

# Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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## Moving Off A Plateau: Part One

Churches in North America may be classified simply as growing, declining, or plateaued. Most of the research has, of course, been done on growing and declining churches. However, recent studies show that about forty-five percent of all churches are neither growing nor declining. Instead, they are sitting on a plateau.

Around fifteen percent of churches are temporarily on a plateau as they progress upward or downward in their growth paths. Thus, some thirty percent are on what might

be called a "dead plateau," i.e., they have been stuck at one size for five or more years.

Statistically, a plateaued church is one that has a growth rate between plus or minus twenty-five percent over a decade. This means churches on long-term plateaus grow or decline about plus or minus 2.5% per year.

To put this in perspective, rapidly growing churches grow at a rate of ten to twenty-percent per year, or about one hundred to two hundred percent a decade.

Remaining on a plateau is a positive result for some churches, particularly those that experience a high turnover of population around the church. But for most churches, growth of at least five percent a year is a reasonable expectation.

Lyle Schaller suggests, "most Christian congregations in the United States and Canada have the potential for a net growth of at least 5 percent per year. That rate of growth would mean doubling in size every fourteen years since the rate of growth would be compounded annually. In most every community on the North American continent there are enough people who are not actively involved in the life

of any worshipping congregation to make that rate of growth possible."

A simple experiment can be applied in any community to demonstrate the truth in Schaller's comment. First, call every Christian church in your community. If you live in a large city, just call churches within a ten mile radius of your own church facility. Second, ask each church how many seats are in its worship auditorium and how many people attend on an average weekend. Third, determine the total seating capacity by adding up all the available seats in all of the churches and double the total. Fourth compare the total available seats to the total population of the community. How many people in your community would be able to find a seat if they came to church? How many could not find a seat? What is the growth potential?

**"Most congregations in the United States and Canada have the potential for a net growth of at least 5 percent per year."**

**—Lyle E. Schaller**

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# Plateaued churches rely on older programs.

## New ministries reach new people.

A number of years ago I did this experiment for a church of ninety-five people located in a city of 110,000 population. A telephone survey of sixty-six Christian churches determined that there was a total seating capacity for 17,600 people. If all of the churches were to have double worship services filled to capacity there was a possible seating capacity for 35,200 persons. Comparing that to the population there would still have been 74,800 people in the city who could not come to church even if they desired to do so. In addition only five of the sixty-six churches had an average attendance equal to or greater than their seating capacity for one worship service. Was it possible for the church I was working with to experience a five percent net growth rate? Yes! Your church most likely has potential for growth, also. Try this experiment in your own city and see what results you discover.

### Reasons for Plateauing

What are some of the possible reasons for the plateaued condition of thirty-percent of churches in North America? While each church is unique, some of the following ideas are usually part of the reasons a church plateaus.

*First, plateaued churches exhibit a high turnover rate of pastors.*

A long pastorate does not guarantee a church will grow, but a high turnover rate of pastors does guarantee that a church will plateau or decline. My research has found that declining churches average 3.68 years, plateaued churches average 5.04 years, and growing churches average 6.00 years per pastor. The old church growth guideline suggesting that a pastor must stay six to seven years in a church for it to experience growth still appears to hold true.

*Second, plateaued churches place a priority on internal fellowship.*

The morale of church members in plateaued

churches is usually very high. Research I have complete on plateaued churches indicates that eighty-eight percent of plateaued churches have a high morale. Unfortunately, this strong focus on fellowship results in a lack of outreach. Plateaued churches basically do enough outreach to replace the people they lose, but not enough evangelism to see the church grow.

*Third, plateaued churches rely on older programs or ministries.*

Plateaued churches do not start new ministries on a regular time schedule. In some churches no new ministry has been started in recent history, i.e., within the last five years. Since it takes new ministries to reach new people, the lack of new ways to serve others contributes to a church remaining on a plateau.

*Forth, plateaued churches make ministry decisions at the board or congregational level.*

Growing churches tend to place a larger degree of decision-making into the hands of the pastor. In plateaued churches authority to make ministry decisions is normally found at the congregational or board levels. This implies a longer time to make decisions, which may lead to a church being plateaued.



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