



Ten Moves for Dealing with the 800 Barrier

(And Why it Matters to Larger Congregations)

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Executive Summary

The 800 barrier refers to the difficulties that congregations face as worship attendance approaches 800 on a weekend. As a congregation grows beyond 400, it faces increasing complexity that produces a variety of problems and issues. People in the congregation may have a vague sense that something is not quite right. One approach to dealing with these issues is to decide to stay small, as in, "I like our church this size," or, "Churches shouldn't be that big anyway." A more productive approach is to make adjustments in these ten key areas that will reduce blockages to natural growth.

What is the 800 Barrier?

The 800 barrier is a common dynamic in growing congregations where attendance begins to stall before reaching 800 people in worship on a weekend. Many find the 800 barrier seemingly impossible to overcome. As congregations grow from 400 toward 800, the level of complexity increases and overwhelms existing ways of operating.

This dynamic is similar to what happens when a small group begins to grow. With five or six people in the group, everyone has a chance to talk and close relationships can be formed quickly. As a small group grows, the dynamics in the group begin to change. At around 16-20 people, the group begins to divide into two smaller groups. In a home Bible study, you will commonly see one group having coffee in the kitchen and the other having coffee in the living room.

A similar dynamic happens in larger groups. As a congregation grows past 400 in worship and begins moving toward the 800 barrier, the level of complexity in the congregation increases exponentially.

Communication becomes more difficult. Just staying organized is a lot more difficult and new management systems need to be developed. Organizational growth tends to stagnate.

This effect is sort of like resistance and support in a stock price. As a stock price bounces up and down, there is a high price it can't get past and a low price it will not go below. The high number is resistance and the low number is support. But if a stock can break through the resistance, the stock will tend to stay above that number and the old resistance will become support for the new trading range.

Similarly, the 800 barrier functions as resistance to a church that is growing, but once it breaks through the 800 barrier, it will tend to stay above 800 in worship attendance. According to Lyle Schaller, a

**He cannot have God
for his Father who will
not have the Church
for his mother.**

Saint Augustine

congregation that does not break through the 800 barrier will tend to slide back down to around 400 in attendance. He called the area between 400 and 800 the “Zone of Instability.” So what are the invisible forces causing this barrier?

From Small Church to Very Large Church

Small congregations and very large congregations are completely different animals. The behaviors of each are poles apart. For example, a small church will decide and announce a “pot luck lunch” a week before the meal. A very large church will schedule the event three months in advance and have the meal catered. A small church has frequent voters’ meetings. A very large church does not. The pastor knows everybody’s name in a small church, but less than half in a very large church.

God must love small congregations because he sure made a lot of them.

Lyle Schaller

There are small church ways of doing things, small church behaviors, and small church thinking. There are large church ways of doing things, large church behaviors, and large church thinking.

To break through the 800 barrier, a congregation needs to morph from being a small church to a very large church. They must let go of their small church traditions, behaviors, and thinking. This is hard. For example, how easy is it for a pastor to tell members that lay leaders will no longer be allowed to come to the front and make announcements at the end of the service? How easy is it to say the congregation has hosted its last pot luck dinner? Yet these are the kinds of changes that have to happen to break through the 800 barrier. The board, staff, and leaders need to let go of their small church way of doing things and act like the very large church they are becoming.

Here are ten key areas to assess and adjust for removing the obstacles blocking growth and holding a growing congregation back.

Streamline the Structure

Congregations dealing with 800 barrier issues can benefit greatly by shifting to a structure with a single board of directors. Most congregations will tend to have a parish planning council structure or a parallel board structure inherited from their small church past. The parish planning council model (known as the Abdon model) consists of 8 to 10 or so ministry boards with the chair of each board meeting together once a month to coordinate ministry activities, watch the finances, and make decisions for the congregation. A parallel board

Too many church services start at eleven sharp and end at twelve dull.

Vance Havner

structure is two or three boards with the same level of authority (also known as the two-headed or three-headed monster). Typically, a congregation will have a church board and a school board with neither ultimately in charge, or a business board and elder board that divvy up spiritual issues and financial issues. Both of these structures are problematic as a congregation approaches 800 in worship attendance.

A general principle regarding governance is that the larger an organization becomes the smaller its governance needs to become. So, a congregation with 45 people in worship can invite all members to the monthly voters' meeting. In systems thinking terms, this is getting the whole system in the room. For a congregation over 800, they can't get the whole system in the room. It is much better for them to elect a single board with 5 to 12 trustees who can effectively oversee the organization for them.

So the first move is to adjust bylaws to allow for a single board of directors to oversee the entire organization. This has to be done in a transparent way closely following all of the procedures specified in the current bylaws.

Upgrade Governance Practices

At the board level, there is a big difference between managing and governing. A managing board is heavily involved in operational decisions, sets goals for the congregation, approves major changes, and determines the budget. A governing board oversees the organization by developing policies and then closely monitoring financial and organizational performance. Governing boards stay out of operational issues as much as possible and empower the staff they have hired to manage the organization. Trustees need to determine if they are going to be a managing board or a governing board.

Not every congregation should move to policy-based governance. I know, shocking!

There are several prerequisites for moving from managing to governing. One prerequisite is that a congregation has to have a senior pastor with proven administrative and leadership abilities. If the senior pastor is not capable of leading a large staff or doesn't desire these kinds of responsibilities, then the board does not have an executive to whom they can effectively delegate the work. Most pastors are not gifted for

**Church parking only.
We will not forgive
those who trespass
against us.**

Sign in parking lot

the role of senior pastor of a very large church. Another prerequisite is that the board needs to have trustees willing to stay out of staff work. It takes discipline for trustees to monitor the organization closely yet stay out of operational issues that have been delegated to the staff. Any board can quickly get into the weeds as interesting or important organizational issues arise. Another prerequisite is that the board needs trustees who want to do board work. Board work does not appeal to everyone. It means electing people to the board who actually want to develop and enforce policies. Yet another prerequisite is that the board needs a couple of trustees who are experienced in governance or are willing to read books on governance and seek training.

If these four prerequisites are not in place, the trustees will feel pressure to function like a managing board. However, this may be the best choice. If so, the managing board should strive to oversee at a higher level and, as much as possible, avoid micromanaging the staff. They should set long range goals for the congregation and think strategically about the future. They should be more concerned about results rather than operations. In effect, they should borrow some principles from policy-based governance even if they do not have a written board policy manual. A managing board should manage at a high level delegating details to the staff.

Display Courageous Leadership

In a very large congregation, the board needs to empower the senior pastor to lead courageously. They need to encourage the senior pastor to make the hard decisions and inspire people to follow his lead. They will ensure that he has a professional development plan to stay sharp and continue improving his leadership skills.

To break through the 800 barrier, a congregation needs a senior pastor who is an authentic leader and who inspires people to follow well. Recent research in transformational leadership has discovered several factors of leadership that can be valuable for pastors and other called workers. These factors are *Individual Consideration*, *Intellectual Stimulation*, *Inspirational Motivation*, and *Idealized Influence*.

Individual Consideration involves building deep, personal relationships with staff and congregational leaders. It includes getting along with others, but goes beyond just getting to know people or being friendly. It means taking the time to engage deeply with individual followers.

Intellectual Stimulation means encouraging staff and others to be more creative and to come to work fully engaged with their minds. It means causing people to think more deeply and expansively. It requires asking people to try new ways of doing things.

Inspirational Motivation means being a leader who is upbeat, positive, and enthusiastic. This requires eliminating negative comments and sarcasm as much as possible. It means getting people genuinely fired-up and positive about life and about the future of the congregation.

Idealized Influence means talking, looking, and acting like a leader. This involves encouraging true teamwork, lifting up the vision, setting goals together, making clear ministry plans, and having each other's back. This is a combination of what you do and how you are perceived.

When the senior pastor displays courageous leadership, people will be more willing to follow and more fully engaged in the congregation and living for Jesus.

Hire Skilled Specialists

The pastor of a small church, by necessity, must be a generalist. He must personally conduct all aspects of pastoral ministry. Most LCMS congregations have only one pastor on staff. Most congregations need a generalist pastor, someone who can do it all. Accordingly, seminaries train their students how to serve as an effective generalist pastor.

In order to break the 800 barrier, however, congregations need specialist pastors. In a very large church, the senior pastor needs to build a staff team of specialists. One person takes the lead on preaching and teaching. Another takes the lead on pastoral care and counseling. Another takes the lead on youth and family ministry. Generalist pastors tend not to perform well in this setting.

In professional sports, teams do not hire players who are all-around athletes, but only those who are truly outstanding at something they need. Winning teams want impact players who can step in and make a difference. Similarly, to break the 800 barrier you need a team of specialist pastors who are impact players at their specialty.

Launch Ministry Action Teams

A ministry action team is a group of people who have joined together to do the work of ministry. The term “ministry action team” is the antithesis to “church committee.”

When the decision is made to form a committee at church, often an announcement is made to the whole congregation with a request for people to volunteer. Anyone can volunteer to serve, and someone is asked to serve as the committee chair. Sometimes committees work well, but usually they're slow and ineffective.

Ministry action teams are different. Once a ministry need has been identified, the staff look for a gifted person who could serve as the leader of that team. Once the staff has found the team leader, then that leader assembles his or her own team. Sometimes, no general announcements are made or are even needed. Each ministry action team has an apprentice who can lead when the leader is absent, but is also developing as a leader. Ministry action teams need a clear task, appropriate resources, and freedom to make decisions. They are supervised and held accountable by staff. Each team leader knows which staff person they report to.

Stop forming committees and launch ministry action teams instead. As much as possible, transition any existing committees, if you still need them, to ministry action teams. Some can transition quite easily.

Ignite the Leadership Community

Small congregations don't need leadership community meetings. They have monthly voters' meetings that bring all of the leaders together on a regular basis. Very large congregations can't do this. They need a special meeting to bring all of the leaders together for inspiration, training, and camaraderie.

Leadership community meetings are typically scheduled two to four times per year. All of the congregational leaders are invited. This includes the trustees, staff, elders, elected leaders, key ministry leaders, small group leaders, and informal leaders in the congregation. During the 90 minute or two hour meeting, the senior pastor provides in-depth Bible teaching, time for prayer together, leadership training, a good dose of inspiration, and a sneak peek into plans for the near future.

This is an effective way to get all of the leadership on the same page. If the senior pastor has the entire leadership community with him, then the rest of the congregation will tend to follow.

Clarify the Core Process

Your core process (also known as Simple Church process) describes the three or four things that everyone in the congregation is expected to engage in. It expresses what it means to be a member. It describes a “discipleship pathway” that we want everyone to be on.

For example, every congregation would, most likely, add regular weekly worship to their core process. Others may add involvement in a formal Bible study class, a small group Bible study, or involvement in a life group or missional community. Having a clearly articulated core process lets members know what is expected of them. It can help the staff more clearly see what needs attention next. It will help in aligning the myriad of programs that a congregation over 400 in worship attendance tends to have in place.

Once the core process is clearly articulated, it quickly becomes apparent that many existing programs are not in alignment with that core process. This can make people uncomfortable. Programs that are clearly already in alignment need to be celebrated. Programs that are out of alignment need to be tweaked or terminated.

Where God builds a church the devil builds a chapel.

Martin Luther

If you have an existing program or activity that is out of alignment and about to die, don't try to revive it. One congregation in Michigan had a church bowling league. It was quite popular within one segment of the congregation. This program was problematic because the evening included no Bible study or prayer, just strikes and gutter balls. Over time, participation declined to the point where the league was going to lose its time slot with the bowling alley. Instead of letting it die a natural death, the pastor made an announcement after each service asking for more people to get involved. The unintended consequence was that a few of these people were not attending any formal Bible study or small group because they already felt connected. It was taking people out of the core process instead of drawing them into it. It was out of alignment.

Install Professional Systems

When complexity increases in a growing congregation, more powerful systems have to be developed in order to stay on top of everything. For example, the desktop photocopier needs to be replaced by a faster full-sized model. To keep track of members, simple lists need to be replaced by specialized church software. Administrative systems need to become more efficient.

A small congregation will usually have a weekly staff meeting with all of the staff attending. When the congregation grows toward 800, all of the staff no longer fit in one room. A new system of cascading meetings has to be adopted where the senior pastor and a few direct reports meet together, then they conduct their own staff meeting.

The senior pastor and staff need to formalize their operating policies. This involves gathering them in one place, reviewing them to see what other policies need to be developed, and then storing them electronically for easy updating and retrieval. These church policies, or operating policies, are owned by the staff, as opposed to board policies, which are owned by the board.

Other areas to be addressed include key performance indicators, reporting procedures, accountability, and organizational culture. Congregations between 400 and 800 are sometimes called the “professional church” because they are moving from small church systems to very large church systems.

Pray for Kingdom Vision

To break through the 800 barrier, congregations cannot do the same thing the same way and expect different results. A congregation that is plateaued, or in a slow decline, needs a fresh vision. Some wonder whether the vision should come from the board or from the senior pastor. Certainly the senior pastor and trustees should be taking a generous amount of time to talk about vision together. It does not matter where the vision comes from, only that at the end of the process both the senior pastor and the board are on the same page and enthusiastic about the vision for the future.

The vision of leaders needs to be rooted in the Word and watered with prayer. They should be asking each other questions like, “What else

might God want us to do in this community?" Kingdom vision is not making our plans for ministry and then asking God to bless it, but asking God to lead us and guide us as we make plans for the future.

Move Forward Purposefully

The pastor, staff, and congregational leaders need to work together to keep the congregation moving forward. This implies making changes where change is needed. But too many changes too close together can lead to change fatigue. Timing is critical for the leaders.

Moving forward means working on real problems. Effective organizations work on their problems. A congregation with facility issues should deal with them. A congregation with underperforming called workers should address the situation.

Moving forward involves regular strategic planning. One strategic retreat per year is not enough for complex organizations. Staff need to be reviewing their strategy more often than that. Quarterly meetings work better in organizations that are driven by their financials. For a congregation, a better approach is to plan seasonally. This may mean meeting two to four times per year to plan the next natural season in the church calendar or semester in the school year.

Moving forward is aided by building a culture of continuous improvement. When a congregation is always tweaking and improving the many small changes can add up and produce a big, positive effect.

Conclusion

None of these ten moves make a congregation grow. Rather, they remove key obstacles that cause confusion and inhibit growth. Deal with these ten areas and growth will be more likely to occur. Fix the flat spots that are holding the congregation back. Ultimately, any growth a congregation experiences comes from the work of the Holy Spirit in people's lives.

This means that setting a goal to break the 800 barrier may not be such a hot idea. It can take the focus off of the real work to be done, which is making disciples. Having 800 people in worship is not a result. It is a measure of activity. Seeing someone move from darkness to light is a result. An individual who is growing as a disciple is a result. A changed life is a result.

For me Christianity is about the Kingdom, not about the Church: it has to do with human growth and development not church growth and development.

Michael Taylor

Congregations with over 1,000 in worship will have most likely already addressed some or all of these ten areas.

Next Steps

Take these ten areas to your staff or church council, or both, and discuss each area thoughtfully. Then give the congregation a grade for each area (A, B, C, D, F). Discuss any larger patterns you may be seeing. This exercise will provide clear feedback regarding strengths and weaknesses, and provide perspective on which areas the leadership should work on first.

Given these ten areas, what will be your next move?

Free Resources

Here is an article by Lyle Schaller about the 800 barrier:

<http://www.religiousproductnews.com/articles/2010-February/In-Every-Issue/Breaking-Barrier.htm>

For more free resources, visit these websites:

<http://www.galvinandassociates.com/resources/articles/>

<http://www.galvinandassociates.com/resources/white-papers/>

<http://www.boardeffectiveness.org>

If you need assistance forming a strategy for any of these areas, feel free to connect by email or telephone. Here are some ways we can help.

- 800 Barrier planning retreat
- Governance transition planning
- Board policy manual development
- Governance tune-up
- Board strategic retreat
- Staff development
- Strategic planning

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