

# ANEMIC OR ROBUST?

by JON JOHNSTON

I once knew a schoolteacher who had a raging case of bacillophobia: fear of bacteria. Each morning she'd arrive very early to saturate her classroom with a pungent, germicidal spray. Sadly, I heard she died a premature death. I can't help wondering if it had something to do with breathing all those chemicals as she worked so hard to stay healthy.

Though few go to this extreme, scores take stringent measures to enhance their physical well-being, such as ingesting handfuls of pills and jogging until their lungs feel ablaze. And feeling or performing below expectation prompts a dash to the doctor to check how blood pressure, cholesterol, weight, and pulse compare to healthy benchmarks.

But health is crucial to venues other than the human body. Wall Streeters hope for a "healthy economy," one not plagued by excessive inflation or recession. Pundits laud a "healthy political climate," one with an absence of mudslinging. Psychologists proclaim the merits of a "healthy self-image" and "healthy relationships."

Can we usefully apply the oft-used concept of health to churches? Absolutely.

Employing appropriate standards, we can assess whether the earthly manifestations of our Lord's mystical Body are in tip-top shape, have plateaued, or are spiraling downward. Such information can empower us to strategize effectively; if we remain oblivious, we invite complacency, stagnation, and even demise.

John the Revelator offered no-holds-barred, accurate assessments of the seven churches of Asia. The same goes for Paul, who forthrightly critiqued churches he started and nurtured. Their honest feedback was invaluable to saints of yesteryear. Likewise, rigorous health exams promise insight for continued vitality in our beloved denomination today.

## CHANGE: NO ESCAPING IT

Former General Superintendent Eugene Stowe once described a sign over a church nursery entry: "We will not all sleep," it read, "but we will all be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51). Though the phrase brings a smile in that context, "we will all be changed" is most applicable to those of us in the preresurrected church. Change occurs continuously, like the incessant flow of a river. We have little control over much of it, such as members relocating because of a sagging economy. But much of it we can and must wisely affect, such as using spiritual gifts to facilitate a climate of love.

The way a church approaches change is a—perhaps *the*—critical issue that determines its health and vitality.

For starters, being informed and aware of change is imperative. Next we must carefully assess its nature, value, and probable effects. Then, with utmost discernment, we must promptly and passionately respond. How? In two important ways.

First, damaging, debilitating change must be countered with all the spiritual weapons in our arsenal. Cultural gravitation toward crime, sexual immorality, and abuse must be aggressively challenged, just as we would pursue radical surgery to stop a rapidly spreading malignancy. In the same way, spiritual decay within the Body must be vigorously and relentlessly countered.

Second, change that contains redeeming elements must be skillfully and diligently used to advance God's kingdom. Paul's dictum "by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22, κἅν) underscores this principle. Like health-conscious persons acting on the latest reliable research findings, the healthy church will be on the constant lookout for effective, proven methods.

These two ways of wisely responding to change may seem obvious. Nevertheless, throughout its history the



*The Church's continued vitality will be determined by how it responds to future changes. Will we choose to ignore them, hoping they'll somehow disappear or have no significant impact? Or will we closely monitor them in order to be best equipped to best respond?*

Church has tripped over knowing what change to resist and what to embrace. Let's have a closer look at each.

## WORTH "GOING TO THE MAT" FOR

Whether focusing on the church as the unconquerable, mystical Body of Christ or the visible organization steeped on earth, one conclusion is irrefutable: many of its key elements are intended to be permanent, to be stalwart rocks of Gibraltar.

Our Lord is, and shall forever be, its supreme Commander. As such, He clearly detailed its everlasting mission and purpose: to reveal God's love. Furthermore, His marching orders include immutable directives that require us to be servants (the "living sacrifice" of Romans 12:1); to go, teach, preach, heal, and make disciples; to obey God's law wholeheartedly; to remain pure and steadfast; to minister to the destitute; to forgive repeatedly; to give cheerfully and sacrificially; to love without calculating; to pray incessantly. And in the process, never to fret.

Again, these stipulations are unchanging. In no age or culture will they ever become obsolete or irrelevant for the Church. Thus, any changes that deviate or distract us from these specs must be vehemently resisted through the enablement and guidance of God's faithful Spirit.

The Church's task is to flesh out God's directives and designs in institutions where purposes, policies, and personnel are flawed and where all programs have shortcomings, leaders have clay feet (or at least a toe or two), and life is never a panacea.

Nevertheless, the Bride of Christ must strive for true spiritual health. And that implies ignoring the "sea of beckoning fingers" that lures it toward shortcuts, deviations, and compromises. In short, it means hanging tough on essentials despite powerful cultural resistance and enticing but faulty ecclesiastical fads.

This assignment requires the Church's utmost commitment and the courage to monitor itself diligently. Toward that end, our denomination employs numerous strategies for self-examination.

More than two decades ago, the Association of Nazarene Sociologists and Researchers originated the Nazarene composite index (NCI), a yearly statistical checkup of our denomination's vital signs. Similar to the consumer price index that charts the U.S. economy, our NCI tracks important trends in the church. Specifically, it targets four crucial areas: participation, outreach, finance, and nurture. The average performance of this quartet, the NCI number, is then used to make yearly comparisons.

What have we discovered using this tool? We know, for instance, that our NCI steadily climbed from 1995 to 2000 but since then has slightly dipped. Also, we know that this decrease is due to the downward pull of only one area: outreach. And when we scrutinize the elements within the outreach category, we learn that our Zion has stumbled the most in two areas: visitation evangelism programs and revivals. The number of each has significantly decreased. For example, 25 percent of our churches report holding no revivals. (Read more



on the Nazarene composite index at <[www.nazareneresearch.org/nci.html](http://www.nazareneresearch.org/nci.html)>.)

Indeed, some things are “vital signs” and worthy of permanence. We have singled out these four and intend to continue monitoring them closely, considering them important indicators of our denominational health.

But the Church’s task goes beyond opposing changes that dilute, deteriorate, or destroy its effectiveness. It must with equal conviction enthusiastically support beneficial changes, using them to enhance effectiveness.

### **A LESS-THAN-GLOWING TRACK RECORD**

Author Joseph Tkach notes that people ate with their fingers during the Middle Ages, often making quite a mess of things. When forks from Italy were introduced to England at the time of Queen Elizabeth I, clergy denounced the innovation as an “immoral luxury intended to undermine the fiber of the people, and attract the wrath of God” (“Common Ground” in *Journey*).

Similar resistance has greeted most changes throughout history, typically spearheaded by sincere churchmen equipped with farfetched notions. The railroad, telegraph, “store-bought” canned goods, car, antibiotics, radio, airplane, TV, and most recently the Internet have all been soundly lambasted by preachers as “inventions hatched in hell for evil purposes” (Tkach).

Efforts to impede legitimate progress have undercut the Church’s relevance. Its proper role is to raise legitimate concerns and urge the right use of creativity.

What’s more, when they indiscriminately oppose all change—including new and better methods—churches drastically lessen their potential for effective ministry. They become archaic, mere survivors from a former era. Someone aptly declared, “The seven last words of a dying church are, ‘We never did it that way before.’”

I once saw this caption below a dinosaur’s picture: “Adapt or die!” To paraphrase the immortal Goethe, we must always change, renew, and rejuvenate. Otherwise we harden. To decide not

to upgrade, sharpen our tools, and reassess in light of changing circumstances is to choose to become irrelevant. Not to move forward is to fall back.

The executive editor of *Holiness Today*, Gay Leonard, summarized the point succinctly: “The refusal to change is one of the biggest detriments to remaining healthy as a church. A church’s refusal to embrace technology, for example, for the sake of the gospel is akin to refusal to take the newest treatments available for cancer.”

Carte blanche rejection of today’s computer graphics, community research techniques, and telecommunication ventures is foolish. Though churches must never impulsively accept every untested fad that appears or bow to compromise, they must exhibit an openness that bespeaks humility. No matter how valuable previously, past formulas and traditions may actually be counterproductive today.

### **HEALTH: A MATTER OF MAKING RIGHT CHOICES**

In a real sense, physical health relates closely to age. Few young people battle rheumatism, arthritis, or broken hips; likewise, I’ve not lately seen many geezers break out with mumps or chicken pox. As folks transition through life’s stages, they’re confronted with constant bodily changes. The same is true for churches.

For nearly a hundred years, the Church of the Nazarene has faced complex, often perplexing, external and internal changes, and in a progression of ways. And if our Lord tarries, we can safely anticipate that these “intrusions” will continue and even intensify.

Our continued vitality will be determined in large measure by how we respond to future changes. Will we choose to ignore them, hoping they’ll somehow disappear or have no significant impact? Or, knowing better, will we closely monitor them in order to be best equipped to best respond?

Finally, after being made aware of changes and their probable impact, will we seek the guidance and empowerment of the blessed Holy Spirit to combat changes that are spiritually toxic and warmly welcome those that promise to enhance our potential?

It’s all beautifully summarized in this paraphrase of Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Serenity Prayer”:

*God, give thy church the serenity to accept what should not be changed, courage to change what should be changed, and wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Amen. HT*

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