

## Practical Helps - A Church Looking Toward the Future

My goal in this article is to provide guidance for a local church in addressing four basic questions.

(1) ***The general will of God.***— God’s general will for churches is revealed in Scripture. What moral characteristics and behaviors does God demand of all Christians in a church family relationship? What purposes and goals does God expect church families to pursue? What activities of church families does God approve?

(2) ***Trends.***— A church family needs to look at the trends in the economy, politics, and culture. How might these trends impact the church family and its members? Specifically, what is God doing in history to achieve His purposes? Again a church family needs to look to the Bible for instruction concerning what is God’s will for His world. And then they prayerfully consider what their church’s role is in cooperating with God in that work. Usually, families will be most effective in serving God in their local communities. So, each Christian family must ask the crucial question about what God is doing in the residential community and in the vocational community or communities. What are the spiritual, social, economic, and educational needs within the church families’ communities?

(3) ***What is God doing within the church family?***— What talents has He provided family members? What bonds is He forging among them? For what tasks is He preparing them?

(4) ***Discovering the specific will of God.***— Discovering God’s specific will for a church family is in agreement with the assessment of the first three steps: God’s general will, trends, and what God is doing within the family. Other factors are involved in discovering God’s specific will – What are its ministries in the communities? To what extent does it participate in the larger, global activities of God? What support is provided for the growth of the church family and its members?

Lead your church family through a consideration of these four steps. Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you in how to proceed.

### What Is God’s General Will for the Church Family and How Does It Apply to Yours?

Many smaller-membership churches have begun to address their future by carefully studying Ephesians 4-6. Found in these chapters are at least four basic principles:

- ◆ unity
- ◆ mutual submission
- ◆ moral purity
- ◆ focused purpose

These principles are crucial concerns for the health and mission of any church family

For Paul the great mystery of the gospel was that it took people of different cultural origins and, from them, formed a new people in a spirit of *unity* (see Eph. 3:6). Christ endows persons in the family with those gifts needed to bring health and unity (see Eph. 4:11-14). Family members grow toward spiritual maturity in faith and knowledge through developmental processes. The family will also grow in numbers. And mutual interdependence will be achieved. This growth is what God wills for His family, your church family. Humility, patience, and love seem to be the means to make it happen. Unity is a worthy goal, something your church should seek.

The second principle is that God desires a family of ***morally pure*** persons (see Eph. 4:17-5:20). The new people are all given a new nature which enables them to be righteous and

holy. Conversion begins a personal process of growth toward spiritual maturity. Likewise, the church family grows toward purity as it does its ministries. How can your church family aid its members to be morally pure? How can it become pure itself? How can it be pure and remain open to the new “babes in Christ”?

The third principle is that of *mutual submission* which is stated in Ephesians 5:21 and elaborated on in 5:22-6:9. Mutual submission means that church members in all relationships with one another, even in those normally characterized by dominance, seek the well-being of the other and of the whole church. *Cooperation* is another word for this quality. Again, discuss how this principle is to be expressed in today’s setting.

The fourth principle is *focused purpose* – combat with Satan (See Eph. 6:10-20). Discussion should consider preparation for and participation in this combat. God wants His family to understand who the enemy is and stand against him. By implication, the concern of Paul here is with both personal purity and with protection of others from Satan. Certainly, aggressive evangelical effort is indicated here. Historically, our Baptist churches have formulated a mission statement of purpose and adopted a constitution and bylaws so the work can be focused. Review the statement of purpose of your church. Does it fit? If you don’t have one, consider formulating and adopting one.

## **How Is God Active in Your World and in Your Community?**

Christians do not believe that things just happen. We look for God’s hand in events, great and small. We seek to understand what God is doing and cooperate with Him.

***What is God doing here? What do these changes mean for our church—redirected ministry, discovery of new leadership, movement to another place of work, formation of a new congregation for new people, merger with another congregation?***

Central in our Baptist understanding is that God speaks to the whole church family. And by open, prayerful discussion of what God has laid on the minds and hearts of the people, a sense of God’s will for the church family will come. In helping your church family address its future, the following process could be used. Sing the gospel song, “Time Has Made a Change,” to help trigger discussion. Show pictures of the church and community from an earlier time. Then a discussion leader should ask the congregation to think back over the past 30 years or so and identify changes that have occurred. Through this discussion the church family can see that God has acted in the past in the community and in the church.

Look at three brief examples. Six smaller-membership churches were within a 10-mile circle on the edge of a major city. All were old. All were farm-family churches. None were geared to the interests and life-styles of the professionals moving into the area. Two of these churches have asked the question. What is God doing here? and redirected their ministry, program and efforts. One needed help from the association. Both are now reaching the new people

Elsewhere a village church realized that having lost the school and most of the stores, the village had little to attract new families. The community was growing older. But rather than give up, the church began to cooperate with two nearby rural churches in a first-rate senior adult ministry. The church realized who its prospects were and directed its activity accordingly. For the foreseeable future, it will remain a smaller-membership church. But given its context, it will be an effective one.

A church in a small California town was dying. The families in it were retiring and returning to their home states. They were being replaced in the town by Hispanic-Americans. The older congregation opened its doors to a Hispanic mission. It grew. The older congregation died. But

the new ethnic congregatin took its place. The church lives on.

***Keep asking, What has God done here in the past? What is God doing here now? How is the church to cooperate with God in what He is doing?***

### **What Is God Doing in Your Church?**

To segregate what God is doing in the community and in the church is not possible. But just as you focused on the community, you must also focus on the church.

***Again you may wish to use a 30-year window. Ask members to identify some high times of worship, of evangelism, of Bible teaching, of ministry. When has God been particularly present in the life and work of your church? When has the fellowship been sweet? When has the Spirit of God resolved conflict and restored relationships? What miracles has God performed for the family? By getting in touch with the fact that God has acted in the life of the church in the past, the church family should be ready to consider what God is now doing in the life of the church.***

***With which strengths and resources has God gifted your church? What opportunities for ministry, nurture, and evangelism are present in the family? What opportunities are open in your residential neighborhoods? What opportunities are open in the kinship, work, and friendship networks of members of your church? What barriers has Satan erected? What are the needs within the family that should be addressed—spiritual, material, social, and emotional? What does your church need from God? What has God given your church so it can help with His work outside the community of the church?***

As the church explores these and related questions, some significant things should happen. Building on the memory of God's past actions and an awareness of His present activity, your church family will become ready to formulate a vision of the future. And beyond that it will organize itself to make the vision a reality.

### **What Is God's Specific Will for Your Church Family—Today and Tomorrow?**

As the church has worked through the process of asking and answering questions about God's general will for your church and His activity in the world, the community, and the church, strong emotions have been stirred. God is great. God is good. He has proved this in the past. He has a will for your church family in the future.

What you learned in reflecting on the previous questions can now be applied to the crucial issue. What is God's will for the future of your church? No ready-made answer is available from any office of a denomination. The answer comes to your family. The past may hold clues. The present may, too. But expect a word from God. The hard work of study simply sets the stage, defines boundaries, and creates a readiness for receiving His word. The study identifies possibilities and options. Church families with similar resources and neighborhoods or networks may get different words from God concerning their futures. The word may come from an unlikely source in an unlikely way—even as when God made His word flesh in Jesus Christ. Pray. Seek. Listen. The word will come.

However, some common topics should be addressed in thinking about the future.

***Apparently, God does not will that all smaller-membership churches become medium-size or large.--*** God has placed some churches in locations where much numerical growth is not

possible. Some of those He calls to be part of His family grow best in a smaller congregation. Smallness is not necessarily evidence of incompetence or of unfaithfulness. Pray about this. God may have something else in store. The result of dealing with the question of God's will for your church may not be that it will grow into a larger one. But, it may be.

***God does will churches to grow, but size is only one measure of growth.*** -- Return to the family analogy. How do families grow? Younger/Older. Richer/Poorer. More blended/more estranged. More respected/less respected. More important to the members/less important. More interactive/less interactive. More loving/less loving. More active/passive.

Generally, the church should give attention to most of these areas of growth. Realistically, if a church family adds no new members, then in a few decades it will die. However, in some congregations growth of the family does not always mean significantly more members.

For those smaller-membership churches which God wills to grow to medium-size or larger, a basic principle is enunciated by Ken Carter, formerly of the Baptist Home Mission Board Evangelism Section in his Structure for Growth seminars. His principle is that the skeleton of the church must be enlarged. The most obvious application of this principle is in the area of church activities. Medium-size churches focus more on programs and less on events and projects. Carter stated that the change must also occur in how the church is pastored and in how the work of the church is administered. The pastor should be doing more training of lay leaders and giving them responsibilities for the programs of the church. Many tasks should be given to committees that act on behalf of the church.

***God wills that His general will shall be achieved appropriately in each church.*** – Unity, purity, mutual submission, and focused purpose should characterize your church family. Since each church is comprised of people from different backgrounds who face different temptations and are engaged in differing conflicts with Satan, each church will need to develop its own way of achieving the general will of God for it. No churches are completely successful in doing God's will. But each church should endeavor faithfully to do so.

***God wills that each church perform the basic functions of church well.*** – The basic functions are worship, witness and proclamation, nurture and education, and ministry. In Southern Baptist life the various programs such as Sunday School, Discipleship Training, missions education, Music Ministry, and Pastoral Ministries are designed to enable churches to perform these functions. Many smaller-membership churches do not have all of the basic programs. And because of limited resources, they will not be adding them soon. As a consequence some fail to worship, witness, teach, and/or minister as God wills. Some are using projects and events as a means of addressing this deficiency. Projects and events can be an effective and efficient means for doing the basic functions of the church.

***God wills that each church be an active part of the extended family.*** – Paul makes it clear that while the local church is autonomous, it is connected to other churches as part of the extended family. God has a will for the whole world and its peoples. Even if your church family is doing an exceptional job in your community, don't become smug. God wills for you to be concerned about those places where there are too few churches, where He wills to call many more to the family. God also wants your church to be a mission church that is effective in gathering resources to support the world-wide missions endeavor. Many churches with limited local work to do need to direct their resources to missions through the extended family of the denomination. This channeling of resources enables the family to spread and grow.

***God wills that each church be organized appropriately.*** – The importance of the church being organized so its resources could be used wisely should be stressed. Using resources wisely means four things: A church must be organized to maintain itself. It must minister to the members. It must be organized to share the gospel with the unsaved. And it must be structured

to respond to opportunities as God presents them.

***God wills each church to have a pastor.*** – This statement may seem strange. Don't all churches have pastors? No. Sometimes they have only a preacher, and other times they have only a family chaplain. A pastor must be free to feed and lead the flock. A pastor does not rely on the pulpit alone. A pastor must not be controlled by a family patriarch. Granted the church may take some time before it puts trust in the preacher and allows him to lead them as a pastor, but it must be willing to do so. And further, a pastor must be willing to lead. Is the pastor allowed and encouraged to pastor in your church?

***God wills that the church be the salt, light, and leaven of its community.*** -- God wants the church family to impact the community in which it is planted. The morality, quality of life, and appearance of the community should be better because the church is there.

***God wills that the church have the resources it needs.*** – Several effective pastors in smaller-membership churches have said that they believe God provides them the resources to do the work He wills for them to do. So as you seek God's will for your church, recognize that He will provide the resources to see that it happens – financial, skills, knowledge, and leadership. Sometimes this provision may even mean that church family members will have to make some sacrifices to ensure that the resources are available. Leading members to be faithful stewards and generous givers will strengthen both individuals and the church.

***God wills that the church be evangelistic.*** – Perhaps this statement seems redundant, but it needs to be clearly stated. Few church families do not have lost persons within the community or within the networks of the family. Pray for these people. Witness to them. Even if barriers exist that seemingly might keep them from becoming part of the church family, this does not excuse the lack of evangelization.

Looking at all of these points, God clearly wants a healthy church. Obviously health comes from being in the will of the Father. To illustrate, draw on the analogies found in Ephesians.

- ◆ It needs to have a healthy structure.
- ◆ It needs to be about its work.
- ◆ It needs to have a passion for witnessing within the family, within the community, and around the world.
- ◆ It should be helping each member be pure.
- ◆ It should foster fellowship and sharing within the family.
- ◆ It should encourage ministry to those outside the family.
- ◆ It should be involved through the family in the world mission enterprise.

## **Conclusion and Challenge–**

The country music album of the year for 1989, ***Circle II***, begins with Johnny Cash singing, “Life’s Railway to Heaven.” It ends with a choir of country music greats singing, “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” and an instrumental version of “Amazing Grace.”

The first two songs speak to what you are about in smaller-membership churches. The smaller-membership church is and must celebrate the family circle. You should be moving with God on a journey. Yet, don't forget that God has a mission for you – evangelism, ministry, and extending the family circle to include others. The journey too must be affirmed. A goal will keep you from settling into a static, sterile, stagnant pool – a circle with no real life. However, the journey must not become so dominant in the life of the church that the circle is broken, shattered, ruined.

How can the smaller-membership church live with this tension? Amazing Grace! Grace – amazing, abounding, free – draws the circle together and keeps it together when tragedy or

conflict comes. “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” asks a question to which the answer comes strong. “No! By the grace of God, no!” In “Life’s Railway to Heaven” the unbroken circle of the wheel running on the rail makes the progress along the journey possible. God’s grace keep us on track and moving along even when the grade is steep and dangerous.

Here, as always, Jesus is our model. He drew around Himself a circle of twelve. Like a family, they worked, loved, rejoiced, and even quarreled. Yet, they were also moving along on a mission. Recall when Peter suggested that they just stay on the Mount of Transfiguration and enjoy fellowship with Moses and Elijah. But Jesus denied the request. They had to be “traveling on” –back to the valley of hurt, sin, and the task of calling people to faith and enlarging the circle as they went. Sustained by God’s grace they went.

A circle on a journey – this is what you as a smaller-membership church must be about.

Your church family is on the front line. You need to understand who you are, whose you are, where you are, and why you are. Your church family has a unique mission from God. Take the programs and other resources made available by the denomination and use what you can to get your work done. Be certain that the basic functions – worship, proclamation and witness, nurture and education, and ministry – get done. If you can’t use a program just now, develop events and projects as an alternative approach. Be a family characterized by unity, moral purity, mutual submission, and focused purpose. Be a healthy family. Use tensions as an opportunity for development. Grow in ways that are appropriate and God-directed. Maintain the fellowship while being on mission.

Remember, none of the basic functions are dependent on or related to size. In fact, smallness has certain advantages. The major concern of your church must be to find and do God’s will. God will reveal this to the church family. You have only to seek out His will. Then you custom fit the programs, events, and projects of your church to the mission God has given to your church family in its setting.