

DEFINING CHURCH VITALITY: LET ME COUNT THE WAYS

Most pastors, laypersons, and denominational leaders develop a personal theory that says *one particular factor* is the key to congregational vitality. Each of those theories is correct and incorrect. Each “favorite factor” is important, but church vitality is a result of a long list of factors.

What Is the Church’s Macro Mission?

Looking at church vitality from the macro direction produces a list of classic, universal mission functions for churches of every size, in every generation, in every kind of community. From this perspective, all vital churches have the same mission. Theologians and church historians have summarized that macro mission with terms such as *Koinonia* (fellowship/relational/community), *Diaconia* (service), *Didache* (Bible teaching), *Kerygma* (proclamation), and *Leiturgia* (worship/communal prayer). We see this macro mission in the writings of theologians, the printed mission statements of denominations, and the preambles of local church constitutions. All of these documents are biblical, truthful statements of purpose.

Most church leaders and members feel adequately informed with the three verses in which Jesus answered the macro mission question: the Great Commandment, the Great Commission, and the Apostle Paul’s definitions of the church’s macro mission. Stated in those biblical ways, congregations accomplish that macro mission by doing three things: (a) transforming the quality of peoples’ lives by helping them strengthen their spiritual connection with God (Luke 10:27); (b) helping hurting people in the church, community, and across the world who have physical and emotional needs (Luke 10:27); and (c) encouraging more people to form a spiritual connection with God (Luke 10:29-37; Matthew 23:19-20).

What Is the Church’s Micro Mission?

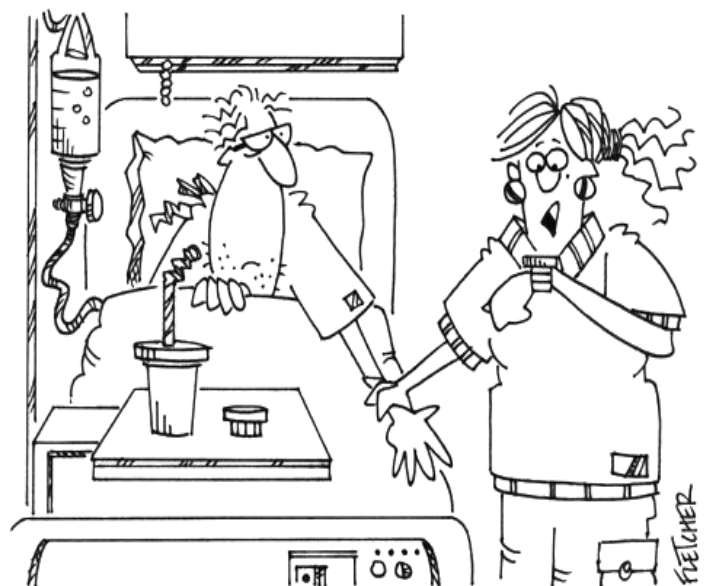
Why is the micro mission important? Books, journal articles, and blogs that answer this micro mission question tell us “how to do it” in small churches or megachurches, while other experts write about the mission

of churches located in urban or rural areas or other specific environments. Ultimately, congregations use dissimilar ways to accomplish Jesus’ mission and ministry in each community and generation.

A healthy congregational mission identity fits its size, fits its members, fits its resources, and meets the contemporary needs of people in its surrounding community. Most unhealthy congregations fall short—not by affirming something other than a biblically mandated macro mission—but by emphasizing a micro mission identity that does not fit that congregation, community, or generation.

What Is the Church’s Method Mission?

The church’s method mission tells people how to do worship, how to do evangelism, how to do member care, etc. Research indicates that healthy congregations deliver on the macro and micro mission with the following methods.



“JUDGING BY THE NUMBER OF VISITORS WHO SAID THEY LOVED YOU... YOU EITHER ATTEND A VERY AFFECTIONATE CHURCH, OR YOU’RE A LOT SICKER THAN I THOUGHT.”

- **Worship that honors God, spiritually enriches members, and retains young adult newcomers.** When a congregation loses its ability, especially with its worship music and preaching, to connect with the people in its community and generation, that failure predicts the end of all its mission accomplishments.
- **Children and youth church school classes and programs that retain parent newcomers.** If the congregation lacks Sunday school classes for children under high school age, it will probably die within a few years, unless it is located in a retirement community. Also, a strong youth ministry program is important to members of most congregations. These methods recognize the validity of the old adage “Kids go where kids are!” and they know that parents often follow.
- **Adult Sunday church school and other adult groups that give members and newcomers a sense of belonging.** Few people experience a strong sense of belonging and spiritual growth except through regular meetings with other church attendees in adult groups that focus on Bible study, prayer, service, recreation, or social interaction.
- **Adult new member involvement in groups and ministries that nourish faith development and growth in discipleship.** New members need to get into a group of some kind—choir, prayer group, Sunday school class, softball team, etc.—within the first six weeks after they join. They need to get into a ministry of some kind within six months after they join. Declining membership churches assimilate the 30 percent who are extroverted. Healthy churches figure out how to involve the other 70 percent, who wait for an invitation.
- **Concern and care for members during times of illness, loss, and other stress.** Some church leaders operate only in a “spiritual achiever” mode that recruits new members. Other leaders operate only in a “mending the broken” mode. Healthy congregations do both. They do not neglect caring about people.
- **Community service/benevolence/world missions that accomplish Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbors.** Jesus defined love of neighbor in a startling way. He said it should include people we do not know, not just people with whom we are acquainted.
- **Sharing faith, inviting others to church, and hospitality that accomplishes Jesus’ Great Commission to make disciples.** All human groups experience a natural centripetal force that pulls them toward taking care of each other instead of reaching out to others. Healthy churches counterbalance that with centrifugal force methods that reach out to not-yet-members in extroverted ways.
- **Atmosphere of faith, hope, and love that promotes the spiritual growth of members.** The absence or presence in congregational personality of the Apostle Paul’s three famous words predicts a great deal of what it can and will accomplish. A strong emphasis on the power of prayer is especially crucial. People who never talk with God do not often experience God’s presence, power, and guidance.
- **Organizational systems that motivate and involve members in our ministries.** Organizational structures that fit a congregation’s size increase its ministry effectiveness by enlarging the number of people involved in its ministries, reducing conflict, and increasing democratic decision making. Dysfunctional organizational structures often go unrecognized by church leaders because their defects have become invisible due to years of “we have always done it this way.”
- **Clergy and staff that motivate and equip members for involvement in ministries.** From the years when the Apostle Paul spun off start-up churches across the Roman Empire, clergy have played a key role in developing and sustaining the ministry of laity. Without this team effort, few congregations achieve their maximum potential in answering God’s call.
- **Financial stewardship that is part of members’ spiritual growth and adequately supports church ministries.** Financial giving is one of the prime methods by which people experience personal spiritual growth. Without encouragement from their church, the crab grass of self-centeredness crowds out the green growth of spiritual development. Eventually, low emphasis on stewardship stunts the congregation’s size.
- **Property and facilities that support present ministries and future goals.** Facilities are not everything, but inadequate parking, sanctuary seating, or classroom space short-circuits a congregation’s effectiveness.

The Bottom Line

Healthy, effective churches accurately answer the classic theological question, “What is the mission of the Church and how do we accomplish it?” They build on the biblical *macro mission*, apply it contextually with *micro mission* activities, and exhibit multiple *method mission* strengths.

On which of the above lists does your church need to focus more energy?

Herb Miller served as coeditor of *The Parish Paper* until 2012. This issue honors his substantial contribution to this ministry.
