

The Missing Ingredient in Most Churches



A friend of mine told me about an argument she had with her husband last week. They were on their way to a family luncheon to celebrate his sister's 40th birthday and had agreed before church that they would stay for the benediction, shake a few hands, and then leave quickly so as not to be late.

As they got in the car to head to lunch, he lightly chided her: "Honey, it's 12:44! You said we would leave quickly today." She protested, "But we only stayed 14 minutes after the benediction; that's not long at all. Besides, we both love this church—you know it's hard to leave!"

My friend and her husband belong to a church they love, a place they are so enthusiastic about that they drive 45 minutes to worship there every Sabbath, and 45 minutes for board meetings and baby showers and Bible study.

They don't drive all that way because there are no churches closer to their home; they drive that distance and come early and stay late because they are committed to that congregation. They have a loving community there, they have fun there, and they are excited to go to church.

- + In our interviews of members of growing churches, we noticed that healthy, growing congregations have a special ingredient that plateauing and declining congregations do not. That ingredient is *enthusiasm* and most churches don't have enough of it.
- + The members of growing churches are excited about God, excited about their church, and excited to share their faith with others. They are proud of their local church and eager to bring with them their friends and relatives, knowing that they'll be blessed. For these people, going to church is a joyful experience that they want to share with others.

+ When the church growth movement was in its infancy, Donald McGavran's book *The Bridges of God*, which launched the movement, said it well: the best explanation of church growth is the enthusiasm of people about God and their church. That was 50 years ago and it is still the same today. When I asked pastors of growing Adventist churches about the secret of growth in their churches, I was told that it was the enthusiasm of the people: they were excited about their church and they recommended it to their friends.

Quoted by Bill M. Sullivan, *Ten Steps to Breaking the 200 Barrier* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1988), 73.

What causes an excitement like this?



Our findings tell us that there are at least seven factors that contribute to a culture of people enthusiastic about their church.



1. The experience of the Gospel.

- + When people fall in love with Jesus, they will experience a sense of joy, meaning, and excitement. When the presence of God is felt, the heart is thrilled and the desire is to do whatever He asks.
- + People who love Jesus have traveled all over the world to tell others about Him; they have risked hardship, persecution, difficulties, some even gave their lives for His sake. The experience of the Gospel is compelling and inspiring and motivates us to share Him with the world around us.



2. Buying into a cause.

- + As human beings we long to be a part of something larger than ourselves, to know that we are making an important, valuable difference in the world. As Christians, the Kingdom of God is our cause and our work for that Kingdom makes an eternal difference in lives of others.
- + Whatever we do in the service of God—teaching a Sabbath School class, visiting the shut-in, ministering to the homeless, leading out in worship, giving a Bible study—we do it to glorify God and bring hope, grace, the presence of God, and eternity to others. Enthusiastic congregations know the significance of their ministries.



3. Love and acceptance.

- + A spirit of love, acceptance, and forgiveness permeate the whole church. Love is experienced by those in the church as well as those outside of the church. A feeling of belonging and intimacy permeate the place.
- + People can express their views without condemnation, even if they're different. People can dress differently, eat differently, look differently and yet still are accepted and loved. Growing churches major in the major issues, which is loving God and people.



4. A warm and joyous
climate.



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5. Inspiring and dynamic
worship.

- + Members of an enthusiastic congregation look forward to going to church because they know that God is going to show up and bless them and do great things among them.

6. Meaningful and relevant ministries.



- + All ministries are done with a sense of spirituality and care. From Sabbath School to children's ministries, from community outreach to nurture, the ministries of the church are meaningful and relevant. There is a concentrated and all-out, intentional effort to meet the total needs of the believer and the seeker.



7. A sense of excellence

- + All things are done striving toward excellence, with an eye to honor God and inspire people. Members can feel good about their ministries because they are done well and they can feel good about inviting their friends and family, knowing that what the church does is something to be proud of.

- + How is your church doing in this area?
- + Is there a sense of excitement and joy in your church?
- + Are people attending your church enthusiastic enough about their experience with Christ and the people in the congregation to share that experience with others?

- + Of course, you may have some questions for me, too.
- + Chances are that your church could use a little more joy and excitement.
- + I'm encouraging you to create that atmosphere in your congregation. "Sure!" you say. "But how? What other miracle do you want me to perform?"

- + I admit that excitement is difficult to manufacture because it has to do with the total quality of experience in church, but it is still an important factor in getting a church growing and sustaining growth.
- + Although developing an enthusiastic congregation might be difficult, it is not impossible. With the blessing of God and with intentionality, it can be done.



The seven features of an enthusiastic church culture must be developed in your congregation: a growing, happy church will bring glory to God and people into His kingdom.



Moving from principles to praxis, what steps can you take to begin establishing those seven characteristics within your church family? Here are 10 possible ways that an enthusiastic culture can be nurtured in your community of faith.

1. Prayer



1. *Prayer.*

- + A well-spring of joy, love, faith, and expectation will develop as you pray. Pray that God will bring a great sense of excitement and victory to your life and to the lives of your people that will spill over into the public services.

2. Spirituality



2. *Spirituality.*

- + The more spiritual the people are, the more excited they are about God and the church and the more they are inclined to share their faith with others. Those who love God will do anything to honor Him and glorify Him. They are those in the forefront of ministry and evangelism. Therefore, your ministry to develop a healthy, Christ-centered spiritual life feeds right into the general culture of joy and enthusiasm of your church.

3. Promote faith-based
optimism.



3. *Promote faith-based optimism.*

- + This sparks anticipation, it supports joy, and it overcomes trouble. We're not talking about spiritual hype but about developing a positive mental attitude. Even though some elements of positive thinking are considered secular or humanistic, we are talking about faith-based hope and optimism which works because God is behind it. If you think you can, you're right: God will make it possible. If you think you can't, you're right still.

- + The most profound concept I learned from this research is that the mind is like a field. It will grow anything you plant in it. If you plant weeds in a field, it will grow weeds. If you plant corn, it will grow corn. If you plant cotton, it will grow cotton.
- + The same is true of the mind. If you sow negative thoughts, you will reap negative thoughts. If you sow positive thoughts, you will reap the same.

- + Helping people embrace a faith-based optimism is one of your tasks as a spiritual leader. As a man thinks in his heart, so is he! (Proverbs 23:7). Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you! (Matthew 7:7-8; Luke 11:9-10).
- + These do not necessarily indicate health, wealth, and fame, but they point toward a balanced approach to life.
- + Neither do they suggest refusing to admit that there is sorrow, heartache, sin, disease, and pain in the world. It means recognizing those problems while believing God will enable us to rise above them.

- + Happiness in life is largely a matter of attitude. Millionaires are often miserable, while others who have barely enough to buy groceries may be radiantly happy.
- + Faith-based optimism is essential to creating excitement, and when leaders stand to lead, they must be positive.

- + This was a lesson that I began to learn in my first pastorate. I would hear sometimes that I wasn't feeding the people.
- + That made no sense to me because I knew I was preaching the Gospel.
- + I was into Paul like you wouldn't believe and I thought I was doing a good job! What were these critics talking about?

Then one day I was sitting in my office and questioning myself: "Will this sermon help anyone? Will it encourage anyone? Will it lift someone up?" I began building my sermons around these criteria and discovered immediately the difference it made. During my first pastorate I had said in effect to the people, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" (Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7).

I didn't realize how negative it was, how devoid of positive encouragement it was. Figuratively, people came crawling into church. They had been beaten down by the world and were almost ready to give up. They struggled to be in church and they looked at me as if to say, "Preacher, do you have a good word for me today? Does God have anything to say to me about this mess I'm living in? Do you have any words of hope and encouragement to lift up my spirit?"

Learning my lesson, I began to preach on texts like, “My grace is sufficient for you: for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Some may be tempted to charge that I compromised, that I stopped preaching the whole Gospel. No, I still preached on sin and holiness, on the lost condition of man, on judgment. I still preached on commitment and self-denial, but not all the time and not in the same way. And every Sabbath I asked myself those same questions to test the helpfulness of my sermons.

I actually practiced making helpful statements, though at first it sounded phony to me; I was so used to admonishing people to be better and work harder for the Lord. I began saying to them, "Hey, it's wonderful to serve God. He knows all about your situation, and He will give you the strength to face it." I told the people over and over that God loves them and is crazy about them. That's what I mean by radiating from the pulpit. Accentuate the positive.

4. Minister with enthusiasm



- + It lifts people's spirits. It's catching. Be genuine, but be enthusiastic. I learned from pastors of growing churches that when you're going to the pulpit, you should get there in a hurry and act like it's worth being there. I see pastors trudge to the pulpit as though they dreaded it. If you're going to create excitement, you must be enthusiastic and speak with enthusiasm.
- + "That's just not me," you protest. Then be as enthusiastic as you can be. Obviously some people are so enthusiastic they are bouncing off the wall.
- + You don't have to be like them, but you can be positive and speak with as much enthusiasm as you have.


- + Dr. Phineas F. Bresee declared, "If any man loses his enthusiasm, he might as well be buried." He knew that a lack of enthusiasm "is one of the greatest hindrances to the work of God."
- + He even said that a lack of enthusiasm "is sure evidence that the heavenly vision is dim."
- + Some people consider enthusiasm a worldly and insincere emotion.

- + Actually, the opposite is true.
- + The two Greek words used for enthusiasm mean *God inside you*.
- + What better source of enthusiasm is there than God inside you?
- + The truth is that enthusiasm is simply faith in action. It is the logical expression of the joyful knowledge of God's good news for the world.



5. Set realistic goals of faith.

- + A goal gives people something to get excited about, something to work toward and look forward to.
- + Most people want to attempt something great, and they will get excited about the possibility of achieving it.
- + A good goal will require special effort and divine help; it should be bigger than the resources that you see you have, but if it is impossible, it will discourage people instead of exciting them.



6. Spiritualize the work of
the church.

+ In your communication, make it clear that saving souls and rebuilding lives is what the work of the church is all about. In your promotion from the pulpit and in newsletters, in phone calls and board meetings remind people that you are not just increasing numbers or erecting buildings, you are doing God's work.

- + Read the newsletters of exciting churches and you will discover that everything is spiritually oriented. They don't just raise money, they ask their people to make a great gift to God.
- + They aren't merely constructing a building, they are providing a place for people who are going to be won as a result of faithful stewardship. Church leaders could say, "You owe 10% of your income to the Lord and you ought to give another 5% to help us do some of the things we're trying to do."

- + People would complain, they would say they couldn't do it—too many of their own bills to pay.
- + If the church leadership says instead, "We're doing a great work for God and you have a chance to share in this tremendous ministry.
- + You can make an investment in the kingdom of God," people will respond much differently. They will invest their resources into a vision like that.

When visiting a growing Adventist church I met a dentist who loved God and his church and community deeply and passionately. I asked him about his ministry in the church. He informed me that he was in charge operating the audio system in his church. Then he got excited and started to tell about all the things he does so that the audio system operates effectively in his church.


Then he said, "I come here to the church several times every week to check on the equipment and make sure it works properly, because what happens here on Sabbath morning is a matter of life and death." Then he stopped and said, "NO, NO, it is a matter of *eternal* life and death." The Holy Spirit had opened the eyes of this dentist to the eternally significant consequences of his ministry in the audio booth on Sabbath mornings. I pray that all of us could see what we do not so much as teaching a Sabbath school class or leading in Pathfinders ministry or distributing food to the needy, but as making an eternal difference in the life of those we touch.

- + Learn the secret of spiritualizing the work of the church.
- + Tie everything back to its core purpose.
- + Is that honest?
- + Yes, it is. The Bible says to do everything to the glory of God.
- + If you can't tie it back to His glory, then you shouldn't be doing it in the first place!



7. Celebrate victories and successes.


- + This is extremely important for building up excitement and godly enthusiasm.
- + Every time someone gets saved, give it special attention in the public services. Every time someone has an answer to prayer that is significant, report it in a public service and in the church newsletter.
- + Help the people to feel that something is happening at their church, that something wonderful is going on all the time. You don't have to make this up, just point out the wonderful things that God is doing in your midst.



8. Focus on people's needs
and help them.

- + I would venture that most of those attending your church would be impressed if they knew the church was actually helping people, whether it was by providing meals, giving them clothes, or helping them through personal problems.
- + This is where love, acceptance, and forgiveness are important.

- + You don't have to condone their problems or their sins, but you do need to love people.
- + You do need to accept them just as they are, and you do need to forgive them for their wrongdoings.
- + When you focus on meeting people's needs, you'll discover that even those who never want the church to do anything but preach the Gospel will be impressed that their church is really helping people.



9. Plan outstanding programs.

- + We have the makings of boredom in our churches. We have 52 Sabbath morning services and 52 Wednesday night services wherein we do about the same things with the same people—just less and less of them.
- + That can get boring. So plan some outstanding programs, introduce variety, challenge the people to get others involved in doing something different. We used to create excitement in my church by adding variety. People would say that our church services were never the same twice.
- + Not everyone can handle variety, but do something to give the people a feeling of expectancy.

- + One way to encourage excitement is to bring in renowned guest speakers and special music artists from time to time.
- + This gives the sense that something special and worthwhile is happening.
- + You may need to grow before you can incorporate them into your program in significant measure, but you will need to do it to maintain excitement in your church.



10. Develop inspiring
worship services.

- + This doesn't necessarily require an emotional response in the form of outward demonstration, but worshipers should feel something.
- + It must fit your personality, and it has to fit your people. It should also fit within your resources.
- + If you have someone who can "sing the glory down," great! If not, utilize the strengths within the congregation and do something else.

- + Surely you can implement one or two of these suggestions to help build enthusiasm in your local church. It will be worth your best efforts.
- + As the church becomes more joyous and positive, more people will be won to the Lord, and nothing is so exciting as seeing people coming to your church and committing themselves to Jesus.
- + Ultimately, excitement emerges where people feel the love of God and His grace extending to them, and through them to others.
- + When the church is a safe and warm place, the result will be enthusiasm: they will enjoy being there, will be eager to invite others, and will be willing to do more ministry.

- + In studying the differences between growing churches and declining churches, we concluded that the members of the declining churches tend to be neutral or even ashamed of their church.
- + In contrast, the members of the growing churches are proud of where they worship and fellowship, proud of their pastor, eager for Sabbath School and worship services.
- + Ultimately, they are proud of God, the One who is doing something extraordinary right in their midst.

A few years ago my wife needed a car. So one day we went out looking for that perfect car that was only one year old, had less than 10,000 miles, was loaded with very option, and yet cost less than \$5,000. Well, we did not find that car, but we did find a beautiful Toyota Camry that was only four years old with most of the necessary features.

My wife liked the car and I went in to ask the dealer about the price. He said to me, "This car is a steal. It is only four years old and has a little bit more than 100,000 miles, but mostly highway miles. I will sell it to you below book, only \$9,998." I said, "Thank you but I do not have \$10,000. We only have \$4,000." He offered to finance it for us, but we told him that we always pay cash for every purchase we make.

As we were walking out, he called us back and told us to wait; he would talk with his manager. About 20 minutes later, he came out saying, "My boss is crazy, he is willing to sell the car for \$8000." I said, "We do not have \$8000, we only have \$4000." He said, "Mr. Kidder, I cannot sell you this car for \$4000. It is worth more than \$10,000. Let me go to the boss again and see what we can do."

Twenty minutes later he came out saying, "The boss must love you. He is willing to sell you the car for \$7000." I told him again that we only had \$4000. This went back and forth from 11am till 7pm. A little after seven, I drove the car off the lot after I paid him about \$5000.

Let me tell you, I was excited! I had gotten a great deal. I told this story to everyone I knew, I shared it in all my classes, I even built a sermon around it. I told the story so many times that I noticed people starting to avoid me: they knew that talking to me meant that they'd hear the story again.

If a deal of \$5,000 made me so excited and willing to share this story a thousand times, how much more eternal life! At the cross of Calvary, Jesus gave me the deal of a life filled with joy, purpose, and hope today, and He added eternity on top of it. When we realize what Jesus has done for us, we will center our lives on Him and tell the world His story with all the zeal and enthusiasm we have.

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