

Diagnose Your Church's Health

Are the Church's Leaders Committed to the Ministry of the Church?

By Chuck Lawless

This article is the final in a series dealing with questions to ask when consulting with a church. The question for this month is perhaps the most personal one, as it focuses primarily on the pastor and other leaders of the church. For the sake of clarity, I will keep the spotlight primarily on the pastor and staff—realizing that these same thoughts apply to other church leaders as well.

Our church growth studies at the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth have consistently shown that the most effective growing churches are led by pastors with a long tenure. Pastors who “stick with” a church through good times and rough times gain a level of credibility and respect that allows them to challenge the church to take risks necessary for growth. The church that knows that their pastor will support them, love them, and still lead them even if they do not always achieve their goals will follow that pastor when he moves them toward growth.

As a consultant, you will often work with church leaders who are struggling with their leadership in a particular church. Indeed, you would likely not be involved with the church at all were they not facing some difficult issues—issues that are almost always related somehow to the one who leads the congregation. His level of commitment to a long-term ministry at that church—as well as the commitment of other leaders—will directly influence your work with that congregation. Below are a few strategies to address this important question:

1. *Up front, ask the pastor about his commitment to the church.* You cannot know the pastor's intentions until you ask him. Because the pastor contributes so heavily to the church's future, I ask him about his personal plans during my first interview with him. You likely will sense his uneasiness in answering this question if the pastor is already considering moving to another church.
2. *Be aware of the pastor's ministry history.* If his track record shows, for example, that he leaves a church after his fifth year, you may have reason to wonder about his plans if he is in his sixth year of ministry at the current church.
3. *Ask the pastor about his vision for the next five years at this church.* If he has none—or if his stated vision is only generic—he may believe that his remaining ministry with this congregation is only short-term.
4. *Ask other staff members about their own commitments to the church.* Again, you will not know their willingness to stay until you ask them. As a consultant, do not be afraid to ask this tough question.
5. *Ask staff members to describe their “ideal” job description.* As you interview them, ask them to define their current job description and role. Then, ask them to describe their “ideal” job description if they could re-write it. Any significant gap between the two is room for discouragement—and sometimes a reason to begin looking elsewhere for ministry employment. Unhappy staff members are seldom ready to think long-term about the church.

6. *Review the church's history of staffing.* Suppose a church has, under the leadership of the same pastor, lost three of its five full-time ministers in the last eighteen months—all within their first three years of ministry in that church. Your role as a consultant is to determine the causes behind these departures, and then determine if a systemic problem exists. *Something* is likely happening when staff members leave a church fairly soon after arriving.
7. *Ask the pastor and staff to describe the "greatest" days in the church's history.* If the church's greatest days are in the past, current staff likely have a weak vision for the future. Ideally, a committed church leader will describe the church's greatest days as yet to come.
8. *Listen closely during laity interviews for internal conflict in the church.* Underlying conflict may push pastors and staff members to think about leaving—even when they say otherwise. Though we might hope otherwise, the same minister who says he is committed to staying may already be talking to another church, especially when conflict exists.
9. *Be aware that some leaders are committed to staying, but not to growth.* Longer-term ministries are especially susceptible here. Once comfort and complacency set in, leaders will sometimes do what it takes to stay—including stifling growth that may threaten the current power brokers in the church. This obstacle to growth is a difficult one to overcome.
10. *Pray for wisdom.* As noted previously, some leaders may struggle being truthful when confronted with questions about their plans. Others may genuinely be committed to staying, but they are nevertheless already dreaming about the next place to go. Ask God to give you discernment as you listen.

A Review

The goal of this series of articles has been to help consultants begin to analyze the overall health of a church. Previous questions were:

- "Is the church's teaching based on the Bible?"
- "Is the church a praying church?"
- "Is the church driven by a Great Commission focus?"
- "Is the church reaching non-believers?"
- "Is the church keeping new believers who join?"
- "Is the church both locally and globally minded?"
- "Does the church have a strategic plan for growth?"

I pray that these articles (available by searching this site) have been beneficial to you as you consult with local churches.