzer. In a recent interview, Dr. Stetzer commented on this issue: "Part of it is that we have to recognize that we've created the system that we loathe. I don't think the reason 15 per-

¹ See Mark Dever, *What is a Healthy Church?*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007) & Mark Driscoll & Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

² Lee Sparks. "The State of Volunteer Ministry." *Rev!*, Jan/Feb 2009, 50-54.

cent serve is because 85 percent are lazy. We've created a system that glorifies the clergy and marginalizes the laity. We got the outcome we created programs for."

The structure and programs of many churches literally encourage members to remain on the edges of involvement. The pastor(s) has become the only hinge on which the whole church operates. An unhealthy dependence has evolved between parishioners and their pastor(s). Sure the pastor(s) should be a spiritual leader and shepherd, but it's not his job, and the duty of a few select others, to do all the work of the ministry. *All* believers have been given specific gifts to minister in specific ways. In order to facilitate this type of cohesive, co-dependant ministry North Wake Church developed a model simply called Study/Serve/Worship.

Biblical Foundation

If we were to start with the question "What works?" before developing biblical parameters, we would certainly veer off course. Sure, we can develop practices and programs that drive attendance and giving upward, but that is not the ultimate goal. A focus on persons and dollars alone inadequately measures true health. Health in a local church is seen in a "congregation that increasingly reflects God's character as his character has been revealed in his word."³ Simply put, a healthy church is characterized by members that are continually growing spiritually and eagerly serving both those inside and outside the church body.

In order to guard against developing a ministry structure undergirded by pragmatism, we must first analyze Scripture to best determine how to guide our congregation into deeper spiritual maturity yielding greater conformity to Christ. Theology must drive methodology in order to sustain long-term, healthy church growth. Therefore, before diving into the methodology and practical application, a biblical understanding must first pave the way.

Study

Jesus was once asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" His reply "To love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Mt. 22:37). Out of all the things Jesus could have said, he focused on loving God, not just with actions and emotions, but also with thoughts. Scripture is clear: all followers of Jesus Christ are to steer clear of irreverent teaching and immerse themselves in sound doctrine – that is, to love the Lord their God with all their mind.

Jesus' last words dealt with the issue of teaching disciples to observe all his commands (Mt. 28:19-20). Inherent in this command is the idea of studying for we cannot teach others if we first have not learned. In the same manner, Paul repeatedly warns us to avoid deceptive philosophies and silly myths by rightly handling the word of truth and always watching our doctrine closely (Col. 2:8; 1 Tim. 4:7-8, 16; 2 Tim. 2:15). Peter, likewise, exhorts us to always be prepared – that is to be studied – to answer those who might question our faith (1 Pt. 3:15).

³ Mark Dever, *What is a Healthy Church?*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 40.
North Wake Church

These few texts alone show the importance of studying God's word. While there are numerous other passages to bolster the point, these verses show that studying God's word is not just for the "super" Christians, nor is it optional – it should be the joyful desire of all who cherish Jesus.

A. W. Tozer once said, "What comes into your mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you." Apart from studying God's word to shape our thoughts, we are left to our own man-centered thoughts about God, which are nothing less than idolatrous. Simply put, in order to rightly think about Jesus, apply a biblical worldview to all of life, teach others, and protect ourselves from false teaching, we must commit ourselves to the study of the things of God.

Serve

In John 13, Jesus gives us a grand example and decisive command in regards to serving one another. Just before his impending crucifixion, Jesus gathers his disciples for one last meal. Amidst all the things Jesus could have told his disciples or had them do, Jesus pauses to serve them by washing their feet (John 13:1-11). Why did he do this? To give all of his followers a stunning example of how we are to serve one another. Not only did Jesus provide an example, but he also gives a command: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (v. 13:34-35).

Bringing further light to this idea of serving one another, the image of a body is used to vividly illustrate the relationship church members have with one another (Rom. 12:3-21; 1 Cor. 12:12-31). While this image is not the most prolific used in Scripture to describe the church, it is perhaps the most memorable because we all are extremely familiar with this concept – we all have a body! In these passages Scripture provides vibrant insight into the defining marks of a healthy church.

Paul clearly puts forth the idea of the church being an intimately connected group of individual members that form the whole body (Rm. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-31). Every member, not just those select few who are seen as mature, has something to offer to the other members. The question, then, is not *if* a member has a gift, but *what* gift does a member have. God gives *that* gift to *that* person, not for his or her own benefit, but for the benefit of the entire body. Just like a body is not whole without an eye or without a toe, the church is not whole without all members actively exercising their unique gifts. When a member does not exercise their God-given gift the whole body suffers. Likewise, when a member exercises their God-given gift, the whole body benefits.

The role of the pastor, then, becomes not one of glorified, omni-competent clergy, but one of equipper. Perhaps the most overlooked, or outright neglected, role of the pastor is that of equipper. Sure, the pastor is a leader, shepherd, example, and teacher, but he is also an equipper. Paul says in Ephesians 4 pastors are given to the church "to equip the saints for the work of the ministry." Despite the common perception, the pastor does not have to be able to do all things for all people in all circumstances at all times. Instead he encourages and equips all believers under his care to minister to and serve one another. The equipping pastor helps every member of his congregation see themselves as ministers and humbly equips them to joyfully fulfill that role. Only when the pastor is seen as an equipper and the members are actively exercising their various gifts will the body be healthy.

Worship

All of life is worship (1Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17). So no matter what we do, it should be done in a way to bring glory to God and not ourselves for this is the very reason we were created (Is. 43:7). Yet, the pages of Scripture portray a specific type of corporate worship.

The church explodes onto the scene right after Pentecost. In Acts 2 we see a description of the *gathered* church body worshipping together. Other texts also speak to the practice of the church assembling for corporate worship, specifically through preaching of the word (Acts 5:42; 6:4; 13:15-44; 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Col. 4:15-16; Heb. 10:25). Biblical worship is marked by reverent awe of God and joyful praise to God. True worship by the church is centered on God, not man, and aims to exalt Christ while edifying the saints (1 Pt. 2:9-10; John 4:24; 14:26, 1 Cor. 14:26). Scripture clearly shows a healthy church body gathers regularly to hear the Scriptures expounded and express adoration to their great God and Savior.



Methodology

Words teach. So do actions. Everything communicates something. Teaching the importance of biblical community, theological study, and mutual service, void of structures and a culture to support those ideologies creates confusion. In other words, what we actively teach with our words must align with what we passively present with our ministry structures. To that end, we turn our attention to the practical application for Study/Serve/Worship, which helps North Wake fulfill their mission of equipping its members to become mature and ministering worshippers of God. The foundation for this model is built around four components: (1) Life Change, (2) Service Opportunities, (3) Corporate Worship, (4) Small Groups.

Life Change

The primary study component comes in what North Wake calls Life Change, a one-hour time of study on Sunday mornings. In order to ensure a cohesive and purposeful curriculum is taught, North Wake creates their own program of study that focuses on the beliefs, practices, and virtues of helping its members grow into mature and ministering worshippers of God. During this time of study members are not only instructed in various Christian doctrines, but also are challenged to

think about how to apply what they have learned to their lives. The goal is not just head knowledge, but real, lasting Life Change.

Service Opportunities

In order to align the church structure with the teaching of the importance of serving one another, the congregation is leaned upon heavily at North Wake. Service opportunities consist of all the areas that are needed to fulfill the various ministries on any given Sunday. Whether it's leading a children's class, directing parking, or working the soundboard, members of the church body fill each position.

Every member is told they are an integral part of the body, and the church structures are designed to communicate this very same thing. Apart from the body being actively involved with every ministry, the church would fail to operate. And it is designed this way – a body whose parts do not work fails to operate. Listing service opportunities and prayerfully expecting the members to fill those roles creates a culture of healthy dependence within the church. This culture facilitates and encourages members of the body to joyfully serve each other.

Corporate Worship

The church body gathers for a time of singing, public reading of Scripture, and hearing the preached word. During this time individuals and families join with the rest of the body to celebrate and "reflect back to God the radiance of His worth!"⁴ This time of celebration and teaching is the cornerstone for North Wake's entire ministry. It is here the body gathers to exult in and be exhorted by our magnificent God, which in turn equips and encourages members to live radically Christ-shaped lives throughout the rest of the week. The joyful assembly of the church sets the tone for all of our spiritual growth!

Small Groups

These groups consist of a few families and/or singles (~10-20 people) that gather formally once a week to study, pray and encourage one another. In addition to the formal gathering, group members are encouraged to meet in smaller subsets (i.e. two or three folks joining together to grab coffee) throughout the week to share life together. These groups are designed to foster biblical community through the relational application of Scripture. Small groups form a pivotal part of being fully ministered to and fully ministering to others, so each person who calls North Wake home is strongly encouraged to become actively involved in one of these communities.

Members of small groups experience all three aspects of the S/S/W at every gathering. As the group members discuss and apply the previous weeks sermon their minds are sharpened by God's word. The small group also serves as an extension of the pastoral arm by ministering to one another, whether in times of family crisis, personal hardship, or during joyful celebration. Group members share life together, and therefore know each other best and joyfully serve each other as opportunity arises. Group members also serve one another by identifying evidences of

⁴ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), 84.
North Wake Church

grace in each other's lives and by openly examining each other's lives for patterns of sin, all for the ultimate goal of being increasingly conformed into the image of Christ. Finally, the purpose of the gathering is to worship God in all his goodness.

Summary

So what exactly is S/S/W and how does it work? S/S/W is a Sunday morning ministry structure that allows North Wake to focus on our mission of becoming "mature and ministering worshipers of God" by taking seriously the biblical values of Study, Service, and Worship. At North Wake, our entire congregation (except for our children) rotates on a six-month schedule that allows every adult (including teens) to Study for six months and Serve for six months. We Worship one hour and Study or Serve the other hour as a corporate body, and gather in small groups throughout the week to encourage each other to live lives that increasingly reflect God's character.

Certainly the S/S/W model is not the only model that has the potential to help local churches striving for health. Nor is this model simply a programmatic structure that fits snugly into any ministry environment. It is the biblical fidelity and methodological intentionality of the S/S/W model that provides a ministry structure seeking to produce a healthy body of mature and ministering worshippers of God.

