

Four Habits of Highly Successful Churches



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The Rev. Dr. James H. Cooper blesses parade-goers in front of Trinity Church during the ticker-tape parade celebrating the Yankees' 2009 World Series win.

THE REV. DR. JAMES H. COOPER, RECTOR OF TRINITY WALL STREET, FREQUENTLY leads retreats for clergy and lay leaders. His talks share a basic format, which distills thirty years of understanding growth in churches into basic traits that he believes all successful churches share.

Growth in the Church is not linear (1 to 2 to 3), but rather exponential (2 to 4 to 16). Scripture tells us that through God the abundance of love is multiplied for everyone in a never-ending flow of plenty. Churches are places that help people keep lives centered in the Gospel. In this endeavor, we do well by cultivating and balancing simplicity and intimacy, splendor and awe, mission and ministry, and prophecy and prayer.

Intimacy and Simplicity

Human beings yearn for small-town life. This is true even for people who live in big cities, where neighborhoods usually self-organize into areas of four blocks or so. No matter where we live, we come to know the grocery store owner, the dry cleaners, and our neighbors — all those with whom we share this pattern of familiarity.

The Church is an antidote to the alienation and complexity so commonly felt in other areas of life. Parishes that foster intimacy and simplicity create situations and opportunities that encourage common experience and storytelling. Coming together in shared work allows people to relax in the task at hand. Through that experience comes intimacy and a shared story.

Everyone, of course, has a different pace and a different path in sharing intimacy with others. I had been married five years before my wife and I prayed together out loud, for instance. Parish leaders who are mindful of that work with others to create a variety of opportunities.

Splendor and Awe

I am always careful not to assume that splendor and awe always have to do with grand size or unfathomable scale. We assume that bigness equals splendor or generates awe. But remember, the Holy Eucharist is splendid and awesome. It is also simple and intimate.

For many years, my wife and I have vacationed in Jonesport, a small town in Maine. There is a big Fourth of July celebration each year with a parade, food, lobster-boat races, and fireworks. The whole town makes it happen, and the whole town participates. In contrast, for the big ticker-tape parades in New York City only a very small number of people are involved in producing the event, while hundreds of thousands watch from the street and on television.

Is one more splendid or awesome than the other?

People want to be part of something larger than themselves. What is awesome or splendid has only to do with the emotions or feelings that come forth. Awe is what we call feeling part of something bigger than oneself. We all yearn for the intimacy of the small-town experience and desire to be part of that which is bigger than ourselves.

Parishes are conduits to feelings of splendor and awe. The little churches can do it as well as the cathedrals. It can be found in tympani and trumpets, and it can be at the fracture of the bread at an Easter sunrise service.

One good exercise is to look at all of your congregational liturgies, activities, good works, and relationships through the lens of splendor and awe. You will find that connection in places you never expected.

Mission and Ministry

We need to be able to get out of the pews and into the world, or all of the intimacy, simplicity, splendor, and awe is just for self-gratification.

As members of the Church, and as followers of Jesus, we are called to do great things. Great things can take many forms. But the building blocks of mission and ministry will always look similar.

1. **Worship:** finding inspiration through relationship with and obedience to God.
2. **Christian Education or Formation:** finding discipline, training, and preparation for ministry.
3. **Faith in Action:** Finding ways to get to it, to do the work on the other side of the Church's walls.

Let us let go of what we want to do or think we should be doing. Let us begin with reflecting on the world around us and seeking to discern what God is wanting. We can then look at what part of that work we have the unique ability to address.

Prophecy and Prayer

Prophecy is that aspect of life in the Church that comes through inspiration, through prayer, and in faith as we strive to integrate worldly and spiritual issues. So once again we enter a process of discernment, centered in lots of prayer. Although we often want and seek a quick fix and a final answer, the process on critical issues may take as much as a generation or two to work out.

In the meanwhile, we do the work through prayer and stay in the conversation and discomfort by faith. We are willing to live together in a church family with differing positions, as we hope and pray and expect that God's will can manifest and that we will be agents and play the part we are called to play. In other words: we will always step on each other's toes — it comes with the territory.

To live in that tension, each living by faith, not certainty, is to live out God's will — living together in fellowship strengthened, bonded, and sustained by prayer and Eucharist. The action is to look for ways we can stay together to hear each other, not knowing at first what the listening will bring us to realize and how it will lead us in God's direction, but knowing that silencing voices stalls us and halts God's mission.

The prophetic voice drives us to our knees in prayer. And with prayer we come full circle in these couplets back to simplicity and intimacy. To pray together with one another in the presence of almighty God is intimacy at its very best. We pay attention to Amos' warning: "Woe to those who sleep on beds of ivory." But we also hear the prophetic voice of Isaiah: "Comfort, comfort my people."