

Growing Healthy Churches

The Story of the CRCA - 2012

by Jack De Vries

Healthy churches are growing churches, and for this reason, one of my ministry priorities in the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia (CRCA) has been to assist churches in becoming healthier. We have seen a marked increase in the number of churches (currently 15 CRCA congregations) utilising Natural Church Development (NCD) as a church health measurement tool and engaging me as they seek to implement new initiatives to increase church health. A number of churches have done three or more NCD surveys over the past four years. So how healthy is the CRCA?

Before we look at the current health status of the CRCA, it is important to remember that while the CRCA is committed to growing healthy churches, healthy churches is not the goal. The goal is to grow healthy churches which nurture and equip their members and, by God's grace, expand numerically, become the mother-churches of as many fellowships and congregations as possible. In other words, the goal is to grow healthy churches which grow, or rather, which multiply.

What is NCD? Natural Church Development, or NCD means releasing the 'all by itself' growth by which God Himself grows His church. This reinforces what we already know, but not necessarily what we do:

- It is God who must bring the growth. Only God can create living things and



cause them to grow. Anything manufactured by human hands can't grow naturally simply because we cannot impart life. The church is not constructed, built or manufactured, it is grown.

- If the church is a living thing, we must work out how best to cooperate with God so that He can bring healthy growth. Our job is to be keen observers who become expert at removing barriers and stimulating the conditions which maximise the potential for life and healthy growth to occur. Only then will the church bear "fruit" of consistent quality and quantity.

It comes as a huge relief to be reminded that God brings the life and growth, not us. It comes as a huge relief that church growth is just that, a process of growing the church as an organism and not a program or series of programs of constructing the church as an organisation.

The research done by NCD identified Eight Quality Characteristics as essential components for a church to address to maximise its potential for “all by itself” growth. These Quality Characteristics are:

- Empowering Leadership
- Inspiring Worship Service
- Gift-based Ministry
- Holistic Small Groups
- Passionate Spirituality
- Need-oriented Evangelism
- Effective Structures
- Loving Relationships

So based on the NCD survey results, what is the health status of the CRCA? Now remember, these results come from a representative slice of the CRCA. The results below come from 13 churches which have in the recent past completed the survey, which amounts to 25% or a quarter of the CRCA congregations.

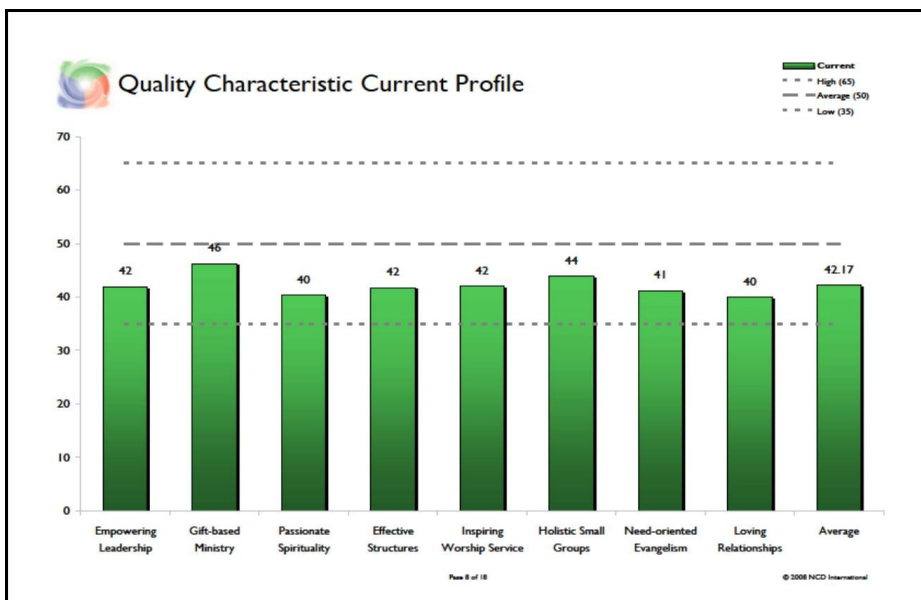
The overall health of the CRCA has improved ever so slightly over the past 5 years(see chart below). The overall average in January 2007 was 40.83. The average now is 42.17. While this is not a significant jump in

overall health, it still is growth.

Another evidence of increased health is the decrease in the difference between the minimum and the maximum factors. The min-max difference in 2007 was 8; today it is 6. This indicates that there is greater balance in our churches in each of the Eight Quality Characteristics. Greater balance, better health.

There has also been a change with the current minimum factor and current maximum factor. In 2007 the minimum factor was **Passionate Spirituality**(38) and the maximum factor was **Holistic Small Groups**(46). Today the minimum factor is **Loving Relationships** (40) and the maximum factor is **Gift-based Ministry** (46). It is important to note that Passionate Spirituality is a very close second minimum factor (less than .5% difference) and Holistic Small Groups is the second highest maximum factor (44). Holistic Small Groups has simply traded places with Gift-based Ministry. Perhaps this reflects the increasing denominational emphasis on training over the past five years.

What do these summary results say about the CRCA? We’ll look at some details later, but first, this summary points to the need for our churches to implement strategies that will improve loving relationships and/or passionate spirituality. **Loving relationships** are the heart of a healthy, growing church. Jesus said people will know we are his disciples by our love. Practical demonstration of love builds authentic Christian community and brings others into God’s kingdom. **Passionate spirituality** is evidenced by faith that is actually lived out with commitment, fire and enthusiasm.



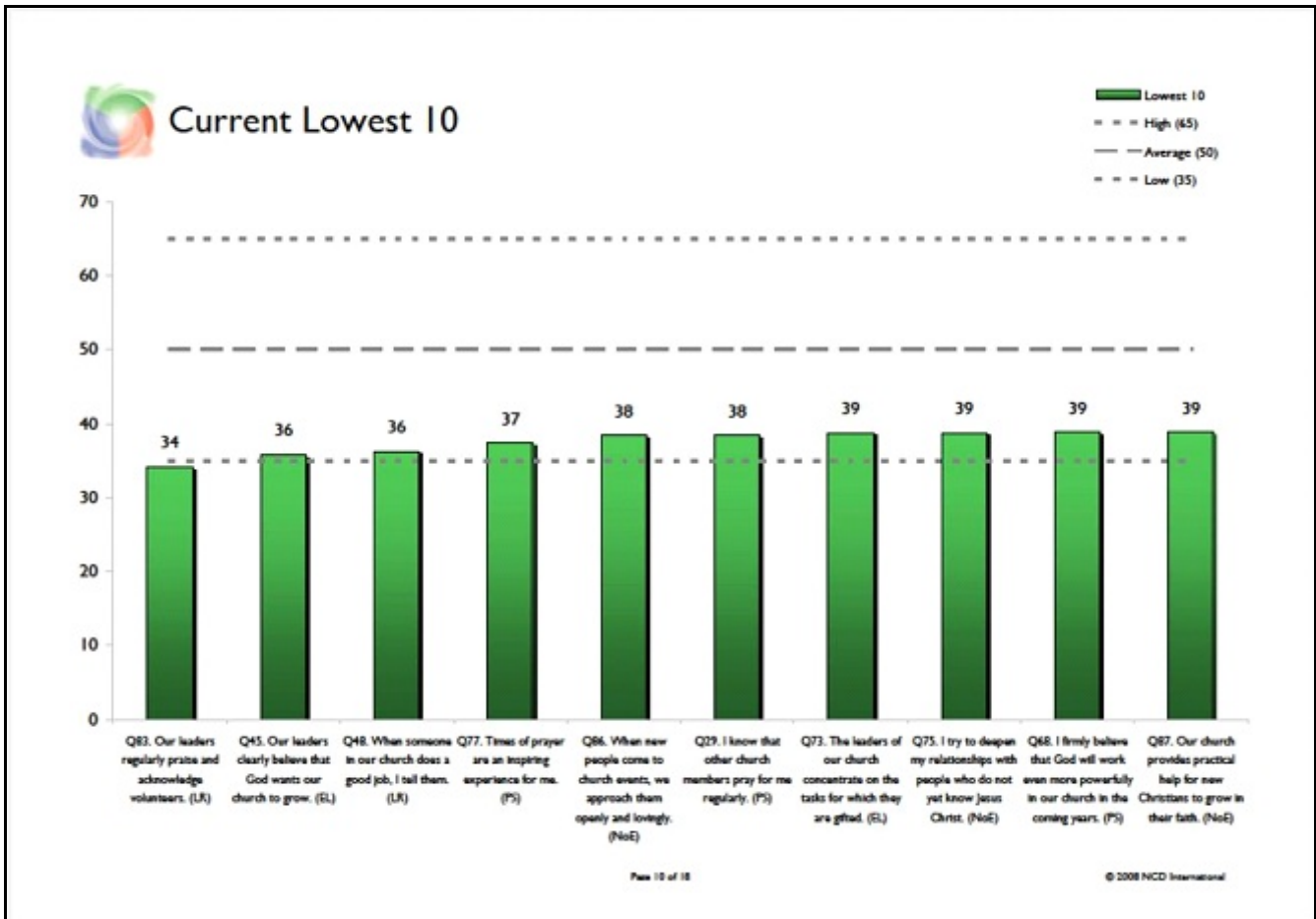
What can churches do? NCD has recently developed some tools which can be very useful in implementing some strategies to increase church health. These tools, called "Cycle Starter Plans", suggest a number of ways the church can address their minimum factors. You can see the "Cycle Starter Plans" for Loving Relationships and Passionate Spirituality below (pp.7-8). These "Cycle Starter Plans" can be found for every question in the NCD survey, so the ideas are almost endless. Churches are finding these tools very helpful.

There is more to learn about the CRCA if you not only look at the whole but begin to look at the parts. For example, look at the "Current Highest 10" in the figure below and the "Current Lowest 10" in the figure found on page 4. The current highest average score (Q28) tells us the pastor's work load is overall quite healthy. This means that pastors are empowering others in the church to do the

work of ministry. This is well above average. Also people's gifts for ministry seem to be used (Q8, 9, 46). The Bible also remains a powerful guide for church members in the decisions of everyday life (Q72). Churches are engaging in needs orientated evangelism (Q36) without disregarding the support given to one another within the church (Q17, 14, 49). These are all healthy signs.

If you look at the "Current Lowest 10" you realise that there is still much work to be done to improve overall church health. Perhaps this comes from our Dutch or Calvinistic heritage, but mutual encouragement in our churches appears to be lacking (Q83, 48). I find this a recurring theme in many churches, and something that can be so easily rectified. Imagine if every church leader would be held accountable to personally contact by phone and/or visit three church volunteers each month for the purpose of encouragement. What a difference this would make, and this





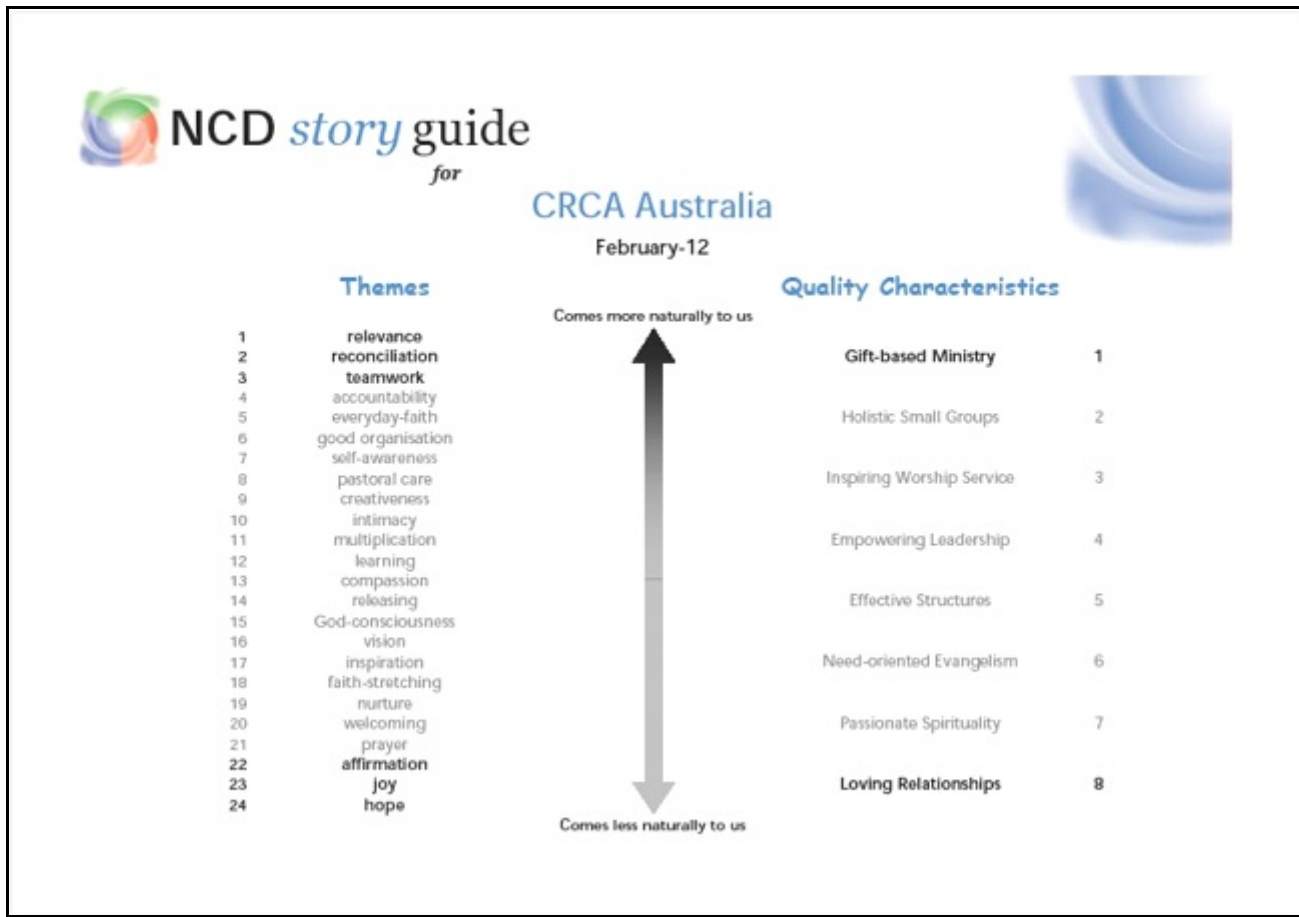
would also impact the need of people praying for one another (Q29). In spite of the CRCA vision to be a church reforming to reach the lost for Christ, to grow and multiply, the leaders in the CRCA still do not clearly believe that God wants our church to grow (Q45). Has the vision leaked? Are we so occupied with things inside the church that we have no time to focus on people outside of the church? At least three other questions also relate to the missional vision (Q75, 86, 87). What can we do as churches to raise the bar in the area of reaching the lost for Christ? The same is in the area of prayer (Q77, 29).

As I look at the "Current Lowest 10" I try to imagine a church where you will find leaders clearly believing that God wants our church to grow – and this passion spreads through the church. People believe that God is going to do amazing things in and through the church. Prayer becomes a priority and

people intentionally go out to develop friendships with the unsaved. When these people come to a small group or a worship service they are warmly received. Many come to faith in Christ Jesus. There is an intentional discipleship program that helps these new believers grow in their faith. Sounds healthy, doesn't it? And healthy churches are growing churches. This is our vision for the CRCA.

Another helpful tool to assess over church health is the NCD Story Guide. Think of your church. Your church is a community of stories. Every week we listen to and tell stories through words and body language of what our church and the Christian faith mean to us. This Story Guide provides a window into those stories that matter most for the long-term growth of our church.

So what is the story of the CRCA? Well check out the story summary on page 5.

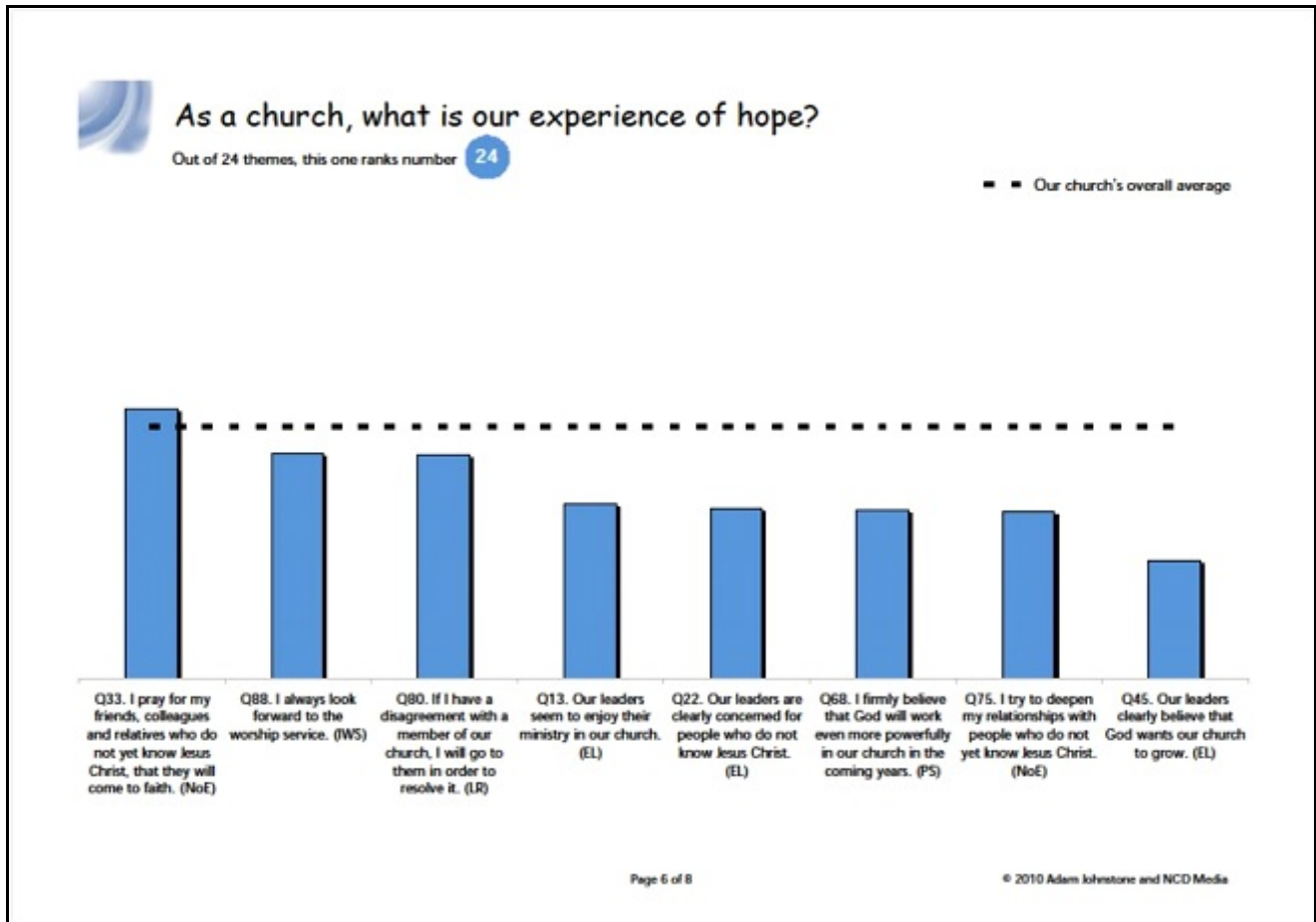


Notice the themes – those things that come naturally to the CRCA and those things come less naturally. Things like **relevance**, **reconciliation**, and **teamwork** come more naturally to the CRCA. But other things such as **affirmation**, **joy**, and **hope** come less naturally to the CRCA. You can check out the full CRCA NCD Story Report which can be downloaded from the Ministry Formation Website: www.ministryformation.com.au.

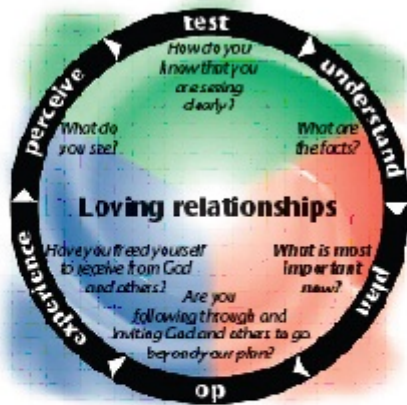
For the purposes of this overview, I want to simply highlight the lowest theme: hope. Refer to the questions related to this theme which can be found in the figure on page 6. Notice that all but one of the questions are well below the CRCA overall average. There is an obvious lack of missional focus (Q45,75, 68,22,33). Leaders do not believe that God wants our church to grow(Q45) and members do not believe that God will work powerfully in our church in the coming years. Members also do not try to deepen relationships with

the unsaved. The only hopeful sign is that people seem to pray for people who do not yet know Christ. Leaders do not seem to enjoy their ministry in the church and members do not look forward to worship services (Q88,13). There are matters between members that remain unresolved (Q80). Hope is lacking. And lack of joy lags not far behind. What can we do to restore hope and joy in our churches? Well, check out the Hope Cycle Starter Plans found on page 9 below. NCD suggests a number of ways churches can take some first steps toward increased hope.

One of the ways I plan to increase hope and joy in the CRCA in the coming months is by sharing real-life stories from people in the CRCA that give evidence that God is working powerfully in our churches and denomination, stories of individuals and churches reaching out to people who do not yet know Jesus Christ. And may we all be much in prayer that



God will continue to advance the gospel in and through our churches. And “may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage [our] hearts and strengthen [us] in every good deed and word.” (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17)



Cycle Starter Plans

Having understood your church a little better with the help of the NCD Church Survey, it's now time to start cycling together towards a healthier church. You've chosen to start experimenting and learning more about the topic to the left. Now, select one of the cycle starter plans below and write number 1 in its box. Put this sheet on your wall, then, go do it!

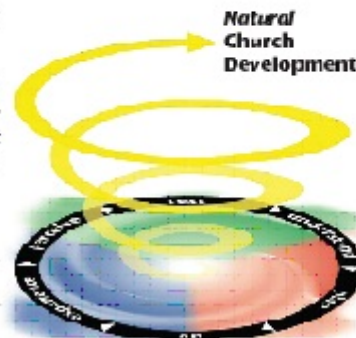
Next time you are meeting with others who are also working through a topic, ask each other the questions from the cycle, starting at "do" and finishing at "plan". After a cycle you may decide the most important thing to do now is to keep going with the same plan, modify it, or choose another option from below. If choosing another from below, just write 2 in its box and so on.

If you'd like more cycle starter options, or to work on another topic highlighted by your NCD Church Survey results, just visit ncdchurchsurvey.org/cycle-starters

- Allow more time than usual in an upcoming meeting when you will visibly put aside the agenda, your diary, your phone and all other distractions to purely focus your interest and attention on the person or people with whom you are meeting.
- Ask anyone you come across in your church or small group, who seems to have some longer-term tension with another person, to tell you one or more positive things about that person, then encourage them to communicate those to the other person in some way.
- Connect with members of your ministry team in a social context where there is no agenda other than enjoying each other's company and relating to one another.
- Consider how effective your church is in caring for the needy who are already a part of your congregation.
- Identify three people who make a valuable contribution to the life of your church and make a point of thanking them personally.
- Invite some people from your church that you don't know very well into your home or out somewhere for a meal.
- Take the 3colorsolive.org Fruit of the Spirit Test on your own or in a group.
- Take time before meetings this week (e.g. at meals with your family, a leadership or team meeting, a mentoring appointment, etc.) to think about a celebration point that relates to that individual or group as a whole and then share it with them.

Your Cycle Starter idea

November 2011 Suggested Cycle Starter Plans





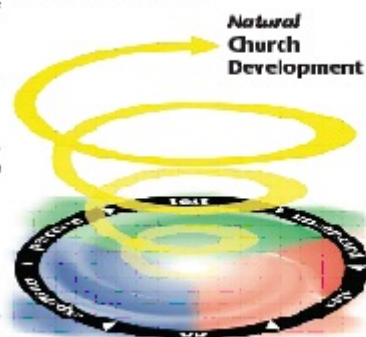
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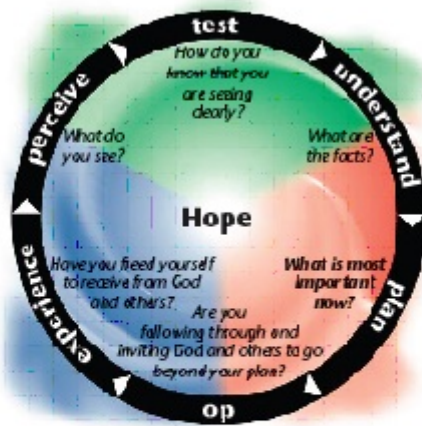
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- Consider what "messages" your church leaders send about their belief in your church's future and speak to them about your observations in an encouraging way.
- Download or buy a Bible reading plan and begin using it. Be sure to think about the time of day when you will be free and relaxed to do so. If necessary, limit another activity or ask for help to be freed up to make this possible. Share with someone what you are learning or have been reminded of from your readings.
- Listen to yourself when praying and consider whether God would find your prayer language distant or unusual compared to how you would normally speak to a very close friend. Then consider the Psalms as examples of direct, honest and expressive prayer.
- Make a list of ten reasons for celebration from your life this week (eg. from your work, church, ministry, family and friendships, the Bible, etc.) and share some of these with at least three people in your church.
- Reflect on challenging circumstances you face in daily life or ministry. If you rarely speak, even briefly, to God about these challenges, consider what image of God (and yourself) you may have. If you don't face significant challenges, consider what if any implications that has for your prayer life.
- Regularly meet with someone who is known as a prayerful person and whose prayers are answered. Talk to them about their experiences of prayer and pray with them.
- Take the [3 colors for your spirituality.org](http://3colorsforyourspirituality.org) Spiritual Style Test on your own or in a group.
- Think of two people who are contributing enthusiastically to your church. Ask them why they are enthusiastic and why they invest the time they do.
- _____



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- Ask anyone you come across in your church or small group, who seems to have some longer-term tension with another person, to tell you one or more positive things about that person, then encourage them to communicate those to the other person in some way.
- Bring to mind one of your friends or family members who does not seem to be growing closer to Jesus. Spend some time reflecting on how God might feel about them. Then, consider whether those thoughts are consistent with the love of a good father.
- Consider what "messages" your church leaders send about their belief in your church's future and speak to them about your observations in an encouraging way.
- Consider whether a lack of new Christians in your church may be connected with a loss of the joy and hope of salvation among the existing Christians in your church. Share with someone what that may mean for you personally.
- If you have a gifted evangelist in your church, ask them to explain why and how they pray for and share the Gospel with others. Consider inviting them to also speak to your small group about the topic.
- If you have relationship difficulties with anyone in your church, find a neutral party to help you repair the relationship, and persist until it is.
- Make a list of ten reasons for celebration from your life this week (eg. from your work, church, ministry, family and friendships, the Bible, etc.) and share some of these with at least three people in your church.
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