

## **HOW BIG: A PLAN OR ACCIDENT**

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## **HOW BIG: A PLAN OR ACCIDENT?**

How should the church/ministry grow and expand? The central question is whether to grow wildly or control growth. Another question has to do with size of the church/ministry in the long run. Or maybe it's time to retrench. When you grow at will you are reacting to opportunity. This was the strategy of General Patton in World War II: "Take as much ground every day as you can." For the church, it's expand your market as fast as possible. The notion is "big is better." Many believe the opportunity is there, and you better not pass it by or perhaps it is gone forever.

Should the church ministry grow and expand? While the answer to that question may seem obvious, it is not as clear as it might seem. While we suggest that the church should grow, growth does not always mean expansion. In addition to getting larger, growth may mean getting smaller, better, or simply changing into something different. To make the choice as to how to grow and how much, it is necessary to understand why churches/ministries should grow in the first place.

### **Why Should Churches/Ministries Grow?**

To answer the question—why should churches/ministries grow—we must understand how organizations grow as systems. We start with the presumption that any organization is a system. We know that all systems by nature may self-destruct in a process theorists call entropy. Entropy is the tendency for an organized system to become disorganized—essentially to fall apart. We can explain the tendency toward falling apart by borrowing liberally from Newton's laws and applying them to the church setting.

Church revitalization expert, Norman Shawchuck, observes the church as any other organizational system: a set of interrelated elements within a particular environment. Constituting its nature and mission are certain subsystems that are crucial to its existence: its organizational structure, human relational system, and theological or belief structure. In order for the church to

grow and be healthy, the internal systems must be developed and managed to support that growth. It is here that Newton's laws, as applied to organizations, are helpful in determining how growth can be properly managed for the overall success of the organization.

#### First Law of Organizations:

##### A Church/Ministry at Rest Tends to Stay at Rest

We know that organizations don't like to change, that inactivity breeds inactivity and finally complacency. This complacency takes the form of the organizational "couch potato"—the church/ministry that has a routine from which it does not want to detour. However, in the rapidly changing world of today's environment, complacency can spell trouble, as we see from the second law.

#### Second Law of Organizations:

##### Churches/Ministries at Rest Tend to Decay

There is an old saying that goes something like "if you snooze, you lose!" While there is much to recommend stability, the religious world is not a particularly stable place. As a result, complacency means that the church/ministry falls behind. In our world, change occurs at ever-increasing rates. The complacent ministry falls behind even more rapidly. For example, it is impossible for the church to stand still and maintain stability. Attrition alone makes it absolutely necessary to sustain an aggressive proactive approach to outreach.

The typical church must add at least 10 percent new members each year just to offset normal loss. In some volatile environments with a highly transient population, this may run 40% or more. Because people move, die, change churches, and leave for various reasons, the church is always in danger of decline from a leadership that simply does nothing. When you think of how many visitors a church has to attract, win over, induct, and integrate to establish membership, the challenge becomes clearer.

### Third Law of Organizations:

#### Churches/Ministries in Trouble Tend to Get Worse!

In his research on bankruptcy, Don Hambrick of Columbia University coined the term “flailing about” to describe the death throes of an organization. When churches/ministries decline, panic often sets in so pastors/evangelists start doing anything they can—as long as they are doing something. Hambrick suggests they flail about looking for a solution. As leaders get increasingly desperate, they also get increasingly poor at making choices, creating a spiral of decline.

Shawchuck describes the failure syndrome in the life of the typical church as beginning with generalized conditions of apathy and an increasingly complacent and reactive posture. In this state, it only takes one crisis of moderate proportions to send what looks like a fairly stable church into a tailspin. The crisis could be set off by a financial setback, a leadership problem, an unforeseen change in the environment, or any number of other influences that would seem manageable under normal circumstances. The result is a deadly cycle of reactions, hasty decisions, and ineffective damage control. This free-fall continues as the church finds it lacks the spiritual and emotional reserves to tackle the problem head-on. Problems increase and multiply until the church is paralyzed by a sense of helplessness. One has no idea of how many dominos are waiting in place until the first one falls.

Church leaders facing this cycle of increasing dysfunction find that if the internal systems of the church are weak or nonexistent, there is little strength in place to resist the trend. Here the value of organizational strengths becomes evident. The internal systems of good organizational structure, sound policies and procedures, ongoing evaluation, and quality control are essential.

#### How Does the Church/Ministry Combat

the Forces of the Three Laws?

Beating the inevitable decline described above simply requires planned growth. In our terms, growth means on-going development of the organization and its capacity. However, growth, as we indicated previously, does not always mean expansion. Growth can mean getting better.

The church must always be about the work of strengthening the internal systems that make it healthy and able to support ongoing growth. These internal systems include the organizational structure which provides for delegation of responsibility and accountability, the relational system which provides for communication, problem solving, and conflict management, and the theological system or belief structure which provides the church with the philosophy and ideology necessary to support its Christian mission purpose.

Growth may mean a different direction. The Mother's March of Dimes started out to fight polio. In 1957, the organization helped Drs. Salk and Sabin defeat polio for good.

Instead of accepting victory and disbanding, the organization took stock of itself, realized the potential good this effective group could do, and took on a new challenge. The new focus, birth defects, sadly is one that the organization will have reason to battle forever.

Describing how churches/ministries get better or different is beyond the scope of this article. What we can discuss is growth in size. To most people, the growth of a church means getting bigger. We see countless examples of churches and ministries that are growing in numbers but are doing little to grow in corporate strength. On the ministry level we see crowds increasing but little being done to nurture the individual or family to health and wholeness.

However, not all size decisions mean the church/ministry is getting bigger. Sometimes the leaner size can be very effective. As an example, in our neighborhood of Tulsa, one church has successfully addressed the issue of responsible growth with a well-publicized slogan. Dr. James Buskirk of First United Methodist Church wanted people to know that the importance of the

individual and the quality of community were a priority in a climate of mega-churches where individuals tended to feel lost and alienated. The slogan: “We don’t think bigger is better, we think better is bigger.”

Church expert, Carl Dudley, observes that the small church is bigger than the large church in two critical areas: relationships and accountability. He contends that small churches by nature are far better at providing the family atmosphere and personal touch so necessary to the nurture and development of the individual and community. Compared to the Sunday “mega-crowd” where anonymity is the order of service, the small church requires that the individuals involve themselves to know each other and build relationships for the church’s survival. Because of this strong interpersonal factor in the small church, such ministries as pastoral care, discipleship, lay-leader training, and fellowship tend to be stronger.

The central question for pastors/evangelists is one of how big the church/ministry should be for the long run. Ralph Moore, one of the new generation’s leaders in the cell-group approach to church growth, uses a proactive method of multiplying and managing groups as the primary thrust of evangelism. Instead of adding groups to meet the needs of the growing crowd, he uses the cultivation of healthy cell groups as the primary focus outreach. Based on his experience with Hope Chapel and its 80-plus member churches, he trains pastors in a very direct process of church growth through establishing, building, and reproducing groups. His method is to set up groups with assistant leaders, then to multiply the group by using these assistants and members of existing groups to start new groups in a well-planned cycle. This approach keeps the basic unit of the church and all its nurturing elements intact as the church develops. As a strategy, this approach seems to have unlimited potential for keeping the balance between growth and nurture.

One needs to look no further than the largest church in the world to see this methodology maximized. Dr. Cho built his church in Korea on the concept of a cell for every member.

Training lay-leaders and multiplying groups and organizing these groups into networks overseen by capable pastors is the demonstrated dynamic that has challenged traditional approaches to church growth based on the Sunday gathering.

The argument for controlled growth is to be conservatively aggressive. Controlled growth requires more analysis. It is proactive not reactive. In this scenario the opportunity is minimized for costly mistakes.

Peter Drucker, noted business consultant and author, (1,641) believes a firm has an optimum size in every industry. It is a good theory, but how does the firm determine size? We believe the church/ministry also has an optimum size.

In order for churches to respond to the call for growth, each area of the ministry must have resources. As such, we need to understand the role that resources play. Webster's defines a resource as "something that lies ready for use or can be drawn upon for aid." Traditionally, economists have classified organizational resources into three general categories—land, labor, and capital. However, as we will discuss below, several intangible resources are also essential for firm survival.

While having resources is necessary for growth, just having resources is not sufficient. Churches and ministries can be in the midst of plenty only to die.

Another way to view long term success of the churches/ministries is with the formula:

$$X = f(a,b,c,d,e, \dots ?)$$

The (X) represents the dependent variable, long-term success. In the formula, X is function of the various combinations of independent variable, a,b,c,d,e, on to infinity. The discussion could be expanded to independent variables: environment, organization, human relations, theological system, etc.

For example, in the best case scenario, long-term success (X) of the church could be a function of balancing or adjusting the internal systems of the church to support the numeric growth of the church. Other independent church variables are leadership and specific programs of evangelism, discipleship, and education; these and other independent variables should be integrated.

### Conclusion

Our recommendation is a thoughtful, creative approach to strategic planning. The strategic plan is developed by taking all factors into consideration. This process forces the size decision. The options could be to double in size, have modest growth, or as we have seen in the past decades—downsize. The emphasis here is proactive planning. Too often, for example, downsizing is in small increments. It is like cutting the dog's tail one segment at a time. Every cut is painful. A better approach is proactive retrenching and then an aggressive scaled-back attack plan.

Too often a ministry with uncontrolled growth ends up with disillusioned leaders, harassed pastors and staff, confusion, and a declining quality of all programs. It can be likened to an army out-running its fuel and food. The excitement of the rapid advance is sobering as the church/ministry (and the army) becomes vulnerable to attack while mired in their self-imposed quicksand.