

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Breaking the 800 Barrier

One of the transitions that takes place as a church plateaus between 400 and 800 in size is the way the senior pastor is viewed by the congregation.

At this level people understand that the pastor is a leader, but lingering expectations require the pastor to stay personally involved in a number of ways, especially with those who have attended the church for years. In effect the pastor takes on the role of a player coach.

“As a church grows beyond eight hundred in worship attendance, team building becomes an important skill for staff members to employ.”

Staff organization and relationships develop slowly as a church grows. As staff members are added over the years, each one reports directly to the senior pastor. This arrangement of staff works well when the total number of staff members is small, normally up to about seven staff members, but as the staff is enlarged it becomes difficult for the pastor to directly relate to each one.

In the early years of a church's growth, particularly when the church is under four hundred in worship attendance, staff members are hired to “do” ministry, and staff are expected to be competent practitioners. As a church grows beyond eight hundred in worship attendance, team building becomes a more important skill for staff.

Smaller churches organize by placing people onto committees. While this involves a large number of people, over time the committees become bureaucratic and impede ministry. Unless the church reorganizes to reflect the dynamic of a larger church, the ministry may grind to a halt.

When smaller churches design their initial board structures, members are

recruited to make decisions on behalf of the church. This works well because the church is small enough that board members can meet once or twice a month for a limited amount of time, understand the needs of the ministry, and make appropriate decisions.

However, as the church grows larger, it becomes increasing difficult for a board to grasp the totality of everything that takes place in a church. Meetings start taking more time and meet more often as the board attempts to gain a good enough understanding of the issues to make wise decisions. As might be expected, decisions take longer to make, and the church ministry slows down due to the slow response regarding decisions from the board. In some churches the board is so slow in making decisions that it gains a reputation for not being able to make a decision.

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Staff members are team builders and specialists.

Start new groups, classes, and ministries.

For a church to grow beyond the eight hundred level, at least six key points of transition must be addressed.

First, the church must begin to define the pastor's role as that of a leader rather than manager or a care giver.

The congregation and lay leaders must come to the realization and acceptance of the fact that the pastor simply cannot do it all. Members of the congregation who prefer a smaller or middle-sized church need to release the small and medium sized church mentalities that expect the pastor to be personally involved in everyone's lives or administer every detail of the church's organizational structure.

Second, the make up of the staff team must change.

No longer are staff needed who are only able to do the ministry themselves, but staff must be able to build a larger program or ministry around their particular specialty. The staff team must change from being a group of practitioners who are good at doing the ministry, to a team of specialists who are excellent at designing ministries, which they lead.

Third, the church must begin to focus on leadership development.

In large part the church will not grow unless additional leaders are developed to help support the enlarging program. If the church continues to grow, but leaders are not developed, eventually leaders will burn out. As leaders burn out, programs will collapse and the church will decline.

Fourth, the church must develop new ministries, programs, groups, and classes.

As newcomers start attending the church, they bring with them new needs, interests, and desires. For a church to continue growing, it is

crucial to identify what these new needs are and to build ministry to meet them.

Fifth, by far the major issue for a church to grow larger than 800 is to shift care giving to lay persons.

Staff members will not be able to keep up with the personal needs that people bring to the church. The large number of people results in too many people needing counseling, too many couples wanting to get married, and too many people in the hospital for the pastoral staff to take care of them all. Care giving must be turned over to the lay persons or the church will stop growing.

Sixth, board members must release decision-making to the pastoral staff.

Growing beyond eight hundred takes place as decision-making for day-to-day decisions is given to the pastoral staff. Board members become responsible for setting policy, while allowing the staff to take care of everyday issues. This requires the board to trust the staff members and to hold staff accountable for doing their ministries well.

(Adapted from *Take Your Church to the Next Level* by Gary L. McIntosh to be released in October 2009)



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