

### Building a Healthy Congregation

Sadly, some congregations rarely (if ever) go. Their life is locked into a maintenance mentality. At all costs, they are concerned to maintain what they've got in case they lose it. We need to recall the words of Jesus, "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it*" (Matthew 16.25,26). Those words, of course, present a personal challenge to all his disciples. But they also represent a spiritual principle which is true for congregations too.

The healthy congregation looks, not for its own glory, but Christ's. It rejoices in every advance of the Kingdom wherever it occurs and does not seek to grow parasitically (i.e. by snatching at members from some other Christian fellowship). Its worship and life are controlled by the Spirit of God and the Word of God. Prayer pervades its decision-making and all of its life. Every activity is characterised by faith and love – faith which is trust in God and obedience to God, love which warmly appreciates and encourages one another and which is ever reaching out to others. Its missional understanding responds in practical and relevant ways to the Great Commission itself.

Congregations may be linked or clustered to help and encourage one another in the fulfilment of their mission. It can bring a broader perspective to individual missional understandings and enable a sharing of resources and skills. It can be a means by which congregations rejoice together in what the Lord is doing and encourage one another in their life and mission. Ideally it may release congregations from a sense of competition so that they can understand and pray for one another.

- Is the above statement of characteristics of healthy congregation adequate? If not, what should be added to it?
  
  - Evaluate the health of our congregation. In the light of this situation, to what specific action is our Lord calling us?

## 3. The Going and Coming of the Church

Bible References: John 10.1-18; Luke 15; Matthew 16.13-28.

God is at the centre of the church's life, so worship is the central activity of his people. In our first session we noted – "People outside the Church need to hear our loving Lord calling to them, '*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*' (Matthew 11.28)." We also noted – "The same Lord who said 'Come!' also says 'Go!' (Matthew 28.19)."

### The Picture of the Shepherd

In John 10, Jesus gives us that striking picture of himself and his people as the Shepherd and the flock. He is saying clearly that he cares for his people in every way, even to the point of laying down his life for them. The shepherd is also "*the gate for the sheep*" – the only means by which we can know salvation and nurture (vv.7-10). But notice v.16 – "*I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.*"

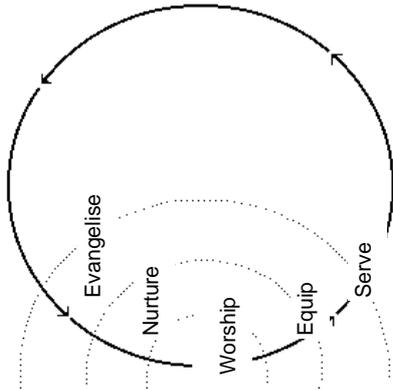
The group of parables in Luke 15 – the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son – all emphasise the same seeking and finding, reaching out and gathering in. These are essential characteristics of the head of the Church and will naturally be characteristics of the life of the Church which is his Body.

### The Life of the Church

It is helpful here to look at the diagram we used in our first session. There we were picturing the mission of the Church with **worship** at the centre, surrounded by a **nurture-equip** circle and **evangelise-serve** around the outside. We saw the different elements in these outer circles as related to one another in the **going** and **coming** of the Church. All groups in the congregation (and in any wider link/cluster) need to be encouraged and challenged to consider their purpose and goals in the light of the Great Commission.

But, as we noted in the first session, "the Elders (and the Ministers of the Word) have been entrusted by our Lord with the oversight of the whole life and mission of the Body." In other words, we need to be thinking, not just about the valid roles that groups and activities may exercise within the mission of the total Body. But – is the mission being fulfilled? Individual groups may well say – "This is what we believe our role is in the mission of the Body." But we have to ask – is the desire of the good Shepherd to call the "*other sheep who are not of this sheep pen*" being fulfilled? are the people who are responding to the call of Christ being nurtured and incorporated into the life of his Body? are the contributions of the various parts coming together to fulfil the total commission?

I have drawn another graphic to represent the life of the church in response to its mission. Perhaps you have come across the concept of “the church gathered and the church scattered.” An important truth is taught here. The life of the church is not restricted to what we do together. We are still the church, the Body of Christ, when we are not together. The whole life and mission of the church will only be seen when we think of what happens when we are scattered and as well as what happens when we are gathered.



But our present consideration of “the going and coming of the Church” goes far beyond this. It relates to the very essence of the life of the Body, in what the Church is doing when we are either “gathered” or “scattered”. The line representing the cycle of the Church’s life will encompass many different groups and activities. The health of the Church’s life will be evident as it moves from **worship** to the **equipping** of its members and the involvement of the Body in **service**. One of the current ecclesiastical “buzz-words” is “unconditional love”. This is a fine concept when we realise that God has loved us “*while we were still sinners*” (Romans 5.8). The real danger is that we will turn it into “non-directional love”! The heart-desire of the Shepherd is to gather in the “other sheep”. So our **servicing** will naturally lead us into **evangelising** and **nurturing**, so that together we **worship** the Lord.

- Let’s do a “mission-check” on the life of our congregation. List the various activities that make up our life together – including frequency and, where applicable, the particular group to which each activity relates. Then note against each how strongly (on a scale where 1 = very strongly and 5 = not very strongly) it embodies the five key elements of the Church’s mission. Be as realistic as possible. After completing the table, now ask...
- To what extent do the activities of our congregation relate to the commission that our Lord has given to us? Do they indicate “going” as well as “coming”?
- To what extent do the basic concerns of our members reflect the heart-desire of the great Shepherd? Are they eager for opportunities to “go”?

## Mission Check

Nurture	
Evangelise	
Serve	
Equip	
Worship	
Special group	
How often?	
Activity	