

ASSESSING THE HEALTH OF CHURCHES IN LOW-DENSITY POPULATION AREAS

Developed by Dr. Harold Longenecker, RHMA Director Emeritus

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Introduction

Self-knowledge is hard to come by. The proverb “know thyself” is often praised but seldom practiced. The same holds true for church ministries. The pressure for evaluation is felt from all sides but, for several reasons, evaluation isn’t easy.

- Honest evaluation of our own work is difficult because we’re often too close to the trees to see the forest.
- Daily preoccupation with ministry concerns can make us “function” oriented—like the two stone masons who were asked, “What are you doing?” One replied, “laying bricks,” the other, “building a beautiful temple.” If our vision is limited to just “doing things”—one, after another, after another—evaluation will be largely statistical.
- There’s also the problem of finding suitable assessment instruments, especially for small-town or rural churches. Most questionnaires are tilted toward the larger church and, as a result, are ill-suited for churches in low-density areas.

This assessment is different because it highlights crucial but non-statistical aspects of church life and ministry. The areas selected for evaluation are designed to present a composite picture of the spiritual health of the smaller church. The questions require a minimum of subjective judgment. The answers point to tangible evidences of spiritual and corporate vitality in ways besides statistics, budgets, goals, programs and strategies. These are important, but chiefly as a means to an end, not the end itself. The aim of the survey is to assess the health of the church for the benefit of both pastor and people. The tone of the survey is designed to say that “our church can be better” rather than “our church is failing.” Careful attention to the thinking that lies back of the questions will help reveal correctives where needed.

Notice that the questions are divided into four sections, covering twelve months—a complete growth cycle. We do this to reflect the sense of seasonal development in Christian ministry. We are not suggesting, of course, that ministry occurs in twelve-month cycles.

Completing the questionnaire

- To assure accuracy in responses, two or more lay leaders should join the pastor in completing the assessment. Since questions focus on the observed insights and activities of church members and community residents, it helps to have more than one person verifying the data. Furthermore, using key leaders in this way helps in the development of a leadership team.
- Each question is followed by material consisting of comments/questions designed to identify possible answers. These are suggestive, not exhaustive. Respondents should try to think of additional comments/questions.
- Take time to reflect, discuss, and consult church records. It is better to do the work well than rush it through.
- Strive to be as specific as possible with your answers.

Evaluating the questionnaire

1. Those who complete it should do the evaluation.
2. The purpose of evaluation is not to identify a passing or failing "grade" but to glean insights into the spiritual vitality of the congregation.
3. Reflect carefully on each question by asking, "Why is the question here? What does a positive (negative) response imply? I.e., if this quality is present (absent) what does it tell us about our church?" For example, question 1: "Have any of your people initiated new relationships with non-Christians that seem to offer openings for a verbal witness?"
 - Why is this question important?
 - What difference does it make whether the answer is "yes" or "no?"
 - If people in the church are (are not) initiating new relationships with community non-Christians, what does this say about your impact on the community?
4. Positive responses are obviously better than negative ones and the more positive responses the better. Since multiple positive responses to a given question enhance the "spiritual vitality" quotient even further, it shouldn't be difficult to determine that your church is (a) robustly healthy, (b) fairly healthy, or (c) not as healthy as it ought to be. But the goal, we repeat, isn't to earn a "grade."
5. More important than a "grade" is learning what is needed to improve church health. A review of the questionnaire will suggest possible responses. For example, if your people are not making contacts with non-Christians, what corrective is required?

Section I - Planting and Watering

Question	Help In Evaluating...
<p>Are any of your people initiating new relationships with community non-Christians that seem to offer plausible openings for a verbal Christian witness?</p>	<p>Are your people engaged with individuals and entities in the community? Do any serve on civic, educational or business boards/committees? In what specific ways do they show concern for their community and neighbors? Are pastor and board members leading the way?</p>
<p>Are people engaging in any new verbal witnessing episodes with neighbors, family or friends?</p>	<p>Are interactions formal and programmed or informal and spontaneous? Are interpersonal relationships open and free enough to allow a gracious witness?</p>
<p>Is there solid evidence that your preaching/teaching is touching lives at practical points and in life-changing ways?</p>	<p>Has anyone told you so? Have you heard reports via third parties? Though pastoral preaching and teaching must have biblical content, concern for intellectual and theological data alone is inadequate.</p>
<p>Are the people seeing answers to prayer?</p>	<p>There are more answers to prayer than we know, though some are more visible than others. It's also true that people differ as to whether an event really is an "answer to prayer." But within commonly accepted parameters, churches ought to see God at work. Question: Are people praying and seeing answers?</p>
<p>If your people could complete the statement, "Our Church exists for the purpose of . . ." what might be their response?</p>	<p>Use your imagination! Suggest several possible answers. What do they imply about the "vision" of your people? Do they see their church as having a reason or purpose for existing, beyond the routine</p>

Section II - Signs of Vitality

Question	Help In Evaluating...
Have your people enjoyed any "celebrations" lately?	This can include everything from youth nights to church picnics, special events with speakers/musicians, historical commemorations, achievements, a class of new members, etc. To qualify as a "celebration," the event must be marked by high-voltage fellowship.
Have there been any notable ministry successes?	Significant increases in Sunday School classes, children's program, youth group, women's/men's groups, salvation or dedication responses, etc. Maybe your worship services are growing and becoming increasingly effective.
Are adults being reached from your area?	Have any begun regular attendance, trusted Christ, been baptized, joined the church? Churches grow as adults are reached, assimilated, and trained.
Do you see evidences of spiritual/personal growth on the part of young people and/or adults?	Dealing with known sin, restoring a marriage, family healing, new interest in the things of God, recognizing and activating spiritual gifts, becoming available for ministry, openness to leadership opportunities, etc. Do your people know that growth toward the likeness of Jesus Christ is God's design for His people?
Are there signs of improved family life?	Are husbands/wives exhibiting more wholesome attitudes? Are marriages more stable? Are parenting practices in the areas of finances and discipline improving? How about relationships among youth? How do you know?

Section III - Measuring maturity

Question	Help In Evaluating...
Are you as a church leader viewed by others as a growing person?	In relationship with God, spouse and children, church and community; in diligence, study, faithfulness, love, concern, purity? Read 1 Timothy 4:11-16 in your favorite translation or paraphrase, especially verse 15. Is your "progress" visible to people around you?
What are the impressions of your people as they watch the pastor and other leaders at work?	Do they see conflict, politics, competition, stagnation, or servant leaders working together? Is there a "team-ness" attitude? Are people increasingly involved in ministry? Is the fruit of "team-ness" having a positive effect on church business meetings? Do people have confidence in their leaders?
Are there visible signs of healthy "body life?"	Love, ministry of helps, prayer, servanthood, sacrifice, humility, wholesome vulnerability, forgiveness asked for and given, discipling and mentoring, the spontaneous forging of personal support groups, etc?
In light of 1 Timothy 3:7, can you point to occasions where positive appreciation and respect have been tangibly expressed by outsiders for the trustworthiness, integrity and honesty of church leaders and church members?	In areas of finances, business dealings, neighborhood relationships, godly living, compassionate concern for community needs—spiritual and social, etc?
Have any major community or church crises arisen that God has been able to use for a redemptive impact?	Untimely death, accident, acts of Providence, etc. These lie outside our control, but if we are ready, God may allow them as a means of getting the attention of people and turning their hearts toward Him.

Section IV - Rejoicing in the Fruit

Question	Help In Evaluating...
<p>Is the church climate closed or open, restrained or free?</p>	<p>Does communication work? Is casual conversation negative or positive? Do people gather in exclusive circles or mingle freely? Can new things be tried without undue resistance? How are problems dealt with?</p>
<p>Are you aware of any reconciliations that have occurred among church people and/or church leaders, or between church members and alienated people in the community?</p>	<p>Especially in smaller communities, alienation between people over what appear to be routine matters can divide communities for decades. With the resolution of such differences, a ministry can take on new luster.</p>
<p>Have there been any high-profile recommitments?</p>	<p>In public or private, have any prominent backsliders, spiritually-alienated husbands, wives, or grown children come back to Christ?</p>
<p>Have leaders begun emerging from within the body?</p>	<p>Candidates for the board, Sunday School teachers, task-force leaders, committee chairpersons, elders, deacons, youth leaders, etc.</p>
<p>Are people showing concern for places/ministries beyond their community?</p>	<p>Can you see any fresh support for missions, concern for nearby towns, the inner city, camps, neighborhood kids' outreach, short-term missions, prayer and/or money for missions, personal visits to mission fields, etc? Are people preparing for a life of ministry?</p>

For questions or additional help, or for permission to reproduce, please contact RHMA.



Rural Home Missionary Association

Box 300, Morton, IL 61550

(866) 263-2350

info@rhma.org www.rhma.org