

Beyond 200

Mark T. McLean
Central Kitsap Church of Christ
P.O. Box 2495
Silverdale, WA 98383-2495

Sam, minister of the Friendly Church of Christ, met over coffee with Frank, one of the congregation's elders. The Friendly congregation had started a number of years ago and had grown well during its early history. But now the growth seemed stymied. For several years the church had averaged between 150 and 200 worshippers on Sunday mornings. Frank, a long-term member and observant elder, remarked, "It seems like every time the church grows to about 200 in average worship attendance, the congregation hit a "glass ceiling." We hit a snag, and for some reason, our growth slows, and then stops. Then we find ourselves slipping backwards and averaging 150-175 again. What is wrong? Why can't we break the 200 barrier?"

Sam took a sip from his coffee and replied, "I know what you mean. I've found myself frustrated by the same phenomena. I went to a workshop last month on the subject, and found out that congregations near the 200 barrier often suffer from one or more limiting factors."

Frank was now more that intrigued. "Limiting factors? Explain what you mean, Sam."

"A limiting factor is a characteristic of the congregation that LIMITS congregational growth. At the seminar they explained that congregational ministry was a lot like filling up a bucket with water. The problem is that every bucket (or congregation) has 'holes' in it. The 'lower' the 'hole,' the less water stays in the bucket.

No matter how much water you pour in the bucket, the bucket won't hold water above the hole. That hole is a 'limiting factor.' Most congregations have several 'limiting factors.' The key is to identify and fix the 'lowest holes' so that ministry is more effective. At the seminar they helped me identify eight common limiting factors of congregations at or near the 200 barrier. I think that some of these limiting factors may be keeping us from growing through the 200 barrier.”

Now Frank had taken out his pen and was ready to write. First he drew a picture of a bucket, and added several holes at various heights on the side of the bucket to represent the limiting factors.

Sam continued, “At the seminar they stressed that different congregations near the 200 level probably have different limiting factors. Therefore we don't want to just copy what the successful church in the next county is doing. We want to examine ourselves and seek to discover what limiting factors may have kept us from breaking the 200 barrier. Our greatest limiting factor, or 'lowest hole,' may be different from the 'lowest hole' in another congregation. But research has shown that churches near the 200 barrier commonly suffer from one or more of eight common limiting factors.”

Frank said, “I know what worked when we started this congregation. But it seems like some of the methods we used when we were smaller just don't work as well today in a church of our size. Could our ministry methods that worked well when we were a small church now actually be limiting our growth?”

“Exactly!” Sam exclaimed. “That's one of the tricky things they told us at the seminar about the 200 barrier. They told us that some congregational habits and some

forms of ministry must change in order for the congregation to grow through the 200 barrier.”

“That makes sense,” Frank replied. “Even a snake has to shed it’s restrictive skin that has served it well in order to continue to grow. It’s still the same snake it has always been, but it grows a new skin so that it can continue to grow. The outside changes, but the inside stays the same. That’s like a congregation keeping its time-honored values and mission and maintaining its Biblical theology, but changing to a larger and more flexible ‘skin’ to fit the ministry challenges of a larger congregation.”

“Great illustration!” Sam replied, as he scribbled ‘outgrown snake skin’ in his notes. “It’s a difficult decision for a congregation that has grown up to 200 to begin to ‘shed the skin’ of the ministry forms that have brought it success in the past. Continued congregational growth is dependent upon ‘growing a new and larger skin’ for a continually growing congregation.

“Here’s another way to express the same concept,” Sam continued. “When my wife and I were just starting out, a small apartment and an economy car were all we needed. But as our family grew, we had to have a larger home, and we traded our economy car for a minivan. Yet our family stayed as ‘our family’ – our values didn’t really change. But we knew that it would be hard to maintain our growing family with only an economy car and a small apartment. We might say that the ‘outside’ changed, but the ‘inside’ stayed the same. In the same way our church has to change as it grows in order to accommodate growth. Our theology and our values are same. But our ‘ministry house’ looks different as a congregation nearing 200 than the church of 50 we were

fifteen years ago. We have to continue to change the ‘ministry house’ in which we live, but we dare not change our theology and values.”

“That’s what concerns me,” Frank said. “When we were a small church, we all knew each other. We were just one big happy family. But now that we’re nearly 200 in worship, we don’t really know each other anyone. I miss that ‘family feeling.’ I’m afraid that we aren’t valuing the individual the way we used to. And I know that I’m having a hard time shepherding so many members.”

“That’s where we have to differentiate our values from our methods of ministry,” explained Sam after another sip of coffee. “At the seminar they taught us that churches of 200 or more members can still value the individual just as much as smaller churches do, but it is expressed differently. Larger churches can still have that ‘close family feeling,’ but it comes through small groups and Bible classes rather than through the worship assembly. But the larger church has to intentionally work on developing that ‘close family feeling’ through its belonging groups of Bible classes, home groups, and other groups that include a social dimension.”

“That’s good to know,” said Frank with a sign of relief. “I was beginning to feel guilty that I couldn’t possibly personally shepherd 200 members. I feel overworked as it is! The thought of new members scares me as much as it excites me! Possibly our groups can help do some of the personal shepherding. What do you think, Sam?”

“Yes, I think that will work, but we’ll have to make sure that folks are equipped to do the task. Just asking folks to shepherd each other in the group probably isn’t enough. We’ll need to train our teachers and group leaders, but then I think it will work.”

After a few moments of silence and a couple of sips of coffee, Frank asked, “Sam, a few minutes ago you mentioned that there are eight limiting factors for growth near the 200 barrier. What are those common ‘limiting factors?’ I’m ready to take some more notes!”

“Oh yes! Sorry – I got us sidetracked again, didn’t I?” Sam continued, “At the seminar they emphasized that although every church is unique; one or more of these eight limiting factors often keep a church from breaking the 200 barrier. We need to identify which factors are the ‘lowest holes in the bucket’ in our church and remedy them first. Here’s the list:”

1. Overcrowded facilities -- Sam began with the first limiting factor on his list: “Just as our family of seven couldn’t function well in the two bedroom apartment in which we first lived, neither can a church of 200 function well in facilities that worked well for 100. At the seminar they told us that inadequate physical facilities may keep a church from growing through the 200 barrier. Church auditoriums shouldn’t average more than 80% full or visitors may feel uncomfortably crowded and visiting families may have trouble finding seating together. Overcrowded Bible classrooms and inadequate parking may be just as restrictive on congregational growth.”

“That only makes sense,” Frank replied. If you knew you were going to be stuck in a two-bedroom apartment, I’ll bet you and your wife wouldn’t have had five kids!”

“Exactly!” Sam said with a laugh, and then continued, “Churches that are habitually overcrowded might as well hang out a ‘no vacancy’ sign for visitors. I don’t think that overcrowding is a problem yet in our auditorium—it is rated for 300, and we wouldn’t be ‘comfortably full’ at 80% capacity until we average 240. But I’ve noticed

that our young adult classroom is always stuffed to the gills, and we have more babies than our nursery can handle. Do you think that we can address that?"

"Yes," Frank responded, "We'll need to shuffle some classes around in the short term, and it's high time that we began thinking of adding a few more larger classrooms. We probably ought to clear our back property for another 25 parking spaces too. I'll talk to the other elders, and then let's bring it up to the congregation. We don't want to limit our growth with inadequate facilities."

2) **"Small Church" Thinking** – Sam took a long sip of his coffee, looked out the window, and pondered how to express his next point. "Frank, the second common limiting factor for churches near the 200 barrier is tougher to identify. At the seminar they called it 'small church thinking.' Since churches tend to behave as they believe, churches that perceive themselves as small churches tend to act like small churches. So small church thinking tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. 'Small church thinking' is appropriate for a congregation of 50, but it is not appropriate for a church of 180 that is challenging the 200 barrier."

"What do you mean," Frank asked, "by small church thinking? Can you give me some examples?"

"Sure," replied Sam. "A while ago you mentioned that years ago everybody in the church expected to know everyone else. That expectation is warranted in a small church, but it is an unrealistic expectation in a church nearing 200. If the majority of the members of a 180-member church maintain the expectation that everyone should know everyone else, there is no 'relational room' for newcomers. Research has shown that the largest fellowship group where we can maintain face-to-face social relationships numbers

about 150. ‘Small church’ thinking can keep us from having ‘relational room’ for newcomers.”

“That makes sense, Sam. I have a hard time keeping up with our all of membership. I guess I should admit that I don’t have to personally know and shepherd all 180 souls in our fellowship; just some of them. Then I can have the ‘relational room’ to establish relationships with some newcomers who might visit our church. Are there other examples of ‘small church thinking?’

“The examples are endless,” replied Sam. “Small churches don’t need secretarial help, associate ministers, or even hired custodial help, but middle-sized churches usually do. Small churches are ‘run’ differently than middle-sized churches. Small churches tend to rely on informal communication and decision-making, whereas middle-sized churches must develop more structured forms for communication and decision-making. Small churches are not just miniature versions of larger churches. Growing congregations have to begin ‘thinking bigger’ before they ‘become bigger.’ ‘Small church thinking,’ just like an outgrown and restrictive snakeskin, keeps the body from developing as it should. Do you think that our congregation suffers from ‘small church thinking’ Frank?”

Frank replied, “Some of our pioneering members remember with fondness the way the church used to be –when we were under 100 members,” answered Frank, “but I doubt it is one of our lower limiting factors. Many of our folks have come here from larger congregations and have a view of how a larger church works. We’ll need to work with our pioneering members to let them know that we’re still the same ‘family,’ even if

we've outgrown our 'house.' Our values are still the same, and we're still the same 'family.' I think that I can communicate that to them.”

“Sam, you've given me more than enough to think about for one morning. Let's schedule another cup of coffee together and explore the other six common limiting factors of growth. I want to help our congregation break the 200 barrier!”

(This article will be continued in the next issue.)

Beyond 200

(Part II)

Frank, an elder of the Friendly Church of Christ, met again with Sam, the minister, over a cup of coffee.

“Sam, I’ve been reflecting on the two ‘limiting factors’ you shared with me last week from the seminar you attended on the 200 barrier. I can see how inadequate physical facilities and ‘small church thinking’ can stunt congregational growth for the congregation nearing 200, but I doubt those are our ‘lowest holes in the bucket.’ What other limiting factors tend to stymie growth of congregations our size near the 200 barrier? I’m anxious to hear the other six factors from the seminar.”

“I agree,” Sam replied, “that inadequate physical facilities and ‘small church thinking’ probably aren’t our greatest limiting factors. They need to be addressed, but I think our first focus should be on plugging the ‘lowest hole in our bucket.’ I think that some of the other six limiting factors are better candidates for immediate action. Here’s the third common limiting factor:”

3. Inadequate Ministerial Staffing – Sam said, “Depending on whose figures you trust, the seminar suggested that every congregation should have one full-time ministerial staff member for every 100-150 people in attendance in your Sunday morning worship service. This is in addition to adequate “support staff” (secretarial and custodial help). Years ago churches thrived with fewer staff members, but in today’s society a church nearing 200 in attendance with only one full-time minister is considerably understaffed. It is extremely rare for a congregation to break the 200 barrier with only

one full-time staff minister. Most single-staff congregations of 200 are declining congregations.”

“You mean that staffing ratios are culturally conditioned?” Frank asked.

“Exactly!” Sam replied, “As American culture has changed, so has the need for higher staffing ratios to maintain congregational growth. Churches in 1960 might have been adequately staffed with one minister per 300 attendees, but that is not adequate staffing today. Here’s another important point: Churches cannot wait until they reach 200-300 in attendance to add a second staff person. Just as most congregations hired their first fulltime minister at an attendance of 50 or 75 in hopes that the minister would help them grow to 150, so the middle-sized congregation needs to hire its second paid minister at 150-200 in order to help it to grow to be a congregation of 200-300.”

“If that is true,” Frank replied, “then we should be looking for a second staff minister in order to help us break the 200 barrier. I had no idea that we were understaffed with only one minister and 180 in worship attendance. But can the second minister be part-time? Our budget is still pretty tight.”

“At the seminar they discussed that in detail,” Sam replied. “I’ll save the long answer for another day (and another cup of coffee!), but the short answer is that in some situations a part-time second minister may be adequate to get the congregation through the 200 barrier, but in any event, staffing ratios need to be examined continually as the congregation grows.”

Frank responded, “That’s another one to bring up to the other elders and the congregation. We may have found one of our lower limiting factors. What other factors tend to limit growth near the 200 barrier?”

4) Short Ministerial Tenure – Sam replied, “Research has shown that longer ministerial tenure is usually associated with congregational growth through the 200 barrier...so don’t fire me next Sunday!” (Both Sam and Frank shared a good laugh over that comment!) “In a research study of congregations at or near the 200 barrier, ministerial tenure strongly correlated with congregational growth.”

“That makes sense,” Frank reflected, “because continuity in leadership is so important...and we want to keep you, Sam! That’s one reason we gave you a raise last January and sent you and your wife to Hawaii on the tenth anniversary of your work with us—we didn’t send you there to ‘try out’ elsewhere, you know! (Both Sam and Frank share another laugh together.) I don’t expect short ministerial tenure to be a problem for us...OK?”

5) Inadequate Number of Belonging Groups – “The fifth common limiting factor for congregations near the 200 barrier is an inadequate number of belonging groups,” Sam explained. “The seminar suggested that congregations have a minimum of a dozen belonging groups for every 100 people in worship attendance. Many growing churches have an even higher ratio of groups.”

“But what counts as a group?” Frank asked.

“The seminar leader said that groups should be between 5 and 40 participants (a size where people will interact with each other) and the groups must meet at least monthly. Most Bible classes (except large lecture classes) count as belonging groups, but if basically the same people meet both Sunday and Wednesday, it should be counted as only one group. Youth groups, home groups, prayer groups, meal groups, ministry

groups, leadership meetings, and even sports teams count as “belonging groups” if they meet at least monthly with 5-40 participants.”

“But why are so many different groups important for congregational growth through the 200 barrier?” Frank asked.

Sam replied, “New people need to find a minimum of 6-7 friends in the church to be ‘socially stable’ within that congregation. As a congregation grows through the 200 barrier, new people will typically find those friendships in group settings rather than in the corporate worship experience. Remember, in churches of more than 150 you aren’t going to know everybody anymore. New people are more likely to find ‘a home’ in one or more groups in a church that offers a large variety of Bible classes and other belonging groups.”

“Sure,” Frank reflected, “that makes perfect sense. When we started that new young adults Bible class two years ago, our total Bible class attendance jumped dramatically. Young adults that had not been coming to class found a new group to call home and became more involved in the life of the congregation. How many belonging groups does our congregation have?”

“Let’s do some math,” Sam suggested. “We have ten “Sunday-Wednesday” Bible classes, six Sunday night home groups, a youth group, a prayer group, the young adult’s monthly fellowship, the senior’s club, and the ladies’ class.”

Frank added, “We also have the monthly elders’ and deacons’ meeting, the visitation team, and the ministry team that works with the homeless shelter. I guess we should include our Sunday afternoon singing class. Oh yes, seasonally we field a softball team. Anything else?”

“That’s 26 groups,” replied Sam. “That’s not a bad number of groups for a church of 180. Although we could be open to establishing additional groups, I doubt that the number of groups is a significant ‘limiting factor’ for our congregation in breaking the 200 barrier. We’re above the critical number of a dozen groups per 100 in worship attendance.”

6) Inadequate Percentage of New Groups – “This next potential limiting factor may have more bearing on our congregation,” Sam said. “Research has shown that congregations seeking to break the 200 barrier not only need a large number of ‘belonging groups,’ but about 30% of those groups should be relatively ‘new’ groups (groups that have been established within the last two years).”

“I can see why that is important,” Frank reflected. “Newer groups tend to be more open to having newer people join them. If the group has been in existence for a number of years, its social patterns tend to be less flexible. You’re right, Sam. That’s a problem for our church. Of the 26 groups we named, only four are less than two years old, and thereby qualify as ‘new’ groups. Only about 15% of our groups are ‘new’ groups – we need twice that.”

Sam continued, “Since assimilation of new members comes not just with an adequate number of groups, but an adequate percentage of ‘new’ groups, I can see that an additional staff minister might have the time to assist us with birthing new groups.”

7) “Minister-Centered” rather than “Ministry-Centered” Congregations. Sam continued, “According to the seminar, the seventh common limiting factor of congregations facing the 200 barrier concerns the relationship of the congregation to the minister. Arlin Rothauge suggested that congregations of 50-150 in worship tend to be

very ‘minister-centered.’¹ In this size of congregation the minister is generally aware of what is going on in the lives of the members of the congregation and in every facet of the work of the church. In a sense the minister ‘carries the church in his head.’ New members are often assimilated into the body through their relationship with the minister. As churches grow toward 200, both the minister and the congregation must begin to change their mutual ways of relating. Rather than the minister being ‘the center of the wheel,’ congregations of 150-350 need to become ‘ministry-centered.’ New members are assimilated by their involvement in a ministry or small group rather than by their relationship with the minister. Rather than being the hub of the wheel, the minister in the ministry-centered congregation is more like the rim of the wheel. His work surrounds the ministry of the church, but the weight of the ministry of the church is not all on his shoulders.”

“I’ve heard something like that,” interrupted Frank. “In smaller churches the minister tends to be the ‘hands-on’ servant for all the congregation. As the congregation grows, he must become more of a ‘rancher’ over a ‘spread’ rather than the lone ‘cowboy’ involved in all the day-to-day care of others.”²

“That’s where I’m having a tough time, Frank.” Sam continued, “As the church has grown, like you I’ve found myself overwhelmed with the responsibilities of the flock. I’ve found it hard to make the transition—or for the church to ‘let me’ make the transition from a deliverer of ministry to an overseer of ministry. This is one limiting factor that I think we need to examine as a congregation.”

8) Lack of Vision – Sam spoke up again, “The last common limiting factor in breaking the 200 barrier is not unique to churches nearing 200 in attendance, but

unfortunately it may be more common in churches of this size. The seminar reminded me that 150-200 attendees is a very ‘comfortable’ size congregation for most of the members of the church. Generally congregations of this size are large enough to be fairly stable, own a building, pay a minister and secretary, offer several ministries, do some mission work, and serve the basic needs of the congregation. It is easy for members of congregations of this size to feel that ‘we’ve arrived.’ Too often the immediate goals of the congregation’s ‘founding fathers’ have been realized.”

Frank took a sip of coffee, thought for a moment, and replied, “I’m afraid we are guilty of this one. We’re comfortable...maybe too comfortable. We’ve lost God’s vision for our future. This issue needs to come before the elders as a whole, and then the congregation as well. Got any good sermons on vision simmering on the back burner, Sam?”

“Yes,” Sam replied, “I can preach on it. But finding God’s vision for our congregation’s future is going to require more than a couple of sermons. Let’s work on this one over another cup of coffee another time. Until then, let’s pray and meditate on this one. OK?”

“Sounds like a plan, Sam. One more thing before we call it a morning: Where do we go from here on our ‘limiting factors?’

Sam replied, “We need to bring this to the church leadership, and let them think through each factor and make their own evaluations. Their evaluations of the ‘lowest holes in the bucket’ may be different from what you and I came up with. Once the leadership understands the process, we need to begin a process of ‘congregational triage’ – working on the ‘lowest holes’ first. No need to worry about the ‘upper holes’ until we

plug the ‘lowest’ ones. We’ll probably have to make the ‘lowest holes’ a topic at each elders’ and deacons’ meeting for awhile.”

“How do we present this to the leadership?” Frank asked.

Sam replied, “At the seminar they used an ‘inventory’ – a self-scored test to help each participant identify which of the eight limiting factors appeared to be the ‘lowest holes in the bucket.’ Another more comprehensive approach would be to host a 200 barrier weekend workshop for the leaders of our congregation in a retreat setting.”

“These two mornings over coffee have been most rewarding! Thanks, Sam, for sharing what you learned at the seminar.”

“It goes both ways, Frank. You’ve given me some good things to think about as well. You know that scripture, ‘As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another’ (Prov. 27:17). Thanks for the coffee and the conversation.”

(These two articles are based on research done by Mark T. McLean in his Ed.D. dissertation through the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary on the 200 barrier in western American Churches of Christ. He may be contacted at minister@ckchurchofchrist.org or P.O. Box 2495, Silverdale, WA 98383 for workshop information or more details about this study.)

¹ Rothauge, Arlin J. *Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry*. New York: The Episcopal Church Center, 1983.

² McIntosh, Gary L. *Staff Your Church for Growth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000.