



REACHING 125 IN NEW CHURCH ATTENDANCE

A Church Planting Resource

Provided by

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&

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REACHING 125 IN NEW CHURCH ATTENDANCE

When your church reaches the point where it is approaching 125 regular participants, there are some drastic changes that will begin to take place. How they are confronted will depend to a great extent on the church being able to break through this numerical barrier. Carl S. Dudley has said, "In a big world, the small church has remained intimate. In a fast world, the small church has been steady. In an expensive world, the small church has remained plain. In a complex world, the small church has remained simple. In a rational world, the small church has kept feeling. In a mobile world, the small church has been an anchor. In an anonymous world, the small church calls us by name". That is a wonderful trait of a small church, but realistically it is also one of the reasons it stays small! It is astounding to realize that 90 percent of all churches today are not growing, and that churches with 101-200 total members 50 percent of them have plateaued. Another 19 percent have declined, leaving only 31 percent of these churches that are growing.

So how can a small church grow into a big church? This question lies at the center of the small church problem. The answer is found in three apparent contradictions, yet for most small churches, the same four answers should be given regardless of their apparent discrepancies. This small church has grown. This small church can't grow. This church could give up its smallness and change into a larger congregation.

In smaller congregations, several functions are important in helping new members become part of the congregation. These functions have been referred to by Kurt Lewin and Carl S. Dudley as the gatekeeper, the patriarch, and the matriarch. They can be identified by the following summations.

The gatekeepers linger around the edge of the church meetings and congregational worship. They are often older, often male. Although they usually do not have positions of leadership, they enjoy greeting everyone, especially visitors. They like to know everyone and everything, but they avoid being at the center of events. One pastor reports that "During the sermon they go outside, just to talk." They may not agree with what the church is doing, but they enjoy explaining it to others. Gatekeepers will be found near the "gates" of the group. More likely, they will find you. Gatekeepers are often seen as busybodies because they want to know everything but take so little initiative in personal leadership.

In the process of adoption, the functions of gatekeepers and patriarchs/matriarchs are essential. Gatekeepers are the matchmakers at the door, or keep a

watchful eye from the choir loft. They may not embody the values of the church or carry the weight of leadership. But they are gifted with the pleasure of communication--gab. They like to talk to anyone, especially visitors. The gatekeepers interpret the church to prospective members, sometimes with a glad hand; but at other times they lock the doors. If the gatekeepers like the match of church and visitor, often being welcomed fully into the church is realized.

The patriarchs and matriarchs are at the center of the church. They sit in the center of the sanctuary, and they feel in the center of the congregation. They may have wealth and be involved in many activities, or they may have passed their prime. They may be friendly or aloof. One pastor describes a matriarch as "gruff on the outside, but a very caring person." They may no longer sit on the official boards of the church. But they have lived through the historical moments of the church. They remember when things were different, and "how we got to where we are."

Matriarchs and patriarchs are often difficult to work with, especially in the introduction of new programs. They are the informal officers who accept the new members into the family. They complete the process of adoption by sharing the church history with the new members. New members know they are accepted when they have heard the stories from the elders of the church family. New members do not really belong until they have appreciated the stories and accepted the "old folks" who shared them.

In Carl S. Dudley's book Making the Small Church Effective, he writes about particular personalities found in the Gatekeepers, matriarchs, and patriarchs. I share them simply for observation.

The Storyteller: He is the living historian who may embellish for the pleasure of the listeners.

The First Sergeant of the Lord: This individual makes it clear that he is not really in charge, but the one who is in charge is "not immediately available." And that he is only making decisions "according to policy."

The Mr. Executive Order: He functions just a little lower than God or the pastor, depending how much "authority" he requires to get what he

desires.

The Early Bird: This person is always early and one of the chief cheerleaders for the church.

The Scorekeeper: He has been called the referee in some congregations, but his job is to see who is winning.

The Sparkplug: This person usually carries two buckets with him. One is water to put out the potentially destructive fires for his comrades. The other is kerosene to make his opposition burn into destruction.

The Peacemaker: This is a quality that needs to be promoted in the church. It is the unifying quality that keeps things together.

The Bellringer: Some call him the clock watcher. This is the one who reminds the pastor that it is time to quit and that there is no such thing as a bad short sermon.

Breaking some innate long held beliefs about why churches exist will be one of the first barriers that will need to be confronted when it comes to church growth in a 125 participant fellowship. Many an individual believes that the small

church has already grown bigger than God ever intended for it to be. If the church is defined by the number of people who know and care about one another, by name, then the small church has already grown. For those who combine the classes of gatekeepers, patriarch, or matriarchs, they see the real strength of the small church as the ability to know, or know about everyone else who participates. In a small church everyone has a particular place. They have an exact place to sit, and an exact place in the social fabric of the congregational structure.

In larger congregations this social fabric begins to change somewhat or even break down. This usually begins to appear in the church approaching the 125 participant barrier. In larger congregations, the subgroups are considerably smaller than the whole congregation of a small church: a fellowship group may have thirty or forty members; a committee or a study group may have fifteen or twenty participants; a prayer cell or a sharing group may not tolerate more than eight or ten people. In larger congregations, members may know persons in one or more other groups. In the small church, everyone knows, or knows about, one another.

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It is interesting that most church members usually claim that they really desire that their church grow. Outsiders, and some insiders, whisper uncomplimentary reasons why they believe that small churches can't grow. They say that they are lazy, and small in vision. They note the lack of a "full church program," and urge the addition of particular activities to attract new members. Sometimes they identify the problem with a style of leadership, or the motives of particular people: the officers are afraid of losing their position, or the congregation is "allergic" to new faces.

In their classic study, Small Town in Mass Society, Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman point out the limited prospects for membership growth in a relatively stable community. They designate two sorts of adults who are not church members (the majority of the community): the first are the people "who look like good prospects, but don't respond," and the others are people whose life-style does not attract the invitation to join. In short, they are the intransigents and the untouchables, which is not a very promising choice.

Still the basic obstacle to growth lies in the satisfaction factor of the present church membership. Intimacy in a small church is not by accident, it is by

intent. The essential character of the small church is this capacity to care about people personally. The small church cannot grow in membership size without giving up its most precious appeal, its intimacy. Many members of small churches unconsciously feel that they can't absorb new faces without redesigning the fabric of the group. Lyle Schaller states the small church is already much larger than similar kinds of caring groups. One of my church members who is a chemist, uses the phrase "supersaturated" to describe a solution in which the concentration of the solid dissolved in that liquid is abnormally high! The same can be said about the small church. It is a supersaturated body with more participants than regular face-to-face encounter groups can hold. The result is that members often feel the strain. They feel that they cannot receive new members without losing touch with those whom they already know. They cannot make a radical change in the size of the church without losing their motivation for belonging. In the number of people who they can embrace in Christian care, the members feel, often they can embrace in Christian care, the members feel, often unconsciously, that they have reached their limit. They cannot grow because, in a word, they feel "stuffed."

Members in some small churches effectively counteract anything the pastor does to make them grow. If a member leaves the church due to a job transferal, replacements can come in, but growth is almost impossible. The point to consider at this stage is the small church willing to change its style of caring (small group structured) for the goal of financial stability? No small church can grow while it remains "our church." It is a choice often made in the unconscious.

CAN A SMALL CHURCH BECOME A LARGER CHURCH

The answer to this question is yes. A resounding yes! Rapid membership growth is possible for many small churches. A substantial minority of small churches could double their membership in the next few years. Rapid membership growth depends less on community potential, more on the values and attitudes of church members. Members of the congregation must want to grow so much that they are willing to give up the satisfactions of knowing, or knowing about, everyone else in the congregation. They must sacrifice the satisfactions of being a small church.

The difference is very clear. Members of larger, multicelled churches cannot know each person in the congregation. They do not expect to know everyone.

Larger churches attract and assimilate members through several small units that are "hungry" for members to share the common task. New members do not join the whole church, but become attached to their group. When a group attracts so many members that it becomes unwieldy, the group subdivides to provide space for more new members. Like cells of the human body, the church body has grown by division of large cells into two or more smaller cells.

Most membership growth programs have been designed for large congregations with different groups and diverse interests. These programs have been particularly effective in suburban communities where the population is management oriented and highly mobile. Congregations have taken great pride in a full church program, from preschool care to programs for the elderly. This program demands a vast variety of social cells, each receptive to new members to fill the necessary functions. The more cells, the more members: the congregation grows by dividing.

Dividing is one activity that the single-cell church refuses to do. A church program with something for everyone is unnecessary when everyone shares in

whatever happens. Members are either present or are immediately informed by the grapevine. Additional church activities are either exhausting or divisive. Growth by division is subversive to the essential satisfactions of belonging to the whole church.

Advocates of the Church Growth movement have stated quite boldly that it is an imperative to grow numerically. C. Peter Wagner writes: "I wish to disassociate myself from the big-church-small-church debate...The optimum size of each church depends primarily on its philosophy of ministry. Churches, much like people, have personalities that set them apart from another." That sounds affirmative, but Wagner continues: "But whether a church is large or small, it should be a growing church...Healthy large churches and healthy small churches are evangelistically effective." He goes on to note the implications: "If smaller churches are growing they eventually will become large churches. Just as every river was once a stream, every large church was once a small church. When this happens, new small churches will continually be needed."

Wagner describes the growing church, with levels of participation. Everyone shares in the large celebration, where anonymity is not bad at all. A smaller

group can be gathered into the congregation, as a fellowship circle of about two hundred worshipers. Last, there is the Christian cell, which is so close to a family situation that it can be called a "kinship circle" to contract it from the membership circle and the fellowship circle.

That's the logic of church growth, and it works. But the small church must be "converted" to believe that the change is worth the cost. One pastor at a conference on methods of evangelism observed that "any of these methods, if used conscientiously, would turn the small church into a large church, and that's the one thing most small congregations don't want to see happen." Members of the small church know the alternatives.

Members who joined large and small churches were compared and interviewed in a careful study by Allan Wicker. Both groups of new members agreed that large churches have better church schools, more formal worship, more efficient committee organization, and so forth. But they also both agreed that in the small congregation, the members spend more time at church, work harder, know the pastor better, and seem to care more. Each group separately seemed more satisfied with the choice that they had made in the church that they had joined.

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In a small church, membership growth means a loss of contact with the whole body of the congregation. The members must give up knowing everyone, for the sake of sharing with many more people whom they can never know. Even when members have agreed to try to get their church to grow, they often find that the heart resists.

When the community has growth potential, any congregation can grow--if the members are willing to let go of their satisfactions in being close to one another. A few of the small churches are changed into larger churches, with full programs and ministries for everyone. But keep clearly set in your mind they are not acting like small churches anymore!

STRENGTHS OF CHURCHES APPROACHING 125 PARTICIPANTS

In order for churches to break the 125 participant barrier there are some perspectives that need to be considered. The strength is the first perspective to be observed. What are the strengths, then, of a 125 participant church? There is some generalization, but many, if not most small churches fit into the majority of these categories.

A WELL RESPECTED PASTOR

The majority of Churches averaging 125 participants, have pastor's that are well respected by their parishioners and community alike.

A WELL LOCATED FACILITY

Around the 125 participant church you begin to find that location is an important strength in its ministry. Usually these facilities are positioned at a highly visible section of the community.

A STABLE AND CAPABLE LAY LEADERSHIP

For a church to exist when it has 125 participants or less, there is a stable group of individuals within the fellowship that are capable of directing the functions and ministries of the church.

A PHYSICAL CAMPUS WITH ROOM TO EXPAND

Good facilities that have room for the fellowship to grow is always a test of a



church desiring expansion. The church that does have such room for expansion could get caught in the mire of funding the building needed for growth.

A HIGH VISITOR FLOW RATIO

For Churches to break the 125 participant barrier, a high influx of visitors is needed. Churches that possess this strength will find it a lot easier to grow.

A SOLID FINANCIAL PLATFORM

Church growth not only requires increase numerically in people, it requires increase financially as well. Additionally, some degree of added giving potential must be likely.

A STRONG SOCIAL MIX

Congregations need a strong solid mixture of what the demographic world calls white collar and blue collar workers.

AN INTACT SUNDAY SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

Many churches realize that to grow beyond the 125 participant barrier it will require a Sunday School structure that is functioning effectively.

ADDITIONAL PROPERTY FOR EXPANSION

Not only must buildings have reason for growth, but additional land needs to be available often to expand on.

THREE ENTRANCE POINTS OR MORE

Churches that break the 125 barrier in church growth have more than two entrance points. Many churches have two, worship and preaching. Growing churches desire as many entrance points as possible. Examples could be a preschool program, a youth department, a singles department, children's church and church choir.

A MINDSET AMONG LAITY FOR GROWTH

Regardless of pastoral desire if a congregation really does not want to grow it will not! Therefore a growth mindset among the laity is extremely important.

OBSTACLES FOR CHURCHES APPROACHING 125 PARTICIPANTS

In order for the small church to break the 125 participant plateau, several obstacles to growth must be addressed.

THE OBSTACLE OF AGE

The average age of a congregation needs to be addressed. If for instance the church has an average age above the late fifties, it is quickly losing the ability to attract young couples.

THE OBSTACLE OF ONE PROFESSIONAL STAFF MEMBER

This obstacle comes into play most of the time right after the age obstacle hits. Since much of a pastor's time is spent at the hospitals, nursing homes,

retirement communities, and funeral homes, there is little discretionary time left for outreach. Prospect discovery, cultivation, and outreach therefore suffers. Understaffing is a big barrier to breaking the 125 barrier. One man simply can not do all the work by himself. Part-time staff is needed in order to expand.

THE OBSTACLE OF COMPLETELY FILLED BUILDINGS

Growth becomes stagnant in churches that do not have room to enlarge programs and ministries. When that happens there is a shift that often takes place. This shift is towards taking care of "ones own" instead of continuing in outreach. Because of filled buildings, membership can easily become preoccupied with maintenance of themselves.

THE OBSTACLE OF NON-FUNCTIONAL CHILDREN'S AND YOUTH PROGRAMS

Because of an older average age, the church does not have many children and youth. A church must have children to attract children. Young couples seek churches that offer meaningful activities. Prior to reaching 125, occasional youth

and children activities seemed sufficient to satisfy the fellowship needs. Growing churches provide ministries that meet needs. At this point, the church must offer quality youth and children's ministry to attract new members in the 25-40 age bracket.

THE OBSTACLE OF TWO ENTRANCE POINTS

Because members are not actively inviting people to the church, having multiple entrance points is quite difficult. With no age graded ministries, there is nothing to attract new members except the pastoral ministry and the worship service.

THE OBSTACLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The church has too many committees and administrative tasks. So much energy spent on "meetings" leaves little energy for outreach. As the church decreased in size, the number of committees remained the same.

ISSUES TO CONFRONT AT THE 125 BARRIER

The 125 barrier has a different set of issues than the 35 and the 75 barriers. With minor adjustments, attendance can grow from 35 to 75. Growing beyond the 125 barrier requires major adjustments in eleven areas:

Programming - Prior to reaching 125, occasional youth and children activities seemed sufficient to satisfy the fellowship needs. Growing churches provide ministries that meet needs. At this point, the church must offer quality youth and children's ministry to attract new members in the 25-40 age bracket. Single parents look for programs that fill the void created by a missing parent.

Entrance Points - Multiple entrance points are required for growing beyond the 125 barrier. An entrance point is a class, group, ministry, or person by which new persons enter the church. To discover existing entrance points, ask the question, "what attracts a first time visitor to the church?"

Most new members join small churches through two basic entrance points: the worship service and the pastor. Most first time visitors attend the worship

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service because of contact with the pastor. Later, they may attend Sunday School. The choir is the most closed group in the church.

A church with four entrance points has a better opportunity to attract new members than the church with one or two entrance points. Multiple entrance points meet multiple needs and attract a variety of people.

BREAKING THE 125 BARRIER REQUIRES HAVING AT LEAST

FOUR ENTRANCE POINTS

CHURCH STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The staff consists of a pastor, a volunteer music director, and a volunteer typist that does the weekly bulletin. More affluent churches have a part-time secretary who works three mornings per week.

The work load increases enormously as the church passes an attendance of 125.

One hundred to one hundred and twenty five persons is the maximum number

for effective ministry by one pastor. Growing beyond 125, requires staff development. Additional clerical duties make a part-time secretary mandatory rather than optional. Part-time youth or music staff may be required depending upon the availability of volunteers in the church. A full-time summer youth and children's minister is a good staff addition.

The pastor, at best, can only keep the church in a maintenance mode at the 125 barrier. Additional staff allows development of additional entrance points.

CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

Churches at the 125 barrier thrive on interpersonal relationships. After all, they have grown old together watching their children get married and have families. As the church grows, comments like "I don't know everyone like I used to and I see new faces every Sunday," are made.

The more a church grows, the less time the pastor will have for each family. The structure must be adjusted to allow face-to-face fellowship opportunities. Close

intimacy does not diminish, it just does not occur between all the members. Members develop selected relationships. An age old comment, "this church has cliques," is not necessarily a negative comment. The church should have enough cliques or fellowship circles so that everyone is included.

PASTORAL LEADERSHIP STYLE SHIFT

Two leadership style shifts are required for breaking the 125 barrier.

SHIFT NUMBER ONE

The pastor must shift from establishing deep one-to-one relationships to establishing group relationships with the members. This does not mean the pastor will lose concern for his people nor quit visiting them. It does mean that he will have less time per family. The pastor and his family may have two or three couples with whom they visit on a regular basis. Sometimes church members become very jealous and accuse the pastor of showing partiality. While it is impossible to love everyone alike and have the same feelings for everyone, the pastor does need friends. Pain with discomfort plus a lack of close

friends, is often great. As the church grows, group relationships increase and personal relationships decrease.

SHIFT NUMBER TWO

The pastor must shift from being a foreman to being a supervisor. An effective supervisor delegates responsibility to his foremen. Many preachers have said, "I had rather do something myself than delegate to someone else." Growing past the 125 barrier requires a shift from "doing it all yourself" to "getting others involved."

CONGREGATION GOALS

Churches fifteen years and younger are occupied with tangible goals: erecting the first building; constituting; paying off the mortgage; paving the parking lot; raising money for missions; paying the pastor's salary; providing housing for the minister, etc. Tangible goals produce a high level of enthusiasm as they are easily measurable. Intangible goals do not generate the same enthusiasm and support.

Blue collar persons are more comfortable with tangible goals as they think concretely. White collar persons think abstractly. Ministry goals, new programming, creating new entrance points, and staff relationships require abstract thinking. Intangibles such as attitudes, progress, and effectiveness are more difficult to measure than meeting a financial goal, painting a foyer, or paving the parking lot.

FACILITIES AND SPACE

Space is a big church growth factor. New churches often outgrow the facilities before the debt is paid, which makes it impossible to build the second unit. Space limits the church growth. A quart container holds a quart of liquid. All excess water spills and is wasted. Attendance does the same.

Mobile units provide a temporary solution. Enthusiasm and excitement leads the young church to build too soon. Knowing when to build and what to build is quite a decision. Some geographical areas equate a building with credibility; therefore, the need for a building is critical.

NEW MEMBER ASSIMILATION

As the church grows beyond the 125 barrier, a strategy shift for assimilating new members is required. Up to now, most new members join because of the pastor's ministry. As the church grows, lay persons must develop relationships with new members. This can best be done in groups of fifteen or less persons. The first six months is crucial as new members must make new friends and develop a sense of belonging. New members attracted to the church because of the pastor, must become involved in a group to develop an "our church mentality."

STRUCTURE

Several organizational structural shifts are required to grow beyond the 125 barrier. Departmentalizing the Sunday School is a big step. Two adult departments are needed.

Additionally, three functional group sizes are required for breaking the 125 barrier:

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- . small groups of 12-15 persons: these include Sunday School classes, committees, choirs, mission groups, etc.
- . mid-size groups of 35-75 persons: these include Sunday School departments, larger classes, several families fellowshiping on a monthly basis.
- . large groups of everyone: healthy churches have regular church wide fellowship opportunities.

Growing past the 125 barrier requires establishing all three levels of group involvement. Because of their sizes, the 35 and the 75 in attendance church can not offer these levels.

LAY LEADERSHIP

Breaking the 125 barrier requires more sacrifice for the lay leadership, than the two previous barriers. As the church grows, the importance of one diminishes. Long-time members seem to develop an ownership of the church that causes newcomers to feel unwelcomed. Conflicts and power struggles arise in the

fellowship. A common conflict is the homesteaders verse pioneers. In a growing church, new members will outnumber the older members in about the third or fourth year of the pastor's ministry. The pioneers feel threatened and often rebel against the pastor's leadership. Sparks fly and soon the pastor leaves for another field of service. New members have their feelings hurt and leave the church with the pastor. After this happens several times, the church becomes resistant to growth.

Lay leaders must allow new members to become a part of the church and become involved in the leadership structure. How long has the newest deacon been a church member? The answer may provide some insights into this issue.

MINISTRY FOCUS

An absolute is a balanced ministry focus between maintenance activities and growth activities. The 125 participant church does an excellent job in maintenance ministries: looking after their members, keeping tabs on the sick, and acknowledging needs, birthdays, anniversaries, and other special occasions. This focus seems to take place naturally if the members are loving and caring people.

The most difficult focus to develop is the growth ministry. Specific intentional actions are required to discover prospects, cultivate relationships, and meet community needs. An inward focused church becomes nothing more than a social club.

TEN SPECIFIC ACTIONS

According to Harry H. Fowler, there are ten specific areas that need correction in breaking the 125 barrier to church growth.

PROGRAMMING:

- . Begin developing a youth and children's program.
- . Discover the needs of young adults ages 18-40.
- . Plan specific events that meet needs of young adults such as retreats, fellowships, etc.
- . Begin broadening the program to include other groups you are not currently reaching.

- . Print a regular newsletter.

ENTRANCE POINTS:

- . Focus on the church's strengths and the community needs to determine needed ministries.
- . Add the fourth and fifth entrance points based on number one.
- . Strengthen the first three entrance points.

CHURCH STAFF DEVELOPMENT:

- . Determine existing staff needs.
- . Choose staff that complements the pastor's ministry and existing programs.
- . Use proper channels - committee, deacons, business meeting, etc., to get approval and affirmation.
- . Add to the existing staff.

CHURCH FELLOWSHIP:

- . Develop a group ratio of 1:15 - one group for every 15 persons.
- . Promote large group activities for everyone.
- . Promote small group activities for 12 to 15 persons.
- . Promote mid-size group activities for 35 to 75 persons.
- . Create opportunities for new members to interact with older members.

PASTORAL LEADERSHIP:

- . Make a gradual shift to relating to groups.
- . Make a shift from foreman to supervisor.
- . Involve more lay persons to ministry.

CONGREGATIONAL GOALS:

- . Develop tangible goals.
- . Develop intangible goals.

- . Develop short and long range ministry goals.

FACILITIES AND SPACE:

- . Provide adequate facilities for 250.
- . Consider all possibilities.

NEW MEMBER ASSIMILATION:

- . Make conscious efforts to involve new members in groups.
- . Provide new groups for new people.
- . Monitor new member involvement.

STRUCTURE:

- . Departmentalize the Sunday School.
- . Develop classes for all ages and needs.

MINISTRY FOCUS:

- . Develop a 4:1 inreach/outreach ratio.
- . Involve members in church community ministries.
- . Develop an effective outreach.

Growing beyond the 125 barrier requires crucial shifts in structure, leadership style and ministry focus. A church can grow numerically providing the pastor and lay leadership desire the church to grow; the church community has sufficient population that will support growth; knowledge and practice of church growth principles; and the presence of power of the Holy Spirit!

Churches located in sparsely populated rural areas, as well as churches in changing urban communities will find it difficult to grow. As a church growth consultant, I have come to realize that some churches just will not pay the price for growth. May we never use our lack of commitment and misplaced priorities to rationalize our non-growth patterns.

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