

OBSTACLES AND GROWTH STRATEGIES



Obstacles for Smaller Churches (15-200)

Obstacle 1 for smaller church is a small-church image. Studies suggest that a primary difference between growing and declining churches is their attitude. Growing churches feel they have something worthwhile to offer to their community.

Obstacle 2 for smaller churches is ineffective evangelism. Many, not all, small churches find it difficult to win people to Christ. Low self-esteem causes them to withdraw rather than reach intentionally to lost people with the love of Christ.

Obstacle 3 for small churches is inadequate programming. Every pastor of a small church has experienced the sadness of losing people due to the lack of programming. Parents of teenagers often leave a small church to find a larger church with an active youth program. Musicians leave smaller churches to become involved in a church offering a greater variety of music. Creative people move to other churches to find additional outlets for their new approaches to ministry.

Obstacle 4 for small churches is downward momentum. If you can remember a time when you removed the plug in the bottom of a sink full of water, you will comprehend this obstacle. Once the downward pull of the water begins, everything goes with it. This is precisely the case in many small churches, particularly those that have declined from a larger size. Once a church begins declining, retreating inward, and cutting back on ministry, it becomes next to impossible for the church to focus on anything but survival.

Obstacle 5 for the small church is ingrown fellowship. This obstacle may be the primary one confronting small churches. As a general rule during the first seven to ten years of a church's life span, it has good success at reaching, attracting, and assimilating newcomers. However, the longer a church remains small, the longer it is in existence, the more ingrown the fellowship structures become.

Obstacles for Medium Churches (200-400)

Obstacle 1 for the medium church is inadequate facilities. All sizes of churches could and probably do identify with the lack of facilities. However, this is a particular obstacle for medium-sized churches, particularly if they have experienced a recent growth spurt.

Obstacle 2 for the medium church is inadequate staff. Today's congregations expect a high quality and diverse ministry. Their desire to have a broad range of specialized programs, worship service, and groups usually leaves a church understaffed. At the core, a medium-sized church has three options: Add sufficient staff to continue growing, add just enough staff to remain plateaued at its present level of attendance, or do not add staff and face eventual decline.

Obstacle 3 for the medium church is inadequate finances. Every church can identify with this obstacle. If we only had additional money , we could...is commonly heard among churches of all sizes.

Obstacle 4 for the medium church is poor administration. Small churches do not require a sophisticated level of management. But as a church grows into the middle stage, the pastor, staff and leaders must care effectively for the increasingly complex functional needs of the church. The typical management problems that surface in this size church include but are not limited to:

- confusing "means" with "ends"
- lack of planning and coordination
- ineffective time management
- poor use of volunteers
- poor budget control

Obstacle 5 for the medium church is increasing complexity. The increased level of complexity is one of the factors that causes churches to revert to a small church after a few years at medium size. Long-term members may recall the "simple" atmosphere of the small church. The increase complexity that requires them to make an appointment with the pastor, reserve a room for a potluck meal, or budget for next year is not appreciated. They would prefer a simpler structure and will do what they can to return the church to previous times, if they get a chance.

Obstacles for Large Churches (over 400)

Obstacle 1 for the large church is poor assimilation. Large churches found it unusually easy to attract visitors to the numerous events and activities that take place each week. The challenge is not to attract more people but to assimilate those who come into the life of the congregation. As a general rule, smaller congregations can effectively assimilate new people using informal friendship processes. However, the larger a church grows, the more necessary it becomes to structure mundane procedures for welcoming, following up, and involving visitors.

Obstacle 2 for the large church is increased bureaucracy. Churches that experience growth from small to medium to large may become paralyzed. Organizational structures and processes that worked when the church was smaller become dysfunctional with a larger congregation. One of the worst situations was at a church that had sixty-one different committees. The committee system worked well when the church was medium-sized, but after it grew, the main work of the committees was just trying to keep from bumping into each other.

Obstacle 3 for the large church is poor communication. Communication in small churches takes place through personal relationships along what is called the grapevine. In the majority of smaller churches this approach to communication works fairly well. It provides a fast and reasonably accurate vehicle to communicate with members. As one can guess, however, the larger a church becomes, the less effective this informal communication system is. The more scattered the congregation and the larger the geographical community, the greater the decrease in the speed and accuracy of the grapevine. Effective communication in larger churches requires two main ingredients: redundancy and numerous channels.

Obstacle 4 for the large church is loss of vision. Healthy, growing churches begin with a challenging dream. But by the time many large churches reach their peak attendance, the dream that propelled them to growth and vitality has likely been realized. When the sense of primary vision has been lost, a large church can easily slide into a maintenance mentality.

Obstacle 5 for the large church is lack of member care. A fact that large churches ignore is that they already have more people than they can care for adequately. Placing the total responsibility for member care on the shoulders of the pastoral staff often results in low levels of personal satisfaction among worshipers. To overcome this obstacle, large churches must develop a health infrastructure of medium- and small-sized groups where members can be cared for at a personal level.

Growth Strategies for Smaller Churches (15-200)

Growth Strategy 1 for small churches is to renew a sense of purpose. This begins by focusing the attention of the congregation on Jesus Christ, particularly his death on the cross. Asking and answering questions such as, What was he doing there? What drove him to Calvary? What was Christ's purpose? will remind people that Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Helping the congregation see that Jesus Christ passed on that purpose to the church is the first step in renewing a sense of purpose. The next step is to write a new purpose statement in fresh language and then establish it in the minds and hearts of the congregation through preaching and teaching in small groups, committee meetings and one-on-one.

Growth Strategy 2 for small churches is to begin new ministries. The ingrown fellowship in small churches is perpetuated by programs and ministries that have become saturated. Since most people prefer to be in on the ground floor of a new venture, beginning new ministries is an essential step to attract and hold newcomers.

At first the idea of beginning new ministries sounds impossible to the small church, but it need not be troubling. "Slow and steady" is a good slogan to follow. A small church need add only one new ministry each year to remain open to new persons.

Growth Strategy 3 for small churches is to cultivate evangelism. It is rare to find a small church effectively involved in outreach without the personal efforts of the pastor. Therefore, it is vital that the pastor of a small church be alert to opportunities to win people to Christ. Pastors of small churches do well to focus on the times when people are most receptive to Christ through the small church ministry, such as when there is:

- a death of a family member
- a personal or family illness
- a need for pastoral counseling
- a child ready for Sunday school
- a wedding

However, the most important dynamic for evangelism, especially in the small relational church, is participation by laypersons. Since the growth of small churches is directly dependent on the adoption of the new people into the church family by long-term members, the involvement of laypersons on the front lines of evangelism is crucial.

Growth Strategy 4 for small churches is to celebrate victories. good things are happening in small churches. Unfortunately the low self-image of most small churches leads them to see their weaknesses rather than their strengths. One solution to improve self-esteem in the small church is to call attention to the positives in the church.

Growth Strategy 5 for small churches is to start new groups and classes.

Many, if not most, small churches are characterized by two circles—a membership circle and a fellowship circle. Newcomers are usually welcomed in the first but find resistance when trying to enter the second. Frequently, new people discover they cannot be accepted into this inner fellowship circle until they have spent several years in the church. As frustrations set in, nearly all the new people leave before the circle opens up to them.

Growth Strategy 6 for small churches is to involve new people. It is a common, but false, assumption that new members or regular attenders in small churches quickly develop a sense of belonging. In reality it takes significant involvement in the life of the church before new members and attenders begin to feel like they really belong. The problem is that rather than involving newcomers in ministry roles or tasks, usually the church does not allow them to serve in any significant way.

Growth Strategies for Medium Churches (200-400)

Growth Strategy 1 for medium churches is to develop a distinct identity. Medium churches need to build on their key ministries to form a distinct identity in the community. Studies have found that healthy churches of this size usually have at least one ministry for which they are legendary in their community. Some are thought of as the church with the excellent preschool. Others are known for their vibrant worship service. Still others are known for their caring seniors groups.

Growth Strategy 2 for medium churches is to add additional staff. A failure to add additional staff and thus expect the pastor and perhaps a secretary to supervise the entire church program will result in plateau or decline.

The second pastoral staff person should be hired before the church reaches two hundred worshippers on an average Sunday morning. To keep growing, a medium church ought to hire a third pastor just as the church peaks at three hundred worshippers. By adding the third pastoral staff person at this point, the church will have the best chance of moving beyond the four hundred attendance barrier. Following this hiring pattern throughout the life of the church will ensure that the ministry has an excellent chance of expansion.

Growth Strategy 3 for medium churches is to use facilities multiple times. Growing medium-sized churches eventually discover they are out of space. One obvious answer is to purchase land and build a new church facility. However, this choice may lead to mortgage payments that strangle a church budget, making finances unavailable for other needs, such as hiring staff. As a general rule, when 50 percent or more of the church budget goes for mortgage payments, utilities, and maintenance, the people become servants of the building.

Growth Strategy 4 for medium churches is to offer multiple worship services. While most medium churches already have a second worship service, some are now adding three, four and even five services on nights not normally used for worship in Protestant churches.

Growth Strategy 5 for medium churches is to write a long-range plan. Plans give a church direction and motivate members with a sense of purpose. The planning process does not have to be complicated, but it should take into account the needs of the congregation, the opportunities to reach their target area for Christ, the resources available to fulfill the plan, and an outline of the steps to get started.

Growth Strategy 6 for medium churches is to improve the quality of ministry. It is not a secret that people today have higher expectations for their church than ever before.

Growth Strategies for Large Churches (over 400)

Growth Strategy 1 for large churches is to renew the vision. For a church to grow, it needs a vision. At one time, all large churches had a compelling vision. That is how they are where they are today. In the process of growing larger, however, they may have either fulfilled their original vision or stopped communicating it because they assume that everyone knows what it is. Both possibilities are danger signs for the large church.

Growth Strategy 2 for large churches is to design an assimilation plan. the challenge of growth in larger churches can be compared to a profit and loss ledger. On the profit side of the ledger, larger churches usually do quite well. Their wide-open front door attracts newcomers in fairly larger numbers. On the other side of the ledger, larger churches often do quite poorly. Their wide-open back door allows newcomers to drift away from the church rather than become involved in significant numbers. Thus one of the main hurdles to overcome in the larger church is balancing the "income-outgo" ledger.

The way to balance this ledger is by designing and implementing a routine assimilation process. Such a process generally involves all or most of the following.

A pastor is designated to be responsible for organizing, deploying, and maintaining the assimilation process.

A team or committee is put in place to work under the pastor of assimilation. This team carefully, systematically, and regularly monitors the assimilation of each newcomer. Tracking newcomers usually goes on for only one year due to the large number of new people constantly coming through the front door of the church. Ongoing assimilation occurs when the newcomer becomes involved in groups or classes during the first year.

A clearly defined and communicated process for becoming involved in the life of the church is established. This process includes at least some of the following; an orientation class or group that initiates newcomers into the values, purpose, and vision of the church; a way to involve newcomers into a group or class whereby they begin to receive regular care, love, and

support; a way to recruit, train, and deploy newcomers into ministry inside and outside the church family.

The uniting of new people with the church is celebrated regularly.

A continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of the entire assimilation process is conducted and the process is adjusted to keep it up-to-date

Growth Strategy 3 for large churches is streamline procedures. To combat the tendency of the larger church toward bureaucracy, you must cut the fat! The fat is the sacred cows, the outdated, flabby systems and practices that have become standard operating procedure and “the way it’s always been done.” Another popular term for this is “decentralize.”

Larger churches grow as they develop an organizational structure that allow them to take advantage of ministry opportunities in a reasonable amount of time, which means before the “hot” opportunity is “cold.”

Large churches streamline their structures by:

- defining their core values and living by them
- structuring systems to fulfill their purpose and vision
- minimizing differences in nonessential areas to maximize ministry potential
- empowering lay members to fulfill their own God-given dreams
- encouraging an atmosphere in which new ministry ideas can be attempted without fear

Growth Strategy 4 for large churches is offer need-based events. If you go to the average supermarket you will discover new products almost weekly. Labels say “diet,” “sugar-free,” and “low-fat.” Why? Because manufacturers listen to the public’s requests.

In the past, churches adopted programs that were designed at denominational headquarters and they expected people in the community to participate. Today’s large church needs to totally reverse that approach by discovering people’s needs and developing ministries to meet them.

This is important to the larger church for at least five reasons.

Need-based ministries become entry-level events where the unchurched may connect with the church’s larger ministry.

Need-based ministries care for people in relevant ways right where they are in life.

Need-based ministries meet people when they are most open to receiving Christ as their Savior.

Need-based ministries keep the church from developing an inward looking mentality.

Need-based ministries carry on the Lord's own example of healing the sick and the lame and feeding the hungry.

Growth Strategy 5 for large churches is adjust leadership roles. As a church grows, the leadership roles played by the pastor, staff, governing board, and supporting committees must change if the church is to continue its emergence as a large church. There are at least three key adjustments that must take place.

The congregational members must mature so that they allow their chosen leaders to lead. Small churches, of course, are often led by the congregation, with the pastor expected to carry out their sense of calling and priorities. As the small church grows through the medium size into a large church, a significant adjustment must take place. The congregation must become willing followers of their chosen leaders. Among the many adjustments needed in this process is the delegation of most of the decision making from the congregation to the leaders. From a practical viewpoint this usually means the congregation reserves the right to call the senior pastor, vote to indebted the congregation, fire the senior pastor, change the constitution and doctrinal statement, and choose their lay leaders. All other decisions they leave in the hands of their chosen leaders.

The governing board must change from being a decision making board to becoming a policy-setting board. In the medium church the governing board and standing committees most often make the decisions. However, as the church becomes larger, the members of these boards and committees normally do not maintain enough contact with the totality of the church' ministry to be able to make day-to-day, week-to-week, or month-to-month decisions. Since the paid staff is most knowledgeable about the church, it falls to the staff members to be the decision makers. The governing board and standing committees; main role becomes that of setting basic policy within which the paid staff make the decisions. To miss making this adjustment normally extends the decision-making process out to the point where the church begins to do a slow walk rather than a crisp run.

The senior pastor must exercise directive leadership. All the studies completed on growing churches in the last half century include one common denominator: The pastor accepts and exercised a strong leadership role. In smaller churches the pastor leads from a strong relational role. In medium churches the pastor leads from a strong administrative role. But in the large church the pastor must lead from a strong directive role. In part this means that the congregation expects the pastor to declare a sense of direction and the way to get there. No longer can the pastor afford to take a neutral position. The pastor must have a strong sense of purpose, vision, and hope for the church. He must accept the role of "leader among leaders," taking responsibility to influence the church by casting the vision for the church.

Growth strategy for large churches is to increase the number of small groups. Effective larger churches emulate the qualities of small churches. This is called the Less is More Principle.

As churches grow larger and larger, their efficiencies steadily decrease, particularly in the area of member care. Once a certain economy of scale is reached, bigger is no longer better but can be worse.