

Pastor's Annual Report for the year 2022

(adapted from the "State of the Church Address" delivered Sunday morning, January 15, 2023, Pastor Brad Brandt)

A Successful Church from the Perspective of Paul

*"This is how one should regard us,
as servants of Christ
and stewards of the mysteries of God.
Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful."
1 Corinthians 4:1-2*

I'd like for us to think about an important question as we begin this year's state of the church address. Was 2022 a successful year for Wheelersburg Baptist Church? How would you answer that question? It raises other questions, doesn't it?

What is a successful church? When we're talking about church, how do we define success? Do we define it the way professional football teams do, in terms of wins and losses? Or is it how a Pee Wee football team defines success, meaning everybody gets to play, has a good time, with plenty of snacks after the game?

Seriously, what does success mean for a church? In 2022 we added new people and exceeded budget. Does that mean we were successful? Back in 1998 we went through a time of pruning and eventually lost a third of our congregation. Does that mean we were unsuccessful? Does the fact that the giving in 1998 *exceeded* our budget (which means we had less people in the pews but just as much money in the offering plates) affect how we assess that year?

Over the years I've thought a lot about this question. When I first became pastor at WBC in 1987, I remember charting how the next ten years might look. Successful churches are supposed to grow, aren't they? By so many percentage points a year, right? And if that doesn't happen, something must be wrong, correct?

In 1990 we built our current auditorium, and our Sunday morning attendance increased from 144 (in 1987) to 228 (in 1993). In just over five years we grew by 58%.¹ Lots of new people were coming to check things out, and many joined.

During the next four years, however, from 1993 to 1997, the Sunday morning attendance went from 228 to 192, a decrease of 16%. What did those numbers indicate? We were no longer successful.

That's what a man told me in 1998, standing at the front door of the church, when he asked me this question. "Why don't you resign?" he wanted to know. "Haven't you been watching the declining attendance? If you were a manager of a professional team, you'd know it is time to leave."

Was he right? What could I say? "Just wait. The numbers will go up again."

But of course, they didn't go up. In the last thirty years, we have gone from 228 on Sunday mornings to 114, a decline of 50 %.

Take a look at these three graphs. Which of the three represents a successful church? It's certainly not the first, is it?

¹ The Sunday evening attendance increased from 101 in 1987 to 136 in 1993.



That doesn't look very successful, does it? That's what we looked like in 1998. Were we *unsuccessful*, as our brother insisted?

Now look at the second graph. This is a successful church, isn't it? Were we successful in 1993? The numbers had gone up by 58%. And what about our present trajectory? In the past three years, the Lord has blessed us with many new people and a surplus in giving. So are we now successful again?



Or perhaps success looks like the third graph. Up, and down, and up again. It's the sports analogy again. You win some, and you lose some. But just hang in there, and if you do, you'll be successful again. This of course implies that as long as the numbers remain down, you remain unsuccessful.



I am convinced that it's vital for churches to be very careful how they define success. That's why I want to begin our annual state of the church address by asking the apostle Paul to help us think God's way regarding success.

How did the apostle Paul define success? I'll be transparent. The seed thoughts for what I'm about to share with you came during a crisis moment in my life. I'll give you the date. The following thoughts came during a special time I had with God on August 3, 1998, at 11:15 p.m., to be precise. It was late that night that I cried out to God

and searched His Word, seeking His answer to the question of whether I was “successful” in my ministry at WBC. I started thinking about Paul, wrote down this question, and then searched the Scriptures and came up with my answer, which I’ll share with you.

In what church was Paul most “successful” as a leader?

We live in a success-oriented society. How we define success in the church is often determined more by what culture says than what God's Word says. In his book *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*, Kent Hughes quotes from Chuck Colson's monthly newsletter for Prison Fellowship called *Jubilee*:

"By the time you read this, we will have dedicated our new national offices near Washington, D.C. As a result of this and other recent expansions, many people have written me to the effect that 'God is obviously blessing Prison Fellowship's ministry.'

As much as I am sincerely certain that God is, indeed, blessing us, I believe even more certainly that it's a dangerous and misguided policy to measure God's blessing by standards of visible, tangible, material 'success.'

The inference is that when things are prospering 'God is blessing us' and, conversely, when things are going poorly, or unpublicized, God's blessing is not upon the work or is unimportant....We must continuously use the measure of our obedience to the guidelines of his Word as the real--and only--standard of our 'success,' not some more supposedly tangible or glamorous scale."

So how does the Word of God measure success? You might be surprised.

Let's focus on the example of Paul. Paul was a church leader. He was personally involved with many churches. In which was he the most ‘successful’?

Here’s the little exercise I did that night. Let’s do it together. Let’s name as many churches as we can that Paul either established or in which he had an extensive ministry (hint: think of the letters he wrote). Then let’s summarize what happened in those churches (+ means something good; - means something not so good).

The Church at Antioch

Key Texts: Acts 11, 13

- +lots of people saved there (Acts 11:21) (this was before Paul arrived)
- +first called Christians (Acts 11:26)
- +very giving; sent benevolent offering during famine (Acts 11:29)
- +missionary minded (Acts 13:1-3)
- struggled with Jew/Gentile prejudice (Gal. 2:11ff.)

The Church at Philippi

Key Texts: Acts 16; Philippians

- +Excellent missions giving and missionary care (Phil. 4:15-16)
- +Partners in the ministry (Phil. 1:5)
- Squabble between some church members that was spreading (4:1)

The Church at Thessalonica

Key Texts: Acts 17; 1 & Thessalonians

- +Persecuted, yet strong (1 Thes. 1:2-3, 6)
- +Solid reputation, though Paul spent only a short time there (2 Thes. 1:4)

- Fornication being tolerated? (1 Thes. 4:3)
- Confused about eschatology (1 Thes. 4:13; 2 Thes. 2:1-2)
- Some not working; in need of church discipline (2 Thes. 3:11-15)

The Church at Corinth

Key Texts: Acts 18; 1 & 2 Corinthians

- +Very gifted (1 Cor. 12, 14)
- +Exposed to abundance of good teaching (1 Cor. 1:12; 4:17)
- Poor reputation, though Paul spent two years there (1 Cor. 1:10)
- Schism and divisions (1 Cor. 1)
- Lack of love (1 Cor. 13)
- Sexual immorality tolerated; church discipline needed (1 Cor. 5:1)
- +/-Lots of excitement in worship services (1 Cor. 14)
- +/-Lots of ministry happening, but its members were jealous of each other (1 Cor 3:3)

The Church at Ephesus

Key Texts: Acts 19-20; Ephesians

- +Well taught; able to handle a good theological book like Ephesians
- +Good "pastors" over the years (Paul, Timothy, John, etc.)
- Eventually left its first love (Rev. 2:4)
- False teachers infiltrated (1 Tim. 1:20)

The Church at Galatia

Key Texts: Galatians

- Compromised the doctrine of salvation (Gal. 1:6)
- Turning to a different gospel (Gal. 1:7-9)
- Being swayed by false teachers (Gal. 6:12)
- Confused about the role of the Spirit (Gal. 5:15, 22)

The Church at Crete

Key Text: Titus

- +An evidence of the sovereign, gracious working of God on the island of Crete (1:1-3)
- A very young church, with lots of issues needing attention (1:5)
- Poor reputation (Tit. 1:10-16)
- Church discipline needed (Tit. 3:10-11)

Ten Observations regarding Paul, and Implications regarding Success

1. Things went smoother (at least on the surface) in Philippi than in Corinth, in Thessalonica than in Galatia.
2. This does not mean Paul did a bad job in Corinth and Galatia. In fact, he took the same approach in ministry wherever he went. He taught the Scriptures and sought to present people complete in Christ.
3. His leadership was frequently under attack in the churches where he ministered. That did not mean he was a poor leader.

4. The fact is, different churches have different problems. Some churches, indeed, have more complex problems than others do.
5. Just because a church is “successful” (or outwardly strong) today is no guarantee that it will be in five years. Which of the churches in which Paul was a leader are strong today? For that matter, which are even still there?
6. Success is doing the job God gives you to do in the way that brings honor to Him. At Philippi, Paul did that and experienced much joy for it. At Corinth and Galatia, Paul did the same thing and experienced much heartache.
7. In the end, God determines success. We cannot measure it because we don't have the right stick to measure the invisible. Only God can, for God alone sees the whole picture, from beginning to end.
8. Paul's example reinforces this reality: A successful church is not a church without problems, but a church that solves its problems God's way.
9. Problems are for solving, not for ignoring (that's why Paul wrote his letters).
10. Problems are not necessarily bad. They remind us how much we need God, and provide opportunities for God to display His sufficiency.

It's not just pastors that struggle with the success syndrome. We all do, in the way we assess how our families are doing, and our work, and yes, our involvement at church.

Think back to the ministry you did at WBC in 2022. Were you successful? Perhaps you taught a Sunday School class. Every week you spent several hours studying the Word of God, preparing a lesson, praying for your students, sending them notes of encouragement, perhaps visiting them to pray with them. And what was the outcome of all this effort? Perhaps your class grew by 25%, and people sent you encouraging notes to express their appreciation. Does that mean you were successful?

On the other hand, perhaps your class declined by 25%, and there was very little expressed appreciation. Does that mean you were unsuccessful?

Be careful. There can be a lot of reasons for Sunday School growth, and the lack of growth. Perhaps a year ago a sister church closed its doors, and people from that church trickled into your class and caused your graph to go up. Does that mean you were successful? Or perhaps this past year you as a teacher engaged in the ministry of admonishing, as the passage you were teaching said you must do. And you lovingly challenged some of your class members, one on one, to deal with some sin issues. And they resisted. No cards of appreciation. They even stopped coming. Does that mean you were unsuccessful?

Perhaps you work in our children's ministry. Every week you invest a lot of time loving on the little ones at WBC. You're on your knees for them in your prayer closet. You have them over to your house for game nights. You write letters to their parents to encourage them. You go with them, and visit their friends, and invite them to come learn about Jesus.

The results? In 2022, they loved the games for sure, but when you gave the lessons, it seems like they weren't even listening. And it was a rare thing to see them to attend two weeks in a row. Or perhaps, they did come regularly, and did listen well, and you were privileged to witness three of them make professions of faith in Christ. Does the former mean you were unsuccessful, and the latter mean you were successful?

Perhaps your ministry was greeting, or watching babies, or sending encouragement cards, or visiting shut-ins. What's the measuring stick to know whether you did a good job or not, whether you were *successful*?

We need a biblical understanding of success, and I believe Paul gives it to us in 1 Corinthians 4:1–5. Listen to what he shares. He's very pastoral.

He says in verses 1-2, "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful."

So what is success? Paul says that success is being a faithful steward of what God has entrusted to you. Success, at its core, is faithfulness.

And what is faithfulness? Some say the Cleveland Browns have faithful fans because they remain loyal to their team one losing season after another. Is that what faithfulness is, hanging in there through tough times? That may be part of it, but it's not what Paul has in mind.

Biblical faithfulness is not natural, but supernatural. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, says Galatians 5:22. It comes from God through the merit of His faithful Son who reproduces His faithfulness in those who abide in Him (John 15:4). So a non-regenerate person cannot exhibit the kind of faithfulness that people indwelt by the Spirit of God can exhibit.

To be faithful means, first of all, "to be full of faith," for our faith plugs us into Christ and His power. It is Christ who then enables us to be as He was and is, "trustworthy, dependable, reliable," no matter what is happening (or not happening) around us.

I'll say it again. Success is being a faithful steward of what God has entrusted to us, in good times and bad.

This means we were successful in our ministries last year if we were faithful. According to Paul, success has very little to do with what we can see. This is why he says in verse 3, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself."

This is the truth. We can't determine success. We don't see enough to make that assessment. Paul says in verse 4, "For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me."

Only the Lord has the ability to make an accurate assessment of our ministry. And He will do that, says Paul in verse 5, when He comes again, and "brings to light the things now hidden in darkness... Then each one will receive his commendation from God."

It's not that numbers don't matter. The truth is, God gave us a book in the Bible called Numbers. And the book of Acts records the numbers of people that God saved and added to his church. So numbers are important. Numbers can be a helpful indicator.

Declining numbers may indicate that we're not doing the work of the ministry (for ministry is *work*, and we may not be working as we ought), that we're not inviting our neighbors into our homes for Bible studies, that we're not a welcoming church, that we're not being *faithful*.

On the other hand, declining numbers may indicate that we *are* being faithful, that we're doing the work of the ministry, that we're seeking to make solid disciples rather than settling for emotional decisions, and this commitment has caused some people to leave.

Growing numbers may indicate faithfulness too, that we are taking evangelism seriously, and that God is saving people and adding them to our number. Or those same increasing numbers may indicate that we are merely transferring sheep from other churches.

So numbers matter. They just don't determine success. Faithfulness does.

Now let's ask the question this way, and then briefly answer it. What evidence of biblical success, of faithfulness, did God produce at WBC in 2022?

Evidences of Faithfulness at WBC in 2022

Again, faithfulness is what God *is*, and what God *produces*. As I look back over the past year, I see three significant evidences of faithfulness that stand out to me.

Faithful workers

This includes our staff. I'm grateful for Pastor Matt, and his equipping ministry in the body. He continues to shepherd our community group leaders and other ministry teams, enabling the members of the body to function well with one another.

Wilma is our faithful office assistant. To use a technology metaphor, she is like the unseen wireless router in this building. She works behind the scenes to connect people with people, making sure we all have the information we need to serve well.

We have faithful pastoral interns. Pastor Matt and I met weekly with Douglas Goncalves and Michael Dow, to discuss ministry and theology. These brothers are teachable, servant-hearted-followers of our Savior, and its joy to watch them grow and serve this body.

We have faithful deacons. I'm thankful for the six godly men who served as deacons this past year (Dave, Jack, Ken, Ed, Greg, and Dan), and for how they model Christlikeness for the Body. I'm particularly grateful for how they invested time on Saturday mornings to pray for the needs of this church family.

God has blessed us with faithful trustees as well. These five men (Randy, Dennis, Joe, Adam, and Sam) also modeled Christlikeness for the Body, specifically by caring for this facility, so it was ready for the Body to use in fulfilling our mission. I appreciate their emphasis on excellence, for whatever we do ought to have excellence stamped all over it (to borrow a line I first heard from Dr. Paul Dixon at Cedarville).

And certainly, the work doesn't stop with our staff and combined board. Indeed, that's just where it begins. *You*, the church members, do the work of the ministry, according to Ephesians 4:11-13. Our God-given task as a pastoral staff and board is to equip you, so you can flourish in the "good works" you were created and redeemed to do (as Ephesians 2:10 indicates). And that's precisely what you did in 2022.

You taught Sunday School classes, prepared food for funeral meals, hosted youth events, taught children's church, and did many, many other good works.

For instance, the greeting team, under Bethany Wilson's care, has worked hard to welcome people into our services. The connect table seeks to make the most of relationships with visitors. The remodeled resource area in the foyer provides everyone with solid, take-home reading.

Kevin Smith provided excellent leadership for our worship team, and these individuals have worked hard to help us mature in our congregational singing. To help us maintain the needed balance between the familiar and the new, Kevin kept track of the songs we sang and recently sent me the summary. We sang 123 different songs in 2022. The songs most often used were: King of Kings (7 times), Good and Gracious King (6 times), Behold Our God (5 times). Twelve songs were used four times and ten other songs used three times. Thank you, Kevin, and those you lead, for your faithful labor of love that gave us the privilege to sing praises to our worthy Redeemer!

Many of you participated in the good work of our Cross Puzzle initiative. As you'll recall, for our Good Friday outreach, we wanted to do something very tangible to fill this community with the knowledge of what happened on the cross, and why. So we encouraged you to invite your neighbors to your homes, so you could give them a cross puzzle to assemble, and in so doing, listen to the seven sayings of Jesus from the cross. About a dozen men made 150 cross puzzles to give away. The tech team, led by Aaron, made a video of the tutorial which went on our website, as well as the sermon series of Jesus' seven sayings. Only God knows the long-term effects of this effort to make the message of the cross known.

And there's so many more good works that God accomplished through the labor of love exhibited by this congregation. There was VBS. There was the Wednesday evening Kids Club ministry. There were good works done at CRADLE, and through our counseling team.

At Scioto Hills, more than 5,000 people experienced the love of Christ, during 18 different retreats or events and 8 weeks of summer camp, through the Christlike efforts of our brothers and sisters serving at Scioto Hills. Many more people were influenced internationally through the camping ministries served by our missionaries, Gary and Nancy, and Jade.

And that's another wonderful area of good works that happened in 2022, through the efforts of the many missionaries and ministries we support. But for the sake of time, we must move to another evidence of faithfulness that our faithful God has produced. In addition to faithful workers, there are faithful followers.

Faithful followers

By using the term followers, I'm talking about *disciples*. It's not a secret that we're not, as they say, into bells and whistles at WBC. By God's grace, we take our mission seriously, which is, "to make disciples of Christ locally and world-wide, through the proclamation of the whole counsel of God's Word, by which lost people will be evangelized, and saved people edified, until Jesus comes again."

It's not hard to get people to come to church. Seeker churches have known that for years. Just give people what they want, and they're come. But that's not our mission, merely to get people to come inside these doors.

We're not into quick results at WBC. We're not merely seeking "decisions" for Christ. We're seeking to produce disciples of Christ who resemble their Savior, who love His Word and each other, and who embrace the assignment He has given us to make Him known to our neighbors and the nations.

That's what we did once again in 2022. And what happened? People came, heard the clear teaching of God's Word, and many kept coming.

In 2018 our Sunday morning attendance was 102. In 2019 the number was 101. In 2020, which is when COVID began to spread, our number was 94. In 2021 it increased to 99. This past year in 2022 it was 114.

But this doesn't tell the whole story. Our current membership is 153. Through the faithful efforts of our technology team, every week we minister to an unidentifiable number of people in their homes.

In Acts 6 we see two significant priorities of faithful followers. They value *prayer* and the *Word*. By God's grace, we saw both at WBC in 2022.

First, prayer. I've been so encouraged at our recent prayer meetings, and here's why. The Lord is producing a spiritual depth in this congregation that is evidenced by the fervent discussing of the Scriptures and the praying of the saints that's occurring. People are not here because they have to be here, but because, by God's grace, they enjoy following. They are faithful followers of the Lord Jesus.

Then there is the Word. The ministry of the Word is a continuing source of great joy to us at WBC. We love this Book. We gather often to mine for the jewels it contains. On Sunday mornings, we finished our journey through the book of Acts, and spent much of the year beholding our Savior in the book of Mark. On Wednesday evenings, Pastor Matt organized and led a team of brothers who taught us Ecclesiastes, and are now taking us through 1 Corinthians. Our preachers in training took us through Titus on Sunday evenings. And our various Sunday School classes gave us even more opportunities to enjoy the Scriptures together.

This leads to another evidence. When they are faithful workers and faithful followers, there will also be faithful givers, which is the faithful stewarding of what God has entrusted to us.

Faithful givers

When COVID came into our world, it did terrible things. But God actually used it to bring about some amazing things too, for His glory. Many churches lost people and income during the COVID season. We've seen growth and financial abundance.

When the coronavirus hit in 2020, we stopped passing the offering plates. And the result in 2020 was \$255,396 in general fund giving. In 2021 the number was \$280,986. The 2020 number was the highest in the history of WBC. And the 2021 number exceeded 2020 by \$25,000.² And it all happened during a pandemic.

In 2022, the general fund giving was \$241,719. Of that number, \$45,540 went to support our team of missionaries (including those we've sent out from WBC: Bob

² For comparison purposes, here are some giving and attendance averages from previous years:

2021 - \$280,986 (weekly \$5403) – attendance AM 99 with others at home due to COVID?
2020 - 255,396 (weekly \$4911) – (attendance AM 94)
2019 – 241,352 (weekly \$4641) – (attendance AM 101, PM 51, Wed PM 49)
2018 - 231,897 (weekly \$4459) – (attendance AM 102, PM 47, Wed PM 38)
2017 - \$234,425 (weekly \$4434) – (attendance AM 109, PM 58, Wed PM 44)
2016 - \$247,509 (weekly \$4828) – (120, 55, 47)
2015 - \$239,625 (weekly 4609) – (127, 60, 59)
2014 - \$228,253 (weekly 4367) – (124, 64, 78)
2013 - 226,507 (weekly 4355) –
2012 - 206,588 (weekly 3973) – (136, 73, 86)
2011 - 199,633 (weekly 3839) – (129, 69, 89)
2010 - 197,900 (weekly 3717) – (121, 61, 70)
2007 – 189,347 (weekly ?) – (129, 61, 74)

Litteral, Erin Wawro, Gary and Nancy Storm, and Jade Burley) and other ministries that help us fulfill the great commission (like Scioto Hills Camp, CRADLE, Tri-State Bible College, ACBC, and others). This means that about one-fifth of our income goes to minister elsewhere.

And then on top of the GF income, there were other special gifts, such as our harvest offering (\$2,779), which we gave to the Baptist Children's Home and Tri-State Bible College, and many other special gifts to help us fulfill our mission.

Faithful workers. Faithful followers. Faithful givers. Three evidences of faithfulness exhibited at WBC in 2022. This was all by the grace of God and for His glory. But, in my estimation, it's also evidence of success as defined biblically.

I would like to share a personal note at this point. I want to thank the Lord publicly for His faithfulness in my life and family in 2022, and for your faithfulness in praying for me and my family.

In November I was again privileged to go as your representative to assist missionary, Tom Carr, in teaching church leaders in Nepal with Tri-M. He also allowed me to turn some teaching we did years ago on the book of Job in a Wednesday evening series, into a mini book which was published by ACBC, *How Not to Counsel: Learning from Job's Friends*. The Lord is now using this resource as an on-going ministry of His Word, designed to equip God's people who are involved in soul care.

And then personally, He demonstrated His faithful generosity in the birth of our fourth grandchild, Brandt, and then His faithful mercy in sparing the life of our daughter, Julie, when she nearly died on the operating table due to post-delivery complications.

Looking Ahead to 2023

What's coming this year? Only God knows! But this we do know. If we are successful, we will exhibit faithfulness. Remember our definition. *Success is being a faithful steward of what God is entrusting to us, in good times and bad.*

So, will we be successful in 2023? We will be if we steward what He entrusts to us, in our personal lives, and families, and church. This includes everything He entrusts to us. Money. Time. Problems. Criticism. Trophies. Bench time. Children. Grandchildren. A hostile government. A job promotion. A job loss. Everything is from God, according to Romans 11:33, and everything is a stewardship.

Was Jesus successful? After 33 years of life, He left behind just a handful of followers. Not very impressive. But it was. He gave what was entrusted to Him, His very life, to save a people by dying and defeating death in their place. His work continues through His people.

Here are a few things we're anticipating at WBC this year. On Sunday mornings, we hope to return to continue our series in Mark. On Wednesday evenings, Pastor Matt has organized a team of men to lead us through the timely message of 1 Corinthians.

And of course, there will be Sunday School classes, and children's and youth ministries, and summer camp and retreats at Scioto Hills, and many other ministry opportunities. There will be special prayer times for men during Pastor's Prayer Partners that meets every Sunday morning at 8:30. The Lord willing, there will be another ministry trip to Nepal in November.

We're considering a next generation leadership training initiative this year, to train future leaders. There will be monthly Scripture Memory benedictions to learn, with songs by our primary age children. There's the CDT that began last week, which will continue for twelve Monday evenings. Preachers in Training will resume in February (on

second Sunday evenings), and our brothers will be preaching from Proverbs. We're planning a special "Gospel Panorama" outreach leading up to Easter (which is April 9).
And more.

I'd like to conclude with one final thought about numbers. While numbers don't equate success, they do give us something to pray about and work towards.

If the 114 people attending on Sunday morning at WBC each led someone to Christ this year, our numbers could double in one year. Wouldn't that be great? Wouldn't our Lord receive a lot of glory from that?

So let's pray, and work to that end. And if a year from now I report that WBC has 228 people attending, we will assess carefully why we've grown, and give Him the honor He deserves. And if that number dips, we will humbly assess, and then give thanks to the One who gives, and takes away. Blessed be His name.