

The Seven Struggles of a Growing Church

Ever think that growth will solve all your problems?

It's tempting to believe that. I know, because I still fall into that line of thinking unless I stop myself.

I'd be the first to admit that I'd rather be part of something that's growing than something that's stuck or dying, but growth doesn't mean your issues disappear.

In fact, leaders of growing organizations just sign up for a new set of problems. While I'll take those problems any day, they're still problems.

Having started ministry in very small churches, I can relate to each of these struggles personally.

As [our church](#) has grown from a handful of people to 1,200 people who now attend and 2,500 people who call our church home, we've navigated all of these challenges. So has almost every growing church.

What's true in church is true in any organization or business. We're even working through rapid growth issues associated with this blog, my writing, and my [podcast](#). You hope and pray people show up, but when they do, you get a whole new set of challenges. As things grow, everything gets more complicated. It's the leader's job to create simplicity in the midst of it all.

Bottom line? Your struggles as a leader or as a church don't go away when your church or organization starts to grow. They simply change.

Here are 7 things every leader of a growing church or organization struggles with.

1. The Senior Leader Being Less Available

I began ministry in a church of 6 people (and that was a normal Sunday...a bad Sunday was 2 people). When your church is really small, you're pretty much available to do anything anyone needs. How can you argue you're not available when you lead a tiny church?

But as your church grows, you need to begin a transition away from being available all the time. If you don't, you will implode or your church will stop growing.

You can be generally available to 20 people.

You will wear yourself out trying to be consistently available for 200 people.

You'll die trying to be available to 2000 people. Frankly, you'll never even serve that many people because it's humanly impossible, even if you worked 7 days a week, 20 hours a day.

People will just walk away, their calls unanswered and their needs unmet.

As my friend Reggie Joiner says, the problem with needs-based ministry is there's no end to human need.

Your church will struggle with the pastor being less available as it grows. But it will struggle even more if you don't restructure to grow bigger.

To reach more people, you need to be available to fewer people.

I wrote more about scaling your ministry through different stages in my new book, [Lasting Impact: Seven Powerful Conversations That Will Help Your Church Grow](#), available [here](#).

2. The Leader Not Doing Everything

A companion of being less available as a church grows is the reality that a pastor can't do everything.

Many pastors of small churches start out as jacks of all trades: preacher, pastor, chaplain, wedding officiant, funeral officiant, bible study leader, team leader, curriculum designer and even friend who drops by.

When your church is small, it's natural for the pastor to do almost all the work, because it seems there is no one else available to do it, and no money to outsource it or to hire anyone else.

When I started in ministry, in addition to preaching, teaching and vision casting (my primary giftings) I also designed and printed the bulletins, created any computer graphics, performed weddings and funerals, visited in hospital, led the church bible study and was actively involved in our kids ministry. I was only mediocre at most things on that list, and terrible at a few.

As our church has grown, my role has become narrower and narrower.

At 200 Pastoral care became a groups and congregational responsibility. So did bible study (which became small groups instead).

At 400, I let go of graphics and design entirely (thankfully). I also go out of direct involvement in student and children's ministry as we hired people (I still share the the vision, but no longer own the responsibility).

At 800, I stepped back from leading and attending most meetings and almost everything else to focus on preaching, teaching, vision casting and senior leadership.

The struggle here is dual: you will struggle with letting go, and people will struggle with you letting go.

If you want to grow, you have to let go.

And, of course, as Andy Stanley says, by doing less you'll accomplish more. Far more.

This sounds like a small thing, but it's a big thing.

3. Not Knowing Everyone's Name

People who are part of a small church panic about not knowing everyone's name as a church grows.

Time to challenge that assumption. Why panic?

Truthfully most people don't know everyone, even in a church of 50.

Human reality dictates we can only truly know about 5 people deeply and about 20 people well.

Which again leads to small groups and serving teams. You can (and should) organize hundreds and even thousands of people to be known in smaller circles of groups and teams.

The point of church is not for everyone to know everyone. The point is for everyone to be known.

I think I have a personal capacity to know between 1,500 to 2,000 people by name and then my mind fries. Our church (and my life) has grown beyond that. At one point I tried to know all of our volunteers by name, but even now, I get stumped (the volunteer name tags really help me).

If you're leading a growing church, embrace that. Create a church where everyone who wants to be known...is.

You will reach far more people if you do.

4. Shifting From Leading People To Leading Leaders

If you're going to lead a growing church effectively, you have to begin leading leaders instead of leading people.

That's a hard shift for many people, including church staff.

There's a temptation to want to be known and recognized by everyone you're leading. The truly great leaders are prepared not to do that.

They realize that their greatest success will be found in leading staff and volunteers who can, in turn, lead others.

Which also means sometimes they get the credit rather than you. Which again, is fine if you're committed to becoming an effective leader.

If you're not fine with others receiving the credit, you'll eventually stunt the church's growth to the level of your insecurity.

If you struggle with insecurity, by the way, [this is an amazing conversation with Josh Gagnon](#), who leads a top 5 fastest growing church in America and has had to battle his own insecurities in doing so.

But you must shift from leading people to leading leaders if you hope to reach more people.

5. Adding Systems

This is a hard one for any entrepreneurial leader (like myself). I love freedom and even spontaneity.

But for your church to ever sustainably pass 500 in attendance, let alone 1000, you have to have systems.

Many entrepreneurial leaders are afraid of systems and structure because they think it means the creation of a bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy stifles mission. Great systems fuel it.

Like an office tower designed to house thousands of people, great systems and structure support the goals of the organization with lean but solid processes around finances, management, discipleship and even the weekend services a church offers.

Without structure, freedom collapses into chaos and disorganization.

The novice leader values freedom from structure. The mature leader values freedom in structure.

Without great systems that foster care for people, you won't care for people.

6. Saying No

'Yes' gets you to initial growth; 'No' gets you to sustained growth.

Many pastoral leaders are people pleasers. As I [argue here](#), that can be deadly.

Most great organizations become effective not just because they decided what they are, but fundamentally because they decided what they are not.

As you grow, more and more people will show up with ideas about how to make things better.

It's much easier to say no when you have a clearly defined mission, vision, strategy and culture.

The leader who says yes to everything ultimately says yes to nothing.

7. Dealing With Critics

So once you start growing, all the critics will disappear, correct?

Sorry to break the news...but just the opposite. They'll line up.

You'll have internal critics who want things to be the way they used to be. After all, the people heading for the Promised Land always want to go back to Egypt.

But the critics are not just internal, growth attracts a growing number of external critics.

Our generation seems to specialize in encouraging leaders and organizations to grow and then criticizing them when they do.

And before you accuse others, there's a 99% chance you've thought or said something negative about a large church pastor you resent.

Growth attracts critics. It just always does.

So how do you process the criticism when you're the one being criticized?

The best way to process what your critics have to say is to understand why they say it.

First, take whatever good there might in what they said and reflect on it. You're not perfect. You can learn and develop from it.

But then process *why* the critics are often so mean-spirited.

What usually fuels a critics' animosity toward success and growth? Three things:

- Jealousy
- A need to justify their own lack of progress
- Sin

Once you understand that a critic's arguments are often less about you than they are about them, you're free to show compassion and even concern for them.

> [Read more from Carey.](#)

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