

HOW TO BREAK THROUGH THE 200 - 300 ATTENDANCE BARRIER

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Let's talk about how to break through the 200 - 300 attendance barrier. It is a barrier, a real barrier. We had a harder time getting through that barrier -- getting above 300 -- than going from 1000 to 3000. It's a definite, distinct barrier.

Statistics on average American churches and their size: The average church in the United States has 66 people in Sunday School attendance. They have 87 in worship attendance. That's across the board out of the 350,000 churches in America. That means if you run more than 87 on Sunday morning you're already above average in America. Tell your people that! Everything you need to do when you're small and you're growing you need to build morale anyway you can. Eighty-five percent of all churches in America average less than 200 in worship attendance. If you run more than 200 in worship attendance you are in the top 15% of churches in the United States.

What is this saying? It's saying that most churches in America are small churches. On the other hand there is a trend toward larger and larger churches. In 1967 there were 97 churches in America that averaged over 1000 in worship. In 1987 there were 8,160 that averaged over 1000 in worship.

There are some sociological reasons behind all of this, not necessarily spiritual reasons. The fact is, churches are getting bigger because people are used to bigger things and there's a dramatic move to urban areas. We go to big ball games and big theaters and big things. It's a fact of life.

Before we get into how to break through the 200-300 attendance barrier I want to give you eight characteristics of small churches. Social scientists call churches that are 60-80 people and below primary groups. There are some definite characteristics of primary groups that you need to be aware of if you're pastoring a small church and what those things are and how you overcome them.

1. Small churches (churches that have below 80 people in attendance) have a strong sense of belonging.

They are held together by family ties, often by blood ties. Sometimes in a small church you'll have one family and half the congregation is related to each other some way -- cousins, aunts, uncles. They're held together by traditions, friendships. And there is a strong sense of bonding and belonging in a small church. That's one of the reasons why people like them because there is the sense of belonging. But visitors walk in and immediately feel, "I don't belong here. Everybody else belongs here but I don't belong here." There is that strong sense of belonging.

What happens is what Pete Wagner says churches can get: koinitis -- the fellowship is too strong and the bonds are so strong nobody can break into that church. A visitor comes in, he sees what's going on and hears what's going on and he likes it, and everybody's friendly initially, but he soon realizes (if his name doesn't end in a certain letter if it's an ethnic church -- German, Scandinavian, etc.) there's a strong bonding there.

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2. Small churches are "familiar strangers".

The second characteristic of a primary group sociologically is that they know a lot about each other, they have a lot of information about each other, but nobody is really intimate. It's against the law to be intimate in a really small church. You know a lot of detail and data about the other people in a church of 60, 70, 80 people but there's no self disclosure in a small church, no real openness. It's very rare for someone to stand up and say, "I'm having a problem with such and such temptation" or "We're having marriage problems". You just don't talk about those kinds of things in a small church. It's OK to know a lot of information, a lot of facts, but they are familiar strangers -- they cannot really open up to each other.

3. There is no structure for intimacy.

They don't see the need for it. Intimacy is not a key value in a small church. You know each other but you keep an arm's distance. You don't really get intimate. You rarely have small groups in a little church where people open up. The small groups are the Sunday School class where you study the lesson and do small talk. You chat and share the weather but you don't really get close to each other.

4. They base their identity on the past.

Not the present or the future. Usually in the sociological primary group of 60-80 people they are usually 20-30 years behind the times. They are not early adapters. They are late adapters when it comes to consumer things. They are interested in one thing: maintaining the status quo. That's a high value, a very important value. Often they are the very last to accept change in a community. Maintaining the status quo, the sense of belonging is very important.

5. The small churches are an end in themselves.

When you are in a church of 60, 70, 80 people you don't need a cause, a purpose, a reason for people to come -- we exist for us. I'm coming -- I'm here. You're coming -- you're here. We exist for us. You don't need the Great Commission and you don't need anybody else. Whether anybody else ever comes to the church or not, we have a church because we're here.

6. Churches under 80 tend to be facility based.

Their identity comes from a building not from the people. In a small church where there is facility based identity there is a strong sense of ownership over the buildings and the rooms in those buildings. Just try to change a classroom and see what happens. In an urban world there are very few things that you can control and we all need to have something we can control. So if we're in a small primary group we can control the building, what we do with certain rooms, etc. That's an important value in a small church.

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7. They are very strong and resilient.

It is almost impossible to kill a small church. They'll put up with immoral pastors that run off, they'll have splits, they'll have financial crisis, the building can burn down -- that's one of their powers. That's why there's so many small churches because they are incredibly strong and resilient. They just can't be blown away.

8. They are resistant to change.

By their very nature they are hard to grow. You must understand if you go into an existing church with 60 or so people that by their very nature if they've been that way for a long period of time they're going to have to fight you on some of the things you preach. For the church to grow, life, as they know it, will have to cease and the church, as they know it, will have to change. So by the very nature they know that growth will kill what they have. So it's very resistant.

Before I discovered this sociological fact, I wondered why churches go up and down and up and down... There are a lot of churches that go up and hit 200 and then go back down and go up to hit 300 and then go back down. This is the fact of resilience in this size group. They'll follow a pastor for a while and he'll lead them to grow and bumps it up to 200 or maybe a little more but after 3 or 4 years they kick out the pastor and they go back down to a size that's comfortable. That's not saying anything about their commitment to the Lord but about the sociological life of this size group. Instinctively they know if they allow the church to grow the way the pastor wants it to grow all that they know will have to die. A pastor comes in and says, "We're going to change things and grow!" and they're thinking, "Not on my dead body! If we get new people in here I may lose my seat!"

So the existing church of 60-80 members cannot grow from within. By nature it will not grow from within, you have to create new units, new classes, new cells, new services, other things to allow new people to come in. The very reason why small churches complain when you bring up the idea of starting two services is the very reason you need to start two services. They say, "If we start two services, what's going to happen? I won't know everybody anymore!" That is the very reason you need to start two services. Create new units to allow for additional growth.

In light of those facts that the average church is a small church in the United States and yet now they're over 8,160 church over 1000, how do you get past that 200 barrier?

1. The church must decide if it really wants to grow.

That's the primary barrier right there. Do we really want to grow? How do you know if a church has decided that they really want to grow? When they've all decided, bought into a goal. We've set a goal to grow and that goal is 300 or 400 or whatever and they've bought into it.

The Bible says real clearly *"Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone. But if it dies it then bears fruit."* In order for a church to grow there are some things that have to die. That's why it takes unselfish people for a church to grow. I wrote a column praising the 60 or so people who are still at Saddleback from the first two years. Can you imagine the

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psychological shock on those people, that they've gone through from when I was in everybody's home all the time to now if I shake hands with them once a month it's rare? Look at the psychological change. They've had to be willing to give up control -- of the decision making, of some ministry (some of them have started ministries, seen them grow and then turn them over to new people and gone out and started other ones). They've had to share their pastor with other people; now they realize I'm spread out among all kinds of people. It takes incredible unselfishness. They've been willing to die to some traditions, to some feelings, to some relationships in order for the kingdom of God to be advanced. That takes a lot of maturity.

Once you've got that out of the way -- you've decided we're going to grow and you've set goals for growth...

2. The role of the pastor must change.

The role must change from minister to leader. Mentally you must (if the church is going to grow) be willing to pay the price for growth. You must be willing to have people that you are not the pastor of, that you don't personally minister to. That's a big decision. If you have to personally minister to every person in your church then the church cannot grow beyond your own energy level. That is a barrier. You become a bottle neck. The church must outgrow your passionnel ministry.

This is called the Shepherd-Rancher Conflict. As the pastor of a little church you know everybody, do all the praying, all the baptizing, all the teaching, know every family, every kid, every dog and cat and you shepherd everybody personally. But there's a limit to how many people you can personally shepherd.

As the church grows you must change roles from Shepherd to Rancher. The Rancher helps oversee under Shepherds. Everybody on my staff practically, does more weddings than I do and counseling and things like this. You must be willing to let other people share the ministry. You don't give it all up if you've got a pastor's heart; you've got a pastor's heart! But you've got to give up most of it because otherwise the church cannot outgrow you. You're the bottle neck. The Shepherd must become the Rancher. Ask yourself, Would I be happy being a Rancher? If you wouldn't be I suggest you take on a goal that your church will sponsor new churches. Most of us God made with a Shepherd's heart. God loves people with a Shepherd's heart because most of the pastors in America have a Shepherd's heart. Can a Shepherd become a Rancher? Yes, he can. If you're willing to do three things:

1. Stay put and outlast the critics. You will have criticism in growth.
2. Give up part of the ministry and let other people minister and not have to be able to do it all yourself.
3. Learn additional skills.

The conflict that's going to occur is the fact that if you go into an existing church realize this up front: They're not hiring you to be the leader; they're hiring you to be the minister. Actually they don't want a leader, they want a chaplain. They want a chaplain who will marry and bury and preach and serve the Lord's supper and do all of the holy things and let the people just handle the church. They'll make the decisions and administrate. You just be the chaplain. When all of a

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sudden you start saying, "I don't want to just be the chaplain, I want to lead this church to growth," they say, "Wait!" They're not saying it consciously but inside they're saying, "Wait a minute!" Most churches think that the congregation is the leader and the pastor is the hired chaplain. He does all the holy things and yet for the church to grow it needs to be the exact opposite. The ministry needs to be in the hands of lay people. The pastor must be willing to let the people be the ministers and the people must be willing to let the pastor be the leader for there to be growth to take place.

Which of these can you identify with?

My pastor

- ... leaps tall obstacles with a single bound.
- ... must take a running start to leap over tall obstacles.
- ... can leap over small obstacles.
- ... crashes into obstacles when attempting to jump over them.
- ... cannot recognize obstacles at all.

My pastor is ...

- ... faster than a speeding bullet.
- ... fast as a speeding bullet.
- ... not quite as fast as a speeding bullet.
- ... would you believe, a short bullet.
- ... usually wounds himself with a bullet.

My pastor ...

- ... is stronger than a herd of bulls.
- ... is stronger than several bulls.
- ... is stronger than one bull.
- ... shoots the bull.
- ... smells like a bull.

My pastor ...

- ... walks on water consistently.
- ... walks on water in emergencies.
- ... swims in water.
- ... washes in water.
- ... drinks water.

There are basically three kinds of churches.

There are single cell churches. In that church there is just one single cell.

The next level are multiple cell churches. That's where you have several cells within it, usually Sunday School classes, women's groups, men's groups, etc. Multiple cell churches.

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Multiple congregation churches. Here you have congregations within congregations within congregations with cells inside of them. In our church, women's ministry is a congregation in itself. Men's ministry is a congregation itself. Our children's ministry is larger than most churches. Our music ministry is a congregation itself. We have districts of small groups that are congregations. This is the multiple congregation church in one church.

The single cell church is approximately the average church that has 87 people in attendance on Sunday morning. The multiple cell church has approximately 150 to 400 maximum. That would be a stretch multiple cell church. The multiple congregation church is usually anything over about 400 people.

In each of these levels of growth your role as a pastor has to change.

The role of the pastor in a single cell church is he is the owner/operator. He's the entrepreneur. He does a lot himself -- he prints the bulletin, he locks the church and unlocks the church, sweeps up, etc. He's the owner/operator.

For you to grow to the next level of growth you have to change roles and become a manager/supervisor. At this level you have to be adding other staff members and you start working through other staff members. You start supervising other staff members. Your role is managing, supervising, making other people successful under you.

But then to get above 400 and when you get into 1000-2000 and even more then you have to take on the role of the executive. This is not a hands on management like the supervisor/manager. How do you know when you've reached this stage? You reach this role of an executive when you have underneath you an administrative pastor or sometimes the terminology used today is the executive pastor. The difference between the executive and administrative pastor is the difference on a ship between a commander-in-chief and the chief-petty-officer. It's interesting I hired as my executive pastor a man who spent 20 years in the navy. This is dealing with details and stuff like that.

Very rarely do you find a person who is able to be skilled at all three levels. One of these three levels you're good at -- either total hands on, or you like working best through other people -- you get excited about managing others and seeing them do the work -- or total hands off -- just vision and decision and you see to the delegation of decisions. There are three things an executive does in a church: he evaluates, he makes decisions, he preaches. That's about it -- leading and feeding.

At every level it takes a different kind of skill. None of us -- or very few of us -- are skilled at doing all three of these. Our church got stuck at the middle level; I'm a terrible manager. I am a terrible supervisor. I work best either when I was doing it all myself or when I'm out of the picture, like now, and let somebody who knows how to do it, do it!

When we in the early stage, things were going great. I did it all. I personally set up and took down the church! For a while, I kept the stuff in my garage! I borrowed a pick up every week and took it to church and set it up, preached, took it all down and took it home. That was fine.

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And at the upper level, I know very little of what's going on in the church in terms of detail. How do I keep in control? I don't. I'm not trying to control it! The executive pastor handles all the details and I'm the leader of the church.

When we hit the middle stage -- 200-300 -- and started to build staff... I'm a lousy manager of staff. I'm not a supervisor. We had a little glitch right there.

An interesting point: If you have 87 people in your church and standing around in a circle and the pastor is one of those 87 people. You gave a thread to everybody and everybody was to hold a thread from everybody else. You'd be holding 87 threads. The one thing that would be different in that church is that the pastor does not hold any threads. Often in a small existing church the pastor is considered "hired hand". Pastors come and go but the people stay. Often there's a short term of pastors. They come for a couple of years and leave. The people are not about to turn over the leadership to somebody. He's really an outsider in this group. He's not holding any of the threads.

The key to growth in the single celled church is the addition of new cells. The creation of new cells. Any way you can do it. New Sunday School classes... If you had a church of 87 people, you probably have eight cells approximately ten people each -- children, nursery, women's class, men's class, youth class, etc. The key is the addition of new cells. You begin to expand and expand. Add more services, more cells, more classes any way you can to begin to grow. But that only works to a certain limit. That's why people get stuck here at the second level.

One of the very key issues at this second level is that the worship service must become better. People will put up with a lot of flack in a little worship service. The person doesn't have to sing on key, a kid can run down the aisle, we put up with a lot of things because it's "just family", just us. But once you start getting about 300 people in your church, all of a sudden, people are not coming to the church for the same reason. They came to church at the 87 level because of bonding. But with 300 people that's too many people to bond to. So the reasons that people come to your church at 300 are different than the reasons they come at 100. They come because of friendships and relational types earlier. Now at the other level they're coming to check you out: is the worship good, is the preaching good, is the music good. What you need to work on to get to this stage is make your worship better so when people come in and see it and hear it and listen to it, all of a sudden it's got to be sharp. It's got to be culturally relevant to the kinds of people you're reaching. That's very important.

The key role of the pastor at this stage here is he is the image maker. He sets the tone and the theme of the church by his own speaking -- what he tells, what he talks about, what he shares.

At the third level, once you get above 400 and you start growing bigger and bigger, then the key at this level is staff management. You're looking at an assistant who is an administrative person and can work with you. The larger your church gets the more you use the pulpit to set the direction of the church. The larger the church gets the more powerful that pulpit becomes to set the direction of the church.

This is all under the second point: The pastor must be willing to change roles from Shepherd to Rancher, from minister to leader and there will be come conflict there.

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3. The third thing you need to do in order to break through the barrier is the members must be mobilized for ministry.

Just as the leadership must be entrusted to pastor and staff, the ministry must be entrusted to the people in the pews. And you must be willing to give up leadership. You must mobilize them for ministry. That often requires a change in government in the structure of your church. You've got to streamline your structure, maximize ministry and minimize maintenance. You don't want to get your people so tied up in maintenance that they can't minister. After they've decided they want to grow then you start teaching the ministry of the laity and talking about the importance of every believer has a gift, every believer has a function. If you don't do your part, I'm getting cheated. We're a jig saw puzzle and if one piece is missing, that's the one thing you notice. You need to use your spiritual gift.

4. The fourth characteristic is multiple services.

If you're not in multiple services right now, I would encourage you to seriously start planning for it. It's putting another hook in the water. It's offering people choices.

5. The fifth is multiple staff.

You must begin moving to multiple staff in order to grow past that 200 barrier.

For your edification and enjoyment I will give you the qualifications for ministry:

Qualifications for the senior minister. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, is more powerful than a locomotive, faster than a speeding bullet, walks on water and gives policies to God.

Qualifications for social minister. Able to leap short buildings in a single bound, is as powerful as a switch engine, is just as fast as a speeding bullet, walks on water when the sea is calm and talks with God.

Qualifications for minister of education. Able to clear a Quonset hut, loses races with locomotives, can fire a speeding bullet, swims well, and is occasionally addressed by God.

Qualifications for minister of youth. Runs into small buildings, recognizes locomotives two out of three times, used a squirt gun in college, knows how to use a water fountain and mumbles to himself.

Qualifications for secretary. Lifts buildings to walk under them, kicks locomotives off the track, catches speeding bullets with her teeth, freezes water with a single glance, and when God speaks she says, "May I ask who's calling?"

Move to multiple staff and specialize in your staff to break the 200 barrier.

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6. Big days.

You must plan big days where you intentionally break through barriers. The best way I know to break through barriers is to break a few at one time. The concept of pyramiding growth through big days is you're down at this level, you go high on a big day, and after it's over you come back down but you're not as far down as you were before. Then you plan another big day and you go up, come back down but not as far down as before.

One example: We were running prior to our first service about 20 people in our home Bible study. We planned a big mail out and special day on Easter day. That was a big day to start with. We had 205 on Easter Sunday. Not counting Easter Sunday, the rest of the month, the first month of our existence, we averaged (April, 1980) 120. We picked up 100 people in one month. Instant church. You can do that given the right kind of advertising today. Big days are key to breaking barriers.

What we try to do each year is make Easter be the mental picture of what we want to be averaging a year from now. When we were running 200 to 300 and had 560 on Easter, people could see what a crowd was like and get all excited about it. Most pastors have to go to convention to experience a crowd. Most Christians have to do that too. They don't know what it's like to be in a large church. You have to periodically show them what a crowd looks like. They get a picture of it, the excitement -- "Wouldn't it be great if a year from now we were doing that every Sunday?" You set that as a goal and you can visually see it.

7. Multiple cells.

The expansion of multiple cells is a key. Cells are 8 - 12 people. That's a good cell size. Once you get more than 10 people, the dynamics of the group changes. All of a sudden somebody stops talking in a group of more than 10 people. It's too easy to hide. Somebody stops talking. Somebody stops listening. The purpose of the cell is defeated because it becomes a sit-still-while-I-instill kind of approach.

One of the big arguments that you will hear from people -- complaints you will hear as your church starts growing is what I call care/control conflict. The care/control conflict is people often complain about not being cared for when the real issue is they're losing control. As the church begins to grow they'll say, "Pastor just isn't around all the time anymore. I don't see him every week like I used to see him. There's so many people I don't feel like anybody cares for me anymore." Caring is a legitimate issue and it can be dealt with by the multiplication of cells. That's how you do it.

The average person knows 62 people regardless of whether the church has 50, 500, or 5000. You don't have to know everybody in the church to feel like it's your church. But you do have to know approximately a primary group number -- 60 people -- some on a casual basis and a few of them intimately. What they're often saying when they say, "They don't care about me anymore" is "I'm losing control! I used to be a big fish in a little pond. All of a sudden the pond got bigger and I didn't get bigger. Now I'm a little fish in a big pond."

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When people complain about this issue you've got a problem. The care issue -- it needs to be solved. When they complain about the control issue, they've got a problem. That is need you cannot meet if the church is going to grow. The worse thing in the world, when they start complaining, "We've lost control!" for you to turn around and turn all the decision making back into a bureaucracy again. That's the worse thing you can do. Care is a legitimate issue that can be met. The need can be satisfied. Control is an issue that cannot be met in a growing church. Both the pastor and the people must be willing to give up control.

8. You must have the expansion of facilities usually.

I say this because I realize I'm dealing mostly with existing churches. If you're not in a building, you just move to another one, often you have to go into a bigger building.

An important fact to understand in growing churches is that the longer your church has been plateaued the longer it takes to get it going again. Then there is tremendous power in momentum. At NASA, most of the energy -- the jet fuel -- in an rocket engine is used up in the first several hundred yards. Getting the thing off the launch pad. Once it's in orbit it takes very little power to keep a rocket going. But it's getting it off. The initial energy up front takes a lot of time. If your church has been plateaued for six months it might take six months to get it going. If it's been plateaued a year, it might take a year. If it's been plateaued for twenty years, you've got to set in for the duration! I'm saying some people are going to have to die or leave. Moses had to wander around the desert for forty years while God killed off a million people before he let them go into the promised land. That sounded blunt. What I mean is those people love God but they're just never going to change.

I often tell pastors of existing churches to remember the illustration of an oil tanker. It takes about 14 miles for an oil tanker to make a U-turn. That's like a lot of churches. It's a minute degree of change and it takes a long time to make that turn around. I personally believe you have to be called to a church like that. People ask, "Is it easier to start new churches or is it easier to take existing churches and turn them around?" I answer, "It's always easier to have babies than to raise the dead." However, God is in the business of raising the dead! He's a pro at resurrections. It just might take some time.

What do you do with a church that's plateaued? Three things I think you need to do:

1. If you're in an existing church the first thing it's going to take to turn it around is TIME. As pastor of an existing church that needs to be turned around, you must pray for an extra amount of patience. People change very slowly. They are resistant to change. The very nature of primary groups are going to fight change because life as they know it will cease to exist. It takes time.
2. You love everybody but you move with the movers. Pastor everybody, hold everybody's hand, don't show partiality, care for everybody. But you move with the movers. Jesus spent the maximum amount of time with those who would bear the maximum amount of responsibility. Even though He fed the 5000 He spent most of His time with the 12. Even with the 12 He had the inner circle with Peter, James and John. Paul, in the book of Galatians, calls Peter, James and John, pillars of the church -- those who would bear the maximum responsibility. In every church there are the E. F. Hutton's -- When they speak, everybody listens! Often they have no elected

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position. But they are the legitimizers in that church. In a small church you need to find out who are the E. F. Hutton's.

How do you know if they are the E. F. Huttons? They're often the person who's teased the most. Interesting little phenomenon. When they tell a joke everybody laughs. Where there's a decision to be made and somebody says something, everybody looks to see how this guy is going to react. You need to be perceptive of people. Find out who are the legitimizers, those who are willing to go for it! In every church, I believe, there's a group there who really wants to go! Find that person -- it may be just one person or a couple and you start pouring your life into those folks. Build your vision in them. Love everybody but move with the movers.

3. Be prepared for conflict. It's going to come. Everybody wants a church to grow to a point. When it first starts growing people say, "Wow! Look at all these new young couples coming in! They can help pay the bills!" But when the newcomers in this balance start outweighing the old timers you've got problems. There's tension there. The newcomers are outweighing the old timers and "We're losing our church!" That's the care/control issue. It's the conflict between the pioneers and the homesteaders. Who was there first and who came later and who's going to win out? There will be conflict.

In every church there are people that were there before you and there are people that were there after you. Then there are people there who are younger than you and there are people there who are older than you. As a pastor, which of these groups can you most easily lead? Those who are younger and after. Which is the hardest group to lead? Those who were there before you and who are older. As a church begins to grow all of a sudden the tension comes. You must feel called in your spirit to lead a church through change and change is never comfortable. Change is always uncomfortable.