

Hindrances To Church Growth

Introduction. The growth of the church after Acts 2 was phenomenal. The gospel was new and it was confirmed by miraculous signs. But over the centuries, its growth slowed dramatically. Market research tells us that as a market gets more saturated with a product or service, growth potential decreases. The church is not immune to these tendencies. As society is more saturated with differing religious thought, it does make it more difficult to spread the gospel.

Having said all that, these are forces we cannot control. However, there are subtle growth barriers that tend to go unnoticed or unaddressed in stagnant churches that can and should be corrected. What we mean by “church growth” 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 are 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 cannot expect to grow.

Great results can truly be accomplished in a smaller congregation. The following reasons are not in the order of importance or prevalence, and there are possibly other reasons individual churches might not be growing.

I. Inferiority Complex

- A. Small congregations often are stymied by inferiority complexes. “We can’t do anything because we’re small. We don’t have lots of money like the bigger churches in town.” So, they set small goals and ask little from their members.
- B. Feelings of inferiority can be found in any size congregation. Want your congregation to reach people and expand and grow? Get your eyes off what other groups are doing. The remedy is to dig into the New Testament and ask, “Lord, what do you want us to do?” Peter said, “Lord, what about John here? What do you want him to do?” The Lord said — and thus set a wonderful pattern for all of us forever — “What is that to you? You follow me” (John 21:20-22). We will be judged on what we can do, not on what we can’t (Matthew 25:14-30).

II. Unsupported Leaders

- A. A congregation needs leadership. Anyone who has spent time in business meetings know that the discussion centers on the minutest of physical matters, not the deeper spiritual matters. Elders can truly take a congregation to the next level of spirituality and service.
- B. However, to say the work of an elder is hard is understating it incredibly. It is discouraging to see people who you love and care for stray from God. It hurts to see them damage the church Christ died for. Action must be taken and then supported by the members of the flock (1 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6).
- C. Furthermore, a congregation cannot be critical and nit-picking of everything the elders do. This is not to dissuade constructive criticism given in the proper spirit, but you have selected worthy men, and you need to trust them to do their work (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 5:17-18; Hebrews 13:7, 17).

III. No Plan

- A. The typical, stagnant small congregation 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.
- B. 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 and going through the motions. They have Bible classes and worship services and every once in a while, they will schedule a gospel meeting or have a get together. But ask the members, “What do you want this congregation to be in the future?” and you will receive blank stares for an answer.
- C. Churches in the New Testament were exceptional in planning and promoting the work of Christ. Antioch sent out teachers (Acts 13:1-3; cp. Philippians 4:15-16) and Philadelphia had an open door for teaching (Revelation 3:8; cp. 1Thessalonians 1:8). They were active and loved the truth. What God does not want is lukewarmness (Revelation 3:15-16).
- D. 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 began praying (Acts 4:29, 31). They spoke the word of God into the community, and not just to one another.

IV. Bad Health

- A. A congregation can be small and healthy, but an unhealthy congregation is known more by what it does than by a list of characteristics and attributes. A congregation that runs its preachers off every year or two is unhealthy. A congregation that lets problems fester and divisions go unaddressed 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.
- B. Visitors are basically ignored, even resented in some areas. No one follows up with visitors to let them know they are wanted. There is no attempt to get people to visit the congregation in the first place. No one is saved, no one joins, people drift away, the community becomes less and less aware of the existence of that congregation, and the remaining members complain that people just do not love the Lord the way they used to. Everything may be orderly in the service, but the singing is lifeless, and any departure from the norm is forbidden. There is no earnest enjoyment. The invitation time is tacked on, lifeless, and without any response. The prayers are stale and filled with cliches.
- C. Not always, but often, a dying congregation shows signs of its weakening condition by the disrepair of its buildings and the neglect of its appearance. The interior walls have not been painted in years and bear the collective fingerprints of a generation of children. The carpet is threadbare, the pews need reupholstering, and the outside sign is so ugly it would be an improvement if someone knocked it down.
- D. So, what is a healthy congregation? Romans 12 is God’s blueprint for it: vv. 1-2 call for each individual to make a personal commitment to Christ; vv. 3-8 call for

each one to find his/her place of service where they can use their talents; and vv. 9-21 describe the relationships within a healthy, loving group of Christians.

- E. When the Old Testament prophets called on God's people to "break up the fallow ground" (Hosea 10:12; Jeremiah 4:3), they wanted to see a willingness to change and a desire to bear new fruit. A congregation with poor health is not failing to have enough social events. The church is failing in the most basic of area of discipleship: a failure to love (John 13:35; 1 John 3:10-14). 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.
- F. Show me a congregation where members are wholeheartedly committed to Jesus Christ, each is using their talents in the Lord's service, and their relationships with one another are agreeable and active and I will show you a healthy congregation.

Conclusion. The best solution would be for stagnant, dying congregations to awaken and become vibrant again. This would mean taking the unprecedented step of re-establishing its presence in the community. Unfortunately, in almost every case, this does not happen. So many buildings that were constructed for hundreds now have 30 or 40. A lifeless congregation can take a long time to give up the ghost (cp. Psalm 85:6).

No one can promise that just because a congregation wants to grow, it will. However, I can guarantee you that if it doesn't, it won't (Luke 15:1-10). But congregations could survive if they chose to. When Saul was bemoaning the woes that had descended on him as a result of his rebellion against God, one of his chief complaints was that God no longer heard his prayer (1 Samuel 28:6), but Jesus tells us to never stop praying (Luke 18:1). Pray or quit. Those are the alternatives.