BREAKING NUMERICAL BARRIERS AND REVITALIZING PLATEAUED CHURCHES

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BREAKING NUMERICAL BARRIERS AND REVITALIZING PLATEAUED CHURCHES

In 2007, forty-three percent of Southern Baptist churches were plateaued in their growth and another twenty-seven percent were in decline.¹ Taken together, approximately seventy percent of Southern Baptist churches may need to develop an effective growth plan. Though many of these churches may be able to overcome whatever growth barriers they face if they are willing to make key adjustments in their current practices, some of these churches may be in areas where numerical growth is extremely unlikely.² These churches, according to James Shackelford, “may serve a vital role in the kingdom while remaining steady in membership.”³ Other churches may encounter demographic changes that lead to plateaus in growth. For example, churches that were surrounded by an English-speaking, middle-class, Caucasian demographic during their previous membership increases will have to make changes in their approach to ministry if that population is replaced by a non-English-speaking ethnic demographic.

¹LifeWay Research, “Southern Baptist Convention 2007 Annual Church Profile Summary Tables and Charts,” 3 [on-line]; accessed 14 September 2009; available from http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/files/lwcF_LifeWay_Research_2007_ACP_Summary_Charts_Part_1.pdf; Internet. In this study, plateaued churches were those that either gained or lost no more than ten percent of their membership. Declining churches lost more than ten percent of their membership.

²An example of a church that may find it difficult to grow regardless of willingness and effort on part of the leadership and the laity is one in a rural area where the population is decreasing.

Assuming that a church is located in an area where growth beyond a numerical barrier is possible, there are several factors that must be considered. The goal of this paper is not to offer any specific model because any working model must be contextualized (if that is possible for a given model) to meet the needs of a specific church. Instead, this paper will discuss how churches should break with the past by learning new ways to be effective and developing new attitudes that will enable growth to occur. Then, this paper will offer several key issues, listed by Church Growth scholars, which must be considered by a plateaued church so that it can be revitalized for effective church growth. A third section will discuss the changes necessary for a church to avoid plateaus and move beyond numerical growth barriers. Churches that move beyond growth plateaus must recommit to the Great Commission so that they will be willing to make the necessary changes, so long as they are in line with Scripture, if they intend to grow numerically in keeping with God’s desire for them.

Breaking with the Past

The Downside of Tradition

One reason for plateauing in churches, according to Lyle E. Schaller, is the tendency of churches to remain stuck in the past by continuing to shape their ministries in ways that appealed to those culturally modern and failing to change as the culture has become increasingly postmodern. Daniel Buttry observes that the old traditions, which often need to be replaced with new traditions that speak to a newer generation and a

\[4Bill~Hull,~7~Steps~to~Transform~Your~Church~(Grand~Rapids:~Fleming~H.~Revell,~1993),~33.\
\[5Lyle~E.~Schaller,~44~Steps~off~the~Plateau~(Nashville,~Abingdon,~1993),~32.\]
changing context, still remain because the traditionalists control the decision-making process to ensure that things remain unchanged. 6 If a church is going to move beyond a plateau, it must find forms, rituals, and expressions of authentic biblical Christianity that are appropriate to those it seeks to reach. As Donald A. McGavran puts it, “[G]rowing churches recognize the current social realities and adjust their prayers and growth activities to the real scene.”7

Younger Americans, for example, have developed a consumerist mentality causing them to make decisions about the church they attend based on how effective a particular church is at meeting their needs. This consumerism is accompanied by a postmodern view that truth is determined by one’s experience. Schaller argues that churches who wish to grow by being more effective at reaching these younger generations must focus on quality while at the same time considering the needs of those they are trying to reach and how best to serve those needs. 8 Wade C. Roof comments on how a church can make room for the postmodern generation: “If the church opens up ‘experiential space’ and adjusts to this new generation’s world, it will change significantly in style and program. If it doesn’t, it will face an even more dismal future of membership decline.”9 Today’s pastor is challenged with the task of determining which traditions can and should be changed so that the church can be effective with the younger


8Schaller, 44 Steps off the Plateau, 49-50.

generations while at the same time maintaining a steadfast commitment to God and His word.

**Structural Obstacles to Growth**

To move beyond the trappings of traditionalism so that a church can be more effective at reaching the younger generations, a church must evaluate its structures in terms of their effectiveness in assisting the church in its mission. This is not to say that a church should relinquish sound doctrine like some emerging churches who “aim to become communities in which people feel welcomed to express their concerns for traditional theological positions and encouraged to explore new ways of formulating their faith without condemnation or threat of exclusion.”¹⁰ While remaining committed to sound doctrine, many traditional churches will likely discover some structural obstacles that inhibit growth. While a church’s structures have served and may still serve various ministerial and functional purposes, these structures need to be evaluated for alterations necessary to sustain the growth. For example, a church may still be using primarily evangelistic curriculum in their Sunday Schools when the Sunday Schools are attended only by mature believers. While the idea of having material that is evangelistic may be good and may have served a purpose in the church’s history, the current leadership must reevaluate that decision based on their current situation as well as their envisioned goal.

Commenting on the importance of church structures, George Barna observes that many churches reach a plateau and remain on it because their structures cause the evangelistic

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fervor of the laity, which enabled the church to grow, to dissipate.\textsuperscript{11} For example, members may be less likely to invite new-comers to a small group that already is overcrowded. A clear solution to this problem is to add more small groups.

A pastor who seeks to make any major changes to a church’s structure will likely encounter resistance especially from those who have a lot invested in the church’s current structure. \textit{A recent study of pastors trying to implement changes in Southern Baptist churches finds that forty-nine percent of the pastors say that they encounter resistance from laymen who do not want to lose their power within the church’s current organization.}\textsuperscript{12} This resistance can become even more acute should the visionary pastor seek a change in the bylaws which undergird the church’s structure.

Any changes to a church’s power structure may cause those currently in power to resist such changes. \textit{To overcome this resistance to change, Buttry advises the pastor to lead the church to make small changes to the bylaws based on the needs and frustrations that are already present among the congregation.}\textsuperscript{13} From his experience, this approach has led to openness among the congregation to do bigger changes to the organizational structure. Bill Hull suggests that leaders can overcome resistance by working through relationships, spending quality time with those who are resistant, and developing empathy for them.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11}George Barna, \textit{Turn-Around Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring New Life to an Established Church} (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1993), 21-22.


\textsuperscript{13}Buttry, \textit{Bringing Your Church Back to Life}, 114.

\textsuperscript{14}Hull, \textit{7 Steps to Transform Your Church}, 66.
The Lack of Excitement

Along with discussing the need for churches to move beyond the trappings of traditionalism by examining their structures, many writers who comment on the factors within churches that limit its growth potential include some discussion on the effect of excitement generated by a positive environment or the lack thereof upon the growth of a church. Eddie Gibbs describes the negativism which is often present in a plateaued church: “In situations where there has been little or no substantial growth within living memory the leadership is infected by a ‘failure syndrome’ which instantly attaches a lead weight to every kite which is flown. People have resigned themselves to the fact that apparently ‘nothing works here.’”\(^\text{15}\) In discussing how to overcome this negativity, Charles J. Stevens points to the pastor’s “insight and vision” as being the primary stimulus needed for a church to develop a positive environment where the people are filled with excitement.\(^\text{16}\)

According to Stevens, other factors that influence the environment within a church include the “pastor’s response to the group’s needs, his attitude toward people and ministry, his use of roles and authority, his style of leadership, and his willingness to give the team proper credit for its accomplishments.”\(^\text{17}\) Harry H. Fowler provides a list of ways a pastor can help his church overcome a lack of excitement. He says that a pastor should establish “specific goals,” “preach positive sermons,” “preach challenging


\(^{16}\)Charles J. Stevens, “A Theology of Ministry for Leading a Church to Growth” (D. Min. project, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1986), 103.

\(^{17}\)Ibid.
sermons,” “lead the people to believe in themselves,” and “involve the laity.”

Gibbs encourages leaders who are trying to build excitement to focus on prayer and biblical instruction on church growth while at the same time rebuilding the people’s confidence in God. Even with these practices, the pastor needs to ensure that other aspects required for growth are in place; otherwise, the momentum generated by excitement will dissipate.

The Comfort of Stability

The lack of excitement about growing God’s kingdom is often apparent in churches that have grown comfortable doing business as usual. This stable environment with little change can become quite satisfactory to the current membership as long as their focus is only on getting their needs met. The resulting apathy toward those outside the church causes the growth of the church to stifle. But what happens when the church is confronted by the Great Commission and the call upon all Christians to evangelize non-believers?

The Great Commission calls the church to action. If the church is not prepared to take that action, it will begin to die. To avoid this, the church must make its mission, the Great Commission, the determining factor in all that it does. By allowing the Great Commission to reignite the sense of purpose within the church, the pastor will be providing the church with the “driving power to recycle dreams and goals toward a new level of morale and mission.”

Based on C. Kirk Hadaway’s research of Southern

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Baptist churches, “[g]oal-setting and evangelism are the two most important actions that can take a church off the plateau.”

As churches recommit themselves to the Great Commission, they must realize, as C. Peter Wagner states, “The first price to pay for growth is hard work.” Neither the pastor, the staff, nor the laity can afford to remain comfortable. Rather, the laity must unite behind the leadership by giving their time, talents, and treasures to the church. Wagner adds another cost to the laity who seek to re-center their lives around the Great Commission. He points out that the laity will have give up some of their time spent in the comfort of Christian fellowship and start spending some time developing relationships with non-believers.

Leading Effective Church Growth

The Need for Vision

Escaping the trappings of traditionalism and the comfort of stability requires a visionary pastor who can generate excitement and build momentum for his vision. Unfortunately, many churches often remain on a plateau because their pastor’s vision is limited. A pastor can limit their visionary capacity by focusing too heavily on the current structures that have been put in place for ministry. Carl F. George and Warren Bird state


23 Ibid., 282.
that “a problem-solving focus will not necessarily guide a church to grow significantly. Instead, it is more likely to help a church merely maintain its present circumstances.”

Along with a maintenance mentality, a pastor can also limit his vision by allowing himself to be overworked. This exhaustion may be caused by external factors such as unrealistic expectations of the membership or church structures that place too heavy a burden on the pastor. While these issues need to be addressed if they are present, a pastor also may have some internal issues such as a lack of trust in God’s people to take some of the burden or an inability to relinquish control of the ministry to the laity. These factors, external and internal, will need to be addressed and corrected if the pastor desires to move his church beyond the next growth barrier.

While visionary leadership can be stifled when a pastor is exhausted, it can also be inhibited when the vision is carried forth with the wrong motivations. Bill M. Sullivan declares that pastors who desire for their churches to grow must be careful to ensure that their motivation is to declare the gospel to those outside the church. While Wagner argues that the “starting point” for church growth is the motivation to grow, this motivation to grow must come from a heart that desires to grow God’s kingdom and not a heart that craves the success that is usually accredited to pastors of growing churches. If pastors allow their ego to be their primary motivation so that they can feel successful,


then they are no longer focusing on glorifying God by leading their church to grow; rather, they are simply seeking their own glorification. Such false motivations will take the leader and the membership’s focus off of a vision for growth that glorifies God while growing His kingdom.

The Need for a Plan

Once a pastor has a vision for growth, he is then challenged with the need to develop a plan on how to make that vision a reality. Randy Pope outlines the elements necessary for the production of an effective growth plan:

A ministry plan consists of a clearly defined purpose, vision, and mission and is supported by a biblically sound and culturally relevant philosophy of ministry. It includes a strategically designed infrastructure and well-documented job descriptions. The overall plan is supported with action plans that define goals, specific action steps, timelines, and resources required to accomplish the vision and mission. Implementation of the plan is measured to determine what’s working well and what’s not.27

A recent study by LifeWay reveals that pastors may become more effective in leading their churches to grow “by evaluating church ministries, organizing to reach their goals and planning for the future.”28 This plan must be developed through both prayer and meditation on God’s Word. Through prayer, the pastor will be able to see the next step God has for growing His kingdom through his church. Since Christ Himself said that He would build the Church, the minister has only to connect with God through prayer to


28 Kelly, “LifeWay Research Finds Poor Planning Hinders Small Church Progress.” This research reveals that while eighty percent of Southern Baptist pastors have a clear vision for their church, forty-four percent are unsure why their current strategies are ineffective, and thirty percent do not know where to focus their efforts. Among those surveyed, forty percent say “their church rarely has time to step back and plan appropriately,” and less than sixty percent acknowledge that their church “regularly evaluates methods and results of events and programs.”
learn how the Lord intends to do so (Matt 16:18). The pastor who prayerfully seeks God’s direction for His vision and plans for a particular church will avoid the trap of becoming overly pragmatic by keeping himself and the church focused on God.²⁹

During the process of prayerfully developing a growth plan, the minister must consider how to integrate exaltation, evangelism, and edification so that all of these biblical purposes for the church are accomplished. Elmer L. Towns, John N. Vaughan, and David J. Seifert argue that the church will accomplish its purpose of exalting God so long as it maintains a balanced approach to evangelism of non-believers and edification of the believing congregation.³⁰ Churches may attempt to grow quickly by keeping their focus solely on evangelism, but then the membership will quit maturing and will likely start looking for another church to meet their spiritual needs. Additionally, a church that focuses primarily on evangelism will suffer from a lack of leadership development among the laity and corresponding inability to grow their organization to meet ever increasing needs of an expanding congregation.

For those churches which choose to remain focused on edification of the membership, the result will be an ingrown fellowship where the members are focused only on getting their needs met with little or no thought given to evangelism. While one may argue that a focus on edification automatically leads to evangelistic fervor among the laity, Win Arn and Charles Arn disagree and say that “education that concerns itself with only the spiritual nourishment of its own members contributes significantly to a

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²⁹ Gailyn Van Rheenen, “Contrasting Missional and Church Growth Perspectives,” Restoration Quarterly 48 (2006): 26. Van Rheenen criticizes leaders who have placed all of their attention on planning for growth without seeking God’s will in the process.

³⁰ Elmer L. Towns, John N. Vaughan, and David J. Seifert, The Complete Book of Church
A “self-service mentality” that effectively seals off the Sunday School from the outside world. Churches that seek to remedy this problem may try to add modeling to their teaching techniques just as Jesus did with the disciples. Additionally, they can develop action plans for their members to engage in evangelism along with some accountability measures to encourage members to fulfill the expectations placed upon them.

The Pastor’s Changing Role

Just having a plan and a balanced approach to evangelism, edification, and exaltation is not enough to keep a church off the plateau. One of the primary causes of plateauing within a church is their view of the pastor’s role. A small church is often limited in their growth potential because their pastor takes on the role of therapeutic minister who meets all of the pastoral needs of the membership while at the same time requiring very little from the members with regard to meeting these pastoral needs. Schaller says that a church’s commitment to evangelism wavers when a pastor sees himself as a shepherd who cares for the membership. A. Duane Litfin suggests a pastoral “leader as completer” model whereby the pastor cares for the congregation by enabling the membership to care for those needs that match their skills, gifts, abilities,

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Growth (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1987), 251.


and passions while allowing the pastor to focus his efforts on those areas that the membership is not able to minister effectively.\textsuperscript{33}

The task of caring for people is a vital and biblical aspect in every pastor’s ministry. Regardless of size, every church faces the burden of caring for its people and the difficulty of maintaining a large enough pastoral staff to accomplish this task especially when a church has limited resources. Churches that wish to grow and remain healthy during the process must be careful to make sure that the pastoral staff avoids the burnout caused by increasing numbers of people being cared for by the same number of staff. According to Baker, Brown, and Dale, the presence “of overworked leaders gives church work a burdensome reputation rather than a joyful reputation.”\textsuperscript{34} A pastor who spends all of his time caring for his people will obviously not be able to give significant energy to the task of evangelism. His lack of leadership in this area coupled with his priority on care-giving can quickly lead the membership to view their role as limited only to the receiving of care from the pastor with little or no responsibility (in regards to ministry) to the others members or those outside the church.

For a pastor to be effective at moving a church beyond the 200 barrier, a church may need a leader who meets the qualifications proposed by Wagner. He suggests that growth is more likely to occur with a new pastor who “build[s] relationships with the opinion-makers and permission-granters” and remains focused on making necessary


\textsuperscript{34}Baker, Brown, and Dale, Reviving the Plateued Church, 37.
changes when membership losses occur during the process. This type of leader will not be solely focused on that which he can accomplish by himself; rather, he will look beyond himself to what the other church members can accomplish and how he can lead them toward making their individual contributions. This type of leadership develops the lay leadership who in turn help shoulder the pastor’s responsibility to care for the needs of the membership.

The Staffing Challenge

As a church grows to reach various numerical plateaus, it encounters many staffing challenges. While larger churches may have the necessary resources to hire a very specialized staff to handle the needs of its people, what should a smaller church do once it has moved beyond the ability of its pastor (as its sole staff member)? Schaller observes that many churches around the 200 barrier typically add a secretary and a “generalist” who covers several areas of pastoral responsibility. While this approach to staffing may work, Schaller offers another approach that may be even more effective for the church that envisions long-term growth. He advocates that churches should consider adding multiple “part-time specialists.” This staffing strategy would allow specialized ministers to focus on areas that match their gifts and passions. Another advantage to having multiple specialists, according to Schaller, is the increase in lay involvement which normally occurs in conjunction which adding more staff.

37Ibid., 104.
38Ibid., 106.
The Role of the Laity

Charles Chaney and Ron Lewis state, “No church can grow beyond the ability of the pastoral leader to delegate responsibilities to staff and lay ministers.”39 The solution to the problem caused by a pastoral model that places the majority of the burden of ministry on the pastor requires a change in the philosophy of ministry of both the pastor and the congregation. This solution also requires congregations (especially those in the Southern Baptist Convention) to rekindle their belief in the priesthood of all believers. For the Southern Baptist, the priesthood of all believers, according to J. Terry Young, “mean[s] that believers are united as brothers and sisters in the corporate body of the church, with each fully sharing in the rights and responsibilities in the life and work of the church.”40 While many Southern Baptists may affirm this belief, they must reconsider whether or not their current philosophy of ministry is in line with this doctrine which supports the idea of empowering the laity for ministry. Acknowledging the importance of an empowered laity, Wagner writes, “Pastors of growing churches, whether they be large or small, know how to motivate their laypeople, how to create structures which permit them to be active and productive, and how to guide them into meaningful avenues of Christian service.”41


41 C. Peter Wagner, Your Church Can Grow (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984), 77.
George and Bird assert that the role of a pastor should be shifted from that of a shepherd who does most of the ministry within his church to that of a “rancher.” A “rancher” is a visionary leader who empowers the laity to serve in ministry teams while supervising their work directly or indirectly through other leadership. Both the minister and the member must learn to view the pastor as one who prepares God’s people to minister instead of one who simply ministers. When Paul discusses the equipping gifts, he says that the purpose of these gifts is “to prepare God's people for works of service” (Eph 4:12). Assuming the pastor has one of these equipping gifts, one can argue that a pastor certainly has an obligation to lead his people to engage in ministry. Paul’s declaration also assumes that God’s people, once equipped, will be expected to minister.

To empower the laity, many church growth scholars advocate the necessity of helping the membership learn their spiritual gifts. Commenting on the necessity for education concerning spiritual gifts, Wagner says, “Ignorance of spiritual gift may be a chief cause of retarded growth today. It also may be at the root of much of the discouragement, insecurity, frustration, and guilt that plagues many Christian individuals and curtails their total effectiveness for God.” Fowler suggests that churches who are attempting to break the 75 barrier need to empower the laity by helping them learn their spiritual gifts.

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42 George and Bird, How to Break Growth Barriers, 91-92.
43 Ibid.
44 C. Peter Wagner, Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow (Glendale, CA; Regal, 1979), 32.
45 Fowler, Breaking Barriers of New Church Growth, 47.
In addition to shifting the burden of ministry from the pastor to the congregation, the pastor must also guide the church to form deeper relationships among themselves. When a church is small, the membership is able to develop a very deep relationship with the pastor whereby they can get their pastoral needs met. As the church grows to around one hundred members, the pastor will be unable to care for each member effectively. By developing strong bonds between the members, the pastor will empower the membership to care for each other. While the members must be incorporated into friendship networks, these networks can become a hindrance to growth according to Daniel V. A. Olson. His research reveals that churches are less likely to grow when the members have long tenure and multiple friends within the church.

**Overcoming Growth Barriers**

While many authors agree on the growth-limiting factors that have been mentioned so far, there is a wide range of opinions on the exact number of members required before a church reaches a growth barrier. Thom S. Rainer typifies this lack of consensus when he states that “[o]ne middle-sized church may have 350 in attendance while another has 800.” His comments are based on the commonly-held view among

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46 Ibid., 55-56.


Church Growth writers that the numerical growth barriers are impossible to predict exactly for any particular church.

The 200 Barrier

Many church growth scholars acknowledge growth barriers that limit the numerical growth before reaching the 200 barrier. Several factors are critical for a church to reach the 200 barrier. First, the leader must have a vision for growth and a commitment to that vision as evidenced by a willingness to change various aspects of the church’s organization and leadership model as the church grows. This leader may need to be a shepherd at first when the church is small especially if the membership is filled with new believers, but gradually the leader will need to transfer ministerial responsibilities to the laity and other staff.

During the initial stages of growth before the church reaches the 200 barrier, the lack of staff and resources forces the leadership to either try to meet every need which leads to exhaustion and results in reduced quality in regard to the ministerial endeavors of the minister. To avoid these problems, Sullivan encourages these smaller churches to focus on just a few things at first so that ministerial excellence can be achieved.50 His advice is based on his observation that churches that do so tend to grow rapidly so long as they focus on the activities that are most critical to their growth.

Another crucial step for churches that desire to reach the 200 barrier and beyond is the establishment of small groups.51 Wagner asserts that “[t]he major

50 Sullivan, Ten Steps to Breaking the 200 Barrier, 60.

51 Small groups that meet the various pastoral needs of the laity can have a multitude of purposes. Some may be for fellowship, discipleship, ministry, prayer, etc.
difference between a church under the 200 barrier and one over the 200 barrier is fellowship groups.” McGavran observes that “[c]ongregational growth occurs best where there are many subcultures of belonging.” Small groups help the minister accomplish the task of caring for the people by providing accountability and encouragement for each member. As group members form bonds with one another, they increasingly find a majority of their pastoral needs met through these relationships and the church leader will be free to focus on the vision for growth. As the pastor begins to empower the laity to perform various ministerial functions, these small groups will provide the membership with a stable environment of personal support.

Developing a network of small groups also helps churches transition from being one big family to being a community of families. Small churches often view themselves as a big family due to the deep fellowship that develops between the members. This deep fellowship, however, begins to fade as a church grows beyond the ability of its people to have deep fellowship with such a large group of people. To regain this deep fellowship, structural changes will need to occur that allow each member to belong to a family within the church. This is where a network of small groups can assist the church by facilitating its ability to grow numerically while still meeting the needs of members.

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52 C. Peter Wagner, Church Planting for a Greater Harvest (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), 130.

Beyond the 200 Barrier

After reaching the 200 barrier, a church has usually overcome the trap of becoming an ingrown fellowship but continues to struggle with inadequate staffing and resources. While the church can add more staff, it will be constantly constrained by its financial resources or the lack thereof. The lack of dedicated staff who specialize in critical roles will ultimately cause the church to suffer from poor administration as it continues to grow. To help relieve this situation, a visionary pastor can build excitement about the vision for growth and lead the people to become more faithful in their giving.

As the church grows to the point that the facilities are beginning to limit growth, the leadership will face a challenge of how to manage the church’s current facilities in order to maximize growth while at the time developing and implementing plans for enlarging the church’s facilities by expansion, acquisition, or even relocation.

Many writers, including George and Bird, suggest that the parking capacity is more critical than the seating capacity. While a church can hold multiple services and offer Sunday School at different times, their parking capacity will be strained when both the Sunday School and the worship service are occurring at the same time. Another issue related to the building capacity is the amount of seating available for the worship service. George and Bird warn that churches that exceed eighty percent of their seating capacity will likely encounter difficulty in their attempts to grow further.

Carnegie Samuel Calian, “Building a Visionary Church: An Organizational Theology for the Congregation,” *Theology Today* 52 (1996): 486. Calian observes that churches with excessive financial resources are more likely to resist change. While a church’s resources play a role in its ability to grow, other factors such as a church’s commitment to the Great Commission are clearly important.

George and Bird, *How to Break Growth Barriers*, 137.

Ibid.
As a church continues to grow beyond the 200 barrier, Bill M. Sullivan believes that “a leader’s ability to develop an expansive infrastructure” is the most crucial skill (excluding prayer) required of the leader who desires to grow the church. This ability becomes even more necessary to address the growth barriers of churches that move beyond the 400 barrier. McIntosh provides a list of some of these barriers: “[p]oor assimilation,” “[i]ncreased bureaucracy,” “[p]oor communication,” and “[l]ack of member care.” In a study of mainline denominations that have been able to continue to grow, Mark Sommers offers evidence that churches that are willing to “restructure and revise” their current methods will continue to grow in the 21st century.

The leadership structure may include a governing board, a staff, and other entities. The presence and purpose of these leadership groups are critical to the growth of a church. A healthy board is crucial to the growth of the church because it usually includes “the primary donors, the primary influencers, the primary recruiters of volunteer energies, and even the primary conduits for reaching large segments of unchurched people.”

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57 Sullivan, *Ten Steps to Breaking the 200 Barrier*, 14. Sullivan acknowledges the importance of evangelism but argues that many evangelistic churches fail to have adequate structures in place to care for needs of those evangelized. As church increasingly fails to meet the needs of its people, growth becomes stifled. If, however, the leader plans ahead for this numerical growth by developing and redeveloping organizational structures, then the church can continue to realize growth from its evangelistic efforts.

58 Gary L. McIntosh, *One Size Doesn’t Fit All: Bringing Out the Best in Any Size Church* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1999), 130.

59 Mark Sommers, “Turnaround in Mainline Churches: An Examination of Three Established Mainline Churches that Have Experienced Dramatic Numerical Growth over the Last Ten Years” (D. Min. project, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998), 42-43.

60 George and Bird, *How to Break Growth Barriers*, 145.
Bill describes a healthy board as one that commits to the Great Commission and models it in their daily lives. Before deciding on the creation of a governing board, churches must consider which (if any) entity other than the pastoral staff within their church should have spiritual authority and whether or not that entity is placed above or below those that serve other functions. For example, if a church allows the bulk of the power to reside with the administrators, then its focus will likely be on maintaining the current structures. However, if the spiritual authorities, such as a governing board, a deacon body, or the senior pastor, are the primary authority, then the church will be led to keep their eyes on the spiritual purpose of the church, which is the Great Commission.

Within the Southern Baptist Convention, very few churches rely on boards to guide them in the leadership process. For the most part, Southern Baptist churches are either congregation-led (forty-two percent) or pastor-led (thirty percent). Among these churches, only eight percent of those that move beyond the 250 barrier still remain

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61Ibid., 146. One may consider whether or not a typical Southern Baptist church has a governing board. Most churches, even Southern Baptist, have some type of informal power structure which will usually become more formal with time. For the Southern Baptist church, the governing board is probably the deacon body. Other churches may have a board of elders which serve this function. Still others may have laymen form a governing board. Depending on the powers given to this board, a church may need to consider the biblical mandates regarding the giving of authority to either women or non-elders.

62Hull, 7 Steps to Transform Your Church, 59.

63Mark Kelly, “LifeWay Research Examines Hot Topics in Southern Baptist life,” LifeWay Research [on-line]; accessed 14 September 2009; available from http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0%2C1703%2CA%25253D168287%252526M%252526D200906%2C00.html; Internet. Mark Kelly finds that seven percent of Southern Baptist churches are led by a board, while four percent were led by deacons and six percent were led by committees. Kelly’s research reveals the lack of consistency between Southern Baptist churches regarding their leadership structure and the decision-making process.
pastor-led and only twenty-four percent remain congregation-led. While both of these may be acceptable, a church that desires to grow beyond the 200 barrier will need to consider other leadership structures such as boards supported by ministry teams/committees.

The existence of a board enables the leadership to have contact with people who are acutely aware of how their congregation will react to decisions and how best to implement decisions for maximum effectiveness. The presence of this board also increases the confidence of the laity in the leadership because they know that the leadership is held accountable. While a church is small, the governing board will often engage directly in church management functions. But as a church grows, the church will begin to staff themselves with people who will be charged with handling these responsibilities. The governing board then holds the staff accountable in regard to their job descriptions by developing and enforcing the related policies. As the governing board takes on the role of policy maker and the staff takes the responsibility of providing direction to the membership, the laity must increasingly take up a ministerial role. If this does not occur, the growth will be stifled when the capacity of staff to render care becomes exhausted.

The Communication Barrier

While the structure of church is an important element in its ability to bypass growth barriers, it is no more important than the communication processes employed by the church to keep its leadership in sufficient contact with themselves and the

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Ibid.
congregation. Gibbs laments that the leadership of many churches fails to effectively communicate with the membership except when they wish to assign more work to them or when they are looking for someone to blame.\textsuperscript{65} This problem can easily occur in a church where the staff is overworked and the laity has not been empowered. An overworked leadership team will not have the time necessary to develop relationships and maintain healthy lines of communication with themselves and the congregation. To solve this problem and keep the lines of communication open, a pastor needs to consistently meet with his leadership team and mandate that his leaders meet with the leaders and volunteers that work directly with them. A pastor can go even further in overcoming communication barriers to growth by holding formal and informal meetings with the congregation and keeping the church’s website updated regularly.

**The Growing Complexity**

After researching Southern Baptist churches that have overcome numerical plateaus after a period of stagnation, Hadaway found evidence that larger churches are less likely to overcome obstacles that prevent them from growing than are small churches.\textsuperscript{66} Despite the increasing complexity, a large church can grow beyond the plateau if the previously mentioned variables are in place. Assuming these variables have been addressed correctly, a large church will still encounter many of the same difficulties it faced while reaching beyond the 200 barrier only with increasing complexity. The larger a church becomes the more critical the visionary capacity of the leader becomes.

\textsuperscript{65}Gibbs, *I Believe in Church Growth*, 424

\textsuperscript{66}Hadaway, “From Stability to Growth,” 187.
The leader of a church that reaches and passes the 1,000 barrier will constantly have to deal with the ever-increasing complexity of administering pastoral care to such a large group. Staff will need to be added along with policies to govern the staff making oversight and professionalism required of a staff for a growing church that much more difficult.

Large churches also face a communication obstacle caused by the overwhelming numbers of people and the inability of the staff to develop relationships with so many. While appropriate organizational structures and lay leadership may alleviate this problem, the oversight and development of the structures and lay leadership to accommodate a growing church requires tremendous insight and vision from the pastor. In order to focus on the vision and direction of the church as a whole, the role of the pastor, according to Towns, will shift away from being a manager of the pastoral staff around the 1,000 barrier. As the church continues to grow, the organizational structures and the various systems in place must be constantly monitored for their effectiveness in rendering pastoral care to every member. The growth of the church will quickly begin to wane when members are no longer receiving adequate care.

**Conclusion**

In the 21st century, churches will continue to face increasing complexity caused by the changing demographics and the cultural shift to postmodernism. In those churches who navigate successfully between these two extremes while at the same time

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68Ibid., 140.
remaining firmly committed to the Great Commission in both word and deed, the pastoral staff will be challenged with the burden of ministering to a growing congregation and the challenge of avoiding numerical plateaus. For these pastors to be effective in keeping their church off these plateaus and other pastors who are tasked with the burden of revitalizing a church that has been stuck on a plateau, the Great Commission must become the primary motivation of the pastor, the staff, and the membership so that they will have the resolve to make the necessary changes required to accomplish the pastor’s vision for growth.
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