

Thriving for Christ

Like all of you, I have been a member of many churches and worshiped under many pastors over the years. In my travels, some churches overflowed with activity, others existed quietly, and others struggled. With my usual curiosity, I ponder why some churches thrive while others stagnate or wither on the vine.

Show of hands. Who thinks this is a special church, maybe even the best church you've attended?

Why do you think that is?

[AUDIENCE MAY MAKE SUGGESTIONS]

Let's explore common features of a thriving church.

- Features of a Thriving Church
 - Love God and Others
 - Of course, this restates the Golden Rule.
 - In Matt 22:34-40, the Pharisees and Sadducees tested Jesus:
 - His response was first loving God and second, your neighbors with a VERY broad definition of our neighbor.
 - In the Parable of the Good Samaritan and others, Jesus calls us to love everyone, even those with whom we disagree.
 - He ended it with "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."
 - Have a clear vision
 - Like the body of Christ:
 - We need his guidance to develop a mission or a common goal.
 - Christ is the head, but we need:
 - A nervous system to provide guidance to the rest of the body.
 - Then, we can speak and act with unity.
 - Unclear guidance or damage to the nerves will hobble the body.
 - Joshua at the battle of Jericho demonstrates the value of unity of the body.
 - He followed God's plan to march around the city walls for 7 days seems silly.
 - His instruction to blow the ram horns on the 7th day seems sillier.

- Yet, the walls came tumblin' down because the army followed the Lord's guidance.
- Servant Leadership
 - Jesus exemplifies the ultimate servant leadership in John 13 when he washed the disciples' feet.
 - Peter initially refused to submit but
 - Christ rebuked him saying he came to serve, not to be served.
- Biblical Preaching and Teaching
 - Rom 15:4:
Everything written in the scriptures was written to teach us, in order that we might have hope through the patience and encouragement which the scriptures give us.
 - Well, duh!
- Committed to Gathering Together
 - Heb 10:24-25:
And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.
 - We all get discouraged from time to time. With fellowship we can support others or others can support us when life intrudes on our tranquil lives.
 - Without fellowship, like sheep, we will drift and may get lost.
- Dedicated to Serving Others
 - Philemon 2:3-4
Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.
 - Studies show that people that focus on helping others feel happier and more fulfilled than people who are internally focused.
 - In fact, people who attend church live longer than those who don't.
- Cultivating Generosity
 - Hebrews 13:16:
And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.
 - Jesus tells us to go the extra mile, even when the demand inconveniences us.
- Engaging in Evangelism
 - 1 Peter 3:15
Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.
 - There's way more to evangelism than standing on the street corner and preaching.
 - Really, evangelism is:
 - Often looked upon skeptically in the UMC.

- But, evangelism involves spreading the news.
 - In my experience, I have found that:
 - Some people need the street corner evangelist.
 - While others carry scars from previous negative encounters. They need a softer touch.
 - Experience while visiting a church.
 - Whatever your talents, we can all share the good news of Jesus Christ just by being friendly and inviting.
- Today, I give you a treat, a glimpse at the way my mind works.
 - Let's talk about a Tale of 2 churches
 - Using the criteria above, let's consider the differences by the age-old compare and contrast method.
 - Let me cleverly disguise the identity of the churches. I'll call them Church 1 and Church 2.
 - So, how are they similar?
 - When I joined, both churches started with about 100 attendees during a typical Sunday
 - Both churches attempt to follow the Golden Rule
 - Both churches teach from the bible
 - Both churches were established in growing communities
 - But, there their paths diverge
 - One has grown
 - The other has been stuck at the same level of membership for many years.
 - I encourage you to think about a church you once attended.
 - How did it compare to Church 1 and Church 2?
 - Leadership and mission
 - Church 1 is blessed with many servant leaders.
 - The minister sometimes cleans. Like Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, this is not a typical role of a leader
 - Through several programs, they work together to follow and share the message of Christ
 - Church 1 has outstanding teachers with bible study attendance far beyond anything I've previously seen
 - The Mission Statement is short and simple, focused on God and service, and easy to remember.
 - Church 2
 - Few adults took part in the one bible study class.
 - Leadership was full of old guard and factional.
 - They realized that they needed to update their mission.
 - Part of the leadership used the mission building process to attack and fire the minister.
 - Church membership split and some left, while others reduced their offerings.
 - Let me briefly introduce Church 3
 - I just started going.

- Leadership was fractured and fired the minister.
- Attendance and the offerings fell.
- Even today, the church continues to limp along and was damaged further by recent events.
- Sadly, Church 3 is withering on the vine.
- Churches 1 and 2 claim to serve others, but how?
 - Church 1's programs actively serve people in the church and the broader community.
 - Programs to:
 - Feed school kids and local families
 - Active women's group with community outreach missions
 - A dedicated team puts the bulletin together and prepares for service each week
 - Volunteer speakers to a Sunday gathering at a nursing home.
 - There is a team that faithfully:
 - Celebrates each other's joyful events, and
 - Like the body that will try to protect an injured part, this team will comfort those who are hurting.
 - This was especially important during the periods of isolation from Covid.
 - Church 2
 - Mostly internal programs.
 - Said they supported the community food pantry, but
 - Nobody volunteered regularly
 - Only did the food drive once or twice a year.
 - There was little effort to support mission projects.
- Evangelism
 - Church 1
 - Described as a very friendly church, barely a visitor leaves without talking to someone.
 - They minister to a local nursing home.
 - There is a monthly offering for the community and global mission projects
 - They financially support a school, as well as provide volunteer help.
 - Church 2
 - Visitors often left after service without talking to anyone.
 - Hired a Youth Director,
 - who started to build a youth program from scratch,
 - but who left when the minister was fired.
 - They gave up on an age-old program to provide secondhand clothing to the poor prior to the school year because:
 - The old guard didn't include or know how to include new members and had grown tired.

- They got frustrated and unilaterally canceled the program.
 - No one or group would step up to reinstate the program.
 - Despite being in the community for more than 175 years, most community members didn't know Church 2 existed.
- I could go on with discussions of Commitment to Gathering, Engagement, and Generosity, but the contrast continues along the same lines.
- What can we learn from these churches:
 - Obviously, my obfuscation provided as much cover as a clear pane of glass, and you recognized Church 1 as our church.
 - Having experienced a variety of churches, it is
 - Way more fun to be in a thriving church.
 - But, it takes many people working together to make a thriving church.
 - So, why did I walk down memory lane to compare these churches?
 - Obviously, we are doing well, but it's not to boast or take a victory lap.
 - God wants us to Thrive for Christ now and in the future.
 - We have an excellent servant leader in Ruben.
 - I told him that he needed to stay here for at least 20 years.
 - For some reason, he just laughed.
 - It's a fact, pastors come and go.
 - Despite their current struggles, Church 2 must have been healthy at one time to exist over 175 years.
 - Of course, some of you may move away and look for a new church.
 - Whatever the reason, I want you to:
 - appreciate what we have,
 - to know what to look for should you move, and
 - to realize that you, yes you, are key to this or any thriving church.
 - To win the race for Christ, the body of Christ needs every part working in unison for one goal.
 - When Paul compares us, the church, to the body of Christ,
 - He reminds us we can't all be the same body part. A body of eyes alone isn't viable.
 - God gave each of us unique talents, so we need diversity and unity of purpose to thrive as the body of Christ.
 - Whatever part of Christ's body you fulfill, you are important to a thriving church.
 - Some help lead by filling roles like teaching bible studies or taking part in committees.

- But remember, while the pastor is important, he/she is not the only leader. We need servant lay leaders focused on the health of our body.
 - The lay leaders provide continuity between pastors.
 - However, as with Church 2 and 3, without servant leadership, insular or fractious leaders will injure and hobble the Christ's body.
 - We need leaders that focus on sharing the message of Jesus Christ through our service to others.
 - And, we need members who are the hands and the feet
 - We have active jobs like handling food from the Food Pantry or filling boxes for Feed New Mexico Kids.
 - We have quiet, sit-down jobs like:
 - The team that prepares for our Sunday worship. By the way, they do a great job!
 - Or the team that counts and deposits the offerings.
 - Churches 2 & 3 demonstrate one thing:
 - We are one argument away from being distracted and hobbled by infighting.
 - Should that happen, we hobble ourselves and cannot respond to Jesus' command to feed his sheep.
 - God provided this church with deep talent.
 - We have had key people move or pass away, but
 - Unlike Church 2 that gave up on an age-old program clothing distribution,
 - When there was an opening, new people stepped up and done a wonderful job.
- Here's my challenge to you:
 - How are you involved in the church?
 - What talents do you or can you share?
 - As Jesus said in Luke 10:2:
The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.
 - A thriving church needs your ongoing support.
 - A leg that drags its foot will not be able to win a race for Christ.
- To be clear, you are not called to do everything or things beyond your talents or something that God is not calling you to do.
 - As Paul says, we are a body of many parts.
 - As a church that is thriving for Christ, let:
 - Us celebrate our unity in the body of Christ.
 - Each of us examine and use our talents to the best of our ability.
 - Us recognize every member for their contributions, even those who quietly perform their tasks.
 - Let us pray fervently that we continue to thrive as Christ's body with unity of purpose.
 - One last thought

- If you have ideas, talk to Ruben or other church leaders.
- If you are unsure what you can do, Ruben will gladly make suggestions.
- Praise God for the talent that He provided us.
- May we use those talents to our fullest for his benefit.