

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Growing Smaller Churches

Research reported by Leadership Network in 2007 indicated that 59% of Protestant churches in the USA averaged less than 100 people at their worship service.

Although mega churches continue to get the most press coverage, it is these smallest of churches that are the main size of church found throughout the country.

Characteristics

Half a century ago, it was normal for churches with at least

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twelve giving units to be able to support a full-time pastor. However, the economic realities of our times make this unrealistic. Churches under one hundred worshipers often find they must employ the services of a bi-vocational pastor, or perhaps share a pastor with another church.

Members of smaller churches see the pastor's primary calling as that of a caregiver. The core values of smaller churches cause them to look for a highly relational pastor who serves church members by listening to their concerns, ministering to their personal needs, and following their lead.

Decision-making authority is invested in a family or small group of friends. Pastors are not thought of as leaders in smaller churches but simply as care givers. The *de facto* leaders are the persons, families, or small cohorts of people who have supported the church over many years. Tight knit relationships tie these key persons together, and they often comprise the majority of board members who view the pastor as their hired hand rather than as their leader.

The church's management structure is somewhat

haphazard. Management decisions are often made outside of formal meetings, but meetings are used when the leaders find them helpful in maintaining control. Long range planning is not considered a necessity, thus plans are made at the last minute with the quality of the ministry often reflective of last minute timing.

Leaders are selected based on their ties to or support of the controlling family or cohort. Newcomers are rarely chosen to serve in any significant manner until it is determined that they are safe, meaning that long-term church leaders trust them. Since the pool from which leaders are selected is quite small, leaders normally have limited abilities. Most leaders are selected based on their availability rather than giftedness or skill sets.

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Smaller churches must add a full-time pastor.

The first barrier to growth is at 35 worshipers.

Growing from 35-85

Approximately 25% of all churches find they stop growing when reaching 35 people in worship attendance. This 35 barrier is not often talked about, but studies have found it a plateau at which churches tend to gather.

The main key to break this first barrier is adding a full-time pastor. Seldom will a church grow beyond thirty-five people with a bivocational pastor. The only time a pastor serving a church in such a limited way results in a growing church is during the initial phases of a church plant. Even then, if the founding pastor continues too long in a bi-vocational capacity, the new church has a greater than even chance of experiencing limited growth.

People have expectations that churches will provide a basic level of programming. At the very minimum people expect a church to provide a worship service and a basic children's program. Once a congregation reaches thirty-five people, the church must develop a nursery, preschool, kindergarten, and early elementary classes if it hopes to reach the next level of 85 worshipers.

Related to the worship service is the need to have a critical mass of worshipers. In most churches this means reaching a minimum attendance of fifty people in the worship service. The larger a church gets, the more people expect the worship service to feel dynamic, and it usually takes a minimum of 50 people to do so. Since a church needs musicians, worship leaders, and child care workers, this means a church must reach about sixty-five total participants in order to have a critical mass of fifty people in the audience. Church leaders must work hard at attracting and keeping newcomers so the church reaches this critical mass.

Finding a facility that will allow the church to expand is still another key element in moving to the next level of ministry. What holds many smaller churches on a plateau for a long period

of time is the lack of adequate seating, parking, and classroom meeting space. For a church to reach an average of eighty-five worshipers, it must have a facility that seats between one hundred and one hundred twenty-five. In addition there must be a minimum of forty to fifty parking spaces available during the worship time. Without this minimum level of available seating and parking, it will be nearly impossible for a church to average eighty-five people in worship attendance.

The church will have to grow beyond one large family. In many smaller churches it is not unusual to find that nearly all the members of the church are related to one another. A church made up of one matriarch and patriarch, their four children and their spouses and children can easily amount to twenty to twenty-five persons. Add on their close friends, and you have the basic thirty-five member church. It stands to reason then, that if such a church is to grow to the next level of eighty-five people, it must add people outside the family cohort group. This may be the biggest challenge in the smallest churches. Small family churches of this sort find it difficult to open their arms to people who are not family members. The old saying, "We're just a big happy family," means more than fellowship in these smallest of churches.



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