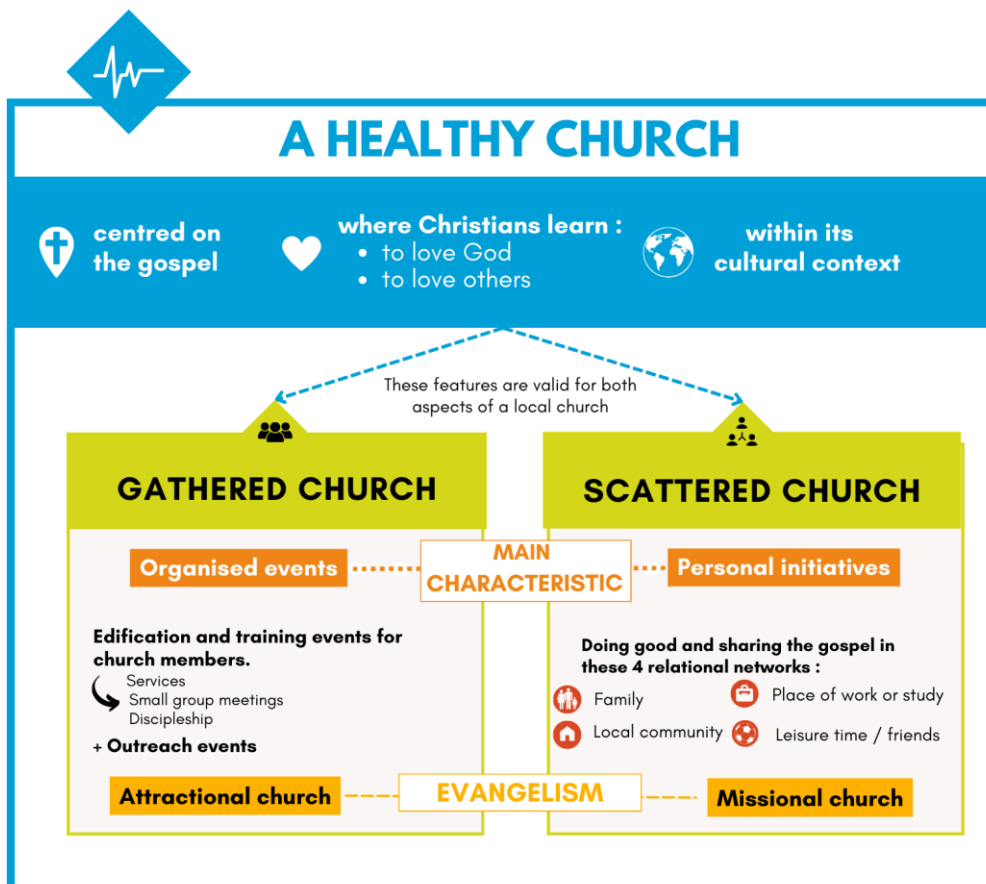


Session Three : the Vision of a healthy church

This infographic is a visual presentation of the vision of a healthy church. It can easily be understood and communicated to all the members of a church so that they see the fundamental reason why changes are being proposed in a church. It's not a question of change for change's sake or an attempt to be modern and trendy. Rather any change is to help the believers move towards God's purposes for his people, and so this diagram is truly biblical in its definition of a healthy church.



In this vision of a healthy church, we have moved away from any emphasis on activities or structures. Of course there will be leadership and of course in today's world there will be legal requirements to fulfil as an organisation and place of worship. They are the scaffolding of the church but what is its purpose?

The definition we suggest for a healthy church is very simple :

A healthy church is centred on the Gospel.

It is a group of redeemed Christians who are learning

- to love God
- to love people
- in their cultural context.

So the first purpose of a church is to keep the Gospel central. Paul told the Corinthian church to hold firmly to the gospel that he had preached to them, because it was of first importance, “and by this gospel you are saved” (1 Corinthians 15.1-2). He wrote with alarm to the Galatians : “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all” (Galatians 1.6-7). Jude wrote his letter about “the salvation we share” to “those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father” in order to urge them “to contend for the faith that was once and for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude verses 1-3). So there is a real danger that the gospel can be disregarded! But if it is, we have no good news to offer the world and we have no good news as Christians in our daily lives (“Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus”, 2 Timothy 2.1). So this grace must remain central in our worship – since we are called “to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood for the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of God’s grace” (Ephesians 1.6-7).

Question

How can you make sure the gospel remains central in your church?

A church is a group of redeemed Christians who are learning to love God and to love other people. Jesus himself identified the two most important commandments in God’s law, by quoting Deuteronomy 6.5 and Leviticus 19.18 when he was asked the question by a teacher of the law : “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (Marc 12.28-31). Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength implies that our whole lives should glorify God. And loving our neighbour as ourself implies keeping every relational commandment in God’s law for “Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law” (Romans 13.8-10).

According to Hebrews chapter 10, verses 24-25, the very reason we meet together is to encourage one another and to spur one another on towards love and good deeds. God is love and the whole purpose of our Christian lives is to reflect his character as he transforms us into the image of Christ who revealed this love in human form ((2 Corinthians 3.18)

Question

How can you make sure that your church fulfills its purpose of encouraging Christians to love God and to love others, not just during your gatherings but all through the week in every aspect of every believer’s life.

The last part of the definition of a healthy church is that we should love God and others “in our cultural context”. I believe that this too is a fundamentally biblical principle.

It is obviously so for evangelism. Paul wrote : “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22). In the verses which come just before this statement he explains how he tries to be like a Jew when he is with Jews, and like a Gentile

(“without the law”) when he is with a Gentile. He practised what he preached. We can see this in the book of Acts when Paul preaches to three very different audiences in different contexts. Firstly, in Acts 13, he preaches to his fellow Jews in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. His aim is to show that Jesus is the promised Messiah by quoting several Old Testament prophecies. Then in the next chapter, Paul is in rural Lystra, where the inhabitants believed in the Greek gods. Paul has to explain that there is one Creator who gives them good harvests, who provides them with plenty of food and fills their hearts with joy, but Paul does not quote the Scriptures unlike his speech in the synagogue. Then in chapter 17 we find Paul in Athens, the intellectual capital of the Roman empire. In his speech on the Areopagus he uses abstract language such as “In him we live and move and have our being.” He quotes Greek poets, but he doesn’t directly mention the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul preaches the same basic message of salvation but from three different starting points corresponding to three different cultures.

However, the “cultural context” isn’t limited to evangelism. It is also very important in helping the Christian live his life where he or she lives. A good example of that can be found in the same letter to the Corinthians (chapters 8-10). As the Gospel spread from Jerusalem throughout the Roman world, the apostles had to address issues which were not necessary to teach the early Jewish believers. The question in Corinth concerned eating food which had been sacrificed to idols. Nobody in Jerusalem would have had to face this question because there were no pagan temples in that city. On the other hand, such practical teaching was indispensable to those living in a context where Biblical values were not the norm and Paul’s argument in these chapters is helpful today in helping Christians think through all sorts of issues arising from their surrounding culture.

Question

What are the implications of the expression “in our cultural context” for church leaders as they seek to prepare Christians to live in the world as the “scattered church”?

In summary, revitalisation is bringing new life, and in particular reconnecting the church - reconnecting the members to God in a renewed way as they reconnect to others, and in particular to non-Christians in the surrounding cultural context.