

## Part One



# THE BASIC QUALITIES

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# GRACE

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I was helping a congregation. We were gathered in the fellowship hall. The congregation had had twenty-five losing seasons. They had slowly and steadily declined over the years. We had shared a wonderful meal together. The room was full. Leaders and grassroots had turned out in droves. They saw this as a decisive gathering in the life and future of their congregation.

One of the old-time mentor leaders, speaking on behalf of the whole gathering, said, “Dr. Callahan, tell us about the future of the Christian Church. We observe many churches and many denominations in trouble. Our church has been in trouble for years. Tell us about our future.”

I had invested considerable time visiting informally with many of the grassroots persons, key leaders, and the pastor of the congregation. I had come to know their strengths, what they have fun doing, some of their puzzles, their history, and their hopes. I was impressed with the latent strengths of the congregation.

“You have a strong future. Have this confidence and assurance. We will have many strong, healthy congregations in the future. Your congregation has the latent strengths, gifts, and competencies to be one of them.”

I went on to say, “In the time to come, we will also have many weak, declining congregations. We will have our fair share of dying congregations.”

With a gentle chuckle, Gene, the old-time mentor, said, “We have been doing pretty well at being weak and declining. We have had lots of practice. We almost have it down pat. A couple of times, over these recent years, we have almost made it to dying. We would like to try our hand at strong and healthy. We would be grateful for your wisdom and help.”

“In the Outback of Australia, in West, West Texas, and in many remote places,” I said, “it is tough to be a strong, healthy congregation. There are virtually no people. Wherever there are some people, a congregation can be strong and healthy. Some areas have fewer people than they did fifty years ago. But, they have more unchurched persons living around them now than they did back then.”

Hopefully, Gene said, “You really think we have a future.”

“Yes, Gene, your congregation can have a solid future. You can deliver the basic qualities of a strong, healthy congregation. And, you can deliver some of the twelve keys that contribute to a congregation being strong and healthy.”

On a chalkboard, I drew a chart to help the grouping see the five basic qualities of strong, healthy congregations. We confirmed together that they have three of these five basic qualities well in place.

We took a good fun break. Tea, coffee, water, juice, fruit, cookies, sandwiches. Much laughter and good fun.

Then, we gathered to claim which of the twelve keys are their current strengths. We selected one current strength to expand, and one new strength to add. We acted swiftly.

Some little while later, Gene wrote me a personal note. He said, “We want to thank you. You have helped us to

get moving. You taught us how to think and behave like a strong, healthy congregation. We have a ways to go yet. We can see we will get there. Everyone thanks you.”

## BASIC QUALITIES

**Strong, healthy congregations share these basic qualities: grace, strengths, compassion, excellent sprinters, and act swiftly.** Healthy congregations deliver three of these five basic qualities with considerable strength. With a diminishing spirit, weak, declining congregations share one or two of these basic qualities. Dying congregations share one or none of these basic qualities. You can assess where your congregation is and where it is heading.

<b>Strong, Healthy Congregations</b>	<b>Weak, Declining Congregations</b>	<b>Dying Congregations</b>
live in the grace of God	sometimes know the grace of God	occasionally sense the grace of God
build on their strengths; then, tackle any weakness	focus on their weaknesses; then, address their strengths	focus on their weaknesses
compassion, community, hope; then, challenge, reasonability, commitment	challenge, reasonability, commitment; then, some compassion, community, hope	challenge, reasonability, commitment
excellent sprinter possibilities; some solid marathon runner possibilities	solid marathon runner possibilities; a few excellent sprinter possibilities	solid marathon runner possibilities
act swiftly	act slowly	study again

## LIFE AND GRACE

Strong, healthy congregations share these basic qualities: grace, strengths, compassion, excellent sprinters, and act swiftly. Now, a word on behalf of grace.

### **Strong, healthy congregations live in the grace of God.**

Life begins with grace. We are who we are through the grace of God. Everything in this universe and beyond begins with the grace of God. We are alive through the grace of God.

For strong, healthy congregations, life is a wedding feast of God's grace, a great banquet of God's hope. Life is filled with wonder and joy, sacrifice and service, and overflowing confidence and hope in the grace of God.

God blesses us with grace. Grace and life are good friends. Grace stirs life. Life stirs grace. We experience the grace of God and we find ourselves living whole, healthy lives. We share our longings for life and we discover, deeply, richly, the grace of God. The grace God gives us . . . the life God gives us . . . these are gifts of God.

We live in the grace of God even when we experience disappointments, despair, depression, despondency, death, sin, and worse . . . In our time, people long for, yearn for, search for grace. They are less interested in organization, institution, and committee. They search for grace . . . for the forgiving, loving, saving grace of God.

Grace is generous. God gives us the gift of grace so we can live grace-filled lives. The nature of grace is amazing generosity. "For God so loved the world . . ." The Manger, the Life, the Teachings, the Cross, the Open Tomb, the Risen Lord . . . these sacramental signs confirm the generous nature of God's grace.

Grace is grassroots. Jesus is born in a manger, not a mansion, a stable, not a castle, a cattle stall, not a cathedral. Shepherds and wise men gather, not princes and kings. Grace is for everyday, ordinary people who are born, live, and serve in mission, blessed by the grace of God.

Grace is gentle. Mission leaders have a spirit of humility. We discover our deepest humility in the presence of the grace of God. We become humility leaders. Grace is kind, and thoughtful. Grace is merciful, reconciling, and moving on.

Grace is mutual. Someone once observed that it is never quite clear who is really sharing grace with whom. The man in the ditch brings forth the best in a Samaritan, who in the centuries come and gone has been called Good Samaritan. Sometimes, the person we are helping is helping us to live our lives at our best . . . in the grace of God.

Sometimes, we find grace. Sometimes, grace finds us. The gift of grace is not just a thing we do; it is a way we live. We are blessed of God. We are given this time. Our lives can count well, richly and fully, for the life of grace to which God encourages us.

## GRACE AND CONGREGATIONS

God blesses congregations with keys of grace. Keys unlock doors. Keys unfasten gates. Keys open possibilities. The ***Twelve Keys*** are possibilities of grace. These keys help you to be strong and healthy. These keys are not mandates . . . laws . . . binding rules . . . legalisms. They are not orders and obligations. It is not that each is *a should*, *a must*, or *an ought*. Rather, as possibilities, these keys open doors to being a strong, healthy congregation.

Growing a strong, healthy congregation is not, finally, a matter of data and demographics, graphs and charts, numbers and statistics. Nor is it a matter of the latest fads and foolishness, tricks and trivialities. Yes, we give attention to data and statistics. They have their rightful and proper place. We give more attention to the grace of God and the possibilities God gives us.

The ***Twelve Keys*** are possibilities of grace. You are welcome to approach them with a spirit of grace . . . a theology of grace. They are keys. They open doors for the possibilities with which God is blessing your congregation. They are opportunities for

you to develop a strong, healthy congregation, sharing richly and fully, in the grace and mission of God.

With these keys, you can grow a strong, healthy congregation. “Strong and healthy” and “effective and successful” are good friends. To be strong is to be effective. To be healthy is to be successful. In the spirit of grace, we focus on the strengths, gifts, and competencies of a congregation.

## CONGREGATION AND FAMILY

You will discover that in this book, I use the term *congregation* frequently. The term encourages us to develop the relational life, the family spirit, the sense of community, of the congregation. A congregation is, finally, a family or a grouping of families with enough in common to share *the same spirit of grace* and the same informal leadership team of key leaders, volunteers, pastor, and staff. The term, congregation, confirms the person-centered, people-centered, relational dynamics of the informal family or families who are the congregation.

Frequent use of the word “church” draws people to an organizational, institutional perspective. A congregation is a family, a grouping or groupings of people gathered in the grace of God. We are not, finally, an organization or an institution. People, in our time, are not drawn to these. People are drawn to community, not committee.

We are drawn to a family, not an organization. The extended family clans that used to deliver this sense of family are scattered asunder across the landscape. We come to a congregation searching for home. When we find home, we help the family. We help the informal, person-centered grouping that is sharing healthy relations in the spirit of grace and family. We are a family of grace, compassion, community, and hope.

God’s longing . . . . God’s yearning is to share grace with us . . . . to stir us to grace and compassion, community and hope. God blesses us with grace . . . . gives us gifts for compassion . . . . invites



us to live in community . . . with hope. These are gifts of God. Through these gifts, we discover a life of grace. We live in grace.

## GRACE AND STRENGTHS

To claim our strengths is to claim the grace of God. To deny our strengths is to deny the grace of God. The *Twelve Keys* books have contributed greatly to a major shift of the conversation from size to strengths. This shift is an important advance in the conversation. Now, we talk more of a congregation's strengths than its size. The mission growth movement focuses on strengths as gifts of the grace of God. It focuses on strengths for mission, not size. It is interested in advancing a strong mission of grace.

One mistake some people make, when they first look at the *Twelve Keys*, is that they ask, "Which ones don't we have; which ones are our weaknesses and shortcomings, which ones are our problems?" Some persons are too preoccupied with the problems, needs, concerns, weaknesses, shortcomings, difficulties, and dilemmas of congregations. Life itself has its fair share of these. When we focus first on our strengths, we are in the strongest position to deal with any weakness or shortcoming.

Regrettably, some see themselves as "fix it" persons. They look first for what is "broken" so they can "fix it." Their identity is wrapped up in "fixing things." They assume that their task is find what is weak and wrong and "fix it." They are preoccupied with finding "the problem" so they can bring "the solution." Sometimes, they try to fix what is not broken.

***The art is to bless.*** Not fix. The art is *first* to bless and confirm with a congregation the strengths, gifts, and competencies with which God blesses them. We begin with God. We begin with God's grace. We begin with God's blessings. We begin with God's gifts. We look first for the strengths of a congregation.

The wise coach, first practice of the season, looks first for what we have going for us this year. Is this the year of power,

blocking, and running? Is this the year of speed, quickness, and passing? The wise choral director, first practice of the season, listens for what we have going for us this year. Is it in the soprano, alto, tenor, or bass sections? In congregations, we look first for what we have going for us. And, the truth is that most congregations are doing better than they think they are.

***We run to our strengths, not our weaknesses.*** We have a team with a pro center, pro right guard, pro right tackle, pro right end, and a pro right halfback. We would *not* run our plays around left end. We will get clobbered there. Yes, on occasion, we might pull a right guard and try a play in that direction. Yes, we would look for a pro left guard. That is, we would add new strengths that match with our current strengths. Mostly, *we run to our strengths.*

***We sing to our strengths.*** We have a choir of pro sopranos, pro altos, and pro tenors. We sing music that matches with the strengths we have. We do not focus our music on the basses. We build our music repertoire on our strengths, not our weakness. Yes, we work toward improving the basses, but we would sing our *first* songs building on the sopranos, altos, and tenors. We go with, *we sing to our strengths.*

Congregations who first confirm the grace of God and claim their strengths, gifts, and competencies are viable and healthy, encouraging and developing. When a congregation focuses first on its strengths, it helps everyone in the congregation to focus first on their own gifts and strengths, in their own lives.

*Strong, healthy congregations create strong, healthy persons.*

*Strong, healthy persons create strong, healthy congregations.*

God invites us to focus on our strengths, not our size. Too much is made of size. When we develop our strengths, as gifts of the grace of God, we will be whatever size results from our strengths. The art is to grow stronger, not bigger. To be bigger is to be bigger, not necessarily better. Some people romanticize bigness. They focus on getting bigger. They say, "Thank God we are big and getting bigger." Some people do the reverse and romanticize smallness. They say, "Thank God, we are small

and getting smaller.” There is no merit either way. The merit is to experience the grace of God and to develop the strengths God gives you.

The term *strong* gives emphasis to the strengths, gifts, and competencies with which God blesses congregations. We are *effective* as we focus on our strengths. We become less preoccupied with weaknesses. We are encouraged, of God, to focus on our strengths.

The term *healthy* emphasizes that a strong congregation is a healthy family together. We encourage constructive relationships. We discover a sense of roots, place, and belonging together. We are a congregation of grace, compassion, community, and hope. We feel like family. We feel like home.

We have our fair share of difficulties and dilemmas, arguments and disagreements. The only groups I know who do not bicker and fuss, feud and argue are the people buried in the nearest cemetery. And, I am not always so sure about them. Sometimes, when I walk by late at night, I hear the mutterings and murmurings. What marks a healthy grouping of people is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of forgiveness, reconciliation, and moving on, with a healthy spirit of grace.

In tough times, we focus on the grace of God and the strengths with which God blesses us. In affluent times, in church culture times, in times when “it is the thing to do to go to church,” we allowed ourselves, regrettably, the luxury and leisure of being preoccupied with our weaknesses. A focus on weaknesses *almost* works when times are affluent and easy. In these current times, in this mission culture, it is important, it is urgent that congregations live in the grace of God and build on their key strengths as they move forward in mission.