

Building A Great Church

(A Classic by Dr. Houston Miles)

This article was written by Dr. Houston Miles and is taken from <http://www.efi.org>, the official website of Evangel Fellowship International and Dr. Houston Miles, one of the most successful pastors I've ever known.

First of all, to build a great church, God has to be the superintendent of the construction. Psalm 127:1 tells us unless the Lord builds the house, we labor in vain, and in Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, "I will build my church." However, we are co-laborers with the Lord and there are some principles we must follow to build a great church. They are:

1. Have a love for people.

We must allow the same Holy Spirit that wept through the eyes of Jesus and ministered through his hands to also minister through us. We are called to serve people. One minister looking for a church was asked, "What kind of church do you want?" He replied, "a beautiful building, a nice car, a good salary, but no people." The Bible tells us in Philippians 2 that Jesus did not think equality with God was something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. Jesus set the example in Matthew 20 when He said, "You must be a servant, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve." Furthermore, the Bible teaches us that the way we serve God is by serving one another. Matthew 25:40: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Just as Southern Bell is in the telephone business, we are in the "people business." So to build a great church, we must love and serve people.

2. Vision.

We must see beyond where we are now. See what can be. Every pastor should have two churches. One in reality and the other one in his mind of what he wants it to be in the future. Objectives determine outcome. We achieve that for which we aim. Proverbs 29:18: "Where there is no vision the people perish." Other translations convey the thought that if there is no vision, people will run aimlessly. One person recently said a fanatic is one who redoubles his efforts after he has lost sight of his goals. If there are no clear-cut goals, we will concentrate on motion, but it will be motion without meaning. Aristotle said, "Like an archer, we have a greater chance of hitting the target if we can see it." God told Abraham, "I will give you all you see." That is all the Lord will give us. If we only see 100 in attendance, we'll never have 200. If we only see 200, we'll never reach 500. We must have a vision that takes us beyond where we are now.

3. Integrity.

There is too much looseness and permissiveness in the Christian world today. As leaders, we must have high moral and spiritual values. In I Timothy 3, Paul tells us that a leader must be above reproach and that he must have a good reputation with those outside the church. He lists fifteen qualities for leadership in this chapter and all have to do with character, including the one "apt to teach", for if we don't have integrity, no one wants to hear our teaching. A person's giftings can take them further than their character can sustain them. What we are is more important than what we do, and it will ultimately determine what we do. We preach what we know, but we reproduce in others what we are. Modeling is the greatest unconscious form of learning. The greatest influence I have is not what I do or what I say, but who I am to those with whom I work. The greatest teaching is not the content of my teaching, but the quality of my life. What Christ said was reinforced by what He did.

4. Tenacity.

We all fail at times. But we are not defeated until we accept defeat. If you do not want to be defeated, do not accept defeat. Failure can deter and defeat you, or it can drive and develop you. To try and fail is better than to do nothing and succeed. Lots of people are good at running short distances, but to build a great church is not a 100-yard dash, but a cross-country run. We need the perseverance to stick with the goal in spite of criticism, circumstances, and problems. There must be an unwillingness to leave the project.

Some years ago when our church was having a difficult time, I felt that perhaps I should look for another church. We had borrowed three million dollars and had a monthly payment of over \$36,000 a month. But after thinking and praying about it, I said to myself, "I got the people into this and I'm going to stay and get them out of it." Shortly thereafter, we had a turn-around in finances and paid the mortgage off early, saving over a million dollars in interest in the process. When asked, "How did you stay over thirty years at the same church?", my answer is, ";I didn't quit." Sometimes my answer is, "I outlasted my opposition."

5. Leadership

A pastor needs to be out front, but not too far ahead. It has been said that if you are one step ahead, you are a leader. If you are two steps ahead, you are a pioneer. But if you are three steps ahead, you are a martyr. You must know where you are going and be able to motivate others to go with you. People are not just joining a church, they are joining a vision. Leadership means you must be a decision-maker. Indecision spells defeat. No church will rise above its leadership. And every problem in the church, whether in the music department or in the nursery, ends up being a leadership problem.

6. Team Ministry

You will never fulfill your vision by yourself. Jesus realized that and put together a team. He chose 12 that they might be with Him. As pastors, we need to be mentoring potential leaders. We should choose qualified people who are compatible with us. But remember, no one is perfect. The important thing is the direction in which they are going. This team will be an extension of your ministry. They will stand with you and help bear the burden of the ministry (Numbers 11:17). The team you raise up must have the same spirit as yourself, and also the same vision. Remember, success without a successor is failure. Do not leave a church until you have a spiritual son who is ready to take your place.

7. Be Open to Change

Famous last words are, "We've always done it this way." Insanity is continuing to do the same things but expecting different results. The fact is if we keep doing the same thing, we will keep getting the same results. If we want different results, we must change. Businesses that refused to change, such as WT Grant and RR Express, are no longer in business. Churches that are not open to change are either dead or dying. They certainly are not on the cutting edge (1 Chronicles 12:32; Isaiah 43:18-19). We need to ask ourselves, "How can this culture be reached with the gospel?" Principles never change, but applications do. Truth never changes, but methods do. As God's people, we must be relevant and use methods that will reach today's society.

8. Faith

Hebrews 11:6 tells us, "without faith, it is impossible to please God." But, "all things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23). The only time Jesus rebuked the disciples was for lack of faith. There are two groups of people. One group says, "I can." The other group says, "I cannot." They are both right.

The question is, "How big is your God?" The size of your God will determine the size of your faith.

9. Equipping the Saints

Ephesians 4:11-12 says, "And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." God has given the fivefold ministry gifts for that purpose. We should have a threefold goal: (1) to bring every saint to wholeness; (2) to equip or train the saints for ministry; and (3) to release them for ministry. Ministry is meeting the needs of the people. It is not my job as Senior Pastor to meet all the needs, but it is my job to teach the saints how to minister and meet the needs of people. Every Christian is a minister. Each has a place of ministry in the body of Christ. They are to be equipped for the work of the ministry so the body of Christ can be built up (Ephesians 4:12).

10. Develop a Friendly Atmosphere

Help with the parking where help is needed. Have greeters at the door to welcome the people. They should dress neatly as they represent the church, and also be able to answer questions, such as, "Where does my nine-year-old child go?" During the service, opportunity should be given for people to not only greet one another, but also greet the visitors. And, as people leave, greeters should cover the exit doors so no one leaves without a handshake. If people do not have friends in the church, they will not stay.

11. Meet People's Needs

All age groups have special needs. Married and singles have needs. Recovering drug addicts need on-going help. One way to grow a great church is to offer something unique - something they can not get anywhere else. We will never grow beyond our capacity to meet needs. Ask, "What are the greatest needs in our community?" then set out to meet those needs.

12. Have a Great Service Each Time

We will lose people if we do not hold their attention or if the meeting is not meaningful to them. Each service is critical and will determine whether visitors return. Preparation is the key to a great service. All who participate should be thoroughly prepared. There is no substitute for excellence. There are three basic reasons why people quit churches - services are too long, too loud, or too cold (air conditioning). In many instances, the "worship" is too long. A good rule is to keep people on their feet no more than twenty minutes at a time. I've attended churches where half the people were standing and half were sitting after 45 minutes of singing. We need to ask ourselves the question "Who are we trying to reach?"

13. Specialized Classes

A new member's orientation class is very helpful in getting new members committed to the church. In our classes, our goal was to be sure that they understood what salvation really meant, that they were properly baptized in water, and filled with the Holy Spirit. It was also an opportunity to teach both our philosophy and form of government, and cover other basic subjects such as stewardship and serving. Another class that helped us build a good foundation was "Preparation for Ministry", using Watchman Nee's book, Spiritual Authority. We taught the subject with balance, and added lessons on "How to Appeal to Authority" and "The Absalom Spirit." This class brought a lot of unity to the church, and also proved to be "life-changing." It was required for everyone who wanted to serve in the church.

14. Keep Balance in the Church

In the short-term, you may grow faster by following the latest fad, but over the long haul, you will be ahead by keeping balance in the church. Heresy is truth out of balance, and the truth is to be found between two extremes. Remember, we need all of the Bible- both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Paul said, "I declared to you the whole counsel of God." Some churches dwell on only one theme. This is not healthy. I recommend expository preaching. When you take a book of the Bible and go through it verse by verse, you will cover subjects that normally you would not. This helps your church to have a broader understanding of the Word of God.

15. Work to make your Marriage a Good Marriage

If you do not have a good marriage, it will be uphill for you as you are trying to build a great church. Your spouse can make or break you. He or she should be your best friend and your partner in the work of God. Remember: of all the sheep you have, your spouse is the most important one.

16. Have A Vision for the Whole World

The main assignment given to us by Christ is to go into all the world and preach the gospel to everyone. Too many churches are self-centered. Jesus said "Lift up your eyes and look on the fields, they are ripe for harvest." Involvement in world missions turned our church around, both numerically and financially. God will bless and provide for every church with a world vision. If we work to build the Kingdom, god will build the church.

17. Special Events

Both Christmas and Easter provide wonderful opportunities for productions that will bring the people of your community into the church. Baby dedications can bring in friends and relatives of the family. Invitations can be sent to acquaintances of those being baptized in water.

18. Retreats

The cults use retreats to brainwash people. We can learn from them. It has been proven that if you get people in a retreat setting, away from the TV, phone, responsibilities, and distractions, you can accomplish a lot more in their lives. Retreats should be held for men, women, singles, married, youth, and children.

19. Adequate Facilities

The rule of thumb is you start losing people when you go beyond 80% of your capacity.

20. Parking

People do not need a seat in the church if there is nowhere to park their cars. There should be space for overflow parking during special events. The parking should be convenient to the church. Special spaces should be set aside for the handicapped, first-time visitors, and single parents.

21. Nursery

This is so important to parents. The nursery should be clean, safe, and have adequate personnel.

22. Visibility

Location is important for both a business and a church. Do people know where your church is located? A main thoroughfare that handles a lot of traffic is an ideal place for a church.

23. Accessibility

Is it difficult to reach your church? This can keep some people away. How many traffic lights must they go through? How many turns must they make to get to your church?

24. Visit Conferences and Other Churches

We learn from each other. Help can be obtained at conferences on Home Groups, Leadership, Soul Winning, Reaching Youth, etc. Other churches may be doing things that would be helpful to you. Visit growing churches and churches on the cutting edge.

25. Prayer

It is through prayer that we birth what God wants to do. Israel was promised rain, but Elijah had to birth it in prayer (1 Kings 18). There is no birthing without travail. Through prayer, we communicate with God. Revival is to find out what God is doing and do it along with Him. Also, through prayer, we pull down the strongholds of the enemy. God's phone number is Jeremiah 33:3, "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know."