

Things All Successful Churches Have in Common

Here is a list of things, from Scripture and experience, which all successful churches (that is, churches that honor and serve God) have in common.

Zeal for God.

John 2:17 says of Jesus, “Zeal for your house has consumed Me.” Those strong feelings for His Father and His Father’s house “consumed” Jesus. No area of His life was untouched. God was always the number one priority. Jesus’ every decision was based on how effectively it would promote the kingdom of God.

God and His church need to be the most important things in our lives. I need to follow God with the fervor some reserve for sports teams! People need to be courageous advertisers of their pride in God, and schedule things around the work of God.

Great leadership.

In Titus 1:5, Paul told Titus to “...put in order what remains” and appoint elders. The churches of Crete were missing something without elders.

When God went looking for a leadership model, He settled on the shepherd—not the businessman and not the veterinarian. Elders are not just figureheads, not just decision-makers, not just paramedics and firemen; but leaders of men, shepherds of the flock, who “work hard at preaching and teaching” the people of the congregation (1 Tim. 5:17–18), who lead by example (1 Pet. 5:1–5), and who will “give an account” (Heb. 13:17).

No congregation will ever rise above its leadership. Shepherding takes time, and it involves people. It requires a thorough knowledge of God’s word and a vision of how it applies in the congregation, and in the community. Shepherds are men who can wisely evaluate the effectiveness of congregational efforts, and who have the authority to make decisions that will be followed, even if not agreed upon. The members need to submit, confident that the shepherds lead in the Lord, and have taken upon themselves the burden of leadership that doesn’t rightfully belong to others.

A desire to save the lost.

Members of successful churches have contemplated what it means to be lost, and they have heard God’s great commission to “go into all the world” (Matt. 28:19–20). They take that responsibility very seriously. They know it can’t be accomplished haphazardly; so they make plans, they make invitations, they advertise, they pray for lists of prospects. They are not satisfied when there are no baptisms. Successful churches, just like the church in Jerusalem, experience

numerical growth through diligent efforts at evangelism (that, or they harden a community and prepare it for judgment).

A sincere pursuit of holiness.

Christianity is more than moral behavior, but it is certainly not less. We are at different stages in our growth as Christians. Diligent efforts must be made to identify things in our lives that are offensive to our God and root them out. This will take some occasional negative preaching. This will take some loving correction. This will take compassion. The lesson of Achan in Joshua 7 is that God cannot bless a group of people who tolerate sin in their midst.

Loving fellowship.

A church that loves as a family has a contagious energy. People are excited to come to church, because they are going to see their family and be together. Successful churches have the doors open early and closed late. They draw strength from each other. They endeavor to pull new Christians and fringe Christians into those same bonds of love. Hebrews 13:1 sums up what countless other passages describe: “let love of the brethren continue.”

A church that loves as a family will also serve as a family. The preacher won’t get those phone calls that say, “no one checked on me,” or “I had surgery and no one brought me any food,” because the members of the congregation love one another enough to see to those things. Even to the extent of selling property and possessions to see that physical needs are cared for. Successful churches know that they can rely on one another to move boxes, to repair roofs, to look after widows.

Uplifting worship.

A successful church is one in which the members are not embarrassed to bring their friends. Where the members are there on time and ready to serve. Where the service runs smoothly and the singing is uplifting and the people participate—not as mere entertainment, but as that which glorifies God. Where people know, as Hebrews 10:24–25 says, “our own assembling together” brings strength and encouragement.

Practical, truthful preaching.

In that worship, the church will receive preaching that is both truthful and practical. Preaching that is false is like having a shiny sports car with no steering wheel—it’s vain, and it will soon lead to disaster. Successful churches demand truth, or any kind of success they have is a false success, and they are winning converts to something other than God (1 Tim 4:11–13).

But that preaching will also be practical. It will mean something. The preacher will strive to communicate with the young and old and in-between. He will ask

himself what the congregation needs to hear, not what can be scraped together and slapped into a timeslot so he can get back to TV.

Unity of doctrine.

It's hard to get work done when we're not on the same page. Successful churches are not divided on doctrinal lines. There are many things in which there is room for opinion, and in that sphere there is liberty. But a congregation can't have doctrinal unrest without becoming utterly distracted. A successful church works together to achieve doctrinal unity on all major points, to do as Paul says in Eph. 4:13, "attain to the unity of the faith." Phil. 1:27, "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel."

That's not automatic. That takes Bible study and discussion, even as was done in the Jerusalem church in Acts 15. There was a disagreement, and so there was a coming together to figure out what the Spirit said. There was honest Bible study daily (Acts 17:11).

A fantastic Bible class program.

A successful church realizes that the future is the children, and does not settle for mediocrity in the classroom. All aspects of our Bible class program deserve honest examination, from the cradle class to the Bible lab to the teen classes to the adult classes.

Full involvement.

Finally, successful churches have a complete buy-in to the work of this congregation. A successful church has a low percentage of high maintenance Christians. By that, I mean those who take more than they give. Only babes in Christ (new converts), or those experiencing a difficult set of circumstances, deserve to get more attention than they give. Successful churches have more Barnabas, less Ananias (Acts 4:36–5:3).

We are at an important junction.

Right now, we can do the things that will provide for the growth of God's people in Lake Wales. Right now, we can begin doing the things that will bear fruit in the weeks, months, and years to come. Right now, we can plant seeds that will grow into a membership of 250 and 300 in a few years.

We can push forward in a positive and energetic and diligent way. Or, we can just ride the wave we're on and ride it for a while longer until it finally begins to peter out. And this congregation will fizzle. Look at neighboring communities and you'll see plenty of examples.

We have no excuses. We do not lack elders, we do not lack a nice building, we do not lack a diverse and sizeable membership, we do not lack money, we do not lack talent and opportunity. Faith and obedience is all we need to glorify God and secure the future.

—*John Guzzetta*