

Twelve KEYS

to an
Effective
Church

Strong, Healthy Congregations
Living in the Grace of God

SECOND EDITION

KENNON L. CALLAHAN

TWELVE KEYS TO
AN EFFECTIVE CHURCH
SECOND EDITION

BOOKS BY
KENNON L. CALLAHAN, PH.D.

*Twelve Keys to an Effective Church, Second Edition,
Strong, Healthy Congregations Living in the Grace of God*
*The Twelve Keys Leaders' Guide, An Approach for Grassroots,
Key Leaders, and Pastors Together*
The Twelve Keys Bible Study
The Future That Has Come
Small, Strong Congregations
A New Beginning for Pastors and Congregations
Preaching Grace
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Visiting in an Age of Mission
Effective Church Finances
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Effective Church Leadership
Building for Effective Mission
Twelve Keys to an Effective Church
Twelve Keys: The Planning Workbook
Twelve Keys: The Leaders' Guide
Twelve Keys: The Study Guide

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To Julia McCoy Callahan

Her life and love enrich our living together.

*Her grace and compassion,
her wisdom and insight
are invaluable in advancing this new work.*

*Her gracious spirit and confident sense of hope
add richly to our lives together.
Warmly, with grace and love*

KEN

A Prayer

Be at Peace

May the quiet grace of God restore your soul
 may good fun and good times find you,
 may your compassion stir you,
 may your wisdom bless you with insight,
 may new adventures give you
 new discoveries,
 may you live well,
 with integrity and honor.

Be at Peace

May you live with wonder and joy, grace and goodwill
 wonder that you are alive,
 joy that God blesses you with strengths,
 grace that God gives you compassion
 toward the universe,
 goodwill toward all beings
 with whom we share
 in this life and the next.

Be at Peace

May the grace of God bless you,
 the compassion of Christ sustain you,
 and the hope of the Holy Spirit lead you.

Amen.

Kenyon L. Callahan, Ph.D.

.... grace and peace to you from God....
ROMANS 1:7

Part One



THE BASIC QUALITIES

GRACE

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.

Strong, Healthy Congregations	Weak, Declining Congregations	Dying Congregations
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.

STRENGTHS

TWELVE ARE CENTRAL

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

Strong, healthy congregations build on the strengths with which God blesses them.

Twelve possibilities consistently contribute to strong, healthy congregations. Yes, there may be fifteen to thirty to fifty characteristics that contribute to a congregation being strong and healthy, effective and successful. But, again and again, these twelve have tended to be persistently present in strong, healthy congregations.

In our research, wherever we find strong, healthy congregations, some of these twelve are present. These twelve are not so much a list of what a congregation should have. This is simply a listing of what strong, healthy congregations do have.

Feel free to consider fifteen to fifty characteristics of strong, healthy congregations. Look first at these twelve. You are welcome to look at other possibilities. Simply give your earliest consideration to these twelve. They are the ones consistently present in strong, healthy congregations.

For now, as you look at the chart, simply see the *Twelve Keys* for strong, healthy congregations. Later, you will have a fuller opportunity to consider which of these *Twelve Keys* are strengths in your congregation. I want you to have the benefit

Twelve Keys to an Effective Church
Strong, Healthy Congregations Living in the Grace of God

Relational Characteristics**1. one mission outreach**

by congregation in community

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. shepherding visitation

in congregation and community

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. stirring, helpful worship

grace centered, well done

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. significant relational groupings

home, roots, place, belonging

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. strong leadership team

leaders, pastor, staff

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. solid decision process

simple organization

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Functional Characteristics**7. one major program**

among best in community

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. open accessibility

in location and people

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9. high visibility

in location and people

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10. land, landscaping,

and parking

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11. adequate space and facilities

spacious, well cared for

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

12. generous giving

solid financial resources

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Claim your current strengths**Expand** one current strength**Add** one new strength**Act** on your plan

underline strengths (8s, 9s, 10s)

underline a second time

circle a 1-7 to grow to an 8

decide your one-time actions

of the **Twelve Keys** chart now so you can discover the central principles related to the **Twelve Keys**.

As you study each chapter, feel free to record your rating of each key on the **Twelve Keys** chart in Appendix C on page 258. Further, you can record your action plan and the key objectives you plan to achieve to strengthen your congregation. You will benefit from **The Twelve Keys Leaders' Guide** to help you develop your action plan.

For now, let's discover the **Twelve Keys**.

NINE OF TWELVE

Strong, healthy congregations deliver nine of the twelve. With one congregation, it will be a certain nine. With another congregation, it will be another nine. You deliver the nine that match best with your strengths and the mission field of persons God gives you.

You do not need all twelve.

One mistake people make when they look at the **Twelve Keys** chart is to ask, "Do we have all twelve?" That is simply that old, old friend, "a compulsive addictive perfectionism" showing up yet again in our lives. We learned that compulsive perfectionism somewhere, from someone or from several persons. Frequently, we learn it from someone who loves us and wants the best for us.

An interest in perfection is helpful, when we search for it in a relaxed, easygoing spirit, not too tense, not too tight, and not too anxious. Think of a golf swing. With a relaxed intentionality, we make a solid swing. It is when we think too much about the shot, try too hard, and seek to get it just right, that we make a bad swing.

The same is true with music. We want to be on key. We want to play the piece of music with perfection. When we have a relaxed and natural spirit, the music sounds wonderful. But, if we strive too hard, we become tense, tight, nervous, and anxious. We miss the note. We lose the beat.

In life, we want to do our best. We want to be growing toward perfection. But often, we try too hard. We do not let the grace of God help us. We try to earn what we have already been given. We seek to do it ourselves. We become tense, tight, nervous, and anxious. We become worried. We become preoccupied with “our efforts.” We strive, without letting the grace of God help us.

The old, old rhyme was posted at the front of many classrooms. “Good, better, best. Never let it rest until your good is better and your better is best.” The rhyme has a restless, striving focus. It is not relaxed and grace-filled. By contrast, at the end of a wonderful story, the angel says to the young couple, “Good, better, best. Know you are blessed.” This is grace.

God invites us to grace, not law, to possibilities, not legalisms.

Compulsive addictive perfectionism, CAP, I sometimes call it, leads one to believe that all congregations should have the same characteristics, with the same strength, in the same manner, in order to be healthy and successful. By contrast, the *Twelve Keys* approach offers grace.

Congregations vary greatly. They have distinctive gifts, strengths, and competencies. There is a Biblical principle encouraging and blessing the diversity of gifts. A congregation does not need all twelve. Deliver the nine that match with your strengths and the mission field of persons God gives you.

Be at peace with three of the twelve. You will deliver nine of the twelve with considerable strength. Two things happen with the other three. One, you will be having so much fun delivering nine well that the other three will not matter. Two, your delivery of nine will be so strong that they create a spillover impact and some of the other three will come along on their own.

VALUE AND PRIORITY

In this book, the *Twelve Keys* are discussed in the order of their priority, value, and importance. For example, adequate parking

is more helpful than adequate space and facilities. If you have a choice, have adequate parking and inadequate facilities. You will do better. I see too many congregations with adequate facilities and inadequate parking. They do less well.

If you have a choice, have open accessibility and, then, high visibility. You will do better. Too many congregations have high visibility, but lack accessibility. No one can find the church site. We can see the church site from the main road, but it is not clear how one gets to it. Lewis and Clark, or, for that matter, any of the early explorers, would take two years to find the site.

Significant relational groupings are slightly more important than a strong leadership team. The more new groupings you start, the more new leaders you will create. People who find home, help. Usually, they find their grouping first. Then, they volunteer. They pitch in and help. Start three new groupings that match with your mission, and, in time, you will have new volunteers and leaders. Some congregations beat the drum for volunteers without first trying to help persons find home. They wonder why they do not succeed in getting volunteers.

It is important to start new groupings that match with the mission of your congregation. These groupings will create new leaders that match with your congregation's mission. Thus, current leaders of your congregation's mission wisely help new groupings to be formed within, not apart from, the mission toward which your congregation is moving.

Shepherding visitation is slightly more important than dynamic worship. We have a pastor who is a good shepherd, loving and loved by the congregation. His sermon, rated a 7, will be heard as a 9. Not a good shepherd, the sermon will be heard as a 5. It is a whole lot more fun to be a 9 than a 5. It is in the shepherding, not the preaching.

Mission is slightly more important. Congregations who deliver one, major, helpful, legendary mission outreach do well. They live beyond themselves. They develop a theology of service, not a theology of survival. They develop a theology of

mission, not a theology of maintenance. They help persons with their lives and destinies in the grace of God.

SOURCES OF SATISFACTION

The sources of satisfaction are: mission, shepherding, worship, groupings, leaders, and decision making. These are the relational, person-centered, people-centered characteristics of strong, healthy congregations. The more well in place some of these are, the higher the level of satisfaction in a congregation. Think of a barometer chart. With five of these six well in place, the level of satisfaction is very high on the chart.

The sources of dissatisfaction are: program, accessibility, visibility, land, landscaping, and parking, facilities, and giving. These are the functional, organizational, institutional characteristics of strong, healthy congregations. The more well in place some of these are, the lower the level of dissatisfaction. Think of another barometer chart. With four of these six well in place, the level of dissatisfaction is very low on the chart.

The strongest nine (see the *Twelve Keys* chart on page 13) are five of the first six—the relational characteristics—and four of the second six—the functional characteristics. We have a high level of satisfaction and we have a low level of dissatisfaction. Some congregations deliver three of the relational characteristics and have all six of the functional characteristics. Yes, this is nine. It is a weaker nine in our time.

In an earlier time, when it was a church culture, congregations could “get away with” delivering primarily the functional characteristics. It was “the thing to do” to go to church in the culture of that time. Thus, congregations could pay less attention to the relational strengths, and people would still come to church. It was “the thing to do.”

Going to church is no longer “the thing to do.” Thus, in our contemporary culture the relational strengths are most important. Congregations that deliver five of these six thrive more

Sources of
SatisfactionSources of
Dissatisfaction

fully. This creates a high level of satisfaction. The higher the level of satisfaction, the more willing people are to “put up with” a source of dissatisfaction. For example, a congregation shares an extraordinary and helpful, stirring, and inspiring worship service. The result is that people are more willing to “put up with” inadequate parking.

Another congregation had a low level of satisfaction because it was not delivering some of the relational strengths. Also, it had a high level of dissatisfaction over inadequate space and facilities. They spent year one in the design of more adequate space and facilities. They spent year two in fund raising. They spent year three in construction. They moved in to adequate space and facilities. They lowered the level of dissatisfaction.

They did not raise the level of satisfaction one inch. They had worked on lowering the level of dissatisfaction. They had not raised any of the sources of satisfaction. A house does not make a home. People do. What, finally, raised the level of satisfaction was what began to happen *in* the new space and facilities: worship was now more stirring and inspiring and groupings now delivered a deeper sense of roots, place, and belonging.