

10 Clear Signs Your Church Is Sick

There are certain metrics and issues physicians check when we go to the doctor. They want to check our blood pressure and temperature. They do blood tests to see if there are any warning signs. They are looking for symptoms that might indicate real problems exist.

After working with churches for 30 years, I too look for symptoms that might point to greater concerns. The symptoms are not necessarily the problem; they simply provide warnings or cautions of potential issues.

While there are many potential symptoms of a sick church, I have found 10 to be consistently common. These 10 are not listed in any particular order:

1. Declining worship attendance. Surprisingly, the majority of church leaders do not monitor worship attendance. I advise leaders to compare each month's average worship attendance to the same month of previous years.
2. Decline in frequency of attendance of church members. This symptom is the No. 1 explanation for attendance decline in most churches. Members are not as committed as they once were. Their waning love for their church is reflected in their declining frequency in worship attendance.
3. Lack of joy and vibrancy in the worship service. Obviously, this symptom is subjective. It is still, however, very important. Most people can sense when a worship service is vibrant, lukewarm or dead.
4. Little evangelistic fruit. As a general rule, a healthy church will reach at least one non-Christian for every 20 in worship attendance. A church with a worship attendance of 200, for example, should see at least 10

new Christians a year.

5. Low community impact. In my consultations, I attempt to find clear indicators that a church is making a difference in its respective community. I ask both church leaders and community members for clear examples and indicators.
6. More meetings than ministry. A sick church will meet about what they should do rather than do it. Some churches have more committees than conversions.
7. Acrimonious business meetings. Christians can and do disagree. Sick churches have meetings where the disagreements reflect obvious bitterness and anger.
8. Very few guests in worship services. A vibrant church will attract guests. A sick church will not.
9. Worship wars. Yes, they still exist in many churches. Those wars are indicators of an inward focus by the members.
10. Unrealistic expectations of pastoral care. Sick churches view pastors and other staff as hired hands to do all of the work of ministry. Healthy churches view pastors as equippers for the members to do most of the ministry.

None of these symptoms are good, but churches do go through periods where they demonstrate a few of them. The key is to recognize the symptoms and respond early and quickly.

Here is my own subjective health analysis according to the number of symptoms:

One to two symptoms. Normal for most churches for a short period of time. Not an indicator of poor health, but the symptoms should be addressed promptly.

Three to four symptoms. The church is sick and needs immediate attention.

Five to six symptoms. The church is very sick. If significant changes are not made, the congregation is in danger of moving

into the phase of terminal illness.

Seven to 10 symptoms. The church is in danger of dying in the next five to 10 years. While it is possible for a church to recover from this level of sickness, it is rare. Intervention must be quick, intense and dramatic. The amount of change necessary is often more than most leaders and members are willing to bear.

Give an honest assessment of your own church by these symptom indicators. What do you see? What should you do if there are a number of symptoms? Let me hear from you. {eoa}

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