



**North Carolina Conference of
The United Methodist Church**

Evaluating and Building Healthy Congregations- An Overview



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The Bishop's Taskforce on Healthy Congregations

The Bishop's Taskforce on Healthy Congregations began its work after the 2006 North Carolina Annual Conference. Clergy and laity from across the conference participated in the process, including individuals from rural, urban, small, and large membership churches.

The work of the Taskforce was rooted in the vision of the North Carolina Annual Conference —

*Healthy congregations and effective leaders in every place making disciples of Jesus Christ
for the transformation of the world.*

The Taskforce was charged with identifying and studying the elements of healthy congregations, regardless of size or location. In addition, the Taskforce was requested to develop an instrument to help the local church assess its current health and make a plan for strengthening its future ministry, mission, and outreach.

The Taskforce engaged in its work with commitment and passion. At the conclusion of this work members of the Taskforce are pleased to offer four documents — this Overview Booklet, a Bible Study, an Assessment Tool, and a Ministry Action Plan.

May the congregations of the North Carolina Conference embrace this work as a gift that will enable them more effectively to offer Christ to the world..

Primary Characteristics of Healthy Congregations

A healthy church in the North Carolina Conference is centered in Christ and shows evidence of making disciples of Jesus Christ, practicing focused spiritual formation, and engaging in risk-taking mission and ministry to the world.

CENTERED IN CHRIST

Healthy churches and its members are founded on the person, work, and example of Jesus Christ.

MAKING DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST

Making disciples of Jesus Christ includes the practices of naming and communicating the vision of the local church, and radical hospitality.

FOCUSED SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Focused spiritual formation includes passionate worship, the development and support of lay leadership and stewardship of money, resources, and time.

RISK TAKING MISSION & MINISTRY TO THE WORLD

Risk-taking mission and ministry include interpreting and leading change and ability to grow through conflict.

Characteristics of Healthy Congregations

CENTERED IN CHRIST

A church centered in Christ is one in which:

- Spiritual disciplines are taught and practiced.
- Ministries, programs, meeting, and decisions are bathed in prayer.
- Acts of mercy, justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, and grace are common.
- Expressions of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are evident.

MAKING DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST

NAMING & COMMUNICATING THE MISSION & VISION

- Time and effort have been set aside for God's direction for this church.
- The mission statement of this church is concise and easy to remember.
- The congregation knows and can articulate the mission statement.
- The mission and vision are used as filters through which priorities are set and decisions are made.
- The church organizational structure equips and supports the mission and vision.
- The mission and vision are regularly reviewed, evaluated, and updated.

RADICAL HOSPITALITY

- There is a sense in the congregation that everyone is wanted, welcomed, and appreciated. Ideas and new concepts are freely considered. All are viewed as God's children seeking a spiritual home.
- Ministry in the community includes a spirit of inclusion and cooperation with other United Methodist Churches as well as other denominations.
- Members possess a passion for un-churched people.
- Members have been trained to reach out to the community's un-churched.
- A practice is in place for follow-up with first-time visitors.
- There is an intentional plan for assimilating new members into the life of the congregation.
- A climate of welcome is evident through signage, parking, greeters, information center, bulletins, newsletter, child care, etc.

REACHING NEW DISCIPLES

- Based on data, the church is effective in reaching new disciples.
 - There is an appropriate ritual for welcoming new members and a social event to introduce them into the congregation.
 - There is an intentional plan for developing new believers into mature disciples (e.g., mentors, classes, groups, teams).
 - All members are encouraged to invite their family members and friends into the faith.
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Characteristics, continued

FOCUSED SPIRITUAL FORMATION

PASSIONATE WORSHIP

- All worship activities, including music and liturgy, are relevant, inspirational, and unified in purpose and focused on the worship of God.
- The worship services and styles are appropriate for reaching both members and potential new members. The bulletin and those who lead in worship demonstrate a sensitivity for visitors and the un-churched.
- Laity are encouraged and equipped to share in leadership of the worship service.
- There is a sense of awe and the presence of the Holy Spirit, a dynamic of worship that is a result of prayer for the worship and anticipation by the members.

SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

- The congregation provides multiple opportunities for spiritual growth from cradle to grave, recognizing different levels of spiritual maturity (e.g., Bible studies, studies on prayer, spiritual life retreats, spiritual direction, spiritual-guide training).
- Small groups (often less than 15 persons) are offered for individuals to find intimate community in which to be cared for, to grow deeper in relationship to God, and to discover God's calling for their lives.
- The consistent practice of prayer is understood as the means of God's power and witness throughout the congregation.

DEVELOPMENT & SUPPORT OF LAY LEADERSHIP

- The laity and clergy view themselves as partners in ministry as they collaborate in worship planning, committee leadership, and project organization.
- There is a plan for identifying potential new leaders and determining their spiritual gifts for leadership.
- Leadership training opportunities are provided annually for equipping and empowering lay leadership.
- There is appropriate support, accountability, and oversight for lay leadership from the Lay Leadership Committee of the Church/Administrative Council.

STEWARDSHIP OF MONEY, RESOURCES, AND TIME

- Conference missional giving (The Apportionment) is interpreted and paid faithfully.
 - Tithing and proportionate giving are both taught and encouraged.
 - Church conducts an annual stewardship and budget campaign.
 - Year-round stewardship education is promoted, emphasizing greater use of money, talent, time, and environmental resources.
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Characteristics, continued

RISK-TAKING MISSION & MINISTRY TO THE WORLD

MINISTRY AND MISSION

- The church seeks to connect with the local community, (the immediate area and neighborhood), based on the culture and needs identified by the people being served. The building is open to outside groups.
- The church encourages members to take initiative and start new ministries within the bounds of the church's mission and values.
- Church leadership understands (through studies and readings) generational characteristics and makes available appropriate activities and programs for all ages throughout the week.
- The Sunday school (as well as other activities) is viewed as a tool for reaching neighborhood children and their parents.
- The church follows God's direction, whatever the cost, to reach out beyond its own membership to meet needs and relieve suffering among the poor, the homeless, and the marginalized.

INTERPRETING AND LEADING CHANGE

- The leadership understands the dynamics of change and works to help all members understand the need for change.
- There is a healthy environment in which change can occur and people are cared for as they respond to change.
- The church is willing to reorganize, change strategies and shift times in order to become more effective in reaching out, winning people and making disciples for Jesus Christ.
- The church is committed to diversity and prepares to welcome all people into fellowship.
- The church uses technology (e.g., voice-messaging, e-mail, website) to communicate effectively with its membership and the public.
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ABILITY TO GROW THROUGH CONFLICT

- The church fosters an environment of trust and acceptance where diverse opinions are welcome.
 - The church leadership understands the dynamics of conflict in the church (from studies, training, readings), and is aware of the different styles and preferences for conflict management.
 - There is a clear process for resolving differences and/or lodging grievances in the congregation (e.g.: pastor parish relation committee, church council, Matthew 18 committee, other).
 - Personnel practices and policies (e.g., sexual harassment, safe sanctuary) are written and available to all, reviewed annually, and faithfully implemented.
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Effective Lay Leadership for Healthy Congregations

A leader in the local church:

- Models commitment to the covenant of membership with faithfulness in worship, prayer, giving, and service.
- Provides support for the pastor and committee leaders with spiritual resources.
- Evidences a strong prayer life and encourages others to faithfulness and diligence in prayer.
- Practices a lifestyle of stewardship of all resources, including the practice of tithing.
- Participates in mission work through hands-on effort and/or with financial support.
- Seeks opportunities for spiritual growth through Bible study or accountability group.
- Practices radical hospitality as Christ's ambassador in the community, welcoming guests and seeking the lost.
- Identifies and empowers future leaders who are gifted to serve.
- Models servant-leading, acting in humility as they grow in Jesus Christ.

Procedure

Church leaders are asked to engage in an annual study of the health of their local church. This study has several components:

1. **Bible Study:** Church leaders and small groups may engage in a four-week Bible study to provide a scriptural foundation to the Healthy Churches Assessment. This Bible study should be completed prior to beginning the assessment. After the initial year, additional Bible studies will be made available.
2. **Healthy Churches Assessment:** Every three years, church leaders will complete a comprehensive assessment of the church relative to the characteristics identified on pages 4—9 of this document. It is recommended that this assessment take place in the summer/early fall.
3. **Ministry Action Plan:** The Healthy Churches Assessment will result in a Ministry Action Plan, or MAP. A MAP is a strategy adopted by the Church/Administrative Council for improving the health and effectiveness of the church. A Ministry Action Plan tool will be provided to assist leaders in developing goals.

MAPs should be included in Charge Conference information.

Church leadership will be asked to implement two-four MAPs in each of the years between the full assessment.

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**North Carolina Conference of
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**1307 Glenwood Avenue
P.O. Box 10955
Raleigh, NC 27605
Toll Free: 1-800-849-4433
Phone: 919-832-9560
Fax: 919-834-7989**

Please direct comments and questions to rharry@nccumc.org.