

Chapter 7 (Healthy church)

On a typical Sunday morning many Christians drive to church. Much of the time we try and arrive just a little early to get a good parking spot. It's like routine to grab the kids and our Bibles and head on inside. Rush, rush, rush. At the door we are usually welcomed by a warm face. I love the welcoming hand shake or nod of how do you do. We say "morning" and "Hello" as we slightly hurry into the church foyer. The husband grabs the coffee while the wife shoos the kids into Sunday school. Then they both scurry into the sanctuary to their favorite spot.

Of course, we generally make a bee line for the right side, third row from the front. It's our normal spot to sit. It's not uncommon for us to be surrounded by the same favorite people doing the same routine. That is church. As I sat in church last weekend the pastor reported the numbers, a lot of numbers. He also said that the church was healthy. Really? As I sat there with my coffee in hand, my mind began to wander away from the sermon. Do the numbers show that this church is healthy?

I'm a thinker. I have a hard time just sitting and listening. My mind is always on a road trip. What makes a healthy church? Then I began to contemplate the healthiness of Christianity. I have heard the warnings over the years. People don't go to church often. Only a small percentage of believers give regularly. Who reads their Bible consistently? Do the growing numbers represent a healthy church? On and on I daydreamed. Did I even listen to the sermon?

I knew a church that claimed over fifteen hundred visitors per weekend. Yet, on a giving meter, over three thousand people gave money on average. What's wrong with the numbers? What they discovered is that over three thousand people call that church home. Yet, about half of them attend per weekend. Further to that, people were attending about once or twice a month on average. How much does regular attendance attribute to a healthy church?

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The numbers don't lie. They are healthy because the attendance is up. Ok, I'm kidding, the numbers do lie. Is your Christianity healthy if you go to church once a month? Maybe money is up? They say about five percent of church attendee's tithe. Is that healthy? Church leaders divide the year into seasons. Budgets are set to survive the summer. We all know it's the summer season when people don't go to church much. Is that healthy? It seems odd that giving is down in the summer too. Is our giving tied to attendance?

If your church is healthy then why is attendance and giving at an all-time low in the summer? Well, patrick, people go away. Fair enough, I'll let attendance slide. Yet, should giving slide too? How many people are tithing year-round? What is the number? Beyond tithing, how many give regularly? I seriously doubt a church is healthy if only five percent of the people give almost all the money. Another rule is the 20/80 rule. Twenty percent do all the serving. Is it healthy when a small percentage do all the serving and giving?

So, what does that have to do with a healthy church? We could have a really good argument with that pastor over numbers. He could say that the numbers are a reflection of his vibrant church. The healthy numbers are the fruit of good preaching and worship. It shows that great life groups and warm smiles work. That's what makes a healthy church. Hence, the good numbers.

I feel that the numbers try and hide the cracks. Cracks that say people are not as invested in church as you might think. One or two Sundays a month does not make you a church attendee. However, I have sat in a church meeting where they decided that attending two times a month is regular. Really? They also decided that the amount is not the issue when it comes to giving. Meeting budget is. Who gives regularly? Why isn't invested Christians the goal?

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Giving twenty dollars here and there does not mean you give regularly. Showing up half the time does not reflect regular attendance. Why then did these learned men decide that hap hazard attendance and giving is normal. It's for two reasons. One is that they need normal. Normal breeds consistency. Consistency breeds looking like they have it all under control. Church looks healthy.

The second is the numbers. If we say that half is normal then it is. As long as normal is our base line then healthy looks a whole lot better than what should be. Failing to meet a budget shows the cracks. Who wants that? I find it's weird that they set budgets so high. It's a damned if you do and damned if you don't thing. Damned if you set it low and appear to have little faith. It's also damned if you set it high and have to tell people God changed the plans when it falls short.

I contend that a healthy church is far more than numbers. We can make the norm anything we chose. Just because 5% tithe and 20% serve does not make it normal or healthy. I have to ask. Is the giving found in Acts 2 beyond normal? People say that we have so much more to do than 2000 years ago. Money gets stretched in a consumer society. Expecting people to attend church all the time is unreasonable. What was reasonable attendance in Acts 2? What did the people deem acceptable giving?

I can understand that in Acts 2 there appears to be things going on that are not here today. The Holy Spirit does not come upon us like tongues of fire. We generally don't live in commune like communities sharing it all. I suppose that it's not reasonable to have three thousand people saved in one day. Yet, did they live in a commune? What if being together was regular? What if true love for each other was real? What if saving thousands was real? I wonder if they gave first and lived second. Was that normal for them?

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I knew a pastor that held a celebration for having eight baptisms in a year. He was over the moon with it. How would the 1st century Christians have viewed that? Horrified I'd guess! I am asking what makes a healthy church? Is it numbers or assumptions and expectations? I suspect it has to do with numbers. Put the bar low and you will always look healthy. Expect less and less looks normal.

I have questions. Why set the bar so low? Why put attendance and giving numbers in your church bulletin? Why ask for money? Why take so much time planning outreach events? Why go to seminars and read books on inviting people to church? I do believe it has to do with a lazy look at love. Those lazy attitudes keep the bar low and make church appear healthy. It's like this. We would rather have people come to church a little rather than not at all? We would rather meet budget than expect too much. Church mindset is allowed to be lazy to keep the numbers in the red.

How to look healthy? When we reach normal targets then were healthy. When budgets are surpassed its Gods, favor shining upon us. Yet, we set the bar. We call it normal. In all honesty, I fear the pastorate cares more about keeping their job sustainable than doing what is right. Church should give more. Serve more. Church should speak out more. What makes a healthy church? Maybe it's impacting the community rather than existing through seasons of the year.

More of my questions go like this. Is a healthy church based and how much you love? Is it based on good attendance? Are the numbers reflecting good preaching and awesome worship? All these things make church vibrant, yet they don't make friends. A warm smile and firm handshake keep people coming back, yet are they the definition of love? For decades now we have redefined love as church love. We participate in love offerings, love ministries, and love

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worship. I am beginning to wonder if church has messed with the definition of love more than the world has?

We cry out from the pews that the world has a demented view on love. The world view has intertwined sex and love together in a twisted state. Yet, I wonder. I have attended the meetings and read the books on how to make church more friendly. Show them love. Shake hands and smile by the love of Jesus. Give them a treat like a first-time gift card, or offer them a free meal at the pastor's house. Here is the big one. Keep the service scripted and timed. Don't let it run too long. It's all wrapped up to keep the love flowing. Church love has changed from serving and giving to providing and entertaining.

I could go further. How to make the masses come back? Is there a way or formula that attracts people? How about making the sermon fit the worship? Give out a book to fit a series of messages. Make sure you highlight kids' ministries. Parade poor black children from Africa across your stage. What I'm saying is that we have crafted and refined the thirty feet from the door to the pew to entertain and serve you. Pull on your heart strings in the name of love. It sounds so good.

Yet, church has become a model of want. A model of entertain me. Why is it that we make such a big deal over the first thirty feet within a church door? It greatly concerns me that we focus on thirty feet and not thirty miles. What? I attended a peppy meeting on buying big screen TVs for the sanctuary. It upped the game visually. However, some ministries had to suffer to buy those things. That church had zero evangelistic ministries. It was all about thirty feet and never thirty miles.

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Sure, let's say that church has tried to distance itself from sex. Good for you. Is it less damaging trying to weave love and entertainment together? McDonalds redesigned their interior to try and draw in new customers. Tim Hortons did the same thing. Where did those ideas come from? I am suggesting that love of the customer has re-defined church. Church has perfected the love of the consumer. Let's entertain them and they will come back. If you break down announcements and bulletins it always comes back to self-promotion. Heaven, forbid we preach the gospel and let that be the defining draw. What draws people to church for thousands of years? God's love and the message or our love and the message?

I believe that Christians have created a twisted view on love. A warm handshake is love. Giving money to distant lands is love. Building food baskets is love. Our love is based on thirty feet. It's not so much on how we can love them but how much we can make them love us. What can we do in thirty feet to make them come back? Love them more? Yet, the numbers honor the normal. The new normal in church is a half assed commitment to the church community. Give and attend just enough to look normal.

Somehow over 2000 years we have gone from Acts 2 to this twisted view on love and community. I wince when I listen to the words of a song by David Matthew called Super-size. He retorts that we could super-size church. "Give a non-perishable food item to the food bank at Christmas and pat ourselves on the back for thinking we've been charitable." I heard stats recently that most people give 1% to charity. That's Christian and the world combined by the way.

The people of the 1st century "the way" were reported as hospitable, charitable, and loving. Those were the rumors. What is the rumor of church these days? I'll be honest here. I am in a unique church setting. We worship in a movie theatre. It's timed because we have to get out by

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noon. I get it. They have existed for around three years. Within that time, they have grown from 2 to 250. It's an amazing story. The white people are probably 20%. As a world community this church looks awesome.

Yet, I'm uncomfortable with it in some ways. This church relies on groups to exist. I get it, they exist only for two hours a week in a theatre. It is working as long as the groups work. The fabric of the church is built on a dream team of people who set up and tear down church every Sunday. However, I am stunned at the amount of attention is being given to multiplying the church in its infancy. I cannot tell you how often the pastor is gone. Flying here and driving there to promote the way he does church. The first thirty feet of this church is stunning. They have it down to a promotional art form.

Yet, in a men's life group of six, I realized that nobody is reading the Bible. I highly doubt two of them tithed. Honestly, does that represent the church health? They probably say it's this churches norm. What will kill this church? I fear it will be several cracks. Numbers mean something to the staff. That is bad news. Why? It's because numbers love the norm and hate the cracks. Secondly, a pastor paying attention to bigger fish is always a bad thing. Why should church be bigger? The numbers say that the bigger you grow the more people are saved.

Yet, when cracks become fissures, things go badly. People start to rate the service. Rate the ministries and child care. They say that my church is a community of accepting people doing life together. Doesn't a ski resort promote that? How about a book club or bowling team? All of these types of groups are together once a week doing something they find entertaining for two hours. I will insist that a church was meant to be more than a loving community on Sunday.

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To me, a healthy church is a Bible study. It's serving the community. Church should have engaging worship and preaching. I get that. Yet, we should be known for our love of others. I was in the foyer last week when a prominent woman came up to us to console my wife on her cancer journey. It was nice of her. Yet, days later her daughter is asking for prayer for that woman's cancer surgery. She knew that Sunday that she (herself) had cancer but never said a thing. Why? Intimate church is not what we have anymore. It is not a tight knit community of sharing and love. I'm not so sure what we are?

I listen to J Vernon McGee on the Thru the Bible radio broadcast. He claims to be a pastor for 40 years. At times he has mentioned that he doubted that 5% of his congregations were devoted to Christ. What does he know? Over 40 years of knowing people? Oh, he knows. He knew who tithes and who attends. He knows who sits in his office broken. He had congregations of over three thousand people. I am sure that he does not believe that bigger is better.

Have we replaced real love with scripted love? The people in the pews have replaced real love with distant love. We reach out our hand and give to distant things that we have little interaction with. Pastors send us far away to serve. We devise ways to draw people in. The thirty feet is the focus, not the people. Oh, we cry foul. The people are the focus, Patrick! The people within the thirty feet are the lure and the thirty feet is the net. Why did that lady not tell us her struggles? It's because love by distance is what we have been reduced to.

Real love stops and talks. It makes coffee dates and goes to football games. Real love and grace always make room for the lost. Loving friendships have a lot of rope. That is not how church love rolls. The thirty feet is important. It's creating distance through giving to another country instead of doing something next door. Segregating church and life by distancing interaction between the congregation and the leadership. Putting a locked door or secretary

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between the pastor's office and the people. But I preach in love! Church love "loves" its distance.

I can see the twisted hearts on this matter. We do love! Church is designed to show the love of Christ. You're not being honest here. Those thirty feet is scripted to show love but not give real love. It's designed to make them stay. If they stay, then the numbers grow. Friendships on the other hand stifles growth to a turtle's pace. Good friendship takes time. Time, we don't have because a healthy church needs healthy numbers. That prominent woman who has cancer loves to go from person to person giving a hug and encouraging word. However, I seriously doubt she has one meaning full relationship within our church. Who really knows her?

Patrick, she wants privacy in her times of trouble. Really? In a church community you want to segregate yourself from prayer, food, and help? Is that how they did it in Acts 2? It's not that life groups are bad. Hearing the word of God in any form is awesome. Singing to the Lord is wonderful. It really is. Yet, church is losing its essence. The heart of the people concerns me. We are training these new children to expect to be entertained.

Sunday school is not a Bible class. Why do less than 20% of Christian children go to church after they hit 20 years old? It's because church is boring compared to Sunday school. Further to this is entertainment. Our phone and lives outside of church are entertainment too. Church has decided to make comfort and entertainment a priority. So did the outside world. The only thing that could possibly beat Sunday football is friendships. A desire to be known. We don't teach or preach that. Instead, we want people to like us.

Does friendship really matter? Inviting people to church matters. Year by year progress matters. Crummy preaching and lousy music can kill a church. Is that true? Do those things

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trump a warm heart and welcoming soul? The trouble with being entertained is a divided heart. Many things entertain us. Yet, finding a warm heart and loving hands are not that attainable.

Why are most churches not fully attended each week? Entertainment is everywhere from football to travel. There are ushers at Walmart. Warm hearted smiles and handshakes in most stores. To the outsider, what makes church better than shopping? We have reduced the first thirty feet at church to Walmart. Give them what they want and not what they need.

Charles Spurgeon was a famous Pastor in London in the 1800's. People paid to have a pew with a door just to be there. The church was packed. His messages quite often chastised the crowds for not living Christ like enough. Apparently, they loved him. Why? He did not care about the thirty feet. Instead, he was more concerned with the souls inside and outside his church. The people kept coming back directly because he loved them better than most.

So, here is the crux of it. The business world has modeled the church. How do we create love in thirty feet? Create warm lighting, music, and contact from an usher. Put up signs that we care and love your business. Preach a good message by giving back to the world through global projects. You will find all of it in the first thirty feet of most stores these days. It's current church 101.

Our churches even go further. It's the current ideology. Make church entertaining and the people will come. There are fantastic foyers now. I know one with an amazing waterfall. Big screen TV and outstanding sound. Be warned. You better be more entertaining than the Superbowl or release of the latest Avenger's movie. Once you start down the entertainment path, you will forever be competing with entertainment. Some weeks you win and others you lose. Hence: the one in four weeks attendee.

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How can we weave love into the conversation? If your attention to people screams you care, then you might be gold in the eyes of the lonely. A soul who can feel another soul is far better than good preaching. Who do pastors place at the door? What signs are they given to hold? In the end, make church look, feel, and smell like you care. Make it look like love. A love twisted with rainbow flags, booming sound, and Rockstar preaching.

I knew a lady who gave depending on the sermon. That is, it in a nut shell. The entertainment values. What makes a healthy church? The numbers? What if your just darn good at entertaining? Good at smiling and creating the right ministries? Is that love and friendship? I thought friendships challenged people. Loving friends have the hard talks and awkward misunderstandings. Yet, the friendship remains. Real love and friendship do not really care how it loves. Why? It's because it should come naturally. Yet, we have been conditioned in church to make our love look good and entertaining. We do care what our love looks like to others? I think we do for all the wrong reasons.

Here is the scary part for me. Pastors and elders ordained by God appoint good people into leadership positions. They spend the time praying and investigating the right candidate. Generally speaking, if your hired into church leadership, you are God sanctioned. So, it seems. Why do head elders get punted from their position if they committed adultery? Why do pastors stand up at the alter and resign without a new church to go to? Why do pastors take stress leave? Elders quit? Why spend hours making the first thirty feet so darn appealing? It's got so little to do with a healthy church or real love. Hire what looks like love rather than someone who emulates love from within.

Now, some bright whip will tell me that is church life. Those incidents make church a healthier place. It removed the bad parts. Fair enough, if you believe that. My question is this. If

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you took the time to investigate, ask God, pray, and interview, then why do church leaders crumble? Didn't you pick those with upstanding track records. They are loving, friendly, compassionate, and great godly men and women. How can a head elder become an adulteress? A pastor gets fired? Why are there disagreements within ministry to the point of separation? Why indeed? Maybe your bar of healthy and normal is not that healthy?

If your church is that healthy then you should have known. You should be able to see. Plus, all the leadership and church congregation should be able to pick up a brother and sister in hard times and see them through, not out the door. A healthy church does not pick bad men. It does not fire people because we love first. Again, the trouble with church is the definition of love. Love is about thirty feet. We must, at all cost, protect the thirty feet.

A church must look love. It must prune off the blemishes. It's biblical! We must keep the time sensitive nature of a service intact. Preach on love. Preach on giving. We must do anything we can to maintain the integrity of thirty feet. Time is not an option. What about time to know a candidate well. Time to raise our own pastors. Time to stop the service and pray. Heaven, forbid we disrupt the thirty feet.

In a community, there are groups of Christians. People that go to other churches. If you had a circle chart it goes like this. Each church has a circle. There are a few other circles that intersect. They are the ministry people and church hoppers. There is interaction between all churches within a community. For that reason, gossip and rumors are kept alive. One day a rumor began that an odd Christian man was going to come to our church. He had tried to fit in in other churches. He was a church hopper, I guess. The trouble was that he was prone to speak out within the service. In regards to time and entertainment we can't have that. A meeting was called

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with the ushers, elders, and pastoral to confront the situation. A situation that had not even happened yet.

We were instructed on how to handle this man if he came. The ushers were asked to try and put him in a safe spot where he was less likely to cause trouble. Extra staff were enacted to attend all services. A police man who attends our church was asked to be at all the services. There were about three scenarios presented to solve the rumored confrontation. As it was this man did attend a service once. Nothing ever happened.

Here is my thing with it. Love was not an option. I seriously doubt we smiled at him or tried to welcome him. Everything was set up to get him in and out. Did anyone try and befriend him? To understand and welcome him? No, that's not how we roll. Our thirty feet was threatened. And like a cornered tiger we came ready to pounce. Do not, for any reason, ruin the atmosphere at an entertainment church service.

Healthy church? How to have a healthy church? Keep the vagrants out. Have a plan to keep them subdued. Church is scripted. The coffee is hot. The child care is ready. Soft music is essential. Just pick the right announcements that are funny and heart felt. Make sure that the worship and sermon connect. Don't misunderstand me. It's smart. Walmart and Tim Hortons would agree. The Holy Spirit?

When you look at the end of Acts 2. You see a church trying to be Christ-like. It's not easy to give everything away or make friends. It takes effort and humility. In those days they preached for hours just reading the Bible letters they had. They sang hymns. Wow, it must have been daunting and horrible. Yet, Acts 2 is magical, wonderful, and heartfelt. We just can't imagine church like that. That is because church is not like that. Take a good look at Galatians 2:9 below:

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“And recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.”

That is church, love, and community. The leadership of the church extended themselves to the evangelist. They endorsed the bringing in of the gentiles. How hard that must have been at first. Why? In those days church was prosecuted. My goodness, even the Apostle Paul was a murderer of Christians until Jesus got ahold of him. Imagine Jesus sending people out to gather people in. Imagine the leadership of a church being commissioned to reach the other side. The non-religious side. Just let that sink in: commissioned.

I had a friend who claimed to be an evangelist. He asked his church several times for assistance in getting out the word. They refused to give him pulpit time. In one argument he asked the outreach pastor what they did to reach the lost. That pastor said that at this time they are doing nothing. Yet, if we do something one day it won't be your way. What is being said? We have no time for the unchurched. We only cater to those who come into our fantastic thirty feet. I'm not commissioned to go farther than thirty feet.

I see my current church two ways. One is that they are doing all the right things. They have participation and the first thirty feet down to a fine art. It is amazing. I love the entertainment value. They have great sound and visual in a theatre seating setting. What else is there? We happen to have a very nice pastor and his wife. They are approachable and accessible. He is a Rockstar. His ability to preach is a truly amazing sight to hear.

Is his church healthy? I know for a fact that many of the dream team double shift. Many of those people never actually attend church. Small church has that issue anywhere. The need for

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servers can cut out attending the service. Certainly, I can see the revolving door. People have come and people have disappeared. They are talking about splitting the church intentionally into two when they have not even weened themselves off of church plant assistance yet. Why? Just to be bigger? Giving is an issue. Bible reading is an issue. I bet that underneath; the health of the church is an issue.

The core of a healthy church 100 years ago is missing. Marriage was a non-issue. Same sex was a non-issue. Reading the Bible wasn't an issue. Today's church has issues. Giving is an issue (large crack). Bible reading is kind of a non-issue: they just don't. There was an article in USA today about Christians not practicing what they preach. Actually, they stated that if anyone did life the Christian way, we would all be better off. There would be more community, safety, and love. Yet, this article said that is not how we roll. Most people believe Christian values make us worse. The end of the article stated that "if" we practiced real Christianity, it works. The trouble is that so-called Christians don't practice what is preached.

It looks right! Healthy numbers look right. A clean well-crafted service looks, smells, and feels right. Yet, what about the revolving door? A pastor should lose some sleep over people leaving. Just accept it as fact? Just accept small giving as fact? Just accept 2 times a month attendance as fact? Is that church life? I guarantee that Paul, the early church, and the Lord Jesus would be horrified. Why horrified? After two thousand years we have made church an entertainment option that "competes" with football and movies? Competes!

The direct reason church competes is the numbers. We accept healthy church based on projections and numbers. Bigger is better. The troubling part is the lie. We say that it is love. We say that it is ordained. The great commission is being filled. Yet, bigger means that distance is acceptable. Personal friendships are not necessary. Patrick, small groups provide personal

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relationships. Please I'm not stupid. The twenty or so people who run small groups are personal (sort of). The rest are just being entertained. It's just not true Patrick!

Really? Then why the board games night? Why the cutting of a mid-week and Sunday night service? Why is outreach reduced to events? Prayer meetings are sparsely attended. Why are men's groups poorly attended? That is an issue by the way. Why indeed is church power point needed? Trust me, if church promoted itself as a Bible study your numbers would suffer. If that is an issue then you have an issue!

Take the time to assess your church health. Put the numbers aside. Actually, ween yourself off of them. I dare you to not look at the numbers for one church season. Just till summer because church closes (sort of) in the summer. No numbers. What I am asking is to use your eyes. Focus on whoever comes through the revolving door. Actually, throw out the revolving door. Just take a breath and love because you can.

Here it is. I got into trouble several times for trying to intervein in relationships. It's me. A friend comes to me with a relationship problem. I try and see how the spouse feels. That is a terrible move by the way. Here is what I learned. This is tough. Just work with those who God draws to you. No matter where you are just be involved with those who contact you.

The kicker is to work exclusively with them. Do not try and solve their issues. Just get to know them. They say in counselling that most people have the answer. A good councilor will just get them to see what they already know. What does that mean? Just be a friend who listens more than they talk. Let those who God brings to you become a friend. A friend is just that. They are not in the business of saving your soul. They are not there to make you better. To have

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advice. Oh, we think that is friendship. Do you really want a friend that always has the last word?

Who wants someone that always gives the last advice? Always harping on you to trust Jesus. Lord no! Be a friend first and maybe, just maybe, you will care less about the numbers because friends come back. You will care less about the first thirty feet and more about what's beyond the church doors. You might redefine what a healthy church looks like. Who knows, maybe people will feel inspired to give more because they want to. Ahh, to truly have a healthy church.