

# 10 Reasons Small Churches Tend to Stay Small

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I know more about getting smaller churches to grow than larger ones. I pastored three of them, and only the first of the three did not grow—I was fresh out of college, untrained, inexperienced, and clueless about what I was doing. The next two grew well, and even though I remained at each only some three years, one almost doubled and the other nearly tripled in attendance and ministries.

By using the word “grow,” I do not mean in numbers for numbers’ sake. I do not subscribe to the fallacy that bigness is good and small churches are failures. What I mean by “grow” is reaching people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. For example, if you are located in a town that is losing population and your church manages to stay the same size, you’re probably “growing” (i.e., reaching new people for the Lord). In addition, any church—large or small—that does not place a high value on evangelism and outreach to the unchurched can’t expect to grow...period. But countless articles and books have been written on that subject. Now, after working for years among hundreds of small congregations, I speak here to the subtle growth barriers that tend to go unnoticed or unaddressed in stagnant churches.

I send these observations forth hoping to plant some seed in the imagination of a pastor or other leader who will be used of the Lord to do great things in a small church. The "ten reasons" that follow are not necessarily in the order of importance or prevalence, and there are probably other reasons individual churches might not be growing, simply because no two churches are alike. But this is the way they occurred to me, and the order seems right.

## 1. Wanting to stay small.

"We like our church just the way it is now." While this attitude usually goes unspoken—it might not even be recognized by its carriers—it's widespread in many churches. The proof of it is seen in how the leaders and congregation reject new ideas and freeze out new people.

The process of rejecting newcomers is a subtle one, never as overt as snubbing them. They will be greeted and chatted with and handed a printed bulletin. But they will still be excluded: "Bob's class is meeting this week over at Tom and Edna's. Come and bring a covered dish." "The youth will have a fellowship tonight at Eddie Joe's. We're serving pizza and you don't want to miss it." Unless you know who Bob, Tom, Edna, and Eddie Joe are and where they live, you're out of luck.

Pastors who want to include newcomers and first-timers should use full names from the pulpit. This allows newcomers to learn who people are. "I'll ask Bob Evans to come to the pulpit and lead us in prayer." "For those who need directions to Eddie Joe Finham's house for the youth fellowship, he's the guy with the crewcut wearing the purple shirt. Raise your hand, Eddie Joe. He has printed directions to give you." No one can promise that just because a church wants to grow, it will. However, I can guarantee you that if it doesn't, it won't.

## **2. A quick turnover of pastors.**

A retired pastor who served his last church some 30 years was supplying for a small congregation south of New Orleans. He told me of a discovery he made: "On Sunday afternoon, I had several hours to kill before the evening service. In the church office, I was reading their history and discovered that in their nearly 50 years of existence, they've had 22 pastors." He was aghast. "Think of that. If they had around six months between pastors, that means the average tenure was less than two years." He was quiet a moment, then said, "They didn't have pastors. They just had preachers."

It takes at least a couple of years for a pastor to become the real deal for a church—a pastor in more than name only, one who has earned the right to lead the congregation. With larger churches, the time period is more like six years.

Again, no one will promise you that keeping a pastor a long time guarantees the church will grow. But I can assure you that having a succession of short-term pastors will prevent it from growing as surely as if you had taken a vote from the congregation to reject all expansion.

## **3. Domination by a few strong members.**

The process by which a man (it's almost always a man) becomes a church "boss" is subtle and rarely, if ever, the result of a hostile takeover.

Say the pastor of a small church leaves for another town. The pastorless congregation looks within its membership for leaders to rise up and "take care of things" until a new pastor arrives. So two or three faithful and mature (we assume) members are chosen. They do their job well. If the next pastor leaves after an unusually short tenure for whatever reason, the congregation resorts to the fallback position: They enlist the services of those same two or three mature—and now experienced—leaders.

That's how it happens that one of them—or possibly all of them—begin to make important decisions for the body, and everything works out. When the new pastor arrives, they let him know that for anything he needs to know, he should call on them. The pastor quickly sees that these men have set themselves up as a layer of authority between the hired man (the preacher) and the congregation.

These "bosses" explain that they are protecting the congregation. "We don't like to upset them with matters like this." "These things are better off handled by just a few." Pity the young idealistic pastor who walks into that church unsuspecting that they lie in wait to—ahem—"give direction to his ministry." Or, as one said to me, "We thought you would like to have some help in pastoring this church."

Such self-appointed church bosses tend to frustrate the pastor's initiatives, block his bold ventures, and control his tendencies to want the church to act on (gasp!) something he calls faith! Result: The church stays small. No normal family coming into the community would want to join such a church.

The remedy: The congregation must see that key lay positions in the church rotate, that no one stays chairman of deacons for thirty years or church treasurer for a generation.

Members of the congregation should feel free to respectfully ask questions about why decisions are made. Church bosses cannot stand the light of day shown on their activities (“They wouldn’t understand”), even though they convince themselves what they are doing is in the interest of the congregation. Read about Diotrephes in the little epistle of III John. He “loves to have the pre-eminence.”

#### **4. Not trusting the leaders.**

Interestingly, the opposite phenomenon often occurs with the same result. I've seen this phenomenon occur in small churches (and never in large ones) at the monthly business meetings. In the small-and-determined-to-stay-small church, discussion centers on why 35 cents was spent on call-forwarding and \$2.00 on paper for the office. Leaders and pastors alike are always frustrated that the congregation doesn't trust them with \$20.00, let alone \$200.00.

The determined-to-stay-small church is far more concerned about the dollars and cents in the offering plate than about the lost souls in the community. This church would never step out in faith and do something bold to reach the lost and unchurched, and if they did, unless their mindset changed, they would then harass their leaders into the grave demanding an accounting of every dime spent. Instead, small churches should elect good leaders and—within reason, as mentioned earlier—trust these leaders to do their work.

#### **5. Inferiority complex.**

I was a seminary student when called to my second pastorate, a church which had been stuck at 40 in attendance for years. I discovered that small churches often are stymied by inferiority complexes. “We can't do anything because we're small. We don't have lots of money like the big churches in town.” So, they set small goals and ask little from their members.

One day, I was visiting in the First Baptist Church of a nearby community. In no way was it what we would call large, but it was three or four times the size of mine. The pastor and I were chatting about some program or other. He said to me, “My people won't attempt anything like that. They’ll say, ‘We're not large like the First Baptist Church of New Orleans.’”

That's when it hit me: Feelings of inferiority can be found in any size church. I wouldn't be surprised if the members of FBC-New Orleans were excusing themselves for their inaction by saying, “We're not Bellevue in Memphis or the FBC of Dallas.”

The remedy is to put one's eyes on Jesus Christ and ask, “Lord, what do you want us to do?” Peter said, “Lord, what about John here? What do you want him to do?” Our Lord said—and thus set a wonderful pattern for all of us for the rest of time—“What is that to you? You follow me!”

Want your church to reach people and expand and grow? Get your eyes off what others are doing. Many of them, to tell the truth, are declining at a rate so fast it can hardly be measured. You do not want to take your cues from them. Ask the Lord, “What would you have us to do?” Then do it.

## **6. No plan.**

The typical, stagnant small church is small in ways other than numbers. They tend to be small in vision, in programs, in outreach, and in just about everything else. Perhaps worst of all, they have small plans. Or no plans at all.

The church with no plan—that is, no specific direction for what they are trying to do and become—will content itself with plodding along, going through the motions of "all churches everywhere." They have Sunday School and worship services and a few committees. Once in a while, they will schedule a fellowship dinner or a revival. But ask the leadership, "What is your vision for this church?" and you will receive blank stares for an answer.

When Peter and John were threatened by the religious authorities who warned them to stop preaching Jesus, they returned to the congregation to let them know of this development. Immediately, everyone dropped to their knees and began praying. Notice the heart of their prayer, what they requested: "Now Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to... (what? How they finished this is how we know their plan, their chief focus)... *to speak your word with great boldness.*" (Acts 4:29) When the Holy Spirit filled that room, the disciples "were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (v. 31). Clearly, this means they spoke it into the community, the world around them, and not just to one another.

A number of leaders have shared with me why they think so many small churches do not grow: "They need to focus on the two or three things they do best—not try to be everything to everyone." Some churches need to focus on children's ministry, others on youth or young adults, young families, or even the oldsters. Some will focus on teaching, others on ministry in the community, some on jail and prison ministries, and some on music or women's or men's work. This is not to say that the church should shut down everything else to do one or two things. Rather, they will want to keep doing the basics, but throw their energies and resources, their promotions and prayers and plans, into enlarging and honing two or three ministries they feel the Lord has uniquely called them into.

## **7. Bad health.**

Anyone who has spent time in more than a few churches can see that some are just unhealthy. And by that, we do not mean they are small—they are *sick*. You can be small and healthy; behold the hummingbird.

An unhealthy church is known more by what it does than by a list of characteristics and attributes. A church that runs its preachers off every year or two is unhealthy. A church that is constantly bickering is unhealthy. A church that cannot make a simple decision like choosing the color of the carpet, adopting the next year's budget, or accepting changes in an order of worship may be unhealthy.

So, what is a healthy church? Entire libraries could be filled with books written on the healthy church, and consultants abound ready to assist congregations toward that purpose. But Romans 12 is God's blueprint for a healthy church: Verses 1-2 call for each individual to make a personal commitment to Christ ("present your bodies as a living

sacrifice"); verses 3-8 call for each one to find his/her place of service where they can use their spiritual gifts; and verse 9 through the end of the chapter describes the relationships within a healthy, loving fellowship of believers.

Show me a congregation where members are wholeheartedly committed to Jesus Christ, each is using (or learning to use) their God-given spiritual gifts in the Lord's service, and their fellowship is sweet and active—and I'll show you a healthy church.

### **8. Lousy fellowship.**

This overlaps with the last point, but it deserves a spot by itself. For my money, the best thing a church has to offer individuals and families in the community—other than the saving gospel itself—is a place they will be loved and welcomed and made part of an active, healthy family. It's what we mean by "fellowship."

There are ways to tell if the fellowship in your church is unhealthy: Visitors are basically ignored, even resented in some areas. No one follows up with visitors to let them know they are wanted or to give information on the church. There's no attempt to get people to visit your church in the first place. Everything is orderly in the worship service, but it's the same order you've used since forever. The singing is lifeless, and any departure from the norm is verboten. A new hymn or chorus, a different kind of musical instrument, a testimony here, an interview there, a short drama or video—no sir, not in our church. There's no laughter, nothing spontaneous. The invitation time is tacked on, lifeless, and without any response—ever. The prayers are stale and filled with platitudes.

When the Old Testament prophets called on God's people to "break up the fallow ground"—Hosea 10:12 and Jeremiah 4:3—they wanted to see evidence of brokenness, a willingness to change, a desire to bear new fruit. Fallow ground is soil that has laid unproductive for several seasons. The hard crust requires a deep-turning plow to open it up, and even then the soil may require more preparatory work before it is productive. A church with poor fellowship is not failing to have enough socials and dinners. The church is failing in the most basic of area of discipleship: a failure to love. Jesus said, "By this shall all men know you are my disciples, that you love one another" (John 13:35). The disciple who is close to Christ loves the brethren. As such, a congregation that is unloving toward one another may be said to be far removed from the Lord and in a backslidden state. It's a simple deduction. "Draw near to the Lord and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8).

### **9. A state of neglect permeates the church.**

Not always, but often, a dying church shows signs of its weakening condition by the disrepair of its buildings and the neglect of its appearance. The interior walls haven't been painted in years and bear the collective fingerprints of a generation of children. The carpet is threadbare, the piano's keys stick, the pulpit chairs need reupholstering, and the outside sign is so ugly it would be an improvement if someone knocked it down.

Dying churches do not tend to their business. They let problems fester and divisions go unaddressed. Listen closely and you will hear a leader speak those infamous words: "These things have a way of working themselves out." And so they do nothing, and the church trudges on toward the grave. No one gets saved, no one joins, people drift away,

the community becomes less and less aware of the existence of that little church, and the remaining members complain that people just don't love the Lord the way they used to.

### **10. No prayer.**

It's tempting to make a little joke here and say, "Such churches do not have a prayer," but they could if they chose to. When King Saul was bemoaning the woes that had descended upon him as a result of his rebellion against God, one of his chief complaints was that God no longer heard his prayer. "He inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer..." (I Samuel 28:6) Luke tells us, "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). Pray or quit. Those seem to be the alternatives.

Want to give your congregation a little test, pastor? Next Sunday, call for your people to meet you at the altar for a time of prayer. Do not beg them or cajole them. Just announce it, then walk there yourself, kneel, and begin praying. See if anyone joins you. Notice who comes and pay close attention to who does not. It won't tell you everything you'd like to know about your church, but it will say a lot.

A friend on Facebook requested prayer for his new ministry. When I asked him about it, he responded privately that in addition to pastoring his church, he was working for the state convention in his region. He said, "Almost all our churches in this part of the state are dying. We have buildings that were constructed for hundreds now running 15 or 20." The plan, he said, is to get systems in place to re-evangelize those regions as the old-line churches die off. I hope they don't wait until those churches actually close their doors; a lifeless church can take a long time to give up the ghost.

The best solution would be for those stagnant, dying congregations to awaken and get serious about becoming vibrant again. This would mean taking the unprecedented step of doing whatever it takes to re-establish their witness and presence in the community. Unfortunately, in almost every case I know personally, this doesn't happen. The leaders would rather see their church disappear from the earth than to do anything new or different. That is as sad a sentence as I've written in a long time.

Let us pray. *"Father, we do like our routines and ruts. Forgive us for limiting you by asking you to adapt to us instead of the other way around. Lord, in the words of the old hymn and the older Psalm, 'Wilt thou not revive us again that thy people may rejoice in Thee?' We ask this for Jesus sake. Amen."* (Psalm 85:6)

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