

No church is perfect, but all churches can be healthier. If you want more for your church but aren't quite sure how to get there, *100 Days to a Healthier Church* is for you. Pastor Karl Vaters has developed a tested and proven 15-week process that's manageable, adaptable, and effective.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Get Better before You Get Bigger

**A**ny church can become healthier in 100 Days—not perfect, but healthier.

If a church is especially ill, it may not become *healthy* in 100 Days, but it can be *healthier* than it is right now—as in less sick, and one step closer to becoming the strong, vibrant, effective congregation it was meant to be.

### PRINCIPLES, NOT PROMISES

There are no one-size-fits-all methods that will make a church healthier, but there are principles. This book is a reverse-engineering of the principles our church has learned by trial and error over the last two and a half decades of moving from sickness to health, then into deeper levels of effective ministry.

These principles have also been discussed, tested, refined, and taught to thousands of church leaders, proving themselves workable in churches of all styles and sizes.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

If you are a pastor or leader of a local congregation, read this book through in its entirety first. Then do a trial run by yourself or with a trusted ministry partner (maybe your spouse). By doing this self-test first, you'll be more prepared to lead the church through the principles later.

If you personalize these principles seriously before teaching others, you can become a healthier church leader in 100 Days, and a church with a healthier leader is a healthier church.

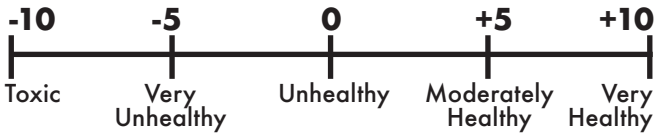
Let me include a quick note about church size. Since the average church worldwide has a Sunday attendance of about seventy-five people, this process is designed with a church of that size in mind. If you're in a church with fewer than fifty (which is about half the churches in the world), some of the instructions about team size will need to be adapted for your smaller congregation. For churches of more than two hundred, remember that most of this book is written with volunteer leaders in mind, so you will need to adapt to include paid staff members. Actually, every church of every size will need to tweak various steps as you walk through this process. That's expected and normal. Methods are meant to be tweaked, but the principles are biblical and universal.

## THE HEALTHY CHURCH CONTINUUM

The goal of this book is not to help you start a new program, or pattern your congregation after another successful church. The

goal is to take another step toward becoming the church God called you to be.

To begin this process, imagine church health on a continuum of Negative 10 (-10) to Positive 10 (+10).



These are not precise metrics, but they can be a helpful way to imagine different stages of church health and maturity.

**Negative 10:** A church at this level of ill health is not just ineffective but dangerous and toxic. There have probably been many years of inner conflicts, bad blood, and a poor reputation in the surrounding community.

The first-century Corinthian church was in a similar condition. They had everything from sex scandals to lawsuits to rampant pride about their own tolerance of such sins (1 Cor. 6–7). In fact, the apostle Paul famously told them, “In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good” (1 Cor. 11:17).

**Negatives 9 through 1:** Churches in this range have various levels of ill health. The New Testament church at Sardis, which was instructed to “Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die” (Rev. 3:1–6) might have been at -8 or -9 on the church health spectrum, while the Ephesian church that had “persevered and . . . endured hardships for my name” but had lost their first love (Rev. 2:1–7) was probably at -2 or -1.

**Zero:** We’ll be sticking with the “unhealthy” label for a

church at zero, because even if the people in the church are getting along and having no fights or scandals, a church in neutral is making minimal contributions to Christ's mission on earth.

This was the problem with the lukewarm Laodicean church (Rev. 3:14–22). Their sin was feeling smug about their status. They thought they were getting along well and in need

of nothing, but Jesus was ready to spit them out for their lack of passion.

**WE'VE BEEN GIVEN A MISSION. AND WE NEED TO TAKE IT SERIOUSLY. DON'T MISTAKE THE ABSENCE OF CONFLICT FOR THE PRESENCE OF GOD.**

The church doesn't exist merely to do no harm or be a safe place for hurting people (although it's good when we are).

We've been given a mission, and we need to take it seriously. Don't mistake the absence of conflict for the presence of God.

**Positives 1 through 9:** While it's great to be on the healthy side of the line, this status is not without its challenges. The danger comes from the almost invisible yet persistent tendency to grow comfortable or prideful, then stale, then start drifting backward. Any church that fails to keep consciously moving ahead is falling behind.

The New Testament church of Thyatira might have been at +1 or +2. Jesus commended them for their baby steps by reminding them, "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first." But they were not strong enough to have rooted out some heresy that had taken a foothold among them (Rev. 2:18–29).

Meanwhile the church at Smyrna might have been at +8 or +9. Despite the persecution and poverty they endured, Jesus told them, “I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!” (Rev. 2:8–11).

**Positive 10:** Well, you’re in heaven now. Literally. No church will ever achieve a true Positive 10 until we’re gathered with Jesus in paradise. As long as we live in this broken world, even the healthiest church will have room for improvement. But we need to always keep Positive 10 in our hearts and minds as an ideal to strive toward.

## **NUDGES, NOT LEAPS**

If the church you lead or attend is, let’s say, at -5, how can it get back into positive territory?

One step at a time.

Your church is probably (almost certainly) not going to jump from a -5 to a +5 in 100 Days. God can do that, and He has on very rare occasions. But you can’t program a church to make that jump.

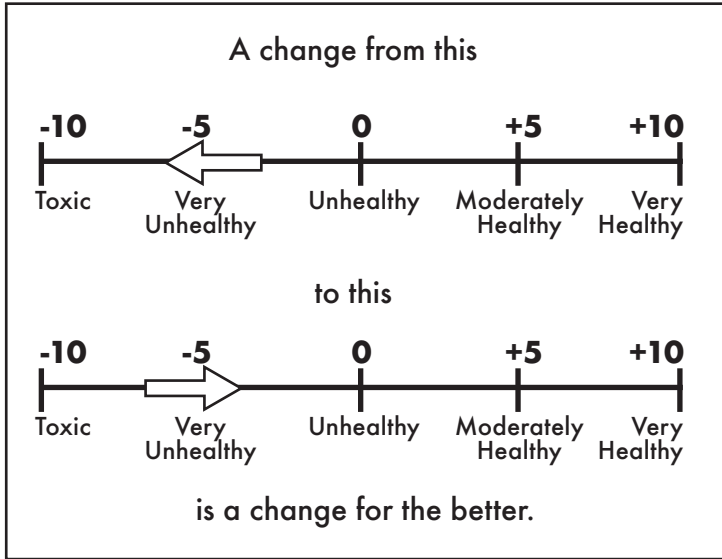
However, you can use principles that can stop the downward slide. Then, once the church has been steadied, those principles can prepare the church to nudge up from -5 to -4 in the following 100 Days.

## **A CHANGE IN DIRECTION**

Sometimes, the change you’ll see in 100 Days won’t be up the scale, as much as a change in direction. A church at -5 facing



uphill in hopefulness is healthier than a church at -5 facing downhill in despair.



Direction is everything.

## PLANNED PAUSES

As you're pursuing healthy change, there will be times when the principles of one week may require more than seven calendar days to accomplish. That's okay. It's better to take a little extra time to handle those challenges well than to hit the somewhat arbitrary deadlines.

But don't let pauses become delays, and don't allow more than one or two pauses over the entire process. If the process

takes more than 120–130 days, you'll lose momentum and impact and become far less likely to finish well.

## WHAT DOES A HEALTHIER CHURCH LOOK LIKE?

A healthier church is filled with healthier believers—believers who are loving Jesus and each other, who are making disciples, who are cooperating for the advancement of Christ and His kingdom, not for individual agendas.

### **Unhealthy Churches** (-10 to -5)

Aren't obeying the Great Commandment, pursuing the Great Commission, or equipping God's people

### **Loving, but Ineffective Churches** (-4 to 0)

Are obeying the Great Commandment, but not pursuing the Great Commission or equipping God's people

### **Immature Churches** (+1 to +4)

Are obeying the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, but church leaders are overwhelmed and church members are not maturing because leaders are not equipping God's people

### **Healthy, Effective Churches** (+5 and up)

Are doing all three

The best way to determine the health of a church is by how its members are responding to three vital elements: the Great Commandment, the Great Commission, and what I like to call the Pastoral Prime Mandate of equipping God's people to do the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11–12).

The goal of this entire process is to assess where your church is based on those three biblical criteria, then get back on track toward health by reestablishing them. (We'll look at this principle a little deeper on Days 1 and 8.)

## **INCREASING YOUR CAPACITY FOR EFFECTIVE MINISTRY**

Did you notice anything missing in that last section on getting healthier? Like attendance figures?

It's great when a church gets bigger as a result of getting healthier. In fact, it's hard to imagine a healthy church that doesn't want to grow. But getting healthy isn't about numerical growth. It's about striving to increase our capacity for effective ministry no matter what size we are now—or what size we may become.

Bigger isn't the goal. Better is the goal. More effective ministry is always better ministry. As Tim Suttle points out, "The church's job is not to grow. The church's job is not to thrive or even to survive. The church's job is to be the church."<sup>1</sup>

Let's strive to be the church. More effectively today than we were yesterday, then more effectively tomorrow than we were today. That's what getting healthier looks like.

## CHAPTER 2

# What Can Be Done in 100 Days?

**T**urning a church from unhealthy to healthy is a daunting task. It starts by working smarter, not harder. Here's an example.

### THE PAINT CAN: A PARABLE

In the 1990s, I led a small group of church members on a missions trip to Bucharest, Romania. The country was just a few years removed from one of the most oppressive, violent, and evil regimes in modern history.

One afternoon we were taking a short break in our hotel. While we were talking, a hotel employee was painting a wardrobe in the hallway—one of those portable closets they use in Europe, like the one in C. S. Lewis's classic book. But there was something about the way he was doing it that was strange.

The employee would brush on a few strokes of paint, disappear into the hotel room for thirty seconds or so, reappear to

brush on a few more strokes, then disappear again. This kept repeating. Why?

Then it hit me.

Although the wardrobe was in the hallway, the can of paint was in the middle of the hotel room, so the painter was walking into and across the room for every single dip of paint! But why would he do that? Probably because that's where everything was placed when he arrived. This painter was nearing retirement age, and he had been raised under an extraordinarily repressive regime in which you kept your head down and did the job you were given, no questions asked. Conformity was rewarded, and innovation was frowned upon.

This painter was taking three or four times longer to paint the wardrobe that day because he had been socially, mentally, and emotionally programmed by a corrupt system not to think for himself. It didn't occur to him to perform one simple step that would have made his job exponentially easier, faster, and better: move the can.

What is true of that painter is also true for far too any pastors and other church leaders. Many of us are pastoring under systems that were in place long before us, and it hasn't occurred to us that we can move the paint can.

Like the tired painter in that hotel hallway, it's tempting to leave things where they are right now and keep going through the motions. Turning an entire church around is like getting the entire room ready—far too big a task to even contemplate at the moment.

That's why, for the next 100 Days, we're not going to attempt to overhaul the entire room. We're just going to paint the

wardrobe. And the first step in painting the wardrobe is simple.

Move the can.

Make the next step toward health as simple and doable as possible.

### *What's Your Paint Can?*

Like moving the paint can, here are some characteristics to look for when considering what to tackle in the next 100 Days:

**1. You can do it right away.** The painter didn't need anyone else's help or permission to move the paint can. He just needed the ability to see that it could be done, then do it.

In the church you lead, what fits those criteria? What simple action(s) do you not need permission for? Start there.

**2. It will ease your burden, not add to it.** Sure, the paint can is heavier than the paint brush, and moving it will be harder than carrying a brush. Once. After that, everything else will get easier.

What tasks can be done in your church that will take a minimal amount of extra effort right now, but will clear a path for several tasks to be done more easily in the future?

**3. It will get you to your next step more quickly.** After the paint can has been moved, the current task of painting the wardrobe will be a lot easier.

Are there any simple steps you can take to reduce waste and help you get more done with your limited time and resources? Make them a priority.

**4. It will be a small first step toward thinking differently.** This may be the most important—and difficult—aspect of moving the paint can.

It's difficult, because it requires the painter to think differently. But it's important because once you start thinking differently about some initial, simple tasks, you start realizing you can apply the same innovative principles to other harder tasks.

What if you moved the paint can—and *no one* got mad? No emergency committee meetings were called to correct you. The roof didn't fall in. In fact, everything started working just a little smoother. After making a small change once, you'll want to do it again.

Soon, you'll be looking around for other paint cans you can move, other ways to change the long-existing dynamic of systems that have been in place because no one thought to change them for the better.

Now I'm not naïve. I've been in pastoral ministry for almost forty years. I've moved paint cans and been treated as if I were guilty of spitting in the face of our church's beloved founders. So you know what I did in response? I moved the paint can anyway. Then I kept painting.

It's amazing what happens to the naysayers when the wardrobe gets painted in record time, under budget, and with a smoother finish. The complainers either fall away, or they join the paint-can-moving team. And if not? Maybe it's not your wardrobe to paint.

## **WHY PUT A NUMBER OF DAYS ON GETTING HEALTHIER?**

I'm not a big numbers guy. And I've always been more than a little distrustful of books that promise I'll be able to do

something in a certain period of time, especially when the “magic” number ends in zero.

So why have I written a book with a number so strongly attached to it?

First, because a number focuses us. It gives us a clear working parameter. Even if we go over the 100-Day mark (which most of us will), the fact that we’re on a calendar helps us think more clearly about what needs to be done and when.

Second, the number reveals our priorities. Like when a woman discovers she’s pregnant. For the next nine months, family activities and decisions are filtered through the lens of getting ready for the baby. The impending arrival helps us focus so we discover what really matters, what doesn’t, what can be delayed, and what can’t.

Third, the number gives us a goal. If our church is going to be healthier in 100 Days, we need to decide what aspect of health we’re aiming for. Otherwise, we won’t know if we’ve achieved it.

Fourth, the number drives us. You can’t hit a goal you haven’t set.

Timelines drive us to action. “We want our church to be healthier” is a wonderful idea, but it doesn’t inspire action. “We want our church to accomplish this health goal by this date” gets us off the couch.

Fifth, that number invites others to join the team. There’s a reason why people who want to lose weight are more likely to do so if they tell others about it (like on social media or in a weight-loss group). When we announce a goal publicly, it’s inspirational, exciting, and fun. It attracts people who also want to reach that goal—or want to help you reach it.



It's hard to build a team around an unfocused, unprioritized, uncertain, unclear, unannounced idea. But clear, focused, time-stamped, prioritized goals inspire people to join in, motivate them when the going gets hard, and energize them for that last push to completion.

### **WHY 100 DAYS?**

When something matters, it goes on our calendar.

This is why church attendance matters. If your relationship with Christ matters to you, it's going to affect everything in your life, including your schedule.

It's the same in church leadership—and even more so when the church needs a refresher, a turnaround, or a kick start. If we truly want our church to get healthier, we need a plan. Any plan that's worth something deserves a big spot on our calendar.

When we give a task only half measures, we get half results. But if we give it our full commitment by

- clearing the 100 Days of other distractions
- meeting regularly with the leadership team
- following the daily disciplines together
- giving the process more than 100 Days, if needed
- and surrendering the entire process to Christ in fervent prayer

we'll get the fullest possible results.

There are several reasons for using a 100-Day marker for helping a church get to the next level of health and effectiveness.

First, 100 Days is about how long it takes to assemble and launch something this important. For years, experts have told us that it takes twenty-one days, twenty-eight days, or forty days to establish a habit. It turns out we were off by multiples of at least two or three. According to a peer-reviewed study reported in *Psychology Today*, it takes sixty-six days on average to establish a personal habit.<sup>2</sup>

Second, setting aside an intentional 100 Days makes this big enough to take seriously, but not too big to be intimidating. If I were to tell you that you could make any significant forward motion in your church in forty days, you probably wouldn't believe it. Especially if your church has serious problems. On the other hand, if I told you it would take 365 high-intensity days before you saw even a small step toward health, you'd have a hard time committing to it.

So 100 Days strikes a good balance. It's long enough to have some hope of being effective, but short enough to maintain the necessary intensity to get something done.

Third, 100 Days is about the length of a natural season. Spring, summer, fall, and winter. Each one lasts about ninety-one days. We're created by God to live and effect change according to that timeline.

Fourth, 100 Days can get something going and build momentum for more later. If you and your church leaders invest 100 Days into helping your church become healthier, even by a single step, that practice is like starting a freight train. It takes a lot of energy to get it

**IT TAKES A LOT OF ENERGY  
TO GET IT GOING, BUT  
ONCE IT'S ON ITS WAY,  
MOMENTUM TAKES OVER.**

going, but once it's on its way, momentum takes over. Working toward health becomes a habit driven by momentum.

## **WHAT DO THE 100 DAYS LOOK LIKE?**

If you start the 100 Days on a Saturday (which is how this works best), Days 1 and 2 will be a Saturday/Sunday weekend. Then Days 99 and 100 will also be a Saturday/Sunday weekend. This will mean a total of fourteen weeks and fifteen weekends by the time you reach 100 Days.

This span of weeks and weekends is intentional. Starting the 100 Days with an intense, purposeful Saturday meeting, followed by an equally intense, worshipful Sunday, is the best way to hit the ground running. Then, ending with a full Saturday to assess, prepare, and plan for the future, followed by a worshipful celebration on Sunday, is a hopeful way to finalize the process. Everything in this book is written assuming a Saturday start date. If you do it differently, you'll need to adapt for that.

You'll also see that the 100 Days is divided into four main steps:

1. Assess Your Situation
2. Select a Target
3. Train the Team
4. Implement the Plan

The first two steps will get you to Day 50. During that period, you'll rediscover who you are as a church, who you're

called to be, and what your first project will be. During the last fifty days, you'll undertake the final two steps, which will pull the team together to actually accomplish your project together.

Within those steps are several intensive Saturday meetings. The meetings will happen every two weeks during the first fifty days with a group we'll be calling the Core Leadership Team (CLT). Then, at the halfway point, you'll assemble Project Teams (PTs), and they will have meetings as determined by their assignments. Also, there's a theme for each week, sermon suggestions for every Sunday, and smaller assignments for every day along the way.

## **HOW CLOSELY SHOULD WE FOLLOW THIS PLAN?**

No two churches are alike, so no plan can fit every church. But there are some universal principles, and those are what we start with. To get the most out of this process, start by following the book very closely. The first two steps in the front half, especially, are about principles—biblical ones first and practical, methodological ones second. Follow them like a blueprint.

But the further you go, the more each step is open to individual interpretation. Partly because every church is different, but also because Step 1 is designed to help you rediscover God's plan for your church, so it's more important to follow His plan for your church than my ideas for it.

If the book starts out as a blueprint, it ends as a suggestion box—helpful, but not necessarily to be followed to the letter.

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