

According to Peter Wagner

Healthy churches build an immune system to resist disease. It is much more advisable to prevent an illness than to contract one and then have to cure it.

The following are the most common diseases that infect churches. By recognizing some of the symptoms my hope is that we will turn to the Great Physician, the Gentle Healer, and seek necessary medical attention.

Ethnikitis

Ethnikitis is fear or disregard for others of different ethnicities and/or races. This disease is caused by contextual factors, usually revolving around a static church (in-grown and non-growing) in an ethnically transitioning neighbourhood.

Ghost-Town Disease

Another contextual illness, this illness is found in communities where old residents are moving out, and no one is moving in.

People-Blindness

This malady is directly related to a lack of understanding of the significant differences between diverse people groups within the community. It occurs when churches fail to consider how those differences may impede evangelism efforts.

Hyper-Cooperativism

Wagner says: "When everyone is responsible for evangelism, no one is responsible for evangelism. Local-church evangelism is much more effective than city-wide cooperative efforts."

This malady occurs when local congregations lose their distinct identity because the church is too committed to being part of something else. There is nothing wrong with partnering and cooperative ministries. But if the only ministry a church does is under the umbrella of others, and the church does not bring any distinct character to the joint-effort, it may be a sign that the church is not healthy.

The healthy alternative is not to forgo all partnerships and joint efforts, through isolationism or competition. Instead each church should develop its own distinct personality which it can then contribute to the community and cooperative efforts.

Koinonitis

Koinonia is the Greek word for fellowship. Koinonitis occurs when interpersonal relationships within the church become so deep and mutually absorbing that we ignore the needs of the community and world around us. When Koinonitis is present church programs tend to become centripetal rather than centrifugal; entirely attractional rather than missional and incarnational.

Sociological Strangulation

Wagner says: "This is a slowdown in the rate of church growth caused when the flow of people into a church begins to exceed the capacity of the facilities to accommodate it."

In other words, this occurs when the building and sanctuary are too small to accommodate more people. The general rule here, in suburban communities is 80% capacity = FULL. In more rural communities, where people are used to having more elbow room, the rule may be as low as 50% = FULL.

Another aspect that George Barna deals with, more than Wagner, is when growth occurs at a rate too fast to effectively assimilate new people into an existing church community. Barna suggests that healthy churches grow at a rate of no more than 10% – 15% annually. Thus, if Barna is correct, a church with a 6% or 7% growth rate may be healthier than a church that is growing at 20% rate over an extended period of time.

Arrested Spiritual Development

Wagner: "When people in the church are not growing in the things of God or in their relationships with one another, the total health of the church deteriorates, and the church cannot grow." To this I will add, if the church did grow, it really has nothing to offer those who come, nor to the community where God placed them.

St. John's Syndrome

When Christians become Christians in name only; feel that their faith is only routine; when church involvement is largely going through the motions, and belonging to church is nothing more than a family tradition or social nicety, St. John's Syndrome is likely at work.

Why is this called St John's Syndrome? I have no idea. At least I do not recall off the top of my head. But I agree that the symptoms described are unhealthy, no matter what you want to call it.

Hypo-pneumia

Hypo-pneumia is a condition caused by a subnormal level of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the life and ministry of the church. This is a church that depends upon talent of the members and the resources on hand. It is a church that may pray, but is not depending upon prayer.

It is this type of church Francis Schaeffer had in mind when he asked his wife what she thought would happen if the Holy Spirit departed from the local church. Their joint conclusion was that in the vast majority of churches nothing would change, and few people would notice.