

“When my car is not running properly, I try to find the best mechanic in town for repairs. I look for the car repair shop with the best qualifications, ratings, and honest service. Why? Because my car is so very important to me—to my family, for my work, and for my overall well-being. Likewise, when my body is not working properly and I am not feeling well, I want the best trained, most experienced, and honest medical care I can find. Why? Because my body is important to me—to my family, for my work, and for my overall well-being. So it is with church.

“When our beloved congregations are feeling sluggish, filled with anxiety, underperforming, and not in alignment with God and community, I want to call the best trained and most experienced and honest people for consultation and help. For the church, the visible life of faith, is important to me—to my family, to my work, and for the overall well-being of our individual lives and our world. So it is here in these pages.

“The experts are speaking, straight from years of courageous church leadership and directly from the pulpit, the theological classroom, and the offices of denominational leadership. You can trust them and their words. I certainly have. Blessed reading to you. May these words begin the path of healing for you and your congregations.”

*Linda McKinnish Bridges
Founding Faculty Member
President, 2017–2019
Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond*

“At a time when many churches are at a critical juncture, this book is another way for the Center for Healthy Churches to offer support and encouragement to those who are on the front lines of ministry. Through personal experience, I have found the CHC to be very focused on and committed to working alongside churches in helping them to think through change and move toward greater health and stability.

“This collection of articles shows how leaders within the CHC network have been able to draw on their extensive experience as consultants and coaches in various parts of the church to provide gifted insight to church leaders. Their definition of a healthy church as a community of Jesus followers with shared vision, thriving ministry, and trusted leadership is right on target and can help provide all of us with a positive way to move into God’s future with a sense of possibility and hope.”

*David B. Hodges
Dean, Christ Church Cathedral
Episcopal Diocese of Western Kansas*

“As a local pastor in a time of cultural change inside and outside the church, I am often left with more questions than answers. The coaches and consultants at the Center for Healthy Churches encourage me with their insight and encouragement in *Just What is a Healthy Church?* This book is filled with biblical and theological insight along with pragmatic approaches for churches in the 21st century as we seek to be defined first and foremost as a community of Jesus followers.»

Jeff Roberts
Pastor, Trinity Baptist Church
Raleigh, North Carolina

“In *Just What Is a Healthy Church?* Bill Wilson and other colleagues affiliated with the Center for Healthy Churches offer reflections on the question posed in the book’s title. Their basic contention is that a healthy church is a community of Jesus followers with shared vision, thriving ministry, and trusted leadership.

“While one may or may not wholly concur with the various contributors as how best to answer the presenting question, there is no question that they are raising and responding to a pressing question that is of utmost importance to contemporary Christian congregations. There is much practical wisdom to be gleaned from the vignettes that comprise this volume. This book has caused me to think more deeply and carefully about the ongoing well-being of the bride of Christ. For this—and for the church local and universal—I am thankful.”

Todd D. Still
Charles J. and Eleanor McLerran DeLancey Dean and
William M. Hinson Professor of Christian Scriptures
Baylor University, Truett Seminary

Just What Is a Healthy Church?

Bill Owen, editor

© 2020

Published in the United States by Nurturing Faith Inc., Macon GA,
www.nurturingfaith.net.

Nurturing Faith is the book publishing arm of Good Faith Media (goodfaithmedia.org).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-1-63528-110-1

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America

I dedicate this book to the three churches among whom I served as pastor. Each was a mixture of health and unhealth, human as we were, but always straining to move forward, intending to follow the Christ who was always ahead of us. Each one loved him, the church, and my family. For Dry Creek, Immanuel, and Mt. Carmel I am indebted and forever grateful.

Contents

Foreword.....	xi
Introduction	xiii
Part 1: A Community of Jesus-followers	1
A Healthy Congregation: A Community of Jesus-followers—Craig A. Sherouse	3
Keeping Jesus Right Side Up—Barry Howard.....	5
Jason’s Upside-down World—Bill Wilson.....	7
Everyone Needs to Go to Arabia—Bill Wilson.....	9
The Practice of Warming—Bill Owen.....	11
Do You Ever Change Your Mind?—Bill Wilson	13
Reclaiming Enthusiasm—Bill Wilson.....	15
When Church Gets It Right—Bill Owen.....	17
Learning to Navigate Diversity—Barry Howard.....	19
Unity of the Spirit—David Hull.....	21
Preaching from a Purple Pulpit—Jim Kitchens.....	23
How to Be a Family of Faith—Joel Snider.....	25
Things We Never Needed—Mike Queen.....	27
Singing Is Praying Twice—Doug Haney.....	29
Are You Ill?—Bill Wilson	31
It Goes Without Saying—Bill Wilson	33
The 8 Deadly Sins of the Church—Bill Wilson	35
King David and Church Culture—Joel Snider.....	37
Pebbles in Your Pocket—Steve Scoggin	39
Is There More Than One Theologian in Your Church?—Barry Howard.....	41
5 Things Churchgoers Need to Know About the Great Commission—Barry Howard ...	43
Part 2: Shared Vision	47
Are You Ready for the 2020s?—Bill Wilson	49
When You Pastor the <i>Titanic</i> —Bill Wilson	52
High Anxiety—Bill Wilson	54

What's Right with the Church?—Doug Haney.....	56
Treasures New and Old—Guy Sayles	58
Shifting from “Why” to “Why Not”—Jim Kitchens	60
Taking the Right Hill—Guy Sayles	62
Discernment: Getting Ready to Hear God—Jayne Davis.....	64
Confession from a Consultant—Bill Wilson	66
Listening for the Still Small Voice—Jim Kitchens.....	68
Creatively Outrageous Congregations—Bill Wilson.....	70
The Courage to Become—Bill Owen.....	72
Memories or Imaginations?—Bill Wilson.....	74
Thanksgiving—Bill Wilson	76
Dream with God—Bill Wilson.....	78
Navigating the Land of Giants—Bill Wilson.....	80
Why Visioning Efforts Fail or Succeed—Bill Wilson.....	82
The One Word of Advice Every Church Could Use—Matt Cook.....	84
Jesus on Strategic Visioning—Bill Wilson	86
Is Your Church Enlarging Its Bandwidth?—Larry McSwain	88
Time to Rethink Everything—Jim Kitchens.....	90
The Conversation We Don't Want to Have—Bill Wilson	92
Everything Breaks Down—Joel Snider	94
Leading Change at the “Church of Stuck-ness”—Bob Dale.....	96
Being Constrained Doesn't Have to Mean Being Stuck—Guy Sayles.....	98
Flipping Orthodoxies—Mike Queen	100
Worth Fighting Over—Bill Wilson	102
The Oxbow Lake Church—Bill Wilson.....	104
Part 3: Thriving Ministry.....	107
12 Healthy Trends Emerging in Revitalizing Churches—Barry Howard.....	109
Empowering “If” in Local Congregations—Bob Dale	111
Hope: A Trait of Thriving Congregations—Matt Cook	113
3 Signs of a Healthy Church—Bill Owen	115
Some Things Never Change—Larry McSwain	117
Living in the Flux of Constant Change—Larry McSwain	119

Connecting the Dots—Bill Owen	122
Stop, Look, Listen—Bob Dale.....	124
From 4-Way Stops to Roundabouts—Bob Dale.....	126
When Your Building Is Simply Too Much—Jim Kitchens	128
Do We Have to Talk About This?—Phill Martin	130
Evangelism Implosion—Bill Wilson.....	132
Loving Our Neighbors—Jim Kitchens	134
Why a Building-use Policy Matters—Bill Wilson.....	136
A New Digital Covenant—Joel Snider	138
By the Numbers—David Hull.....	140
Frequency of Attendance—Bill Wilson	142
The Case of the Declining Congregation—Bill Wilson.....	144
The Unbalanced Church—Bill Wilson	146
Critical Questions to Ask Each Year—Bill Wilson.....	148
Endings and Beginnings—David Hull	150
Changing Seats—Bill Owen	152
A Pivotal Question—Bill Wilson.....	154
10 Things Churches Can Learn from the Masters—Barry Howard	156
Communicate, Communicate, Communicate—Joel Snider	158
Part 4: Trusted Leadership	161
Trusted Leadership Begins Here—Bill Owen	163
A Guide to Building High-trust Leadership—Bill Wilson.....	166
What Does Real Leadership Look Like?—Bill Wilson	168
The Essential Skill for a 21 st -century Pastor—Bill Wilson	170
What Future Leaders Do Differently—Bob Dale	172
Pastor, Please Stop—Bill Owen	174
Curbing an Epidemic—Bill Wilson.....	176
7 Ways to Invest in Your Staff Culture—Phill Martin	178
Holding Your Staff Accountable—Bill Wilson	180
Staffing for Survival—Bill Wilson.....	182
4 Traps for Clergy and Their New Congregation—Bill Wilson.....	184
Leadership in Turbulent Times—David Hull	186

Necessary Leaders—Joel Snider	188
Ministry in the Meantime and Mean Time—Guy Sayles	191
Wanted: Agile Leaders for Seismic Eras—Bob Dale	193
An Old Treasure: The Rule of St. Benedict—Guy Sayles.....	195
Prophetic Priests, Priestly Prophets—Guy Sayles	197
How Do Leaders Become Leaders?—Doug Haney	199
3 Virtues of a Healthy Staff Team—Jayne Davis.....	201
Do You C.A.R.E. Enough?—Jayne Davis.....	203
Too Busy Not to Stop—Jayne Davis.....	205
Boundaries 101—Bill Wilson.....	207
Conflict: It's Complicated—Tracy Hartman.....	209
Conflict as Blessing: Please Don't Waste This Crisis—Bill Wilson.....	211
Epilogue: Leadership During Crisis.....	213
Covid-19 and the Church—Bill Owen	215
A Tale of Two Futures for Your Church—Bill Wilson	217
Applying Lessons from a Hurricane—Matt Cook	221
When Can We Breathe Again?—Phill Martin.....	224
Navigating Our Emotions in Times Like These—Barry Howard.....	226
Now What?—Bill Wilson.....	228
Tomorrow—Mike Queen.....	230
7 Lessons from the Covid-19 Pandemic—Barry Howard.....	232
Pandemic Preaching—David Hull.....	234
Lessons from the Ancient Church for the Present Crisis—Matt Cook	236
Adaptive Change During Crisis—Kairos Time!—Deborah London Wright	238
Contributors.....	241

Foreword

Collective wisdom is a good thing, especially in such an uncertain time for the church in North America. No one who has contributed to the collective wisdom of this anthology would tell you that we are infallible experts. If such ministerial experts ever existed, it was in a different moment in history. What this collection does represent is a community of experienced practitioners who are thinking together about what it means to help churches be the best version of themselves amid all the changes confronting 21st-century congregations.

We think you will find wisdom in these pages that is both timeless (because it points to habits of the heart and mind that the church has always cultivated) and timely (because the ministerial context and thus our strategies for responding to it are always changing). Regardless of the question or challenge that has you thumbing through the pages of this book, our hope is that you will find just what you need to help your church develop a shared vision of thriving ministry.

Matt Cook
Assistant Director
Center for Healthy Churches

Introduction

Every once in a while, one of us who serves as a consultant or coach at the Center for Healthy Churches (CHC) is asked by a church leader, “Exactly what do you mean by a healthy church?”

That’s a fair question. Initially, you may be tempted to think, “Well, everyone knows what a healthy church is,” but upon further reflection you’d realize that answer is incorrect. There are many ways to define a healthy church, based largely on what metrics you use to think about the word “healthy.”

At one of our CHC semiannual gatherings, we decided to come up with a definition of “healthy church” that would help us articulate our understanding of what lies at the heart of the Center’s work. We spent several hours crafting a definition. We wanted it to reflect both our own long years of experience in creating healthy churches in congregations we had served as pastors *and* what we have learned from our years of working as consultants with church leaders from around the country.

We quickly came to a shared agreement about what metrics *don’t* inform our understanding of “healthy,” specifically: the number of members a church has, the size of its budget, and how “successful” it has been. We’ve seen too many large, “successful” churches that exhibit unhealthy behaviors. We’ve also worked with too many small churches that exhibit robust health and a vital mission.

After many drafts, we came up with a statement that we feel captures the heart of our work. It also mirrors our understanding of the church’s call to be the body of Christ in and for the world. This definition emerged from our discernment:

A healthy church is a community of Jesus followers with shared vision, thriving ministry, and trusted leadership.

Notice that this is a *qualitative* definition as opposed to a *quantitative* one. We focus on who the community understands itself to be and how it exhibits that understanding in its shared life. Rather than looking at how much a church is doing or what it has accomplished, we look instead at how much that church follows in the way of Jesus.

- A healthy church understands that its most fundamental call is to be *a community of Jesus followers*. This understanding turns us away from institutional concerns and toward discipleship commitments. Such a church is clear that its core purpose is to incarnate Christ’s healing and saving ministry in a hurting world, joining God in God’s work in that world in the power of the Holy Spirit.

- A healthy church has *a shared vision* that all of its members seek to embody. When a church's vision is fractured, its ministry's impact weakens, both in its members' lives and in the community God has given it to serve. Having a clear and focused vision invites us joyfully to align all our resources—spiritual, mental/emotional, physical, financial, and structural—toward shared Kingdom work.
- A healthy church has *a thriving ministry*. There is a sense of excitement and passion among its members. People experience meaning and purpose as they are given the opportunity to share their gifts. They experience God's deep generosity and grace and are glad to give of themselves and their resources. They understand that their church has all it needs to accomplish the mission God has given it.
- A healthy church has *trusted leadership*—both clergy and lay. A congregation that deeply trusts its leaders can face any adaptive challenge, respond with enthusiasm to any new call, and work faithfully through any conflict that may arise. Clear communication and encouraging words and actions by leaders embolden the congregation to step out in faith.

This way of thinking about a “healthy church” reminds us of Paul's metaphor of the church as a healthy body in Ephesians 4: “(W)e must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love” (v. 15).

Our call at the CHC is to help your congregation “build itself up in love,” so that your ministry can become ever more faithful, vital, and full of hope. We would love to talk with you about how we might walk that path together.

Contributors



William “Bill” Wilson founded the Center for Healthy Churches in January of 2014, following his service as president of the Center for Congregational Health at Wake Forest Baptist Health since 2009. Previously he was pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dalton, Georgia, where he served since 2003. He brings more than 33 years of local church ministry experience to the CHC, having served as the pastor of two churches in Virginia (Farmville Baptist Church and First Baptist Church of Waynesboro) and on a church staff in South Carolina. Bill has led each of the churches he has served into a time of significant growth and expansion of ministry. His work with churches and ministers is marked by a positive and unyielding belief that Christ-centered ministry is fulfilling and relevant. His deepest desire is to encourage churches and clergy to discover a vital and vibrant future. He believes that, as difficult as it is to be the church today, there has never been a day when the church is more needed.



Matt Cook is the assistant director of the Center for Healthy Churches. According to Bill Wilson, “Matt’s joining CHC is both an answered prayer and testimony to the remarkable growth and potential of our group. At age 47, he represents the future for our efforts to engender sustainable health in congregations and clergy across the nation.” Earlier, Matt served local congregations for more than 25 years, with nearly 20 years as senior pastor in churches in Texas, Arkansas, and North Carolina. He is a gifted and thoughtful leader who knows how to listen and how to sort out the issues a congregation needs to address as it prepares for the next season of vital ministry. In his work, Matt combines research and scholarly insight with an emphasis on strategic focus and missional awareness. He has training and experience in strategic planning, staff reorganization, and leadership development, in addition to assisting congregations in pastoral transitions. Matt is also a noted speaker and preacher in churches, at conferences, and on college campuses.



Robert (Bob) Dale is an Oklahoma Baptist University graduate and former assistant executive director of the Virginia Baptist Mission Board. He is a noted author, consultant, and coach who for nearly 50 years has been a thought-leader in the world of congregations as they engage the question of health and vibrancy. Following a distinguished career as a pastor, seminary professor and denominational leader, Bob now turns his focus toward coaching. In this role he is helping to guide a generation of clergy and laity toward a healthier understanding of leadership and maturity. He is also a coach for the Center for Healthy Churches. He and Bill Wilson are the authors of *Weaving Strong Leaders: How Leaders Grow Down, Grow Up, and Grow Together* (Nurturing Faith, 2016).



Jayne Davis has served as the minister of spiritual formation at the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina, since 2001. Prior to going into ministry, she was the executive director of a non-profit organization and worked as a strategic planning consultant for early childhood initiatives. Jayne is a certified coach, working with individuals and churches and with the Center for Healthy Churches and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina. She is also the co-author of *Hopeful Imagination: Traditional Churches Finding God's Way in a Changing World* (Nurturing Faith, 2014).



Doug Haney has served as minister of music at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, since 2004. He previously served at Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, and at churches in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. At Wilshire he directs the choral program and supervises the churchwide music ministry, with major responsibilities for worship. Wilshire's sanctuary and youth choirs are renowned for their quality and innovative approach to traditional worship.



Tracy Hartman most recently served at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond as a professor of preaching and practical theology, and previously as director of the seminary's supervised ministry and Doctor of Ministry programs. She is the author of *Letting the Other Speak: Proclaiming the Stories of Biblical Women*, the co-author of *New Proclamation Commentary*, and a contributor to the *Feasting on the Word* and *Feasting on the Gospels* commentary series. A popular preacher, she is active in Baptist life and has served as a staff member and interim pastor at several Virginia churches.



Barry Howard is now pastor of the Wieuca Road Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, after serving as senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of Pensacola, Florida, from 2005–2017. With more than 40 years of experience in the local church, he has worked with the Center for Healthy Churches in training future pastors and is passionate about congregational health.



David Hull, an active leader in community and denominational life for 35 years, joined the Center for Healthy Churches team in 2014. He recently retired after serving as associate pastor of Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, and before that as pastor of the First Baptist churches of Huntsville, Alabama, and Knoxville, Tennessee, and also at churches in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Kentucky.



Jim Kitchens, a native of Mississippi, has served Presbyterian churches in California and Tennessee for almost 35 years. He loves helping congregations prayerfully discern how the Spirit calls them to adapt to changing cultural contexts. Jim is the author of *The Postmodern Parish: New Ministry for a New Era*.



Phil Martin is the CEO of The Church Network (TCN), an interdenominational professional association of churches and individuals that exists to connect, develop, and strengthen church leaders in administration. His passion is to engage and connect individuals and organizations to help them reach their maximum potential. Phil enjoys coaching, teaching, mentoring, and connecting people with information and resources. He is also a coach with the Center for Healthy Churches.



Larry McSwain is a long-time educator at McAfee School of Theology, Shorter College, and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He specializes in congregational research and in training others in strategy-planning processes and conflict ministry. While Larry is now in retirement, he continues to be a vital resource to the Center for Healthy Churches.



Bill Owen is a congregational consultant and coach for the Center for Healthy Churches after a 32-year pastorate at Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in Cross Plains, Tennessee. An experienced leadership coach, he also has worked as a cognitive coach among educators, particularly secondary school teachers, with a focus on innovation and personalized learning. He brings these skills and experiences to his work with and love for congregations and ministry staff development. He works extensively with the Strategic Transition Education Program (STEP), designed specifically for churches and their leaders during interim periods in a church's life.



Mike Queen has served churches in North Carolina for the last 40 years. He retired after 25 years as pastor at the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, but continues to serve in various interim positions. Mike, along with his colleague Jayne Davis, founded a ministry of encouragement called Hopeful Imagination to work with traditional churches dedicated to finding God's way in a changing world. They are the authors of *Hopeful Imagination: Traditional Churches Finding God's Way in a Changing World* (Nurturing Faith, 2014).



Guy Sayles serves as a congregational consultant and coach after a 13-year pastorate at the First Baptist Church of Asheville, North Carolina, and four years of teaching at Mars Hill University in North Carolina. He is part of the adjunct faculty of the Gardner-Webb University Divinity School. Along with his other interests of teaching, preaching and writing, Guy works with the Center for Healthy Churches to foster congregational health and depth.



Steve Scoggin is a minister, professor, licensed professional counselor, certified Franklin Covey facilitator, and Associate Certified Coach (ACC). He is president of CareNet, Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in North Carolina. Along with his responsibilities of providing leadership to a statewide outpatient counseling network of 32 clinics, he also is adjunct assistant professor in psychiatry and behavioral medicine at WFBMC. He specializes in executive coaching and consulting, having worked with executives and organizations in the private, public, and non-profit sectors.



Craig Sherouse retired in February 2019 after 11 years as senior pastor of the Second Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia. His 47 years in local church ministry—43 of those as senior pastor—included his native Florida, in addition to Kentucky, Georgia, and Virginia. Craig has training and experience in strategic planning/visioning, coaching, team building, and pastoral transition. He is a coach and consultant for the Center for Healthy Churches.



Joel Snider retired in 2016 after a 21-year pastorate at the First Baptist Church of Rome, Georgia, and a total of 40 years in active ministry. Joel has an active coaching practice with a wide variety of clients, including ministers, small business owners, and financial planners. In his work with the Center for Healthy Churches, Joel focuses on creating a faith development ministry with young families and churches, in addition to consulting for minister search committees and congregational health. He also serves as a coach for the CHC.



Deborah London Wright is a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and a principal with PneuMatrix, an adaptive change consulting group based in northern California. She has returned to working directly with presbyteries and congregations after 25 years as a corporate chaplain, bringing adaptive change rooted in spiritual formation.