

CHURCH OF HOPE EVANGELISM AND MINISTRY TRAINING COURSE BY EMAIL AND WEBSITE: *STUDY GUIDE: WEEK TWELVE*

TOPIC TEN: ATTRIBUTES OF A HEALTHY CHURCH / EXPERIENCING GOD'S POWER IN OUR MEETINGS

INTRODUCTION TO WEEK TWELVE:

We are now beginning the part of this course that relates to the important role of local church fellowships. It is so important for all believers to be planted in a local bible-based fellowship so that they can grow in their walk with the Lord and be encouraged to fulfil their God given destiny. **(Ephesians 2:10)** The bible makes it clear that being connected to other believers is crucial in our walk with the Lord and to bearing fruit in our life. **(Hebrews 10:23-25) (Psalm 92:13-15) (1 John 1:7)** This week we will begin this part of the course by looking at the attributes of a healthy church as well as the importance of experiencing God's power in our church meetings and in our own lives. As believers we have been given great power and authority in the name of Jesus Christ. **(Mark 16:17-18)**. Local churches have the potential to bring transformation to their communities. There is power in the gospel message to transform lives. Churches full of outreach focused loving believers who are mature disciples have the potential to bring hope and transformation to their community.

Having fellowship with other believers was a big focus in the early church which experienced rapid growth.

In Acts 2:42 we see four major features of the early church that contributed to its rapid growth,

“And they continued steadfastly in the **apostles' doctrine** and **fellowship**, in the **breaking of bread**, and in **prayers**.” In this passage of Scripture, we see that in the early church believers;

- 1) Continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine (the Word of God),
- 2) Had consistent fellowship with other believers,
- 3) Took communion together (breaking of bread) on a regular basis with other believers, and
- 4) Had a strong and committed prayer life

We see here in the early church that the followers of Christ, who had been baptised in the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost **(Acts 2:1-4)**, devoted themselves both to communication and unity with God and with each other. In relationship to God, they “continued steadfastly” in the apostles' doctrine (the Word of God) and in prayer. In relationship to one another, they devoted themselves to fellowship and to breaking bread with one another. Having fellowship with other believers was therefore an important part of the early church.

In this week's study we will be looking at the importance of fellowshiping with other believers and the importance of being connected to the life of a healthy bible based local church or house group. Being part of a local church family helps us to be loved and nurtured in our walk with the Lord and to remain connected to the body of Christ. Being submitted and accountable to other believers and to those in spiritual authority helps Christians to remain strong in their faith. **(1 Peter 5:5) (Hebrews 13:17)**

Fellowshipping with other believers is crucial if we are to remain strong in our walk with the Lord. The bible makes it clear that there is a very real enemy, the Devil who is out to destroy the faith of all believers. The Apostle Peter wrote, **“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.” (1 Peter 5:8-9)**

The Church in many ways resembles our natural family like the father as a priest ably assisted by his wife teaching the children the word of the Lord and how to live an overcoming Christian life. For some people their church family is the only family that they may have. Being connected with other believers helps us to grow in our walk with the Lord and to be nurtured and encouraged as we have fellowship with other believers.

It is important for all believers to be connected with other Christians. There is a corporate blessing that comes from meeting together with other believers. Jesus Himself said,

“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” **(Matthew 18:20)**

There are churches of all different sizes reaching out to different groups of people and in different cultures. There are different models for church growth such as house group movements but the main focus needs to be on helping all Christians to become mature disciples. **(Matthew 28:19-20) (Colossians 1:28) (2 Timothy 2:2)**

In next week's Study Guide we will be focusing particularly on training up mature leaders and establishing multiplying small groups which are also a great vehicle through which people can be evangelised. The important thing is that we allow the Lord to build our local church fellowships His way.

The early church experienced great unity (**Acts 2:46**) and growth (**Acts 5:14**) as the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (**Acts 2:47**) The early church also evidenced miracles on a continual basis (**Acts 5:16**). The early church was characterized by UNITY, GENUINE LOVE AND GOD'S POWER BEING EXPERIENCED. So, in many ways the early church needs to be our primary model for what is important in the life of a local church or house group fellowship and what constitutes a healthy church.

The keys that I will be looking at in this teaching are relevant for both larger size churches as well as for small house group churches. No matter what size church fellowship we have at present, we need to focus on,

1) Winning souls to Christ, 2) Making mature disciples, 3) Equipping and releasing people into ministry, and 4) Helping all those in our fellowship to feel connected and cared for. Jesus emphasised the importance of every single person to God in the parable of the lost sheep. (**Luke 15:4-7**)

Being connected to smaller groups is a key to seeing the pastoral needs of believers met. Whilst corporate worship was important in the early church (They continued daily with one accord in the Temple), small house group meetings also enabled believers to have more intimate fellowship with other Christians as they broke bread from house to house. (**Acts 2:46**)

We see that as those in the early church had intimate fellowship with God and with others "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." (**Acts 2:47**) We see here in the book of Acts that it was the Lord who added to the church daily those who were being saved so how important it is that we allow the Lord to direct us in all that we do in our churches. (**Proverbs 3:5-6**) (**Proverbs 16:3**) (**Proverbs 16:9**) (**Psalms 37:3-5**) Because believers had a genuine love for both God and for other Christians, there was great unity in the early church. (They were of one accord and had all things in common). (**Acts 2:46**) (**4:32**) The bible makes it clear that where brethren dwell together in unity God commands a blessing. (**Psalms 133:1-3**)

I will begin this study now by looking at a number of passages of scripture in the book of Acts that relate to the growth of the early church to help set a foundation for this week's study.

"Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. "For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call." And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them."

"And they continued steadfastly in the **apostles' doctrine and fellowship**, in the **breaking of bread**, and in **prayers**. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. **Now all who believed were together**, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with **one accord** in the temple, and breaking bread from **house to house**, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, **praising God** and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." (**Acts 2:38-47**)

"Now the multitude of those who believed **were of one heart and one soul**; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, **but they had all things in common**. And with **great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus**. And great grace was upon them all. **Nor was there anyone among them who lacked**; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need." (**Acts 4:32-35**)

“Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and **serve tables**.

Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you **seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.** And the saying pleased the whole multitude...Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:2-5 & 7)

“Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. **AND THERE WAS GREAT JOY IN THAT CITY”** (Acts 8:4-8)

FROM THE ABOVE PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE, WE CAN SEE A NUMBER OF KEY PRINCIPLES THAT LED TO THE RAPID GROWTH OF THE EARLY CHURCH

WHEN WE LOOK AT THE EARLY CHURCH WE SEE FROM THESE PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE:

1) That the preaching of the gospel with an emphasis on *true repentance* was the norm

It is so important that as a church we are actively involved in the preaching of the gospel to the lost and that we have a focus on equipping all Christians to become soul winners. If we are to see God’s Kingdom expanded here on earth we need to have a passion for fervent prayer, we must confront the demonic, we need to have an expectation of the miraculous and we need to have a burning heart for evangelism. It is so important that as a church we have outreaches into our community in which we preach and share the gospel with those who are not yet saved. Jesus Himself said, **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.”** (Mark 16:15)

2) Water Baptisms were an important part of the early church as believers outwardly expressed their new found faith by going through the waters of baptism

“The bible makes it clear that water baptism is not an optional extra. Jesus Himself was baptized, even though He had no need to repent of sin. (Mark 1:9) Jesus commanded His disciples to baptize new believers. (Matthew 28:19) Water baptism is for all believers. (Mark 16:16) ***Water Baptism is an outward expression of what has already taken place in the heart of a new believer.***

When we follow the Lord’s command to be baptized, we identify with Him in this way. The water into which we are immersed is like a “grave” and indicates that we were buried with Christ. As we rise from the water, we testify that we are now a new creation in Christ, rising to newness of life (resurrection power) in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:4, Colossians 2:12)

DUE TO THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE “BELIEVERS BAPTISM” WE NEED TO AT LEAST MONTHLY OR EVERY TWO MONTHS GIVE ALL NEW BELIEVERS THE OPPORTUNITY OF BEING WATER BAPTISED. Water Baptism helps to consolidate a new believer’s decision to come to Christ. Often during water baptisms people also experience God’s presence in a tangible way and come out of the waters of baptism set free from addictions and demonic oppression

3) That the ministry of the Word of God was a great priority in the early church. That they continued steadfastly in the Apostles Doctrine (The Word of God)

Ministering the Word of God as a pastor and leader is crucial to seeing growth in the lives of those who attend our church. (2 Timothy 4:1-3) Jesus Himself emphasised to Peter the importance of feeding His sheep the Word of God and tending to His sheep. (John 21:15-17) During His time here on earth Jesus spent much time teaching the Word of God to multitudes of people. (Matthew 9:35)

In the gospel of Mark we read, **“And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things.” (Mark 6:34)**

So many people’s minds have been tattooed with thoughts of negativity, defeat, wrong thinking, unbelief, fear and anxiety, which have prevented them from embracing all that God has planned for their life. As we minister the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, wrong mindsets are broken and people are set free. There is life in the Word of God. **(Hebrews 4:12)**

Preaching and teaching the Word of God is a key to seeing people’s minds being renewed, to people being set free from wrong attitudes and behaviours and for building up the faith of believers. The preaching of the Word also helps people to gain instruction and wisdom to lead an overcoming and victorious life and to be equipped for every good work. **(Romans 12:2) (John 8:31-32) (Romans 10:17) (2 Timothy 3:16-17)**

It is so important that people coming to our churches are also encouraged to develop a private devotional life in studying the Word of God themselves, to help them to become established in their faith and to be prosperous and to have good success. **(Joshua 1:8) (Psalm 1:1-3)** Having mid week bible studies and new believers’ classes are also important to help Christians to become strong in their walk with the Lord. It is very important though that we are always balanced in our walk with the Lord and that we are both filled with the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. One well known theological professor wrote, “Too much Word and you dry up and too much Spirit and you blow up but together you grow up”

Church of Hope in Blacktown has Street Church meetings twice a week where they minister the Word of God to those in the community who would otherwise not come to church. Their key focus is on helping people to come to Christ and to then grow in their walk with the Lord as they share keys from the bible to leading an overcoming Christian life. From these Street Church meetings, they have now seen some of these people attending their weekly worship meetings at their centre. In the book of Isaiah we read, **“So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:11)**

There is power in the preached word and the gospel to bring transformation to our cities. **(Acts 8:4-8)**

The Apostle Paul also emphasised the importance of those in church leadership spending much time in the Word of God to ensure that they are doctrinally sound in all of their teachings.

The Apostle Paul wrote, **“Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.” (1 Timothy 4:12-16)**

Two important epistles for all pastors to read which were written by the Apostle Paul are 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians, which was written to resolve Doctrinal and Practical Problems within the local church. 1 Timothy has been a handbook for pastors throughout the whole church age and was written to help guide the young pastor Timothy in fulfilling his responsibilities as a church leader.

- 4) That fellowship with other believers was an important focus - “Now all who believed were together, ...” (Acts 2:44)** Given the lawless and ungodly times that we are now living in, **(2 Timothy 3:1-5) (Matthew 24:12-13)** more than ever before it is crucial for all believers to be encouraged to be connected to the life of a healthy bible based church. Being connected to other believers helps Christians to be accountable to others and to receive encouragement in their walk with the Lord. **(Hebrews 10:23-25)** God’s plan for our life will always be worked out in connection with other believers. We all need one another in the Body of Christ. **(1 Corinthians 12:12-28)**

5) That the taking of the Lord's supper (the breaking of bread), to remember what Christ had done on the cross for them was a regular practice

The taking of communion on a regular basis helps to remind us of the significance of what Jesus Christ did on the cross for us at Calvary, and how we can now enjoy the freedom, forgiveness and fullness of life that comes from being in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Having communion at least on a monthly basis helps us to remember Christ's sacrificial love for us on the cross. **(1 Corinthians 11:23-26)**

6) That prayer was a great priority in the early church (Acts 4:31)

Prayer is a great key to seeing our church making a difference in our community. Prayerless people are powerless. As a church we need to be praying for our city and for our nation and for those in our church on a regular basis. **(2 Chronicles 7:14) (1 Timothy 2:1-3)** Prayer needs to be an important part of all of our meetings. We need also as church leaders and pastors to encourage all believers to have a lifestyle of prayer. **(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) (Proverbs 3:5-6) (Philippians 4:6-7)**

7) That there was a reverential fear of God among those in the early church as they had an appreciation of the Holiness and greatness of God

In Chapter nine of the book of Acts we read, "Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied." **(Acts 9:31)**

Having a healthy fear of the Lord helps us to stay on track in our walk with the Lord and to make right choices in life, so that we see all that God has planned for our life come to pass.

In the book of Proverbs we read,

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, But fools despise wisdom and instruction."
(Proverbs 1:7)

"Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and depart from evil. It will be health to your flesh, And strength to your bones." **(Proverbs 3:7-8)**

8) That praying for the sick and for miracles was a common thing. Miracles of healing are often a means by which people come to Christ

Praying for the sick and for miracles needs to be an important part of our church's ministry. Miracles and healings are often the means by which people come to faith. When we look at the life of Jesus Christ, healing others was a significant part of His ministry. **(Matthew 9:35)** When Jesus sent out His twelve disciples **(Luke 9:1-2)** and the seventy others **(Luke 10:1 & Luke 10:8-9)** part of their mandate was to heal the sick. When people are healed of sicknesses or injuries, their testimonies have the potential to help lead many to Christ. **(ACTS 9:32-35) (ACTS 9:36-42)**

Praying for healings, miracles and deliverances **(Mark 16:17-18)** needs to also be a vital part of our church ministry. We need to also encourage those in our church to pray for those who are sick and who have needs in their life. We need as a church to pray for and believe for the same miracles to happen in our church meetings as happened in the early church. **(Hebrews 13:8)**

9) That there was great unity in the church and genuine community

Maintaining unity in our church meetings is crucial to seeing the power of God operating in our meetings. Where brethren dwell together in unity, God commands a blessing. **(Psalm 133:1-3)** Good leaders have the necessary discernment to keep strife out of their church meetings. It is important to deal quickly with any divisive attitudes that have the potential to bring disunity into our church fellowships. **(Titus 3:9-10)**

Making mature disciples that learn to walk in love towards others is a great key to helping to see unity established in our churches. Jesus Himself prayed that all believers would be one (that there would be unity in the body of Christ) that the world would believe that the Father had sent Him. **(John 17:20-23)**

10) That people had a genuine love for each other and helped out in practical ways as well

Creating a culture of loving acceptance and serving of others is important if a church is to make a great impact in its community. The world is now experiencing greater levels of strife and has become more and more impersonal. Jesus Himself emphasised the importance of loving others when He said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” **(John 13:34-35)** The Apostle John and James in their epistles also both emphasised that our love and faith also needs to be practical. **(1 John 3:16-19) (James 2:14-18)**

As leaders of churches, it is important to both model **(1 Timothy 4:12)** and teach the importance of reaching out to and loving others, so that we have a church culture of love and acceptance in all of our church meetings. The Apostle Paul wrote, “**Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.**” **(Galatians 6:10)**

11) That small group fellowships were a big key to seeing the growth of the early church (Breaking Bread from House to House) – NEXT WEEK WE WILL FOCUS ON SMALL GROUPS

Small groups are crucial for helping all believers to have their pastoral needs met, and to being encouraged in their walk with the Lord. Next week we will be looking at the dynamics of a healthy small group model which can be implemented in any church. In fact, the bigger a church grows the more important small groups are. In larger churches these small groups are often called life groups or connect groups. It is within the context of a small group that believers can be connected to the life of a church and encouraged to use their God given gifts. **(Ephesians 5:19)**

12) That the early church believers had a simple childlike faith (simplicity of heart)

As pastors we need to help encourage all believers to grow in a simple childlike trust in the Lord by preaching bible-based messages that help believers to grow in their understanding of God’s Word. The bible is full of great promises for all believers that we can build our life on. **(2 Corinthians 1:20)** The Apostle Paul wrote, “**So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.**” **(Romans 10:17)** As a church we need to have a pioneer spirit and be prepared to launch out into new things as the Lord directs. We need to encourage all believers to be people of faith and vision

13) That worship and praising God was a big part of the fellowship meetings

Praise and Worship is a great key to helping Christians to grow in their love for the Lord. King David was a worshipper and a man after God’s own heart. **(Acts 13:22) (Psalm 63:1-3) (Psalm 138:1-2)** Many of the fastest growing churches have a great emphasis on worship and evangelism. Worship helps us to touch the heart of God and to get His compassion for others. **(Psalm 37:4)** Worship also helps to usher the presence of God into our meetings and circumstances. **(Psalm 22:3)** Jesus Himself said, “**But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.**” **(John 4:23-24)**

14) That the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. All new believers were immediately connected to the life of the church

It is so important that when people come to faith in Christ that they are connected to the life of a healthy church. Without being grounded in their faith new believers can quickly fall away when persecution arises for the word’s sake. **(Mark 4:16-17)**

All believers have an important part to play in the body of Christ so it is important that all new Christians are quickly planted in a local church fellowship, so that they can become fruitful in their walk with the Lord. **(Psalm 92:13-14)** Given the lawless and perilous times that we are now living in, **(2 Timothy 3:1-5) (Matthew 24:12-13)** it is so important that all believers, but especially new believers are connected to the life of a healthy Spirit filled, Bible based, local church fellowship. **(Hebrew 10:23-25)**

15) That the meeting of the practical needs of the widows and the poor was also a key focus

The early church was naturally spiritual. Though the early church moved in great power and miracles were common place, there was also a great emphasis on meeting the practical needs of the marginalized and widows. There is a saying that people do not care how much we know, but they do want to know how much we care. James in his epistle wrote what true spirituality meant, "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." (**James 1:27**) Meeting the practical needs of the poor and marginalized in our community is a great key to helping to see the hearts of people being opened to receive the message of the gospel. In the book of Isaiah we read,

"Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh? (**Isaiah 58:6-7**)

16) That the Apostles delegated the Care Ministry responsibilities (serving of the tables) to seven men of good reputation who were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom SO THAT THEY COULD FOCUS CONTINUALLY ON PRAYER AND THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

In the early church we see that when the church began to grow the apostles gave themselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word to help build up those in the early church spiritually. The early church learned quickly that their prayer had to be continual because spiritual warfare is continual. As the church grew, circumstances required more of the apostles' time. In response to this they appointed seven men to serve as deacons to care for the church whilst they committed themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Although when starting a new church from scratch we often have to do many tasks, it is important that as pastors we focus on the all important areas of prayer and the ministry of the Word and freely delegate responsibilities to others as God raises up helpers and leaders to perform roles within the church. It is crucial that we do not hold on to roles that others should be doing. Feeding our own soul with the Word of God and ministering the Word of God to others needs to be our primary focus as pastors and teachers.

WHEN WE LOOK AT PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE IN THE BOOK OF ACTS, WE SEE THAT THE EARLY CHURCH EXPERIENCED GOD'S POWER AND THAT MIRACLES AND HEALINGS WERE A COMMON OCCURENCE

"And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch." (**Acts 5:12**)

"And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, **and they were healed.**" (**Acts 5:14-16**)

The church was birthed in power on the day of Pentecost when all around 120 in the Upper Room (Acts 1:13-15) were baptised in the Holy Spirit. We see this in Chapter two of the book of Acts.

"When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." (**Acts 2:1-4**)

Almost immediately the Apostle Peter preached a sermon (Acts 2:14-39) which resulted in about three thousand people being saved and added to the church (Acts 2:41)

With the church birthed in power, miracles and healings were common place which resulted in many people coming to Christ and the rapid growth of the early church. (Acts 3:1-10) (Acts 5:16) (Acts 9:32-35) (Acts 9:36-42)

Seeing all believers being baptised in the Holy Spirit was a key focus of the early church. In Chapter Eight of the book of Acts we see many people coming to Christ in Samaria through the preaching of Phillip (Acts 8:5-8). Prior to this Phillip was serving in the distribution of food to the widows (Acts 6:5) but then he was used by God to see multitudes coming to Christ as he preached the gospel in the city of Samaria. Here we see a perfect example of how when we are faithful in the little, God is able to promote us into a major ministry calling. Phillip was a non-Apostle but this was no hindrance to his miracle ministry.

After many people had been converted to Christ through his preaching, we read how the apostles came to Samaria to pray for all those who had come to Christ to be baptized in the Holy Spirit,

“Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might *receive the Holy Spirit*. For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they *received the Holy Spirit*.” (Acts 8:14-17)

It is so important in all of our church meetings that we encourage all believers to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) and that we have an expectation (faith) that God will perform miracles in our meetings as we pray for people in need of healings and miracles in their life. (Hebrews 11:1) As we do, we will see the same miracles that occurred on a regular basis in the early church.

IN THE BOOK OF HEBREWS WE READ, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8)

I WILL NOW ALSO JUST BRIEFLY LOOK AT SOME OTHER KEYS THAT WE CAN SEE IN THE EPISTLES IN RELATION TO HAVING HEALTHY CHURCHES WITH SOME RELATED SCRIPTURES FOR EACH

1) The importance of making mature disciples. (The Great Commission – Matthew 28:19-20)

The role of those in the five-fold ministry is for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry and for the edifying and building up of the body of Christ. As every believer fulfils God’s plan for their life (Ephesians 2:10) we see growth in the body of Christ (the church)

The Apostle Paul wrote,

“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the **EQUIPPING** of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;”

“that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, **but, speaking the truth in love**, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head-Christ-”

“from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself IN LOVE.” (Ephesians 4:11-16)

2) The importance of training up and mentoring leaders and releasing people into ministry. As pastors we need to be continually investing our lives in other future leaders to help them to be released into other ministry roles and new extension services or church plants. As pastors we need to imitate the apostle Paul and become fathers of the faith. (1 Corinthians 4:15-16) Developing mature leaders will help to see a church growing and making a greater impact in the community. We must always have a Kingdom building mindset as a pastor and leader. It is about seeing His Kingdom being built. The Apostle Paul said to the young pastor Timothy, “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2)

3) The importance of appointing Christians of character into leadership positions as directed by the Lord (Holy Spirit) - (Acts 13:2) As Christian leaders, it is important that we model what it is to live the Christian life. For this reason, appointing leaders with Godly character and integrity is vitally important. As pastors we should not appoint leaders hastily. **(1 Timothy 5:22)** What is in the heart of the leaders will influence the spiritual state of the church. The Apostle Paul wrote,

“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you - if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.” **(Titus 1:5-9)**

Here the Apostle Paul emphasised the absolute importance of leaders (elders) having godly character as a prerequisite for being appointed into leadership roles. (See also 1 Timothy 3:1-7)

4) The importance of having programs for children and the youth. It is so important that we minister to the needs of children and the youth in a way that is relevant and understandable to them. Having Kids Clubs and Sunday Schools for children and separate programs for youth is an important part of seeing a church growing strong and healthy over time. There are many good teaching tools and literature for teaching children that can be downloaded from the internet.

In the book of Proverbs we read,

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” **(Proverbs 22:6)**

5) The importance of having specialised women’s meetings and men’s fellowship groups

Having women’s meetings and men’s fellowship groups gives the opportunity for men and woman to be ministered to in areas relevant to their roles in the Christian family. Having strong families is a key to seeing stability in our communities and in our church fellowships. For this reason, monthly men’s breakfasts and regular women’s meetings can be invaluable to seeing growth in the lives of those in our congregations. Many of the larger churches have regular meetings and events to specifically address the unique issues and spiritual needs of men and women. Hillsong Church has also run a yearly colour conference for women for many years as well as an annual weekend retreat for men. In the book of Titus, the Apostle Paul emphasised the importance of older women training up the younger women in the church in the ways of living the Christian life as a wife. The Apostle Paul wrote, “the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behaviour, not slanderers, not given to much wine, *teachers of good things* – that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed.” **(Titus 2:3-5)**

6) The importance of encouraging all believers to use their spiritual gifts and to fulfil their God given plan for their life. As a team we can achieve much. Every believer has a unique calling and gifts which are to be a blessing for the wider body of Christ **(1 Corinthians 12:7)** and for helping others to come to Christ. As we all need one another in the body of Christ, it is good to encourage all believers to use their spiritual gifts. True joy and purpose come from using our God given gifts and talents for the expansion of His Kingdom **(Matthew 25:14-23)** **The Apostle Paul wrote,**

“Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: If prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. **(Romans 12:6-8)**

7) The importance of allowing the Holy Spirit to have His way in our meetings. (Zechariah 4:6) Not quenching the Spirit. Having the tangible presence of God in our meetings is a key to seeing lives being touched and transformed by the love of Christ. We must not cut meetings short when the Holy Spirit is moving upon peoples' hearts and lives. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Do not quench the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19)

We can also quench the Spirit if we allow an attitude of pride and showmanship to distort the simplicity of God's workings in our meetings. We must always be careful to give all the glory to God

8) The importance of also having Godly order in our meetings. "...The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets." (1 Corinthians 14:32) To preserve balance and to prevent confusion in the worship service, the apostle Paul emphasised the importance of regulating prophecies in that those who function in the gift of prophecy are to judge the authenticity of all prophetic utterances, in relation to their content, alignment with God's Word and relevancy to the meeting. (1 Corinthians 14:26-32)

The Apostle Paul also commented on the importance of not distracting others by talking out of line to people during the middle of church meetings. He addressed this matter in relation to women speaking to their husbands during a church meeting. (1 Corinthians 14:34-35) The Apostle Paul also wrote, "Let all things be done decently and in order." (1 Corinthians 14:40) When the Holy Spirit is free to move in our meetings and people are respectful of others and prophetic utterances are judged as to their authenticity, we can expect God to move in a mighty way in our meetings.

9) The importance of the LORD being in control of all that we do in our church. It is crucial that we continually allow the Lord to guide and direct our steps in all that we do and that we follow HIS BLUEPRINT FOR OUR CHURCH. In the book of Psalms we read,

"Unless the LORD builds the house, they labour in vain who build it; Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman stays awake in vain." (Psalm 127:1) and

10) The importance of all church pastors being accountable to other mature pastors. It is so important that pastors of churches are accountable to others and open to people speaking into their lives. Having checks and balances through pastors being accountable to other mature men of God is a great key to a church remaining strong and healthy. It is good for all churches to be affiliated with a healthy movement such as the Assemblies of God, or associated with a network of churches. It is advisable for all pastors to have fellowship with other pastors. Iron sharpens iron. When pastors become isolated and are not prepared to have people speak into their lives, there is an ever-increasing danger of error and wrong doctrine creeping into their church fellowships. Having healthy relationships with other pastors is a great safeguard to help us remain doctrinally sound in all that we do in our church meetings. Jesus Himself warned that in the days just prior to His return that many would be offended. Jesus said, "And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many." (Matthew 24:10-11)

We must be careful that we always maintain a soft heart as pastors and are quick to forgive those who may speak against us or offend us. We must always maintain a forgiving heart and be open to letting others speak into our life. There is wisdom in a multitude of counsellors. (Proverbs 11:14) (Proverbs 15:22)

There are many Scriptures that warn of the dangers of being isolated from fellowship and from being disconnected from the wider body of Christ and which also warn of the fact that in the last days many false prophets will rise up and lead many believers astray. **(Proverbs 14:14) (1 Timothy 4:1) (Matthew 24:4-5) (1 John 2:18-19) (2 Peter 2:1-3)**

How important it is given the days that we are now living in, that we have healthy checks and balances in our life and that we are in relationship with other pastors and ideally affiliated with a healthy network of pastors or with a movement such as the Assemblies of God.

I WILL NOW FINISH WITH A FEW PRACTICAL THINGS TO CONSIDER IN RELATION TO MAKING OUR FELLOWSHIPS HEALTHY COMMUNITY CHANGING CHURCHES

1) The importance of having a clear God given vision for our church. (Habakkuk 2:2-3)

Having a clear written down vision for our church, helps to attract believers to the life of the church and to take on ministry roles and responsibilities. Having a clear vision for our church fellowship helps us to stay focussed on reaching our community with the love of Christ and the gospel message.

2) The importance of connecting with our community in a relevant way

We need to look for opportunities to engage with the community in a real and meaningful way. Each year Church of Hope holds a special Christmas lunch for the community in Blacktown where they also share the message behind Christmas. In Melbourne, Church of Hope provides every Saturday night a meal for the marginalized which is supplied by other church groups who have a heart to feed the poor. It is so important for all churches to actively reach out into their community in practical ways so that they can engage with people and build relationships which enable them to share the gospel with them.

As pastors we need to encourage all believers to look for opportunities to share their faith with others. Every believer has a mission field and ministry. (Ephesians 2:10)

It is very important as a church in our community, that we also have a focus outside of the four walls of our church and that we have a heart to reach out to the lost and backslidden in our city. In the book of Acts we read,

“Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogues with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.” **(Acts 17:16-17)**

Jesus Himself said, “... ‘Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.’” (Luke 14:21)

As church leaders we need to be always seeking the Lord for creative ways of connecting with our community to help those in our villages and cities come to Christ.

3) Responding to some of the needs in our community. We need to seek the Lord for practical ways of connecting with the community such as Teaching English, Cutting Lawns for single mums and pensioners, or setting up Sowing Schools to help build relationships and bridges to share the gospel with those in our community

4) As more people become connected to the life of our church, we need to encourage believers in our fellowship to reach into our schools, hospitals and prisons with the love of Christ and the gospel message

5) That people sense God’s love and acceptance when they enter our church worship meetings. First impressions are very important. Having friendly ushers to welcome people into their church is a key focus for larger churches. We need to make all visitors feel welcome. We only have one chance at a good first impression. Serving tea and coffee after our meetings has the potential to help create a loving Christian community in our church. We need to cultivate an atmosphere of love and acceptance in all our meetings.

- 6) That our church worship centres are clean and tidy (this helps people not to be distracted during the worship time and the preaching of the Word) – We should take pride in looking after God’s House
- 7) That where possible we help to resource new Christians with teaching materials and resources to get them started in their walk with the Lord.
- 8) That we help all new believers to be grounded in their walk with the Lord. Providing support and encouragement to new believers is especially crucial during the first month or two of their Christian Walk until they become established in the fellowship, especially if they are the only Christian in their family
- 9) That as a church we have a Kingdom building mindset and look to work with and support other churches in joint initiatives. Every church has a unique calling and different strengths that are also to be a blessing for the wider body of Christ. (In every city we have one church with many congregations)
- 10) The importance of having a sound administrative structure and financial integrity and accountability as a church. Complying with all Government requirements is crucial (Romans 13:1). We must be an example to those in the corporate world. If we have integrity in our church administration, the Lord can entrust to us great amounts of resources to complete His work through our church and ministry and entrust to our care many souls to shepherd and care for (Luke 16:10-11)
- 11) That our churches are safe places for people to come to, and
- 12) That the Senior Pastor needs to be a bigger picture person who looks at training up and mentoring leaders to help see the above church initiatives becoming a reality. It is so important for all senior pastors to prayerfully select a number of Christians to train up and mentor to fill leadership roles in their church.

I WILL CONCLUDE BY EMPHASISING AGAIN THE IMPORTANCE OF ENCOURAGING ALL BELIEVERS TO BE CONTINUALLY FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT (**Ephesians 5:18**) AND TO BE ACTIVELY PRAYING FOR OTHERS THAT HAVE NEED OF HEALING OR MIRACLES IN THEIR LIFE. Every Believer can see miracles of healing as they pray for the sick in the name of Jesus. (**Mark 16:17-18**) WE NEED TO CONTINUALLY PRAY FOR AND BELIEVE FOR MIRACLES OF HEALING in our church meetings. The world needs to see again in these times, and especially in the Western world, the demonstration of miracles of healings and God’s power in our lives and churches as we pray for the sick. (**1 Thessalonians 1:5**) We need to encourage all believers that God is able to use them in a great way for His glory. (**Ephesians 3:20**)

One final concluding thought. How important it is that we continually allow the Lord to unfold His plan and purpose for our lives, churches and ministries. Because “unless the LORD builds the house, they labour in vain who build it; ...” (Psalm 127:1)