

# let's discuss fit church

by Larry Hovis, CBFNC Executive Coordinator

Health and fitness are on everyone's mind these days. From debates over health insurance to ever-changing dietary guidelines to a proliferation of gyms and exercise programs to the construction of new hospitals in many communities, physical health is front and center in our lives.

What are the contributors to good health? What practices keep us fit? Proper nutrition, regular exercise, sufficient sleep, effective stress management, and access to healthcare resources are commonly accepted as necessary elements of a healthy lifestyle. New research points to less obvious factors in producing health, such as having a purpose in life, enjoying supportive social networks, and engaging in spiritual practices.

We spend a great deal of time, money, and energy keeping our bodies healthy and restoring them back to health when they become ill. What about the church? The Bible, especially the writings of Paul, refer to the church as "the body of Christ" (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 3:6 and 5:23; Colossians 1:18, 24). What are the contributors to the health of the body of Christ? What practices produce fit churches? What are the dimensions of congregational health?

We will be exploring this topic in upcoming issues of *The Gathering* and in other ways in CBFNC life, culminating with the next CBFNC Annual Gathering at Knollwood Baptist Church in Winston-Salem on March 15-17, 2018. Our motivation for this exploration comes from the 2014 CBFNC Vision statement, *The Road Ahead*, which identified four "areas of focus" as worthy of exploration. We have already addressed two of these and now turn our attention to "Nurturing Healthy Congregations," described in the document as follows:

*We will encourage the flourishing of congregations, which are the primary communities in which followers of Jesus develop practices of faith that express the love of God and neighbor. We recognize a great diversity of congregations. There are established churches, some of which feel significant anxiety about their vitality and do not have a sense of a hopeful future, and others of which are experiencing renewal and growth. There are also new and yet-to-emerge groups of disciples who are exploring new expressions of Christian community. CBFNC will nurture opportunities for mutual learning about the dynamics of healthy congregations, facilitate the discovery and sharing of life-giving innovations, and encourage the thriving of a wide variety of Christian communities.*

Though there are many dimensions of church health, we will focus on the following in *The Gathering* in the coming months:

**Generosity (July/August)** – God is generous and so are healthy churches. Generosity is expressed financially and in other ways. How are churches expressing generosity toward congregants, their communities, and God's mission in the world?

**Practices (September/October)** – What are the individual and corporate practices that lead to congregational health? What classic spiritual disciplines do healthy churches teach and share? What other habits, practices, or disciplines characterize such congregations?

**Innovation (November/December)** – We jokingly describe the seven last words of the church as, "We've always done it that way before." But healthy churches are always looking for new ways to engage in mission and ministry. What innovative practices are partner congregations exploring in our time?

**Diversity (January/February 2018)** – What expressions of diversity do healthy congregations exhibit? What blessings does diversity bring? What challenges? How do healthy congregations capitalize on the former and respond to the latter?

**New Expressions of Church (March/April 2018)** – The Christian Church has been around for two millennia. It has seen many changes during that time. At its best, it has given birth to new expressions of church. What new expressions of church are emerging in our Fellowship that we should celebrate, support, and allow to guide and shape us?

In the current issue, we are exploring the idea that healthy churches have a **Hopeful Future**. Yes, churches are facing many challenges today, ones that produce anxiety and lead some to despair. Healthy churches, in spite of the challenges, are characterized by hopefulness about both present and future. How is this kind of hopefulness experienced and expressed?

We would love to hear stories of how the congregations of our Fellowship are practicing and exhibiting these dimensions of health. Is your church healthy? If not, what would contribute to your church's fitness? How can our Fellowship celebrate expressions of church health and support one another when we face health challenges?

One critical dimension of individual health is being part of a supportive community. Congregations play a vital role for their members in this way. The same is true for churches. Isolation and extreme autonomy detract from church fitness. CBFNC provides a "beloved community" for churches, and therefore makes a significant contribution to congregational health. Thank you for being part of this Fellowship. In order to be Fit Churches, we need each other now more than ever.