

## The Most Loving Church I Have Ever Experienced

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The Lord saved me when I was a freshman in high school in the context of a para-church ministry. Unfortunately, I didn't commit to a local church once I was a follower of Jesus. Oh, I attended church — actually, more than one. But I wasn't taught the importance of baptism nor the necessity of having godly leaders over me and the accountability of fellow believers in an individual church.



During my college days, I became a Bible major, ironically to become a pastor of a church. It wasn't until my senior year of college that I *finally* joined a church, and that was mostly to get a discount on tuition at the seminary I wanted to attend. While at seminary, I did quickly join a church, but looking back, this church was more about attracting people with creativity instead of compelling people with the gospel and leading people to submit to Christ, the head of the church.

As you can see, I made some poor “church life” decisions once I became a Christian, but God was so patient with me. Heading into my final year of seminary, a friend who was the youth pastor of my church asked if my wife and I wanted to join him in a tiny church “to help out.” It was a church of 25 that had recently had an ugly split, but my friend assured me, “All the mean people left!”

“We're in!”

And that was the beginning of a year spent with the most loving church I have ever experienced. That doesn't mean I don't think my current church is full of love — it is! Perhaps I have such fond memories of this previous church because it was the first authentic, loving church I had ever known. What made it so memorable? Was it great teaching? No, even though the teaching was faithful to Scripture (a non-negotiable!). Was it great music? Uh, no.

There are three words that summarize what made this little church such a loving body of believers.

First, *happiness*. These believers simply enjoyed being together. They arrived early and stayed late. I can still see their smiling faces and hear the buzz of discussions that occurred before and after the services. To walk into those gatherings was a respite from the world's selfishness and pain.

Second, *hospitality*. We were regularly invited into people's homes for food and fun. The majority of the church members were older, so this was especially educational as a young married couple to see older believers not only open their homes, but interact with one another and demonstrate quiet faithfulness after decades of marriage and church attendance.

Third, *hundreds*. What do I mean by that? It was early December, and by now four or five seminary couples had joined the church. It was the Sunday before most of us would travel home to see our families. At some point, one of the deacons passed out an envelope to each seminary couple. Inside was either \$200 or \$300 (my memory fails me). Most seminary families are not exactly living with surplus financially, so this felt like thousands of dollars to each of us! When we asked them why they did that, the main part of their answer was, “Because we love you!”

Happiness, hospitality, and hundreds. This was a church *full* of love! This is God's will for any church, and it's a characteristic we should strive to increase.

Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more. (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10)

Perhaps the most loving church I have ever experienced will inspire you. For example, you can raise the love temperature in your church by eagerly participating in meetings — showing up early and staying late — and routinely taking an interest in others. Just a little effort in this direction might stir a revival of selflessness and happiness in your gatherings.

You can also join in the hospitality opportunities. Not everyone has a home conducive to having people over, but almost any place will do. Actually, it's not the size of the room that is so appealing, but the size of the heart. What's stopping you? This may be the most significant ministry of your life! Or, you could offer your help to those in your church who invite others. Help with the food, or the set up, and don't leave before the dreaded clean up.

Finally, you may not have hundreds to give to those in need, but you probably at least have some tens. You definitely have the gift of time to offer to others — perhaps babysitting, or helping with their garden or yard work, or caring for their pet while they are away.

What is to keep your church from being the most loving church someone has ever experienced?