

Big Faith in Texas

For years John Hagee has employed what he calls 'bulldog faith' to defeat obstacles. Today he's sharing his success secrets in a significant new book.

John Hagee was not what people would consider successful during the early days of his ministry. He slept in a garage for a year when he first began preaching—and he shared the cramped space with a Great Dane. He lived on \$7,000 during the first three years of ministry and worked odd jobs to keep food on the table.

He suffered setbacks and failures. He was criticized and analyzed. Religious people investigated every word he spoke from his pulpit.

But today, pastors who walk into the impressive, 5,000-seat sanctuary of Hagee's Cornerstone Church, situated on a \$40 million plot of land in San Antonio, Texas, want to know Hagee's formula for success.

The pastor, known for his Texas twang and tough preaching style, puts it simply. He became successful because he maintained a contagiously positive attitude in the face of adversity. He laughed at his problems and never took no for an answer—even when the devil whispered the word "impossible."

Success, Hagee says, is the result of what he calls "bulldog faith."

"God does not consult your past to determine your future," Hagee often tells his congregation at Cornerstone Church. "Yesterday ended last night. Look forward to today in Jesus' name!"

Hagee admits that certain things in his past—such as his mother's strong work ethic and his experiences on the football

field-shaped his message. But he insists that past mistakes alone will not destroy a person. It is how the person responds to those failures that determines the final outcome.

“Losers focus on what they are going through,” he tells his church, sounding much like an athletic coach. “Winners focus on what they are going to.”

In his new book, *The Seven Secrets*, which was released in February, Hagee clarifies what success is not. It is not power, ability or lack of criticism, he insists.

And most of all, he adds, success is not money.

“Money can buy you a palace,” he writes, “but it cannot buy you a home filled with love.”

Hagee recalls a time when he was allowed a personal visit with Elvis

Presley at the height of the entertainer’s career. The pastor saw Elvis’ gold-plated telephone and his Cadillac with the gold-flecked paint job. But what Hagee saw in and around Elvis was misery and loneliness in spite of his wealth.

Although Hagee’s book might be considered a success-motivation tool, it goes deeper than the popular you-can-do-it books. Using characters from Scripture, Hagee challenges Christians to shake loose from negative attitudes that steal faith and limit achievement. He is especially hard on those who make criticism a career.

Hagee writes: “A person with a critical spirit is someone who has divorced hope and married despair.”

Professional critics and habitual whiners won’t like *The Seven Secrets*—particularly when Hagee tells those who are dealing with hurt, failure and betrayal to simply “Get over it!” But his forceful words provide strong medicine for anyone who is interested in achieving his full potential in God.

A Gentle Giant

John Hagee is a multifaceted minister. He's a passionate man who can be powerfully moved by the pain and suffering of others. He is a serious student of the Bible and current affairs who will read dozens of books on subjects he considers important.

He is also a strongly opinionated commentator on the ills that plague America and the contemporary church, and he's not afraid to stake out positions on issues that put him at odds with other Christian leaders.

And he is never hesitant to state his convictions in the strongest terms, even if his pronouncements cause controversy, conflict or—in the case of his forceful stand on Israel—death threats.

"It's good to hear someone who has put in his Bible study time and is committed to telling it like it is, whether you like it or not," says award-winning country singer Randy Travis, who with his wife, Elizabeth, has been a part of the Cornerstone family for three years.

Travis says he listens to Hagee's sermon tapes daily when he's on the road. Like many Cornerstone members, he says Hagee's no-nonsense preaching combined with his care for his congregation creates a small-church feeling within a big church.

"From the first day we came here it was like we belonged," Elizabeth Travis says. "This church is like our family."

During an interview in his book-lined office, Hagee discussed his views on politics, end-times theology, the strengths and weaknesses of his Pentecostal heritage, and his own difficulties growing up in the home of a stern Assemblies of God evangelist. He also revealed a kinder and gentler side of his personality that is rarely seen by those who hear only his

fire-and-brimstone TV sermons.

"I personally see myself as a gentle, easy-going person," says Hagee while in a laid-back and affable mood.

Hagee can sound like an Old Testament prophet when he rails against the sin and degeneracy of the world around him. But in person he comes across as a thoughtful man who thinks before he speaks and carefully phrases each answer.

"I have been called a prophet by many people, but I hesitate to accept that title," he says. "The Bible teaches that if a man presumes to speak for God and is not absolutely correct he will incur the wrath of God upon himself."

But Hagee does feel compelled to speak out about the moral condition of America. And he is putting his words into action this year by mobilizing support for a constitutional amendment that will define marriage in Judeo-Christian terms.

"The reason that the abortion industry and the homosexual agenda and the humanist movement have flourished in our country is because the church has been a sleeping giant," Hagee says.

"Some pastors have been dumb dogs—watchdogs who will not bark in the day of danger. If the church does not rise up and speak out and take action on issues like the sacredness of marriage, we will bequeath a moral cancer to our children and grandchildren, and we will not recognize our country 20 years from now.

"But I shudder whenever I hear a charismatic preacher say, 'God told me,' or 'I hear You, Lord,' or 'Thus sayeth the Lord.' People who say that had better be absolutely accurate lest the judgment of God fall upon them."

The Formative Years

Hagee heard much about the judgment of God while growing up in

the home of the Rev. William Bythel Hagee, a strict Assemblies of God (AG) evangelist who founded AG congregations in Channel View, Texas, and Houston and pastored Glad Tidings Assembly of God in Corpus Christi before his death in 1988.

Today, many of the principles Hagee uses to run his church and manage his bustling family spring from his conflicted feelings about his own religious upbringing.

Hagee was an honor student at John H. Reagan High School in Houston, where he was involved in drama and other programs and lettered in football and three other sports. "I didn't like sports; I loved sports," the pastor says of his youth.

But his parents never attended a single game, practice or school play because his father thought such activities would lead to sin. "It was considered worldly to be at a football game, complete with cheerleaders in short skirts," he says.

Hagee was required to attend services every time the church doors were open, including Sunday mornings and evenings, and weeknights. "These people were at church so much they were too tired to sin," he says with a laugh.

Though Hagee was present in body, his mind and heart were a million miles away. Underneath his calm exterior his resentment and rebellion were boiling.

"I told some of the people at my father's church that if they were all going to heaven then hell wouldn't be half bad. I thought, If this is what Christianity is all about, you can count me out," he says.

His dreams for his future revolved around athletics, not religion. "If there were a thousand things I wanted to be, being a preacher wouldn't have been on the list."

Then one Sunday morning in January 1958, Hagee was sitting in the back row of the balcony of his father's Houston church,

his head buried deep in a trigonometry textbook and his mind working on a quadratic equation.

“All of a sudden, I responded to the altar call,” he remembers. “It was like a light came on in a dark room. I went forward and gave my life to Christ. And the next day I withdrew from John Reagan High School and enrolled in Southwestern Bible Institute.” The school is now known as Southwestern Assemblies of God University.

Hagee has been preaching ever since, but the way he does things at Cornerstone—which he founded in 1976—illustrates his efforts to lessen the destructive effects of the Pentecostal legalism he endured as a teenager.

“I believe in the spiritual gifts as taught in Scripture—tongues, interpretation, prayer languages and the rest,” he says. “But these gifts are not the central theme of the gospel, and they are not the central theme of this church.”

Once when the late Derek Prince was preaching at Cornerstone, Prince had a prophecy for a very specific person in the congregation—a woman who had recently been diagnosed with a deadly disease that had killed a sister. But on most Sundays, services at Cornerstone seem less spontaneous and more controlled.

Some people, in fact, might walk into Cornerstone, hear Hagee’s Southern drawl and assume they are in a Baptist church.

“I am a Bible-believing evangelical, and I believe that everything that happens in a worship service should be Christ-honoring and biblically based,” he says. “Many things done in churches in the name of God do not represent God or His Word. But I do not allow anyone in my service to do anything that brings the attention of the congregation to them.”

Nor is Hagee enthusiastic about a growing trend toward therapeutic preaching that he fears encourages people to adjust to their sin rather than repent from it. His views on counseling and recovery therapy are as blunt as they are radical.

He once told his congregation: "Have you had an unpleasant past? Get over it."

Bulldog Faith

The football team at Cornerstone Christian School is named the Warriors, and the team's home games are played in Bulldog Stadium. There are times when Hagee's rhetoric makes him sound like a warrior or even a bulldog.

Hagee is a fighter, and he likes fighting words. Give him a microphone, and he can heat the room. And that heat spreads fast, considering that his sermons are now telecast over 115 TV stations and 110 radio stations in the United States.

In one of his televised sermons, Hagee described Hollywood as "nothing but hell's public relations firm." During a Cornerstone service the Sunday morning before Thanksgiving, he offered words of doom about America's moral and spiritual corruption and denounced all nine Democratic presidential candidates as liars.

It isn't necessarily what Hagee says but how he says it that gets him in trouble. That appears to be the case with his series of televised sermons on Islam, which were cancelled by a Canadian station after the church received numerous complaints from irate viewers.

Hagee also has had plenty of attacks from religious critics as well as from the secular media. Last July The San Antonio Express-News questioned the income he receives from his Global Evangelism Television.

In response, Hagee told Charisma that he is unapologetic for his income, but at the same time he distances himself from preachers who promote a so-called prosperity gospel. His position is that he made his money the old-fashioned way—by working for it.

In the end, criticism doesn't faze Hagee. The message he offers readers of his book *The Seven Secrets* is the same one he preaches to himself.

"Criticism is one of God's finest shaping tools," Hagee writes, obviously drawing from years of personal experience. "In the hands of an expert it can transform us from self-centered individuals into people who live and act like Jesus."

One of Hagee's life secrets is simple: To persevere, accept criticism graciously when it is merited. When it is unjustified, forget it. And never back down.

Hagee certainly has no plans to back down. He believes he has been placed in a national pulpit and entrusted with a responsibility to change the nation.

"All preaching must reach a point of decision in the person doing the listening," he says. "You are in a tug-of-war with the Prince of Darkness for people's souls. I feel the tension of that battle every time I stand in the pulpit and open the Bible."

A Hagee Family Tradition

Ministry has run in John Hagee's lineage for generations.

Becoming a preacher was the last thing on John Hagee's mind during his teen years. But in entering the ministry Hagee was doing his part to continue a family legacy that stretches back six generations.

The first John Hagee in America was a Moravian immigrant from the Swiss-German border area who came to the New World in

search of religious freedom in the years before the colonies declared independence. "The prayer of his life was that God would raise up a seed to preach the gospel," Hagee says. "And today, I am the 47th descendent of that John Hagee to preach the gospel."

But Hagee knew that if he wanted to pass on his family legacy to his own children he would have to approach things differently from his own Pentecostal father.

"The Christian faith, at least for teenagers of my generation, was an endless list of don'ts," he says. "But I tried to make faith, in the life of my children, an unlimited possibility of what you can become."

The approach seems to have worked with Hagee's youngest son, Matthew, who decided he would become the 48th descendant of immigrant John Hagee to serve in the ministry. Matthew, who serves as associate pastor of his father's Cornerstone Church, is always by his dad's side on the platform.

Matthew appears with his dad at crusades and events around the world. And his melodic voice can be heard on Cornerstone musical numbers and on *We Believe*, the latest Southern gospel recording by The John Hagee Family, which also features married daughters Tish and Tina.

Tish teaches Spanish and Bible at Cornerstone Christian School, and Tina is the director of publications for John Hagee Ministries. Two other children—oldest son Chris and youngest daughter Sandy—are pursuing careers outside the church, with their father's blessing.

Hagee calls Sandy his baby, even though she is about to leave the roost to get married. "I will have to adjust to the deafening sound of silence in my house," he says.

The family member who is most often pictured with Hagee in ministry photographs is his wife, Diana. Hagee praises Diana

as a master organizer of ministry events, but she means much more to him than that.

“She means the world to me,” the pastor says. “I cannot imagine myself functioning at this level and at this intensity without her support.”

While many Christian leaders say they value their families over their ministries, Hagee seems to mean it when he says it. His eyes take on a heightened intensity when he talks about his kids.

“All my children have known since their first days on earth that if they were trying to reach me, I could be talking on the phone to the president of the United States but I would take their call,” he says.

Hagee has three grandchildren, and though arthritis in his knees prevents him from letting them ride him like a hobbyhorse as he did with his five children, his love for them remains strong.

The pastor adds: “The love I feel for my wife, my children and my grandchildren is simply all-consuming.”

Standing for Biblical Morality

John Hagee has asked Christians to petition Congress for a constitutional amendment that prevents legal gay marriage.

Last fall when the Supreme Court struck down a Texas law that banned consensual gay sex, John Hagee got mad. Then he put his righteous anger into action.

He immediately drafted what he called A Petition of Moral Concern for Our Nation and urged his television viewers and financial donors to join his crusade. He gave them until January 28 to sign a petition that calls on Congress to adopt a constitutional amendment that will prevent legal recognition of gay marriage.

Hagee's supporters mailed the petitions in by the cart load. He delivered 125,000 of the forms to lawmakers in Washington.

Terry Thompson, who is development director for John Hagee Ministries, was pleased with the response. "I think a lot of people in this nation have a great concern about the moral deterioration we are seeing," he says.

Hagee says he is dumbfounded that Americans are actually having to define that marriage is heterosexual. "Who would have ever believed that we would be fighting for moral sanity in this nation on this level?" he wrote to his supporters in January.

Battle lines are being drawn on the issue. After the Texas anti-sodomy law was struck down, President Bush went on the record stating that he believes marriage "is between a man and a woman." But other politicians have danced around the issue.

Sen. John Kerry, currently the favored Democrat in the 2004 presidential race, says he opposes gay marriage. Yet he also has stated that he believes the nation must guarantee equal protection for gay couples.

Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean, the former governor of Vermont, has said that he opposes gay unions. But public opinion in New England seems to favor wider acceptance of homosexuality.

In January, when President Bush unveiled plans to fund marriage-counseling programs in low-income areas, gay organizations demanded that the proposal include aid for gay couples. When Massachusetts judges ruled in favor of gay unions in early 2004, congressional leaders vowed to fight the decision.

Hagee's petition proposes an amendment to the Constitution that states: "The United States of America will only recognize marriage between a man and a woman of legal age." It is

similar to a proposal being promoted by the National Association of Evangelicals.

A Staunch Defender of Israel

John Hagee has been criticized for his support of the Jewish state. But he's not backing down.

The auditorium is decorated with colorful tapestries representing the 12 tribes of Old Testament Israel. A half dozen men wearing yarmulkes are sitting on the stage. Behind them, a robed choir sings the hymn "Y'Varech' Cha" and "Hatikva," the Israeli national anthem.

But this is no Jewish synagogue. It is the 5,000-seat sanctuary of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, where thousands of Christians and Jews have gathered on a Sunday evening in November for the church's 23rd annual celebration called A Night to Honor Israel.

"We're here to send a message to Europe, to Russia and to the United States State Department," says pastor John Hagee, who between rounds of applause announces that the event is being broadcast internationally by satellite.

"Israel will not now, will not ever, be alone, and there are 70 million of us in this nation who feel like this," Hagee declares.

The pastor is just back from his 21st trip to Israel, which included two press conferences and meetings with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Minister of Finance Benjamin Netanyahu and other Israeli officials.

"I have visited with Israeli and U.S. officials, and with God Almighty in prayer," says Hagee in his booming pulpit voice. "God has an eternal covenant with the land of Israel, and Israel needs no one's permission to do what's best for the Jewish people."

Hagee has been an avid supporter of Israel since he first visited the embattled nation in 1978. "I went to Israel as a tourist and returned home a committed Zionist," he told Charisma.

But his friendship with Jews has also raised controversy among some Christians, mainly because of Hagee's view that Jews have a special place in God's economy. Hagee says his position has been misreported by the press and misunderstood by critics such as Jerry Falwell, who once labeled Hagee a heretic.

Hagee says his views are based on chapters nine through 11 of Paul's letter to the Romans. "Paul says the Jewish people have been blinded to the identity of Jesus by the hand of God for the benefit of the Gentiles, and they remain blinded to this day," says Hagee, who believes in the long run that "all Israel will be saved."

Thus, he believes Christians have no duty to evangelize Jews but that "Gentiles are commanded to treat Jewish people lovingly until the revelation of Jesus [is given] to them." Hagee's study leads him to conclude that this commandment has been disobeyed for centuries by Christians, some of whom fanned the flames of anti-Semitism.

While Hagee doesn't think evangelizing Jews is an essential part of the Christian life, he believes that loving them is, and he publicly proclaims that belief in typically black-and-white terms.

He declares: "It is not possible to say, 'I am a Christian,' and not love the Jewish people."

Hagee's Secrets Of True Success

In his new book, John Hagee offers these tested principles, which he believes will assure biblical success:

Unlocking the Mystery and Power of the Mind

The Perseverance of a Champion
Cultivating Biblical Self-Esteem
Mastery of Your Most Subtle Enemy—Yourself
Developing “Level One” Communication (The Conversation of the Soul)
The Power of Continuous Prayer
Learning the Undeniable Laws of Prosperity

Jim Douglas is a freelance writer. Steve Rabey, former reporter for the Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph, did the reporting for this article. He is the author of Revival in Brownsville and other books.