

# HOW DOES OUR CHURCH ‘STACK UP’?

Over the past year, I have read numerous articles penned by nationally renowned authors whose research, they say, indicates there are multiple issues that almost all contemporary churches need to address and change. Naturally I’ve been interested in their comments because I, as do you, I’m sure, want our church to be as meaningful and effective as possible. “Bring it on,” I thought, and, together, we’ll do all that we can to become the best we can be. So I’ve read every article and every book of which I am aware that might help us to maximize our potential. Well, compared to the cutting-edge research and survey results that have been published during the past year, how did our church ‘stack up’?

The most recent article I’ve read appeared in my mail this week. It was in the August 5, 2015, issue of a prestigious national publication, *The Christian Century*. What did it say? We’re told that, in the past, churches spent a great deal of time and energy *attacking* science. But today, based on the author’s research, “churches don’t *attack* science, but they don’t *engage* it either.” So-called progressive churches tend not to mention the vital contributions of science and its relevance for the Christian journey *even* when they underscore the relevance and truth of many of the teachings of Jesus. So, said the author, that unfortunate situation in our churches needs quickly to change.

I was saddened to learn that so many congregations are being disenfranchised. However, CCM has had the benefit, both in sermons and in our educational opportunities, to become aware of the cutting-edge scientific research relevant to religion since our inception!

But what *other* areas besides not neglecting science were highlighted in articles this past year that churches need to change for the better? I’ll mention several of those that were mentioned most frequently.

So, second, there were strong recommendations that churches begin finally to offer helpful informal discussions or talk-backs to each Sunday sermon following worship, because research has proved that people who *discuss* what they have just heard, have an opportunity to ask questions and make comments, (1) understand it more fully, (2) remember it longer, and (3) put it into practice more frequently. Also, (4) they experience the benefit of feeling more connected to others—something that usually is missing by only sitting in rows and staring at the back of someone’s head in a worship gathering.

Hmm. Informal discussions of the sermon following worship? Does that sound familiar? As you know, CCM has been providing that helpful opportunity since day one!

Next issue? Third, we're told that numerous church members think that churches should update their antiquated hymns that often use archaic language and frequently have little to do with life in today's world. That needs to change, the researchers say. At CCM, of course, we're not *just* attempting to update language, we have been writing many of our *own* hymns for 16 years so that the one's we use fit hand-in-glove with the theme of the sermon for the day. Indeed, our entire order of worship attempts to do that Dr. Carl Evans commended us on that distinctive feature on his last visit with us.

Fourth item: Researchers found that most church members would like for their churches to become "more 21<sup>st</sup> century friendly" by doing away with having to stand and repeat creeds or affirm dogmas that have little or nothing to do with the teachings of Jesus and put more emphasis, instead, on applying his helpful teachings to everyday life and relationships. How does *CCM* stack up on that score? We have *always* avoided the repetition of creeds in worship because Jesus himself did not teach dogmas or a creed; as I have mentioned often, he taught a way of life characterized by love, and the ancient creeds do not even *mention* love. So much for the *fourth* recommendation!

Fifth: A lot of church people, according to surveys, tend simply to *endure* inordinate emphasis upon denominationalism which, they say, seems often to compete with the gospel for attention. The more thoughtful comments indicated that people tire of hearing about "our Methodist this, our Presbyterian that, or Lutheran so-and-so" which, they report, seems sometimes to emphasize a feeling of separation from other Christians, a sense of apartness from the Christian community as a *whole*. Interesting—but it's not helpful to *us*. We have our meaningful affiliations as do they, but when was the last time you heard an overemphasis on any of them during one of *our* worship gatherings? Probably never. And, as far as creating a sense of separation from other Christians, we have reached across traditional boundaries and invited representatives from other denominations and even from the major world religions to CCM in order to increase understanding and to let them know we respect *them* as God's valuable children, too.

Sixth issue: Researchers report that in the more liberal churches, some of the congregants quietly expressed sadness that they are no longer able to experience prayer in their services. They report that, in the title of their fellowship, even the word "church" has been taken away and the word "congregation" substituted. Also, they feel

that there is an *overemphasis* on social issues to the exclusion of even the most vital teachings of Jesus, and it is almost as if the word “God” has been banned in their services. They believe all of these things tend to render their fellowship “sterile *spiritually*.” There seems, they say, to be an effort to exclude the most important aspects of Christianity; but they are afraid to mention any of these concerns to others for fear that they would be looked down upon as “not liberal enough.”

Obviously, the sixth issue has no relevance for CCM. Although CCM is unapologetically *progressive*, we also are unapologetically *Christian*; so we don’t try to distance ourselves from that which we believe matters most: the spiritual dynamic that always has been—and still is—at the heart of *all* our gatherings.

Finally, parishioners regularly tell researchers that they wish they had available a transcript or a CD of the sermons delivered in their church. If they have to miss a service, they would like to “play catch up.” Others would like to listen to some sermons again or keep them for future reference. Still others would like to share some of them with friends or family. I thought most churches *do* provide such a service; but, based on surveys, apparently there are a large number that don’t. At CCM, in past years, we *always* have been able to make our sermons available to you and, as a part of our outreach ministry, to others beyond our fellowship. Also, as you know, we still do.

There are several other recommendations for change that researchers indicated need to take place if the church is to be relevant to the lives of people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; but none of them applies to *us*.

So how does CCM ‘stack up’ when compared to the changes researchers say are needed for a church to provide vital meaning for its participants? Ironically, *every one* of the changes we’re told we *ought* to make is a reference to something that we are *already* doing and *have been* doing since our inception! It is amazing—and even heart-warming—to know that our small fellowship would be designated by renowned researchers as being among those that are “ahead of the pack” nationally. It also is *humbling* to realize that God may be working in our midst in ways that we never realized. Who *knew* that we are providing something that many much, much larger, extremely wealthy churches seem *not* to be offering?

Of course, it strikes me that two of the most *important* components in any fellowship that seeks to be authentic are issues the researchers didn’t mention and could not easily measure: (1) the level of each person’s commitment and (2) the reality and depth of everyone’s loving. *No* fellowship is perfect in *those* areas, and that includes CCM.

We *all* have some growing to do when it comes to the quality of our commitment *and* our loving. But I believe both are *present* here in more than a few of us. And that is not just my *belief*: I *know*, because I have experienced them in so many of you.

So, based upon all that I have learned from the aforementioned research during this past year,

IF YOU CAN'T FIND *VALUE* HERE,  
CHECK YOUR PULSE!

**With deepest love and caring,  
Your pastor and friend,**

**John**