Fifteen Common Barriers to Church Growth

Remember, we should not ask, “What will make our church grow?” Rather, we should ask, “What is keeping our church from growing.” God brings growth automatically when living things are healthy. He just waits on us to remove the barriers. The task of leadership is to find the barriers and then remove them.

1. **Members don’t bring friends to church.** You can’t grow until you have visitors. But members think that visitors looking for us will find us through other means. Members are instinctively embarrassed that the services are not designed for their seeking friends. They feel that the church is designed to meet their needs but not their neighbor’s needs; so they don’t bring them. We must design something that the members can’t wait to bring their friends to. Evaluate every Sunday service on a weekly basis – viewing it through the eyes of a visitor.

2. **People fear that growth will ruin their fellowship; they won’t know everyone.** If that’s the case, we will never grow beyond 200 because after that, it’s impossible to know everyone. Since the average person knows 67 people, then it is imperative to get them involved in a ministry with others of like calling and get them involved in a small group. Churches that grow must first decide to grow – it really begins with desire. Get committed to growth.

3. **Being driven by tradition.** Traditions are not necessarily bad; we make things repetitive because they work. We don’t automatically throw it out because it’s not new, we just don’t automatically accept it either. It’s dangerous when we make methods sacred. It’s also dangerous when we forget WHY we do things. When the horse is dead, dismount. Let dead programs die. Life support systems are very expensive. Business as usual is just not working. We’re getting behind and must change. There are more live births each year than spiritual births. We’re losing ground on the Great Commission. We must not be afraid of change! Moses lost his right to lead when he refused to change. The first time his people needed water in the wilderness, God said to strike the rock. But the next time they needed water, God changed and said to only speak to the rock. Moses couldn’t flow with the change, and lost out. He said, “We’ve never done it that way before.” Confronting the barrier of traditionalism was Jesus’ greatest challenge. We must always ask, “Is this fulfilling its purpose?” Once a year, review each program and do one of three things: re-affirm, refine, or replace. The hardest thing to change is what’s working. But if we want more maximized results, we have to change it before it stops working. (Like pruning rose bushes; pruning takes place before all the roses have died.) We cannot use yesterday’s tools in today’s ministry to meet tomorrow’s challenge.

4. **Trying to appeal to everybody.** We must define our target, then accept the fact that not everyone in the community will connect to our church. McDonald’s knows they won’t appeal to those wanting Chinese food.

5. **Being program-oriented rather than process-oriented.** We have a growth process much like a tree – getting people rooted in their faith, developing the disciplines for spiritual maturity, and discovering their purpose for fruit productivity. Programs become outdated, expensive to run, ineffective, exhausting to volunteers, and unfamiliar to guests.

6. **Emphasizing meetings rather than ministry.** You know that you are askew when your #1 measurement for health is attendance – counting noses instead of the lives being transformed. Meeting-orientation makes people passive spectators and leaves no time for ministry. We don’t need more meetings; we have to meet more needs.

7. **Teaching without application.** Preaching that merely informs but does not transform will stifle a church. The antidote is behavioral preaching – preaching that focuses on obedience. Be doers, not just hearers only. Acts 2 gave us the perfect outline: At the beginning, people said, “What does this mean?” and at the end, the people said, “What must we do?”

8. **People don’t trust their leaders.** Build credibility and earn the right to lead. Gather honest advisors around you because there is wisdom in a multitude of counselors.
9. **Legalism.** Many churches are more interested in keeping rules than winning people to Christ. We must build a climate of acceptance. Start where people are and engage them on their slow journey of faith.

10. **Structured for control rather than for growth.** Too many churches are over-structured. Keep the structure simple. Empower others to make decisions regarding their area of ministry. The pastor must deliberately change his role from being the sole source of ministry to releasing others to minister and make decisions; otherwise, he becomes the bottleneck. There is a limit to how many people can be shepherded by one individual.

11. **One Service.** By starting multiple services, even before another one is really needed, we give more people opportunities to connect and get involved. It’s like putting more hooks in the water. Secret: Only pastors really like large church services!

12. **Small Staff.** Good staff members pay for themselves. If we wait until we can afford them, we might wait a long time. If they join us, those additional folks with whom they connect will support them with their giving. Always be prepared to hire another staff member to take you to the next attendance level. Continue to acquire those who can specialize in one particular area very well – worship, children, hospitality, administration, etc.

13. **Failure to Capitalize on Big Days.** We must deliberately break attendance barriers on days when it is more likely others will come. Plan a big event on a special day and the numbers will go up. Perhaps the numbers will go back down afterwards, but not to the place prior to the event. Big holidays are an obvious time to concentrate on events.

14. **No small groups.** People with real needs tend to fall between the cracks and drift away from church when the source of care is centralized around the pastor’s office. Failure to feel cared for is a common complaint among churches that do not encourage small group participation. By intentionally training new leaders and encouraging everyone’s participation, creating a climate of cell multiplication, the body will become self-responsive – people ministering to one another’s needs out of relationship rather than being assigned by the church office.

15. **Remaining within the same facility.** Project what your needs would be if God allowed you to reach the next level of attendance, then plan for it and move that direction. An over-crowded, or even a comfortably full, facility will plateau a church. But be sure the facility is multi-purpose.