

Introduction to "Cultivating a Healthy Church"

Matthew 16:18

March 30, 2025

[**PLEASE NOTE:** The Briefing Document and Study Notes were created with the assistance of AI, and have been reviewed by the pastoral staff to ensure that an accurate presentation of the sermon is given.]

Briefing Document: "Introduction to 'Cultivating a Healthy Church'"

This briefing document summarizes the main themes and important ideas presented in the provided sources: excerpts from "Introduction to 'Cultivating a Healthy Church': A Study Guide" and the transcript of the "DAC Sermon 2025-03-30.mp3." The central message revolves around the concept of actively "cultivating" the church to ensure its ongoing health, growth, and effective mission.

Main Themes and Important Ideas:

1. Avoiding Nostalgia and Embracing the Present for Future Growth:

- The sermon begins by cautioning against excessive focus on the past, quoting a statement: "If you spend your life yearning for the past, it is likely that you will not have much of a future."
- The speaker elaborates that clinging to the "good old days" can lead the church to "overlook God's guidance and direction for today that will have the effect of impacting our future in a positive way."
- While acknowledging the 100-year history of Danville Alliance Church and celebrating the multiplication through their sister church in Champaign (now planting house churches in Vermilion County), the speaker emphasizes the need to move forward.
- The COVID-19 pandemic, occurring four years prior, is acknowledged as an "ongoing challenge" that has impacted members and disrupted past routines. However, this is not seen as a reason to give up.

2. The Unwavering Foundation and Hope in Christ's Church:

- Despite present challenges, the speaker offers encouragement by quoting Jesus: "On this rock I will build my church. The church will reign triumphant even at the gates of hell."
- This declaration assures believers of God's ultimate plan and victory for the church, even amidst struggles.
- The speaker also references Isaiah's prophecy about God's compassion for the struggling: "what is bruised and bent He will not break. He will not blow out a smoldering candle." This reinforces the idea of God's support and encouragement during difficult times.

3. The Analogy of Cultivation for Church Life:

- The central metaphor introduced is "cultivating a healthy church." The speaker draws a parallel to backyard gardening, contrasting his simple experience with rhubarb ("grab[bing] the rhubarb by hand and pulling it up was the full extent of my cont. contribution to gardening") with the "significant amount of knowledge and skill" required for serious vegetable gardening.
- He then cites West Hills Tractor on the benefits of cultivating physical soil: "It helps remove weeds from the soil and loosens the ground to let air, water, and nutrients penetrate deeper, resulting in the growth of your yields." Other benefits include bringing weed seeds to the surface, increased water retention, and easier growth for germinated seeds.
- This analogy is directly applied to the church, suggesting that similar intentional effort is needed for spiritual growth and health.

4. Identifying and Addressing "Weeds" and "Crustiness":

- Churches can fall into a "time warp" by remaining unchanged since their founding, with examples including: "singing the same old songs from outdated hymnals," "speak[ing] the same Christianese dialect," and resisting new ideas with "'We've never done it that way before.'" This "crustiness" hinders growth and can alienate newcomers.
- Drawing from Paul's writings in Galatians and Colossians, the speaker identifies "weeds" that can take root in a church: "idolatry, drug use, hostility toward others, making trouble, strife, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, making people angry with each other, causing conflict and divisions among people, being envious of others good fortune, being hot-tempered, malicious, spiteful behavior, doing or saying things to hurt others, the use of filthy and obscene language." These negative influences need to be "rooted out."

5. The Importance of Flexibility and Adaptability:

- The Apostle Paul is presented as an example of flexibility, willing to "become a slave to all people... When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ... When I'm with the Gentiles who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from the law so I can bring them to Christ."
- Paul's aim was to "find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some," emphasizing the need to adapt methods while maintaining the core message of the gospel.
- The speaker paraphrases Paul from "The Voice" translation: "I'm flexible, adaptable, and able to do and be whatever is needed for all kinds of people so that in the end, I can use every means at my disposal to offer them salvation."
- The church is encouraged to be "not crusty but flexible. Not crusty but adaptable. Not crusty but whatever is needed for all kinds of people."

6. Defining and Cultivating a "Healthy Church" through Natural Church Development:

- The sermon connects the idea of church health to the eight qualities identified by Natural Church Development (NCD):
- Empowering leadership: Preparing others for ministry.
- Gifts-based ministry: Believers serving according to their spiritual gifts.
- Passionate spirituality: Genuine relationship with Jesus lived with joy and enthusiasm.
- Effective structures: Removing barriers.
- Inspiring worship services: Meaningful and passionate praise.
- Holistic small groups: Encouragement and sharing of the Good News.
- Need-oriented evangelism: Effectively sharing the Gospel.
- Loving relationships: Demonstrating Christian love in action.
- These qualities provide a framework for assessing and improving the overall health of a church. The concept of the "minimum factor" (the weakest of the eight qualities) is mentioned as a potential focus for improvement.

7. Overcoming Obstacles and Dependence on "Machines":

- The anecdote about the Florida waitress unable to serve orange juice due to a broken machine despite being surrounded by millions of oranges illustrates how the church can become dependent on ineffective methods or structures, hindering the delivery of the life-transforming "Good News."
- The speaker questions: "Could it be possible that the Good News is not reaching its intended audience because as the waitress said, our machine is broken? Are there obstacles? Are there hindrances? Are there some things that are just simply not working?"
- The call to action is for the church to "take the necessary steps to remove these barriers" and actively participate in Jesus' mission to build his church.

8. The Speaker's Personal Approach:

- The speaker incorporates personal anecdotes (gardening, foot race, encounter with the waitress) to illustrate his points, making the message relatable and engaging.
- These personal touches reveal a humble and self-aware approach to leadership and teaching, willing to acknowledge past mistakes and learn from others.

In conclusion, the sources emphasize the vital need for intentional and ongoing "cultivation" in the church. This involves learning from the past without being bound by it, embracing flexibility and adaptability in methods, actively addressing negative influences, and focusing on the key qualities that define a healthy spiritual community. The ultimate goal is to remove hindrances and create an environment where the life-giving message of the Gospel can effectively reach and transform lives.

"Introduction to 'Cultivating a Healthy Church': A Study Guide

Quiz

Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. According to the sermon, what might be the negative consequence of spending too much time yearning for the past?
2. What milestone anniversary did the Danville Alliance Church recently celebrate, and what subsequent development is occurring with their sister church?
3. What ongoing challenge from the past few years continues to affect the church today, according to the speaker?
4. What did Jesus say about His church that offers encouragement in the face of present challenges?
5. What analogy does the speaker use to illustrate the concept of cultivation in the context of church life?
6. According to West Hills Tractor, what are some key benefits of cultivating physical soil?
7. What are some examples the speaker provides of how churches can get stuck in a "time warp"?
8. How did the Apostle Paul demonstrate flexibility in his ministry, as highlighted in the sermon?
9. What are some examples of "weeds" that can take root in a church, according to the speaker, drawing from Paul's writings?
10. What are some of the eight qualities or characteristics identified by Natural Church Development that tend to be found in every healthy church?

Quiz Answer Key

1. Spending too much time yearning for the past can cause individuals and the church to overlook God's guidance and direction for the present, which can negatively impact their future. This focus on the "good old days" might prevent them from seeing and seizing the opportunities God is presenting in the here and now.
2. The Danville Alliance Church recently celebrated its 100-year history. Following this, a sister church in Champagne is taking steps to plant house churches throughout Vermilion County, demonstrating ongoing multiplication.
3. The COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out four years prior to the sermon, continues to present a challenge to the church. For some members, chronic illness has become a reality, and past routines of church life have not fully adapted to the new circumstances.
4. Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my church," and affirmed that the church will reign triumphant even at the gates of hell. This declaration assures believers that God's plan for the church will prevail despite current struggles and uncertainties.
5. The speaker uses the analogy of backyard gardening, contrasting his simple experience with rhubarb to the knowledge and skill required to cultivate a successful vegetable garden. He also references the insights from West Hills Tractor regarding the cultivation of soil for crops to illustrate the need for cultivation in churches.
6. According to West Hills Tractor, cultivating soil helps remove weeds, loosens the ground for better air, water, and nutrient penetration, and brings weed seeds to the surface to wither. It also increases water retention, benefiting the growth and health of crops.

7.Examples of churches stuck in a "time warp" include continuing to operate each week and year unchanged since their founding, singing the same old songs from outdated hymnals, and using Christian jargon that is unfamiliar to newcomers. They may also resist new ideas by saying, "We've never done it that way before."

8.The Apostle Paul demonstrated flexibility by becoming like those he was trying to reach, such as living like a Jew when with Jews and living apart from the Jewish law when with Gentiles (while still obeying the law of Christ), all in order to bring more people to Christ. He was willing to adapt his methods to communicate the unchanging message of the Gospel.

9.Drawing from Paul's writings in Galatians and Colossians, the speaker lists weeds such as idolatry, drug use, hostility, strife, jealousy, anger, selfish ambitions, causing conflict, envy, being hot-tempered, malicious behavior, and the use of obscene language as negative influences that must be rooted out of the church.

10.The eight qualities of healthy churches identified by Natural Church Development include empowering leadership, gifts-based ministry, passionate spirituality, effective structures, inspiring worship services, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships. These qualities help assess and improve the overall health of a church.

Glossary of Key Terms

•**Cultivation:** In the context of the sermon, this refers to the ongoing process of tending to the spiritual "soil" of the church to remove hindrances (like weeds of the world) and create an environment where faith can grow and flourish. It involves adapting methods and addressing ineffective practices.

•**Time Warp:** This term describes a state where a church remains unchanged in its practices, styles, and even vocabulary since its inception, failing to adapt to current contexts and potentially alienating newcomers.

•**Christianese:** This refers to a specialized vocabulary or jargon commonly used within Christian circles that may be unfamiliar or confusing to those outside the faith.

•**Bylaws:** These are a set of rules adopted by an organization, such as a church, to regulate its internal affairs and operations.

•**New Song:** In the biblical context, particularly in the Psalms, this often signifies a fresh expression of praise and worship to God, reflecting new mercies, experiences, or a renewed spirit.

•**Flexibility/Adaptability:** In the sermon, these terms describe the willingness of the church and its members to adjust their methods and approaches in order to effectively share the gospel with a diverse range of people, following the example of the Apostle Paul.

•**Weeds (in the church context):** These represent negative influences, behaviors, and attitudes (such as idolatry, strife, jealousy, etc.) that can take root within the church community and hinder spiritual growth and unity.

•**Healthy Church:** As discussed in the sermon, a healthy church is one that actively cultivates an environment for growth, addresses internal issues, and embodies certain key qualities that foster spiritual vitality and effective outreach.

•**Natural Church Development (NCD):** This is a framework that identifies eight quality characteristics found in healthy, growing churches. It emphasizes focusing on these qualities rather than solely on numerical growth.

•**Minimum Factor:** In the context of Natural Church Development, this refers to the weakest of the eight quality characteristics in a particular church, which often becomes the primary area of focus for improvement.