



OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO GROWTH

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About the Author

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The Summary

Introduction: God Has a Plan for You and Your Church

When a new church begins, it is often planted by those who, in the early days, do everything as friends. The church is their mutual project and they “own” it together. When folks arrive, everyone knows everyone else by name. It’s easy to spot newcomers, who are usually swarmed upon. Growth is happening organically, and it is all exciting.

No one can remember when it started to happen. One day you came in and it seemed that the place was full—of new faces without names. More people were getting involved and things were becoming more complicated.

In one area after another, leaders were appointed and teams formed to facilitate the flow of ministry. The church was growing, but no one knew why. And no one knew what would stop the growth. Who has time to ask questions like that? New leaders are raised up, and after awhile elders are appointed to help the pastor “carry the load.” At first, that is their only assignment—to help out and do ministry. Result—the church grows more. Ironically, the same people who are helping the church grow have the power to stop its growth.

Not that they want to stop growth, but they will. There is a barrier to growth that awaits them—a barrier caused by their own success. They are both the creators of the barrier, and the key to getting over it. If the pastor and elders will adjust the way they relate together in leadership and realign some of the internal structures of the church, they can keep right on growing.

Every church, as it pursues its vision, goes through phases and will encounter certain numerical barriers to growth. The key transition that needs to happen is a change in the relationship between the pastors and elders or leadership team. If these changes are made, then the church can address the growth barriers successfully. If they aren’t made, the church will never make it through the barriers no matter what other changes they make.

There are three key stages, and two key transition points between them that need to be navigated. Tension mounts as transition points are approached. These points can be anticipated, and adjustments made, so stress is reduced and growth continues.

Chapter One: The Power of Vision

Not long ago I asked a group of young men I was training, “What is the most important thing to make a church or ministry successful?” Most identified something important, but not the key thing. Effective leadership is the key thing that must be present for growth to occur. Simply put, it is what good leaders naturally do that produces and sustains momentum.

Effective leadership always expresses itself in two ways: vision and faith. A leader begins to dream, and over time confidence—faith—begins to grow that what he pictures can become a reality. Over time this gets passed on to those around him who begin to work to make it happen.

The formation of vision is a solo project. It begins with a dream in the heart of the leader, who sees what God wants to do in and through a group of people. Vision allows the leader to see beyond small numbers, financial difficulty, impossibilities and see the future as if it is already here.

But, a dream without faith is a fantasy. A dream is about what God *could* do; a vision is about what God *will* do. The process is like this: the leader begins to dream, and through prayer God begins to breathe faith into his heart. As the leader prays for God's vision, and wrestles with God about it, the vision often changes and grows, becoming bigger than something he would have constructed himself. Finding God's vision is both the hardest and most important job of the senior pastor.

Note: all of this dreaming, praying, and believing happens in the heart of one person. The formation of vision is a solo project. More people are involved in refining and implementing it, but the initial birthing starts with one person. After that, any vision that comes to pass goes through three stages: articulation, unification, and mobilization. This is what I call the "Threefold Law of Vision."

The first step—articulation—is about communicating the vision to others so clearly that they can see it. Many visionaries are weak here. Since it is so clear to them, they assume it is clear to others. Leaders need to use every means at their disposal to communicate vision.

Step two is unification. God's timing is determined by the pace at which the people of God rally around the vision. Leaders can easily get frustrated here—they don't want to slow down! But the goal is to rally the troops and help them buy in to the vision.

The final step is mobilization. Once the people see and embrace the vision, they step into action to make it happen. There is no hard-and-fast rule as to how long this process will take. There are three key questions that need to be answered.

The first is "What?" What is God's vision? The answer to this question is given by one person—the senior leader.

The second question is "When?" This is where other leaders or elders enter the picture. They help to ensure that the steps required to accomplish the vision are laid out at a pace the people can keep. Without other leaders involved, the senior leader can let his passion drive the people at an unreasonable pace.

The third and final question is "How?" Visionaries see the big picture; most people just need to be shown the next step. Elders help the leader break the vision into parts that people can manage and design a plan that produces a string of successes—thus creating unstoppable momentum.

Chapter Two—Every Stage Requires Change

A small church is very different from a medium-sized church, and a medium-sized church is very different from a large church. The real difference is not the size but in how the internal functions of the church operate. As a church grows, overall needs remain the same—

fellowship, Bible study, prayer, outreach, assimilation, etc—but how leaders attend to these needs must be adjusted.

If church leaders do not change the way in which they address the functions of church life, the leaders will actually hinder growth. Growth always requires change.

In order to cross over into a new stage, leaders must understand what lies ahead and make the necessary changes *before* they expect to move to a new level of growth. Let's look at some of the different aspects of ministry at different sizes of church:

In small churches, the elders/leaders are the ones who are actually “doing” the ministry. They are the key people in the church, and usually the most committed and mature. These are also the people who make all the decisions in the church, both the big and small ones.

In medium-sized churches (100-200 active members), ministries and leaders multiply. It isn't reasonable for all these new leaders to be considered elders, so a second tier of leadership begins to informally develop. The elders then begin to oversee sections of ministry led by others (one might be over all the small groups, while another is over music, or children, etc) and it is the people who do the ministry.

The elders no longer make all the decisions for the church; now they make *ministry* decisions for particular areas.

A large church (700-800) has multiple staff members. The larger the church, the more specific the areas they lead. At this size, not all the pastors are considered elders. At this stage the role of elders is almost strictly governmental. They bring wisdom to the table, rather than ministry skill. The people do the ministry under the oversight of pastoral staff, and decisions are made by the leaders directly over specific areas. Elders concern themselves with policy decisions, like the budget and what areas leaders can and cannot make decisions in.

In all three stages of growth, the roles of the senior pastor and elders in relation to the vision don't change. The pastor is always responsible for the “what” and the elders and pastor work together to formulate the “when” and the “how.”

Chapter Three: Church Growth Dynamics and Breaking Barriers

While there are numerous barriers to growth, most local churches need only concern themselves with two: the 100/200 barrier and the 700/800 barrier. Both have to do with how many active members a church has. An active member is someone who is participating in some way in the life of the church. Once a church hits 100/200 active members, or 700/800, it has reached a barrier to growth.

What makes a small church successful is what will eventually halt its growth. Everyone in the small church knows everyone else. Without realizing it, small churches resist growth since continued growth threatens the closeness they so enjoy. They find ways to distinguish those who are “in” and those who are “out.” Also, in a small church everyone connects to the pastor—he is the go-to person.

For a church to break through the 100/200 barrier, at least three things need to happen:

1. The people must accept the fact they will not be able to know everyone in the church.
2. The people will have to become inclusive of others, and unwritten rules will have to be supplanted with clear methods of communication.
3. The pastor will have to switch from a Shepherd model to a Rancher model. That means another leader has been raised up who can be a “go-to” person also.

In my opinion, shifting from Shepherd to Rancher is the most important step.

There are three key changes of thinking that need to happen in changing from a Shepherd to a Rancher model. The first is in the mind of the pastor. He must embrace the idea of sharing leadership with others. This is scary to many, especially when the pastor is fed emotionally by having all the people look solely to him. The second shift is in the mind of the elders or leadership team. They also need to embrace the idea of new leaders being released, (even if they consider them less skilled or competent), and also embrace the pastor’s growing authority (as the church grows, the role of the senior pastor becomes more about leadership and less about ministry).

The final shift is in the minds and hearts of the people. They have to be willing to accept care from someone besides the senior pastor. Ultimately, people want to be led and fed. If that is happening, they can usually accept it from someone other than the senior pastor, especially if the person they are getting it from has the pastor’s support.

Breaking the 700/800 barrier follows the same dynamics as the 100/200 barrier, albeit on a larger scale. To surpass 100/200, a church has to restructure from one swollen fellowship circle to multiple circles to make room for people. Eventually there ends up being a lot of circles, and it becomes a management problem for the senior pastor.

What is needed is a restructuring of leadership to form circles of circles. Another layer of leadership must be established, this time among the paid staff, to whom new levels of authority and responsibility must be delegated. Now you have pastors reporting to other pastors, as opposed to all reporting to the senior pastor.

The role of the elders changes also. They are no longer involved in day-to-day decisions or planning; they are only involved in church-wide, big picture decisions (e.g. setting the budget).

At both levels, barrier-breaking begins in the brain, and first of all in the brain of the pastor. Then the elders/leaders and the people need to make the shift. Once that happens, change can follow easily.

Chapter Four: Tension Points Produced by Growth Barriers

As a growing church approaches one of the growth barriers, tension and stress increase. It is felt differently by different segments (pastor, elders, people), but all experience it in some way. The issue actually has nothing to do with size; it has everything to do with how the senior pastor, elders, and staff relate to one another, who does the ministry, and how decisions are made.

I cannot emphasize this enough: small, medium, and large churches are completely different from each other. A medium-sized church is not a small church with more people! Almost everything about a small church is different from a medium-sized church: the way they communicate, how they recruit volunteers, how they prepare for events, how they make decisions, etc. *Everything is different.*

In navigating a church through a growth barrier, a leader needs to consider three issues: the problem, the paradigm, and the personnel.

Let's look at the 100/200 barrier first.

The problem: we have reached a barrier, and we must change to keep growing. The elders usually don't need a lot of convincing that a change is needed. They have been living with a growing tension for some time. At the same time, some may resist releasing other leaders, seeing it as a diminishing of authority. Wise pastors help elders see that they are not being replaced; in fact, they are being taken "up" not "down" since they will actually be "over" those doing the ministry.

The people usually don't care about church growth barriers. In fact, most people don't care about church growth at all! Rather than focusing on what changes need to be made, the pastor should concentrate on creating an understanding that the church *should* grow, and that its growth will *actually benefit* the average believer.

The paradigm: The role of the elders must change.

The elders need to recognize that in letting go of ministry, they are not letting go of their role. The chief function of the eldership is to rule, and the calling on every believer is to minister. At the same time, elders must resist the urge to micromanage. In a small church, they make all the decisions; now they need to delegate some of those to others.

When the church is smaller, the pastor is looking for volunteers. In a medium-sized church, the pastor is looking for leaders. I have often heard pastors say they lack leaders in their

congregations. I believe the real problem is not a lack of leadership but a lack of perception on the part of the pastor. Rather than waiting for God to bring great people to our church, we need to look for great people already there—and then develop them. The best leaders are always the ones raised up from within the church; they have your values and philosophy of ministry inculcated into their leadership style already.

“But he/she isn’t ready!” I’ve heard many pastors say that. The truth is, no one is truly ready for the next step in life. But if you will believe in people more than they believe in themselves, and invest in developing them, you will always be successful. Those you raise up will propel you to success.

Personnel: we must move from the Shepherd to the Rancher Model.

In moving to the Rancher model, you are adding staff. The elders need to set the pace in supporting the new person and following them. How elders respond to this leader will dictate how the people will respond to them.

Now let’s look at the 700/800 barrier.

The Problem: We have reached a barrier and must change to grow.

At this barrier, the pastor and the staff feel the tension, rather than the elders. The thing creating the tension is the realization that things are falling through the cracks. The senior pastor has to focus on managing what has been built, and he may not be a very good manager. Tension and frustration result.

In adding another level of leadership to bring order, the elders need to let go of larger and larger decisions, until they are only focused on key, church-wide decisions. If they don’t do that, elder’s meetings will get progressively longer, and growth will slow or stop.

The Paradigm: The roles of pastors and elders must change

This is often the most difficult shift for elders to make, but it is vital if the church is going to break the barrier. Elders must move from being decision-makers to becoming policy-makers. Policies are decisions at a macro level. They provide the overall framework that pastors will use to make their daily ministry decisions.

In addition, the church needs to be reconfigured as “circles of circles.” There is no set way to design these, since the style of each church is different. Just keep in mind that the goal is to release people into ministry. In the long run this is what provides growth, because this is what matures people. Structures either inhibit or promote this process.

It takes some adjustment on the part of the people to get used to doing things a different way. In a medium-sized church, people get used to going to whatever pastor they want,

regardless of what the pastor's area of responsibility is. That changes in a large church. Pastors have more specialized responsibilities, and it becomes more important to direct people to the right person to talk to. A pastor may have no idea about what is going on in an area he isn't involved in. Ultimately, the specialization results in a higher quality product for everyone, but it takes some getting used to.

The Personnel: We must create another tier of pastoral leadership.

In a medium-sized church, all of the pastors except the senior pastor are likely to be on the same level. At a larger size, some pastors will be over others on the organizational chart. This is necessary for two reasons: 1) the senior pastor can then focus on leading instead of managing, and 2) creating a new level of leadership will enable people to focus on more clearly defined areas, increasing accountability, closing cracks, and providing more opportunity for people to be released into ministry.

How do you decide who fills this new leadership level? These positions must be filled by people who are *leaders*. I like to think of the folks who fill these slots as people who could be senior pastors themselves. They definitely need to be people who can lead/manage a large and growing number of people.

How you communicate these changes to the people is crucial. Shared the wrong way, people are likely to feel like they are losing their pastor. Shared the right way, people will understand that these changes are made so that they will be "led and fed" better than they were before. They will have more access to a pastor, just not the senior pastor. And, if the pastor and elders express their confidence in the new leaders, the people will usually embrace them, growth will follow, and the barrier will be broken.

Chapter Five: Tension Produced by Improper Alignment

One cause of tension in a church comes when a church is approaching a growth barrier and change is needed. Another cause of tension comes from improper alignment.

The most severe and potentially damaging tensions are those caused by pastors and individuals on the leadership team who relate to the church according to the wrong size category.

There is the one elder in a large church who still has a small-church mindset and carries the expectations associated with the small church. This elder wants to handle matters that should not be addressed at the eldership level.

I've also seen local churches led by a pastor with a large church mindset in a small church context. Having a vision to be large is fine, but you can't skip the stages necessary to get there. Putting a large church structure in place too early will cause the people to feel unpastored.

In these situations some of the most hurtful things can be said by the best people, each suspicious of the other's motives, while longing for the church to be all God intends it to be. People begin to take sides, church politics become prominent, division and bitterness follow, and momentum for growth is lost. How can we avoid such a calamity?

Simply put, the truth sets people free. Both pastor and elders need to recognize where they really are in the growth and life of the church. Once they come into agreement on that (small, medium, large?), they can begin to consider what their internal mechanisms look like, what their expectations are, and what specific changes need to occur.

Part of the needed conversation is about embracing the necessity of change. Change is hard, even for leaders. But, living things change. Establish the idea that the church is a living thing following a living God, so change will always be part of the picture.

In all likelihood, there will be pastors or elders on the team who are not operating or thinking in the right context. They probably won't know it—most of us don't see ourselves accurately. Love demands that we take a non-confrontational approach in this setting. Start with a generic discussion of how things ought to be done, how ministry is conducted and decisions made, etc. In embracing the future, the pastor and elders are actually turning from the past.

The most powerful byproduct of being on the same page is found in the idea that "expectation produces invitation." Once you know where you are, you are able to see where you are going. With those two items in place, the visionaries go to work, devising a plan to take the church to the next level. As the pastor and elders create a plan and the people embrace it, alignment happens, work gets done, and growth follows.

Chapter Six: Frequently Asked Questions

At the end of every seminar I do, we take questions. No session is the same; however, three particular topics come up regularly.

1) Who should I bring on staff to help break the next barrier?

This is most commonly asked by pastors approaching the 100/200 barrier. Often they have someone in mind and are wondering if they are the right person. They may have unspoken promises concerning future employment that they don't want to break, or are looking for the cheapest or fastest way to get through the barrier. It's important here to slow down and take a step back, because this is by far the most important hire they will ever make.

Just because the person is a great guy doesn't mean he should become "Number Two." This person needs to be someone who church members see in an authoritative/pastoral role—as a shepherd. Just because they can fill a particular role as youth leader or worship leader doesn't mean they are seen as a pastor.

It is always better to have a “jack-of-all-trades-and-master-of-none” as your second full-time pastor and use volunteers for youth and worship (the two traditional first hires) until the church has broken the 200 barrier.

You can tell if someone is a leader by considering these questions: Do people outside the scope of their responsibility follow him/her? Do people seek them out? Do the groups or ministries they lead grow? If the answers are yes, you have a leader. Hire away! If not, leave that person in their present position and allow them time to develop.

2) What do I do with an elder who cannot “make the jump” to the next level?

First, understand that this situation is always going to be present in a growing church. Give people time to make the adjustments, knowing that they will at times “revert to form” or go back to what they are familiar with. Keep educating them and many will be able to make the jump.

There are some who are unable or unwilling to make the needed shifts. Church leaders who cannot grow and change with the group become roadblocks and they must be repositioned.

Caution! How you approach a roadblock at a leadership level is a statement of the type of leader you are. Many simply remove these people from their positions and discard them like disposable products. For leaders like this, the forward progress of the organization is the highest value they hold.

Healthy leaders don't just remove people; they try to reposition them. Helping them find a place that fits them, where they can have a significant impact, is one of the kindest and most responsible things a senior pastor can do. Just because they can't “make the jump” doesn't mean they are disqualified from ministry!

3) How do I identify and raise up new leaders?

Without a continual supply of healthy new leaders, a local church cannot sustain growth. This is another version of the chicken and the egg. As leaders are raised up, more people come into ministry, which draws more people overall. As more people come, more leaders are needed. In raising up those leaders, there are a couple key things to remember:

A new leader should be someone who has internalized the culture, values, and philosophy of the church. They need to have the church's DNA. A church's DNA will reveal *what* is most important and *how* do we do things—not just plans, but values and style (e.g. laid-back or formal? Programmatic or relational?)

Look for people who are **FAT—Faithful, Available, and Teachable**. Don't look just for talent or giftedness—*Character really is king!*

Once you have raised up leaders, don't abandon them. Maintain relationship and accountability, and keep investing in them to help them develop. One of the biggest mistakes we make is forgetting about people once they are in a position. You need to give them regular input, as well as keep the vision in front of them. They *will* lose track of it otherwise.

Chapter Seven: What If the Church Is Not Growing At All?

Everything I have said so far relates to growing churches. Unfortunately, most churches aren't growing. They have plateaued, or are in decline. If a church is not growing, there are three particular areas for leaders to look at first: the "front door," functions & operations, and the "back door."

The front door is, simply, how many visitors are there each week. Without visitors, there is no way a church can grow. Many churches don't even keep track of how many visitors they have, much less how many return and turn into regular attenders or members.

Studies show that the average church should aspire to keep 10% of its visitors (although I have never seen that number hit, it is something to aspire to). Knowing this, one way to begin to grow is simply to increase the number of visitors you have. There are lots of ways to do this: advertise a sermon series; hold a "friend day" where everyone invites a friend; try servant evangelism; host community events. If you increase the number of visitors, you can begin to grow again.

Note: make sure you have a simple process in place to follow up your visitors, and a plan for how to help them get connected. People will come to church for a lot of different reasons, but they stay because of the relationships they develop.

A second thing to look at is how you operate. I'm sorry, but some churches are just weird. They don't grow because they scare people away. You don't have to be a "seeker" church, but you should be sensitive to the concerns and fears of visitors. Additionally, identify what you do best, and invest in it. Do you have a great children's ministry? Let people know—especially parents.

Finally, take a look at your "back door." Some churches lose folks as fast as they gain them. New members are added while old members walk out the back door. Shutting the back door isn't hard. The key to keeping members in the church is not great worship or great preaching. People stay in a church because they have relationships with the people in the church. Do you have a plan for helping people develop relationships?

A Final Word: Church Life is a Team Sport

Senior pastors multiply themselves through proper alignment with their leadership teams. The leadership team rises to its highest level of impact when they function in right relationship to the senior pastor.

The secret of church growth is actually not making growth the main goal. If the focus is on growing people and releasing them into ministry, the natural result is a numerical increase in active members. To make room for people to come into their destiny through service, the internal structures of the church have to change. When they do, room is created for others, and growth results.

Christianity is a team sport. There is only one superstar on the roster, and that position is filled. The rest of us each have a part to play, and when we are all playing our part, the whole team wins, and ultimately, God gets the glory!



From the Pastor's Perspective

Michael Fletcher's book gives a good overview of basic church growth principles. I appreciated his focus on the leadership dynamics of the process.

My take-away is the importance of recognizing what stage your church is in, and making sure it is operating properly for its stage. Recognizing that operating in the wrong way for your church size results in tension is a helpful insight. As a church approaches a barrier, the way it has been operating becomes less effective, and those in leadership start feeling tension.

I think we often experience the tension but diagnose it wrongly, because we aren't aware of the dynamics involved. So, we often look for a villain—someone to blame. We are commonly

a fault-finding people! We aren't in the habit of looking at our systems, or how we operate, so we can miss the real cause. All we know is that things aren't working, we are experiencing tension, etc. As a result, the person or people who don't agree with us become(s) the "bad guy," leading to more tension, fault-finding, and division—and definitely no growth.

The other thing that I made note of, even though it wasn't the primary point of the book, was the comments related to churches that aren't growing. A church that is not growing never needs to deal with a "barrier." That church experiences a different kind of tension—the kind that comes from a lack of momentum or growth, and the discouragement that comes with working hard and not seeing positive results.

Putting a specific focus on increasing the number of visitors is a very practical and powerful step. It is simple and clear (although this doesn't necessarily mean easy!). Small churches, especially, can over-complicate things or try to do too much. It takes discipline to focus on gathering, especially if it is taking awhile, but I don't think anything is more important for a small church to focus on.