

Third Mark: seeks to discover what God wants

Discerning the Spirit's leading rather than trying to please everyone

Objectives of healthy church:

- **Vocation: seeks to explore what God wants it to be and do**
- **Vision: develops and communicates a shared sense of where it is going**
- **Mission priorities: Consciously sets both immediate and long-term goals**
- **Able to call for, and make, sacrifices, personal and corporate, in bringing about the above and living out the faith**

In the Early Church it was a brave move to become a Christian, and this is still true in many parts of the world today. Perhaps this is less true for us, although ostracism is experienced by Christians the world over. To be a baptised Christian means being baptised into Christ's death and Resurrection, and allowing that pattern to shape our lives. The Lord's Prayer also reflects something of this pattern; beginning with dedication to the things of God (his name, Kingdom and will), and then entrusting our needs to God's gracious provision. In summary, death to self and rising to new life in Christ.

Healthy churches seem to have reconnected with this understanding of discipleship, both corporately and as individuals within a church. *Church is practised as a courageous following after Christ and a corporate willingness to engage in 'conversion' as a way of life. (Greek word for conversion is metanoia meaning both change of heart and change of mind).* In other words, faith becomes totalizing.

In many churches there is a genuine desire to 'do something for God.' Healthy churches discover what *God wants to do with them*. God sets the agenda of a healthy church, which can be both unpredictable and disturbing.

The Church belongs to Christ. Christ alone died for his Church. It is his Church before it was *my* or *our* Church. A healthy church acknowledges this by seeking to discover what God wants *for* and *of his* Church.

To assume we know what God wants is not a healthy route to pursue. *There is a profound difference between Christ's promise that the Truth would set us free, and an attitude that indicates that the truth has made us right.*

Wrestling with and questioning how we understand God what wants of us is a sign of maturity for both an individual and a church. Health is found at least as much in the seeking as in the finding.

Some ways in which the third mark of discernment is evident are as follows:

Vocation: seeks to explore what God wants it to be and do

Being and *doing* are important. But, it is often the case that healthy churches put a lot of effort into their 'being'. They care about the quality of what is being done, about how people feel, about the nature of the relationships within the church and the impact of the whole life of the church on a local community. From *who* we are emerges *what* we are, irrespective of courses, programmes, plans, etc.

Vision: develops and communicates a shared sense of where it is going

This is not primarily about having a Mission Statement. Vision is what develops as a result of prayerful and considered reflection. As often as not, it just emerges.

Even when it starts with leaders, it does not become real unless owned by most of the church. The best way to achieve ownership is not to 'sell' a vision but rather to allow and encourage people to design it. Participants in the design of a vision are often much more motivated to work to bring it into being.

Mission priorities: a healthy church consciously sets both immediate and long-term goals.

Mission is something we don't just fall into. There is an intentional quality to mission.

Vision and vocation sometimes get stuck if they are left in the abstract - as things we were in favour of but never got around to expressing in action. Healthy churches take their vocation and vision seriously enough to act upon them.

Sometimes the action is to stop doing something to discern just what it is God is calling us to do. (Lockdown!) Frantic activity in a thousand directions is not necessarily a sign of health. When a church takes time to discern God's call on its life it will end up doing a few things and doing them well and sustainably.

Able to call for, and *make, sacrifices,* personal and corporate, in bringing about the above and living out the faith

Where there is a sense of vocation (*that we are joining in with what God is doing*) and vision, people will go beyond the normal and safe limits of giving time, energy and resources. Sacrifices will be made. Vocation and vision happen when the church's spirituality engages with its sense of mission. Through prayerful reflection, a corporate sense of direction emerges and people discover their own sense of vocation within that broader vision. This is why nurture groups/ study groups/ home groups are so important. They build this prayerful climate, belonging and a sense of sharing in a broader vision.

An illustration of this dynamic ... is the story of a church that spent over 18 months seeking to discover what God was calling them to be and become. They came to a one-word answer, that God was calling them to hospitality. They understood this first as being invited, in the Eucharist, to receive hospitality from God. They then saw that they were called to offer hospitality to one another ('Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you'), and that that should have a profound impact on the quality of their relationships within the church. They then recognised that they were called to offer hospitality within their local community and focused all their energies into caring for immigrants and

other groups that felt excluded by society. They were sometimes criticized in the local community because they were friends with doubtful characters, just as Christ was.

As we continue through 'the Marks' we will see how they reinforce each other. However, let's summarise by saying that in the case of the church above, their faith led them to seek God's call upon the life of the church, which resulted in a deep commitment to the people who were not part of the church.

So far we have looked at faith, outreach and discernment. It is apparent that these marks do not stand alone but are woven together, with one mark feeding and strengthening others.

The question for us all is: *'What is God doing in this place and what is He calling us to do as a church?'*

Let's Pray

Lord you call us into life.

May you be Lord over our lives,

and help us to put our trust in you

that we may do your will

in our church and in our communities.

May we always remember that the Kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,

now and forever.

Amen

Study Passages

Luke 10: 38-11.13

What is Christianity - and so the Body of Christ - about?

What place does quiet reflection have in our life and church? What really matters in life?

Colossians 3: 1-14

What sort of church might God want to join?

What do we need to work on?

Meditation

The church is called to express the life of Jesus Christ who, as a child, said:

I must be in my Father's house, (Luke 2:49).

Spend some time reflecting on what Jesus is saying here.