

practice makes perfect?

by Larry Hovis, CBFNC Executive Coordinator

I took piano lessons from fourth grade through high school graduation. I was a mediocre pianist. Two things kept me from becoming a great or even good pianist: talent and practice. The second was a bigger problem than the first. I don't possess natural musical talent. I can't play by ear and my hands don't move naturally to the right notes, but when I worked hard, I could play well. The problem was, I hated to practice. I was a lazy pianist. Because I failed to practice as much as I needed to, I never became a great pianist. When I stopped taking piano lessons, I stopped playing altogether.

In his 2008 book, *Outliers*, Malcom Gladwell says, "Practice isn't the thing you do once you're good. It's the thing that makes you good."

Jesus knew the importance of practice. In that well-loved passage we call The Great Commission, Jesus gives these instructions, *Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.* (Matthew 28:19-20, *The Message*)

What are the practices that lead to spiritual maturity? What are the practices that lead to Fit Churches?

Personal Practices

Another word for practice is "discipline." Richard Foster popularized the idea of regular spiritual practice for the individual Christian in his book, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. In this contemporary classic, Foster outlines thirteen spiritual practices divided into three groups:

- **Inward** – Meditation, Prayer, Fasting, Study
- **Outward** – Simplicity, Solitude, Submission, Service
- **Corporate** – Confession, Worship, Guidance, Celebration

The regular practice of these disciplines, performed in a graceful, non-legalistic way, will lead to spiritual growth and greater spiritual health for the individual Christian. But what about the church? Will the practice of these

disciplines by the members of a church lead to the growth and health of the church? I believe the more individual church members practice classic spiritual disciplines, the more spiritually healthy the church will be. There are additional practices or factors that churches need to exhibit in order to be healthy.

Congregational Practices

In 1983, just five years after Foster's book was published, Kennon Callahan produced *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, which provided a similar framework for healthy congregational practice. Callahan's twelve keys are divided into two groups:

- **Relational** – Specific, concrete missional objectives; Pastoral and lay visitation; Corporate, dynamic worship; Significant relational groups; Strong leadership resources; Streamlined structure and solid, participatory decision-making.
- **Functional** – Several competent programs and activities; Open accessibility; High visibility; Adequate parking, land, and landscaping; Adequate space and facilities; Solid financial resources.

Callahan states, *Generally speaking, effective, successful churches have nine of these twelve central characteristics. Moreover, the majority of the nine are relational rather than functional. Tragically, too many churches have concentrated on the functional rather than the relational factors that contribute to mission and success* (p. xii).

Current Practices of CBFNC Congregations

I'm a firm believer in Foster's disciplines and Callahan's keys as spiritual aids to individual and congregational health. But what do they look like "on the ground" in the lives of people and churches of our Fellowship? This issue of *The Gathering* provides a few examples of the healthy practices of some of our Fellowship's Christians and churches.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). The word translated "perfect" is *teleios*, which means, "brought to its end, finished, complete." It doesn't mean sinless, but mature, having accomplished its purpose. To quote an old U.S. Army slogan, it means "being all you can be."

At this point in my life, I don't have the time, energy, or effort necessary to practice piano and become proficient, much less "perfect." But I am committed to devoting the time, energy, and effort to lead our Fellowship to engage in the practices that will enable us to be healthy, whole, and complete, achieving the purpose for which we were created and called.