

Breaking Through the 100 Barrier by Dan Reiland

My "Uncle" Nick's church was a unique experience. First, I should tell you that he wasn't my *actual* uncle. Nick was one of those wonderful and close friends of the family that we all affectionately called "Uncle". He was bi-vocational, and worked at a full time job in aircraft manufacturing. Nick pastored as he had time on the side. His theology was sometimes a bit "creative" but he loved the Lord and faithfully served his little flock.

Church started at 11:00. The street address revealed that church was at someone's house. When you walked in you were greeted formally and given a printed bulletin. It contained an order of service including the title of the morning homily and special music. A small wooden pulpit stood in front of maybe 40 folding chairs packed *very closely* together. About 35 people gathered on average and most carried a Bible. The service was generally warm, friendly, not too challenging and reverent. When church was over, the congregation sort of turned around in unison, faced the kitchen, and it was then time for cake and coffee.

They were a wonderful group of people, but one thing was clear, they had no intentions of growing. Guests were made to *feel* welcome, but you remained just that, *a guest*. Perhaps you have experienced something similar to this.

Or in contrast, perhaps you pastor a small congregation and feel passionate about serving your community and growing your church. If so, please be encouraged by knowing that hundreds if not thousands of small churches have grown to become large churches that make a difference in their community. Also be encouraged by the fact that size isn't the issue, its impact that matters - how many lives are changed. Remember that God knows what is going on in His church and you are not alone. His Spirit is with you.

The following guiding principles will help you move toward and break through 100 in attendance.

Determine if your church wants to break through 100.

I'm writing to you assuming that as the pastor, (or other key church leader), that you want your church to grow. Don't assume, however, that because you want your church to grow that they do. Further, sometimes congregations think and say they want to grow, but their actions reveal that they don't. For example, the most obvious evidence is that few people invite and bring guests to church. Another example is that when guests do come, the love and acceptance offered them is only a surface level and socially polite gesture.

The best way to determine if your church wants to break through 100 is to first gather your top five leaders and ask them five key questions:

1. Are you genuinely open to whatever change is required for our church to grow?
2. Are you willing to personally pay the price for change and growth?
3. What are you not willing to change or do to see our church reach more people for Christ?
4. What do you believe we must do differently to reach people and serve our community?
5. What do you love and appreciate most about our church?

When the top five leaders have answered these questions in a positive and unified way, then take the same questions to the majority of the rest of the congregation. For example, if your church has 65 people, you would want to gather 30-40 of the most involved people to cast your vision for growth (be sure to tell them why you want to grow, not just that you want to grow) and then ask them the same questions.

Conduct an informal check-up on the church's self-esteem.

This is an important process to go through because many small churches genuinely want to grow but are unable due to their corporate poor self-esteem. This is not dissimilar to a person who wants to grow spiritually, mentally, professionally, etc., but their self image is so skewed that they can't move forward. Until that person sees things more accurately, including their potential, they are unable to grow.

A corporate self-esteem check-up is relatively easy to do. Write ten statements that reveal how they feel about the church and rate the questions on a scale of 1-10 each (1 = low and 10 = high) for a total of 100, or 100%.

Some sample statements are

1. You are proud (versus embarrassed) to bring new people to our church.
2. Our music and worship ministry is a blessing to those who experience it.
3. Our church has changed your life in a positive and noticeable way.
4. Our building is attractive and comfortable.
5. Our budget and resources allow us to make a difference in our community.

The answers will reveal much as well as get you started with some specific ideas to raise the self-esteem and morale of the congregation. Don't try to fix everything. Go for one or two small noticeable wins first, and when accomplished let the congregation know publicly. Cheer them on to even greater change and watch the corporate esteem rise.

Change the perspective on how the pastor is perceived, from chaplain to change-agent.

It is very common for the pastor of a church under 100 to be viewed more as a chaplain than a change-agent. This is particularly true if the church has a long history, with a number of pastors over the course of that history, who have been hired by a board consisting of long term members.

The chaplain perspective is one in which the church views the pastor as responsible to respond to any number of their needs. This would include things such as visiting in the hospital, counseling, and even picking someone up from the airport. Duties include preaching, marrying, burying and attending committee meetings - but not necessarily leading them.

In the chaplain scenario, the board or a few key families run the church and the pastor is hired and directed by them to complete their picture of a church. In this scenario, and others similar to it, I can tell you that the church is not likely to grow beyond 100 people.

The pastor must step up to become the leader (change-agent) and the board or key families must give the pastor true permission to do so. This will not be an over-night process. If you are the pastor, don't walk into your next board meeting and announce that "things are going to change around here." If you do, you are likely to be the change. The slower but wiser approach is to win their followership by making small changes that benefit the church. These small changes will earn you the needed influence to begin making larger changes. Remember, you are not attempting to diminish their influence or remove them from leadership, (you can't) you are trying to increase your influence and effectiveness.

Change the perspective on how the church is perceived, from friendly family to focused fellowship.

Eight out of ten churches under a hundred (the two remaining are usually new church plants) are viewed as a "friendly family" and not a "focused fellowship." Friendly is a good thing, but not if it prevents you from reaching new people and serving your community. Friendly families are just that, very close and connected, but closed to outsiders.

A focused fellowship is still warm and friendly, but with a different priority. The focal point is the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20.) The small church must still be itself, and why not enjoy the warmth of close relationships, but the shift is in the ultimate purpose for gathering. It is not for the sake of the existing relationships, but for the sake of the relationships, with Christ and others, that have not yet been formed.

A biblically-based focused fellowship is all about evangelism, compassion to outsiders, and giving themselves away. It is not about more programs for the "church members." In fact, a church focused on the Great Commission may well cut back on some "church" programs in order to free up resources to reach people outside the church. A church focused on the Great Commission is willing to make tough decisions, including the toughest decision of all. The decision that causes some people to leave. This is the greatest challenge to the small church. It feels counter-intuitive. "We only have 59 people, why would we do anything that might result in losing 13 people?" The answer is because that decision may be what is needed to clear the

way for the real growth and service to the community that God wants you to experience.

Don't over-organize.

Let me close with a brief point. Keep it simple. In my consulting practice, the vast majority of small churches I've worked with are over-organized and under evangelized. I urge you to go with less committees and structure and pour more heart and energy into reaching out to new people, and compassionate service to people in your community. I'm not suggesting a sloppy approach to church, but one in which the policy, by-laws and organizational charts serve the mission and not the reverse. At Crossroads we say it this way - "Mission over Machine." Your church may be too small to feel the "machine" like issues, but they are still there. I urge you to never let the machine (or system) overtake the mission (or Spirit.)

My prayer for you is to break loose from whatever may be holding you back from experiencing all that God has planned for you.

Recommended Reading: (2006 Leadership Network Publications) □ □ *The Missional Leader - Equipping Your Church to Reach A Changing World*, Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk; Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint □ □ *Practicing Greatness - 7 Disciplines of Extraordinary Spiritual Leaders*, Reggie McNeal; Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint □