

Ten Reasons Small Churches Tend to Stay Small (Part 1)

Joe McKeever

I know more about getting smaller churches to grow than larger ones.

I pastored three of them, and only the first of the three did not grow—I was fresh out of college, untrained, inexperienced, and clueless about what I was doing. The next two grew well, and even though I remained at each only some three years, one almost doubled and the other nearly tripled in attendance and ministries. By using the word "grow," I do not mean in numbers for numbers' sake. I do not subscribe to the fallacy that bigness is good and small churches are failures. What I mean by "grow" 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're 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 and outreach to the unchurched can't expect to grow...period. But countless articles and books have been written on that subject.

Now, after working for years among hundreds of small congregations, I speak here to the subtle growth barriers that tend to go unnoticed or unaddressed in stagnant churches. I send these observations forth hoping to plant some seed in the imagination of a pastor or other leader who will be used of the Lord to do great things in a small church.

The "ten reasons" that follow are not necessarily in the order of importance or prevalence, and there are probably other reasons individual churches might not be growing, simply because no two churches are alike.

But this is the way they occurred to me, and the order seems right.

1. Wanting to stay small

"We like our church just the way it is now." While this attitude usually goes unspoken — it might not even be recognized by its carriers — it's widespread in many churches. The proof of it is seen in how the leaders and congregation reject new ideas and freeze out new people. The process of rejecting newcomers is a subtle one, never as overt as snubbing them. They will be greeted and chatted with and handed a printed bulletin. But they will still be excluded: "Bob's class is meeting this week over at Tom and Edna's. Come and bring a covered dish." "The youth will have a fellowship tonight at Eddie Joe's. We're serving pizza and you don't want to miss it." Unless you know who Bob, Tom, Edna, and Eddie Joe are and where they live, you're out of luck.

Pastors who want to include newcomers and first-timers should use full names from the pulpit. This allows newcomers to learn who people are. "I'll ask Bob Evans to come to the pulpit and lead us in prayer." "For those who need directions to Eddie Joe Finham's house for the youth fellowship, he's the guy with the crewcut wearing the purple shirt. Raise your hand, Eddie Joe. He has printed directions to give you."

No one can promise that just because a church wants to grow, it will. However, I can guarantee you that if it doesn't, it won't.

2. A quick turnover of pastors

A retired pastor who served his last church some 30 years was supplying for a small congregation south of New Orleans. He told me of a discovery he made: "On Sunday afternoon, I had several hours to kill before the evening service. In the church office, I was reading their history and discovered that in their nearly 50 years of existence, they've had 22 pastors." He was aghast. "Think of that. If they had around six months between pastors, that means the average tenure was less than two years." He was quiet a moment, then said, "They didn't have pastors. They just had preachers."

It takes at least a couple of years for a pastor to become the real deal for a church—a pastor in more than name only, one who has earned the right to lead the congregation. With larger churches, the time period is more like six years.

Again, no one will promise you that keeping a pastor a long time guarantees the church will grow. But I can assure you that having a succession of short-term pastors will prevent it from growing as surely as if you had taken a vote from the congregation to reject all expansion.

3. Domination by a few strong members

The process by which a man (it's almost always a man) becomes a church "boss" is subtle and rarely, if ever, the result of a hostile takeover.

Say the pastor of a small church leaves for another town. The pastorless congregation looks within its membership for leaders to rise up and "take care of things" until a new pastor arrives. So two or three faithful and mature (we assume) members are chosen. They do their job well. If the next pastor leaves after an unusually short tenure for whatever reason, the congregation resorts to the fallback position: They enlist the services of those same two or three mature—and now experienced—leaders.

That's how it happens that one of them—or possibly all of them—begin to make important decisions for the body, and everything works out. When the new pastor arrives, they let him know that for anything he needs to know, he should call on them. The pastor quickly sees that these men have set themselves up as a layer of authority between the hired man (the preacher) and the congregation.

These "bosses" explain that they are protecting the congregation. "We don't like to upset them with matters like this." "These things are better off handled by just a few." Pity the young idealistic pastor who walks into that church unsuspecting that they lie in wait to—ahem—"give direction to his ministry." Or, as one said to me, "We thought you would like to have some help in pastoring this church."

Such self-appointed church bosses tend to frustrate the pastor's initiatives, block his bold ventures, and control his tendencies to want the church to act on (gasp!) something he calls faith! Result: The church stays small. No normal family coming into the community would want to join such a church.

The remedy: The congregation must see that key lay positions in the church rotate, that no one stays chairman of deacons for thirty years or church treasurer for a generation. Members of the congregation should feel free to respectfully ask questions about why decisions are made. Church bosses cannot stand the light of day shown on their activities ("They wouldn't understand"), even though they convince themselves what they are doing is in the interest of the congregation. Read about Diotrephes in the little epistle of III John. He "loves to have the pre-eminence."

4. Not trusting the leaders

Interestingly, the opposite phenomenon often occurs with the same result. I've seen this phenomenon occur in small churches (and never in large ones) at the monthly business meetings. In the small-and-determined-to-stay-small church, discussion centres on why 35 cents was spent on call-forwarding and \$2.00 on paper for the office. Leaders and pastors alike are always frustrated that the congregation doesn't trust them with \$20.00, let alone \$200.00.

The determined-to-stay-small church is far more concerned about the dollars and cents in the offering plate than about the lost souls in the community. This church would never step out in faith and do something bold to reach the lost and unchurched, and if they did, unless their mindset changed, they would then harass their leaders into the grave demanding an accounting of every dime spent. Instead, small churches should elect good leaders and—within reason, as mentioned earlier—trust these leaders to do their work.

5. Inferiority complex

I was a seminary student when called to my second pastorate, a church which had been stuck at 40 in attendance for years. I discovered that small churches often are stymied by inferiority complexes. "We can't do anything because we're small. We don't have lots of money like the big churches in town." So, they set small goals and ask little from their members.

One day, I was visiting in the First Baptist Church of a nearby community. In no way was it what we would call large, but it was three or four times the size of mine. The pastor and I were chatting about some program or other. He said to me, "My people won't attempt anything like that. They'll say, 'We're not large like the First Baptist Church of New Orleans.'" That's when it hit me: Feelings of inferiority can be found in any size church. I wouldn't be surprised if the members of FBC-New Orleans were excusing themselves for their inaction by saying, "We're not Bellevue in Memphis or the FBC of Dallas."

The remedy is to put one's eyes on Jesus Christ and ask, "Lord, what do you want us to do?" Peter said, "Lord, what about John here? What do you want him to do?" Our Lord said—and thus set a wonderful pattern for all of us for the rest of time—"What is that to you? You follow me!"

Want your church to reach people and expand and grow? Get your eyes off what others are doing. Many of them, to tell the truth, are declining at a rate so fast it can hardly be measured. You do not want to take your cues from them. Ask the Lord, "What would you have us to do?" Then do it.

Dr. Joe McKeever is a preacher, cartoonist and the retired Director of Missions for the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans. Currently he loves to serve as a speaker/pulpit fill for revivals, prayer conferences, deacon trainings, leadership banquets and other church events. Visit him and enjoy his insights on nearly 50 years of ministry at JoeMcKeever.com.