
GETTING YOUR CHURCH UNSTUCK

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

Most of us have been stuck somewhere, somehow, in the desert sand off the main road; up a tree we climbed in our pre-adolescence; or, on a tricky algebra problem. But somehow, somehow we got unstuck. When our tires spun uselessly in the sand, we tried different approaches; when the algebra equation withstood one thought, we assaulted it with another.

Getting ‘stuck’ forces us to adapt our approach to life. In fact, one theory of learning says the brain is wired to solve predicaments, and true learning only happens when the mind tries to figure something out. God designed us to keep at it—knocking, seeking and asking—but to do so in close counsel with Him.

One of the shame-inducing truisms floating around the body of Christ goes something like, “All healthy organisms grow.” Pastors of smaller or plateaued churches feel the implied jab: lack of growth is symptomatic of underlying sickness. That’s not very helpful in the real church world. To begin with, there are limits to the size any organism can reach (Trophy trout are rare—especially in small streams), and if you keep growing after the legal age, it’s called getting fat.

We may find more solutions to what hinders our churches from growing larger if we think in terms of getting unstuck, rather than just getting bigger. Mega congregations are the exception, not the rule, but they—like the oversized athletes who play in the NBA—get far more coverage than the many times more numerous weekend-warriors in leagues sponsored by local leagues.

SIGNIFICANCE

Besides, the point is not, I hope, just to grow bigger congregations. Our true aim ought to be to grow more spiritually significant people. Rather than trying the latest surefire program emphases, just to attract more people, we can actually focus our church growth strategies on the very things that make for bigger people. If we remember that the goal has never been to put on church per se, but to develop people with the tool called church, we can still find several ways to get our people unleashed and our churches unstuck.

The statistics are clear: 80% of all churches in the U. S. average fewer than 200 attendees each weekend. Without major change in leadership style, congregational dynamics, ministry vision, or some other significant aspect of church life, churches that have existed for more than 5 years will most likely stay the size they are now, with only moderate growth over time.

Studies on church growth have sought to identify possible elements that accompany increases in the size of congregations. Some pastors mistakenly criticize church growth statistics, claiming that numbers do not tell the whole story: one's passion for Jesus, one's radical obedience to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, one's diligent study of the scriptures, etc. cannot easily be translated into numbers for analysis. That is true, but if we presume that every pastor is equally diligent and committed, then other differences can tell us something interesting about what elements may promote or retard church growth.

While we must reject too clinical an approach to church growth—making it devoid of God's sovereign working—so too must we refuse to attribute all the growth of some churches to the arbitrary whims of God sent revival. Thus, a healthy perspective on church growth leaves to God the things that only He can do (the stuff we pray about), but it willingly assumes responsibility for the things we can do something about. God gave me the teeth He gave me, but I brush them.

LIKELY STICK POINTS

When my computer fouls up, I call a friend who knows many (secret) things about how they operate—the apparently logical explanations for why/how they do what they do. Being at a distance from my hardware and me, he can only guess at why I might be stuck with an unresponsive machine. His favorite line begins, “Why don't you try...”

Some congregations remain the size they are because of physical limitations (community or building size) or assignment. Your church situation may be so unique that suggestions such as the ones to follow are of little help. In that case, keep praying. But just as 95% of all the fish in a lake habit a mere 5% of the space, and most computer problems can be traced to a limited number of common issues, so, too, do growth stick points tend to cluster around a few factors.

Of the many such elements, there are three that seem most critical to me: staff composition, fellowship grouping and people mobilizing.

Who comprises the staff—both paid and volunteer? A church will rarely grow beyond the capacity of its staff. One of the easiest, surest ways to foster church growth is to add people with staff responsibilities (not necessarily salary). The benefit to each of those new “staff members” and to the whole church cannot be overstated.

What fellowship groups exist in the church, and how easy it is for individuals to attach themselves to those clusters of people? Small churches stay stuck by trying to keep everybody doing all the same things as one big, happy family. Multiple services, small groups, choirs, and other groupings within the church will gear congregations for expansion—and open more opportunities for individuals to lead meaningfully.

Have significant levels and types of responsibility been delegated to people in the church? If God entrusts His church with increasing levels of responsibility based on proven faithfulness, He will bless churches that do likewise. Besides, the more leaders are freed from doing “the same old same old,” the more they initiate new enterprises. Growth churches keep generating new ministries that inspire and challenge the congregation.

Churches get stuck at some sizes more than others, and while the plateau numbers may not be exact calculations, they do present pastors with slightly different challenges for trying new strategies in staffing, grouping and delegating.

UNDER 60 PEOPLE

Generally speaking, the leader feels his job involves knowing everything about each and every person in the congregation, and “being there” personally for everybody. Church is a big family at the dinner table; that’s why potluck meals work so well within this size church. Pastor cares and does so much, that he lulls the congregation away from its own responsibility to bear one another’s burdens. For the most part, he responds to problems and reacts to situations that arise in the normal course of people’s lives.

Acting more like a chaplain or a concerned parent, the pastor of the typical small church delegates almost nothing, and if he does ask someone to oversee an aspect of church life, he will keep checking on it so often and so intrusively, that the individual feels about as empowered as a youngster with a learner’s permit on her first driving lesson with mom.

SUGGESTIONS

Identify three ministry jobs (i.e., doing the bulletin, selecting the worship songs, running the sound system), turn them over to volunteers, and after explaining the job for an hour, do nothing and say nothing related to those jobs for three months.

Do not attend the next church fellowship function, and for the next three months always invite someone different to open any gatherings (with a prayer or a greeting) and have them close at the end. Have neither the first nor the last word.

Redirect one hour of your weekly schedule—something you normally do—and go sit somewhere, like in a coffee shop with pen and paper; write down any new ideas for church (not reminders).

90-120 PEOPLE

Having broken free from the previous stick point, churches of this size are developing into a comfortable community, not just a family. Usually, there are not (yet) many structural or logistical problems. The first faint glimpses of a leadership structure are emerging, but delegation is probably friendship-based and related almost exclusively to small or easily controlled aspects of church life. No one is really being freed to do things the way they think is best. Rather, the pastor has thought it through and merely tells someone what to do and how to do it.

There will always be exceptions, but generally speaking, a church of 90 will stay stuck without a full-time pastor and a half-time assistant who keeps regular office hours.

SUGGESTIONS

Legitimize your operations by making the “office staff” more substantial—setting prescribed hours when you’re (always) open, filling those hours with workers (paid and unpaid), getting a “real” piece of office equipment, having a “staff lunch” for volunteers, etc.

Begin to establish multiple gatherings of the same kind, like dividing into two weekend services even if your building is not full, starting three breakfast groups for emerging leaders. For five months discontinue regular meetings with your elders, so they can each meet during that time slot with their own group of the same size/gender composition as the former elders’ group.

Identify three main areas of ministry (i.e., CM, worship, men’s meetings), and invite at least five people in each area to two brainstorming sessions to dream big. Delegate specific jobs and responsibilities to each participant. Help them to do it if they need the help, but expect them to do it. Leave it in their hands.

200 PEOPLE

The vast majority of all U.S. churches stay stuck here because it marks the limit to the number of people with whom the pastor has the time, the energy or the personal reserves to stay close. People drift in and out of the church because the pastor has unknowingly set up the expectation that he, personally, is going to attend to them. Sooner or later, the pastor will unintentionally violate that agreement, and they will feel like things just aren’t the same anymore since all the new people came.

The pastoral strategy must be to remove himself slightly from the whole congregation in order to concentrate on a few present or prospective leaders. Forced to become more strategic and long-term in thinking, the pastor must back away from the people and get ahead of them.

SUGGESTIONS

Staffing plays an especially critical role in pushing past the 200-barrier. Even if it seems like the money is not there, seriously consider hiring two full-time, pastoral-level staff with two full-time support personnel. Begin by paying salaries to the two support personnel and add pastors to the payroll as you can (they're much more expensive to hire, and far more likely to be excited about the role—even as a volunteer).

Identify a fairly major work project and bond people to each other by getting them to work together on it. If people scrape paint side by side, they will feel like they are a part of the body, and the church will begin to grow. It builds esprit de corps, a vital replacement to the “big, happy family” feeling.

Write down the names of the seven most active-in-leadership individuals/couples in your church and the “hats” they wear; ask each individual/couple to help you think of other people to whom you can delegate all but two of your leaders' jobs.

400 PEOPLE

The pastor is absolutely convinced he or she cannot and should not pastor all the people in the church; so, significant administrative and discipleship measures to utilize the few to pastor the many have already been adopted. Pastoral care, along with virtually every other ministry segment of the church, must be delegated the way Jethro instructed Moses. Church is administratively and relationally complex. Individuals and groups shift the focus of attention, and some “widows” are not going to be serviced properly.

The church becomes its own mission field, needing sub-congregations almost like new churches pioneered within it. Leaders are beginning to have an ambition for the people they directly oversee, and sometimes that internal ambition will cross grains with the whole program. Internal expansion and program needs should win out over the larger church program at least some of the time.

It's time for the youth pastor to be his or her own person. The senior pastor should welcome times when various ministry leaders “buck the system,” (developing kingdoms within a kingdom) not in the spirit of Absalom, but in the spirit of true servants who, like you, are in the business of ministry because they see the sheep needing more shepherds. Commission and appoint people, full of the Holy Spirit and power, to oversee vast areas of ministry responsibility.

SUGGESTIONS

Staff for sanity, staff for growth: If you keep an appropriate ratio of staff/people, sanity calls for the equivalent of 6 full-time staff, and growth will likely require a couple more than that. Make a list of everyone you would hire (to do what?) if you were given \$500,000 to be used only for salaries. Don't wait for the money. Ask the people on the list to start doing what you'd like them to oversee.

Appraise and repair the church program offerings to increase the number of strands—fellowship situations or opportunities—in the net you're using to fish for people. The two main types of groups are getting (people come for care and nurture without having to do anything) and giving (people come in order to provide service for others). With an apprentice leader at your side, start two new groups, one of each variety, with very specific focuses—i.e., one targeting fathers in blended families, and the other developing prayer teams.

One of the most substantial ways to build team spirit and cooperation is to encourage members of the team to share their stories/successes/struggles with the whole group—especially with the primary leader present and attentive. Pastors who do all the talking at leadership gatherings miss a great opportunity to promote others into greater involvement and service. At your next church-wide leaders meeting, ask at least eight people to give a 5 to 7-minute presentation (complete with handouts) on the current condition of and the future vision for the 'department' they oversee. And (you) take notes while they are speaking!

BURN YOUR CHURCH UP

It's too bad that so many pastors approach ministry with an Old Testament concept of anointing (By the way, that's an over-used, under-understood expression in church today.). In the old days, Elisha hoped to get Elijah's sole ministry mantle—and it was a bit iffy that he would get it. In the new days since Pentecost, the mantle has been divided up into countless spiritual flames, distributed innumerable upon church people everywhere. That's the beauty of fire; it can be divided again and again without losing any of its original significance.

If we're going to burn the hell out of our world, it certainly doesn't hurt to have a few bigger bonfires. But there's a lot to be said for firing the flames of even the smallest campfire, so that it will jump outside whatever presently rings it in. The Kingdom principle has always been multiplication. We find our spiritual significance not through collecting people, but in gathering them for the purpose of sending them out to replicate their experience with us.

Raising more people to their full Kingdom potential is a higher calling than simply building a larger sanctuary. And frankly, churches of every size struggle equally with the tension between gathering and releasing people.

GREATER GROWTH

The underlying rationale for all these suggestions is found in Ephesians 4:11-16, which is the New Testament's most obvious discussion about church growth. Remember what we're supposed to be growing—congregants not congregations. For some amazing reason, Jesus did not chose to bequeath to His church a special potion to be poured on pews to attract people like bees come to honey. He didn't give us a franchise-church-in-a-box, or limitless sources of money to erect impressive buildings.

Instead, He gave the church people-gifts (prophets, mercy-showers, exhorters, etc.), and a prayer focus (more laborers). Hmmm...

Paul puts it all together when he says, "...The proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body..." (Ephesians 4:16). The more that we develop people in their unique ministry gifting, and empower them with training, permission and opportunity to act meaningfully, the more they (and our churches) will grow. The key is the work supplied by each member.

So, whether a church has big or small numbers, God's interest is the same. And even more to the point, that interest is a sobering reality check for us pastors, regardless of how big or small our congregations may be. The true question is *not how can I get a bigger church?* But how can I empower more of my church in ministry that really matters?