

## Breaking Through the 200 Barrier

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It's been a long time since I've seen a "run" of conferences based on this topic. It got me thinking, is this just an old and tired idea which has long since been replaced by "emergent" language and related issues, or is there still a reality to this idea of breaking through 200 in worship attendance?

It didn't take much digging to learn that this "breakthrough" point is still alive and well. The intriguing thing is that **there is no supportive research on a literal or physical barrier.**

**This barrier is more psychological and socio-emotional.** There is a sort of relational gravitational force that pulls churches trying to get through that 200 mark back under that line. This is not an imaginary force. It's real and it is strong. It need not, however, be seen as an actual barrier, meaning one that cannot be broken. **It is human nature to keep things within our control. When a church is moving close to 200 it can no longer be easily "controlled" by one person or a small group of people.**

Many years ago I served for a brief time before seminary at a church in this attendance bracket. The church averaged about 150 people give or take. The church was located in Lakeside, California and I still have fond memories of my part-time youth / associate, wet behind the ears, teeth-cutting experience. I delivered my first sermon there at Lakeside Wesleyan and I have considered going back to stand in that pulpit and say "I'm sorry, please forgive me for anything I may have said or done!" They were gracious to give me my first opportunity, and since I did use scripture, it couldn't have been all bad!

**The following thoughts** are not comprehensive in nature, nor are they "how to" steps and programs. They **are guiding principles** that if followed, over the long-haul, I'm convinced your church will make progress.

### ***Place vision over needs.***

If you are a seasoned pastor of a church under 200 you may have flinched as you read this first guiding principle. You, like most of us, are likely a people person and a shepherd at heart. The idea of not responding to people's needs is just wrong to you. I am with you. We are all here for people. But this is an issue of stewardship. If God would allow you to reach and meet the (spiritual) needs of 300 people instead of 150, wouldn't you want to do that? Part of the way to get there is to place the vision for people over the needs of people. Double talk? No. Keep reading.

The difference is who is driving the agenda. If you are a needs first leader, the people are driving the agenda. If you are a vision first leader, you are driving the agenda. Actually, I wish it was that simple, but it's not. Ultimately the people drive the agenda because we serve for their good, but that is not the same as the entire congregation setting the direction, agenda and making key decisions. Serving for the people's good often means saying no to their immediate wants; for example, of a new program, staff member or a certain sermon series. Those kinds of things are the responsibility of the key leaders. If the key leaders do a good job with that, you will reach more people and ultimately meet more of people's needs. So, bottom line, invest your energy in initiating and implementing vision!

***Focus on changed lives more than attendance goals.***

We all love to see the charts show Kingdom success, but there are some things more important than numbers – for example, serving your community. And what you focus on is what you are most likely to achieve.

In my consulting with a number of churches it is quick and easy to see which ones “go for numbers.” Their approach is very different than those who are going after changed lives. From printed goals, to strategy, to how you reward people, it is all very revealing as to what you are going after.

We all know this is not a mutually exclusive idea. No church worth its salt ignores numbers. I love talking with staff members who don't want to “mess with numbers” because “you can't box the Holy Spirit in a natural container”. I say to them: “OK, tell you what, you don't have to mess with numbers and I don't either. So, when it comes to your paycheck, I'll just ‘go with how the Spirit leads’ each week.” Yea, I know, that never goes over very well, but sometimes I just can't help myself.

So which is it, numbers or not? Yes. It's an issue of focus. If you truly focus on changed lives, the numbers nearly always take care of themselves. If you focus on numbers, you will likely sacrifice realizing changed-lives.

In the nearly five years I have been at Crossroads we have never set an attendance goal. But we look at attendance all the time. We focus on baptisms (conversions), people serving and joining a small group. We focus on compassion, serving the community and engaging the culture. We believe that if lives are genuinely touched with the transforming power of Jesus Christ – people come back for more!

***Make your best possible choice for your first staff hire.***

We could spend hours here, in fact I have done just that in past conference

environments, but I'll spare you from that in this article! Let's keep it brief for now. Staffing is mostly art, at least 51%. The art portion of staffing is comprised largely of experience, intuition, common sense, hard work, a little luck and a lot of prayer. Candidly it is more like 80% art. The remaining 20% deals with Human Resource laws and regulations, legal issues, finance and policy. I say this because if you want a cook-book formula for staffing you won't find one. Helpful "how-to's" and guiding principles are good, but they are for your guidance only, they are not law. So now that I've over set this up . . . let me share a couple thoughts with you.

**First, always go for the best person you can hire, even over the position you want to fill.** For example, there are a number of good choices for your first hire; such as an administrative assistant, a children's leader, an associate pastor, a worship leader etc. Remember it's an art not a science. I would reduce the list to the top three needs and then pray for God best and highest talented person to come on your radar. Begin to put out feelers and get the word out informally. If a "God talent" doesn't surface, then choose the one position you want to go after and focus on it formally. Even then the principle stands. Hire the best candidate possible. Pay as much as you can. Staff is not the place to cut corners.

**Second, go for the greatest need of the church's ministry.** (In this case you have your first staff member, but they leave.) For example, let's say you have a youth pastor, but he or she decides to move on to another church. Your immediate response is likely to hire another youth pastor. That may well be the right answer, but take enough time to make sure. Perhaps there is a lay leader who could take over and give excellent leadership to your student ministry, which would free up monies to hire a much needed children's leader.

***Do not add programs, increase evangelism and compassionate outreach.***

You will be under great temptation and pressure to add more programs as your church gets larger. Don't cave in. I'm serious. Don't do it. Unless the Holy Spirit lights a bush on fire and tells you to start another program, stay lean and invest your "extra" energy in to reaching people who are not pursuing God or part of a local church.

***Invest in leadership.***

Everything rises and falls on leadership." (Maxwell) I know many Godly leaders who pray much (as we all need to) who serve in small churches that do not grow. There are many mature believers who focus on depth of discipleship which is also important, but their churches aren't growing. There are churches with long and sincere worship, but they don't grow. We need prayer, depth and worship, but without leadership (connected with the power of God's Spirit) let's be honest, the local church doesn't move forward.

Again, this is not about a static size, it's about impact in your community and subsequent growth.

Get around leaders of larger churches. Take them to lunch and ask well thought-out and written questions. Read great leadership books. Attend leadership conferences. Read the Pastor's Coach. Ask God to increase the size and scope of leadership within you. In other words, work at becoming a better leader in the same way you work at writing and delivering better sermons. But don't stop there! Take all the good leadership "stuff" you are learning and teach it to "apprentice" leaders in your church. Pass it on and teach them to pass it on to others as well!

**Practice these ideas or guiding principles and, they will help you break-through 200 in attendance.**

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