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The most important ingredient in church growth: Faith-based optimism

Faith and *optimism*—two simple words that can change you, your church, and your future. A positive, healthy attitude based on hope and faith is the number one human ingredient in church growth. In research done in the Adventist Church from 2003 to 2007, the fastest growing Seventh-day Adventist churches in North America were identified.¹ These churches had at least 5 percent growth in attendance, membership, and baptisms for five consecutive years.

In order to be able to compare the churches fairly, the study excluded all churches that ministered to the highly receptive first-generation immigrant populations. There were five churches that met these strict criteria (named below as “Church A,” “Church B,” etc.). For each one of these fast-growing churches, the researchers identified three churches in the same geographical proximity that were either declining or in the plateau stage.

What can we learn from this study?

Same places, different results

At the time of this study, the fastest-growing church, Church A, was in mid-America. In order to understand the dynamic of this growing church, three pastors of stagnant Adventist churches in the same area were asked the reasons behind their lack of growth. Almost all said, “It is very difficult to work here. The people are not interested in the Adventist message. Most of the people are Baptist or Charismatic.”

“What about the future?” I asked.

“It does not look good,” they said. “The Baptists are getting stronger and we are getting weaker.”

In contrast, Church A was a church planted in a medium-sized city in the late 1990s and has a strong evangelistic ministry. When interviewed about his city, the pastor of Church A said, “I love living here. The people of our city love God, we pray for them, we meet their needs, and they keep coming to our church. God has been so good to us. We started our church approximately eight years ago with a handful of

people and today we have over five hundred people in attendance.”

Church B is one of the fastest growing Adventist churches, situated in a Southern metropolitan area of over three million people close to downtown. The church experienced revitalization in the last decade. Currently, this church can be described as a culturally diverse congregation with strong leadership and preaching, and about 500 attending.

Meanwhile, the pastors of plateauing or declining Adventist churches near Church B said that the people in the area are very strong Baptists and thus not interested in the Adventist message. I asked, “Are you telling me that all of the three million people who live here are religious and churchgoers?” There was no response.

In contrast, the pastor of Church B had a faith-based optimism. “We’re not intimidated by challenges. Our role is to pray, to have effective ministries and evangelism, and God’s role is to send the people to us.”

Church C is a long-established church in a suburb of a very large city in the Pacific Northwest. The congregation has more than doubled to between 450 and 500. It operates a strong and innovative community service ministry. The pastor of Church C said, “The best thing that ever happened to me was to be here. The people in our area have no church connections or ties. We pray for them, we minister to their needs, and they come to our church.”

But when three pastors of declining congregations in that same area were interviewed about the condition of their churches, they said, “We live in one of the most secular places in the world, which makes it very difficult to do any kind of evangelism. People here do not think about God and they don’t need Him, and they certainly don’t need the church.” One of those pastors said that the percentage of people who go to church in Paris, France, is higher than the percentage of people who go to church in this area. When asked about the future, the unanimous answer of these pastors was, “It’s going to become more difficult.”

Same place, much different attitudes, much different results.

And not just suburban or city churches have the opportunity to grow. Church D is in a small town in the central United States, but was growing well for its size (about 175 on Sabbath morning) and exercising various ministries. The pastor was not deterred by the small-town setting. He believed that, small-town or big town, the members of his church would be enthusiastic evangelists, praying for, and inviting their friends to church. Accordingly, he worked to grow the church spiritually and make it a place worth inviting people to. Five years later, the church had grown by 50 percent.

Church E is in a rural area in the West and was growing phenomenally with a strong community presence and a passion for souls. The attendance was around 400, predominantly Anglo-American. In addition, there was also a minority

Hispanic constituency.² But this was not always so. At one time the church had been dying and the new pastor arrived to hear words of discouragement: “This church will not grow. It’s in a small town and the town is not growing.”

Yet the pastor of Church E believed God could grow that dying church in a small town, and with that faith he went forward, leading his church to become a bright light in their community and a dynamic, enthusiastic Adventist congregation.

The most important ingredient

No single factor alone will help your church grow (including some imaginary, ideal location where growth is automatic), and no combination of efforts or strategies will make your church grow without the Holy Spirit. But with the Holy Spirit we have every reason for optimism and enthusiasm for the future. Of the factors that this research study identified as contributing to church growth—including effective leadership, enthusiastic involvement of the laity, utilizing the power of prayer, and inspiring and dynamic worship—none was more important than faith-based optimism.

The most important ingredient in church growth is to have a winning attitude based on faith in God. With God’s power and blessing, we can win the world for Jesus. When we say that the people are not interested or are difficult to reach, we limit God, limit ourselves, and limit the people we are trying to reach. If you have the underlying belief that people are not interested, would you work or try new methods to reach them?

The situation today is much the same as it was when Jesus walked this earth. In the first century, three major philosophical ideas were represented by three major cities. Jerusalem represented tradition, uninterested people, and rigidity in beliefs. Athens represented modern philosophy and openness to new ideas. Rome represented post-modernity, a culture of entertainment,

hero worship, and hedonism. And in every city, faithful Christians faced unremitting persecution. Despite these challenges—challenges no easier than the ones we face today—the Christian gospel spread and the kingdom of God grew. The first century was the era of church growth and Christian spirituality that we look back on with envy, but the first-century church grew not because it did not have challenges but because it had a strong faith in Jesus Christ and the power of His Spirit.

In our time, God will carry His church to triumph and success. If we want to be part of that triumph, we must believe in God and His Spirit.

During the research interviews, we heard many excuses of why the churches were not growing. One pastor said, “Our church is in a very affluent area and people have no need for God.” Another one said, “My church is in a very poor area, thus people have to work two or three jobs to make ends meet; therefore they have no time for God or the church.” One pastor said, “My church is in a very educated part of town; people question God.” Another one told me, “My church is in a very rough part of town, people don’t like to change, and it is difficult for them to come to our church.” One said, “Our church is in a very postmodern demographic, people are open-minded to everything except absolute truth.” Another pastor said, “My church is in an industrial part of town, people find it difficult to look at new ways of experiencing God.”

We heard excuse after excuse after excuse for why the churches were not growing. But the pastors of the growing churches have a faith that they can win the world for Jesus and an attitude that says that all things are possible with God. They also have faith that with God every church could be growing, dynamic, healthy, and excited about ministry and evangelism. This amazing faith and attitude of hope tends to be contagious. The members of these churches have the

same faith, attitude, and optimism; they believe that God will do great things for them, their families, and their church.

In *Common-Sense Church Growth*, Howard K. Batson writes, "The pastor's response will set the tone for the congregational response. If the pastor is publicly defeated, bitter, disappointed, or depressed, the congregation will mirror his feelings."³

The Lord is willing to do great things

We are coworkers with an almighty God who can accomplish anything. Ellen G. White stated, "The Lord is willing to do great things for us. We shall not gain the victory through numbers, but through the full surrender of the soul to Jesus. We are to go forward in His strength, trusting in the mighty God of Israel."⁴

The Lord will do great things for His children and church. Faith-based optimism is not wishful thinking, ignorance of reality, or dismissing of difficulty. No, we find optimism based on the power of God who can do the impossible.

God can do impossible things. This is the testimony of the Scriptures. The Bible demonstrates that God can do anything. God gave a child to a barren woman who was 90 years old married to a man who was 99 years old (Gen. 17:17; 18:10–14); He gave a child to a virgin who never knew a man (Luke 1:34–38); He took a little boy and defeated a giant (1 Sam. 17); and He promised that if we have the faith of a mustard seed we could move mountains (Matt. 17:20). The entire weight of the Scriptures relies behind faith in a God who can do all things.

" 'Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. . . . You performed miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt and have continued them to this day, both in Israel and among all mankind, and have gained the renown that is still yours. You brought your people

Israel out of Egypt with signs and wonders, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror' " (Jer. 32:17–21).⁵

"Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God' " (Mark 10:27).

When people believe in the power of God, He rewards them with His rich and abundant blessings. The Lord Almighty is still almighty. Our optimism remains based on His unchanging nature, His abundant power, His faithful promises.

The faith factor

How does an attitude of faith affect the church and make it grow?

1. *Nothing is as inspiring as seeing God moving in our midst.*

To witness God in action energizes individuals and congregations in an uncommon way. An attitude of faith enables God to work miracles among us, and these miracles beget more faith, which beget more of God's visible action.

2. *We can choose our attitudes.*

An atmosphere of a winning attitude is more important than anything else, more important than the church's history of success or failure, the church's budget or attendance, or the church's fame (or infamy). And even more important than the church building, the giftedness of the members, or the skill of the pastor.

The remarkable thing is that we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change the past. We cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The single most significant decision we can make is the choice of our attitude.

3. *An attitude of joy is contagious.* Your attitude of joy at the Lord's work can permeate the whole congregation. Your enthusiasm and belief in the greatness of God has a way of influencing everyone in the congregation and changing their attitude into possibilities and victories. Build

up your faith in God. Start seeing the mighty works of God, and your church will go on to effectiveness, health, and growth. And God will reward you according to the size of your faith and vision. He will give you that church that is full of joy and energized with confidence in God.

What kind of pastor do you want to be?

What kind of pastor do you want to be—full of excuses or full of faith and optimism? If you have the right kind of attitude, you will be able to acquire the necessary skills for success, and God will give you the resources you need. Someone might say, "You do not know my area. You do not know my church. You do not know the difficulties I am facing, the conflicts I have." Growing a church is not effortless, not even easy, but with God all things are possible, including growing a church in a difficult area. God has not called us to live a defeated mentality but to have the spirit of success. "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). He has assured us that He will be with us always even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

Making it happen: Four practical steps

1. *Strengthen your own faith.* Study God's action in the Bible and history.
2. *Live that faith.* Demonstrate faith in word and action, always talking about the incredible power of God.
3. *Instill a vision in the congregation of the greatness of God.* Use sermons, testimonies, slogans, banners, and songs.
4. *Build an enthusiastic congregation with a healthy self-esteem that believes all things are possible.*
 - *Celebrate the blessings.* Call attention to the action of God in your church. Celebrate high attendance and offerings. Make anniversaries a time to bless the past and

mark how far the church has come. Have a time for prayers of thankfulness that focus on the good God is doing in your church.

- *Change the language.* Address problems from the perspective of faith, calling them opportunities and challenges. Do not think of problems as limitations but as occasions to be creative. Banish the word *failure* by blessing risk: "We are a church not afraid to try new things for God."
- *Recruit cheerleaders.* Find the people who have faith-based optimism and belief in possibilities. Let them serve as cheerleaders by giving testimonies, taking leadership roles, and speaking out at decision-making times.

Faith-based optimism

An attitude of optimism and faith means that instead of being

intimidated by challenges, we expect God's triumphant intervention. We pray for conversions in large numbers. We work in the power of the Holy Spirit. We expect God to do great things.

What are your expectations? God will reward us according to our faith and expectation. Therefore, expect great worship, great services, great faith, great Sabbath School, great people, great growth. Expect God to do great things. Expect God to help you fulfill your potential. Expect people to be changed and to change the world and do great things for God.

"Prayer and faith will do what no power upon earth can accomplish. We need not be so anxious and troubled. The human agent cannot go everywhere, and do everything that needs to be done. Often imperfections manifest themselves in the work, but if we show unwavering trust in God, not depending upon the ability or talent of men, the truth will advance. Let us place all things

in God's hands, leaving Him to do the work in His own way, according to His own will, through whomsoever He may choose. Those who seem to be weak God will use, if they are humble. Human wisdom, unless daily controlled by the Holy Spirit, will prove foolishness. We must have more faith and trust in God. He will carry the work out with success. Earnest prayer and faith will do for us what our own devising cannot do."⁶ ■

- 1 To find these churches, the researchers contacted every local conference in the North American Division and asked for churches within their jurisdiction that met the criteria of the study. Once the growing congregations were identified (as well as the plateaued churches in close geographical proximity), the pastors were interviewed about what makes their church grow, training and equipping the members, prayer in their churches, and worship in their church.
- 2 The Hispanic constituency was not included in the growth calculations, but was in addition to it.
- 3 Howard K. Batson, *Common-Sense Church Growth* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 1999), 89.
- 4 Ellen G. White, *Sons and Daughters of God* (Silver Spring, MD: E.G. White Estate, 2003), 279.
- 5 Scripture quotations taken from the New International Version.
- 6 Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Release* (Silver Spring, MD: E.G. White Estate, 1993), 8:218.

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Fixing our eyes on Jesus

The year was 1889. For months, Ellen White traveled extensively to promote revival and reformation, speaking continually of the transformational beauty of Christ's righteousness. Though she had just spent three weeks preaching at a Kansas camp meeting, she pressed on for more appointments at Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

The journey would not be easy. Because of heavy rains and flooding, trains were delayed or canceled, and many passengers returned in frustration to New York. Ultimately, finding no other recourse, Ellen and her assistant hired two drivers, a carriage, and horses to continue the

journey. In the end, Ellen walked many miles through the mud and rain, slipping and sliding over the mountain rocks, around uprooted trees and flood debris, crossing gulches where the bridges were entirely washed out. They did not know a dam had broken southwest of Williamsport, causing a roaring flood through Johnstown and killing more than 2,000 people.

At last, they reached a hotel, but no warm food was available. Wet and hungry, they went to bed only to awaken to the roar of the swollen river, which now seemed impassable. Undeterred, Mrs. White organized a raft-building project, safely crossed

the treacherous water, and found the soggy campground with the campers discouraged but safe.

Was the arduous trip worth the trouble just to talk about revival and reformation at a soggy camp meeting? Ellen White thought so. She found a group of believers who had listened to a lot of doctrinal discourse, but were in desperate need of practical instruction on how to believe, simply believe, in Jesus Christ.

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Revival
and
REFORMATION