

Why do Churches Get Stuck at the 50 Barrier?

First we need to understand the 50 barrier and the dynamics involved that keep the church stuck at the barrier. We will then deal with how to get a church unstuck, or how it can cross this barrier.

Dr. Lyle Schaller asks the question as to what kind of congregation can be institutionally viable with an average worship attendance of less than 50? By “institutionally viable” he means these churches that exist even though they are so small and seemingly have little effect on the community. He suggest the following reasons as to why these church exist:

1. They were established many decades ago and so have remained in existence through the allegiance of a few committed people.
2. These churches normally own a completely paid for parcel of land with a reasonable adequate building structure. It is their “quaint, little church”.
3. They largely rely on kinship and friendship ties to keep the attendance where it is and to keep the church “going” – whatever that means.
4. There might be local traditions or geographically defined constituency that keeps the church “functional.”
5. Often there is a fair level of inherited denominational loyalty that holds that collection of people together at that site.

6. Such churches comfortably affirm the limited time given them by a part time, ordained minister or lay pastor. He has a “preaching stand” and they have “their preacher.”

I would like to add to Dr. Schaller’s list that there are a lot of churches that occupy this barrier because there are new church plants that have not yet been able to get unstuck or which have started too small and so are caught in this barrier.

Dr. Schaller says that around 40,000 protestant congregations fit into this category today, which is about 11% of the churches. This translates into around 2,000,000 Americans which are involved in this type of church, almost the same number that are in the mega churches—churches over 1,000.

1. **What does a church stuck in the 50 barrier look like?**

There are two types of churches stuck in the 50 barrier. There is the *Established Small Church* and there is the *New Small Church*. We will start with the latter first.

- A. **The New Small Church:** This is the church that has been started in the last 5 years and has stayed at less than 50 throughout that time. They might have had more than 50 at a special event like an Easter service or a Picnic day, but the church returned very quickly back to less than 50. Let me say that a church less than 50 that lasts five years is very likely to die unless it fits the criteria that Dr. Schaller mentions above. **The main ingredient that keeps this church alive is three fold:**

- i.) The people who are there are attached to the pastor. They are either related to him or have become his friend and do not want to desert him.
- ii.) It has a building that the current congregation can afford to pay for.
- iii.) A group of people who started the church or who remain at the church want it to survive. However, often these same people want the church to remain small.

B. The Established Small Church: The established small church has existed beyond the 5-year point of existence. For reasons we will deal with later, it has been able to stay alive in spite of every option to close. Most often these churches were once much larger, some even breaking the 400 barrier. However, problems in the church, they had “DEFOLD” (as talked about in the chapter above) or changes in the community to which the church did not adopt, caused the church to drop down to less than 50. The six points that Lyle Schaller mentions above, relate to this type of church.

2. **How the 50 Barrier Churches become “Unstuck”:**

Again we have to deal individually with the two different types: The New Small Church and the Established Small Church.

a.) **How to break the 50 barrier—the New Small Church:**

1. **Capitalize on the churches strengths.** I radically disagree with Swartz in his book on “Natural Church Development” in which he says a church should look at its weak areas and strengthen these¹. This approach is a never-ending street. You never have a church which is strong at everything. A church can spend the rest of its days building up its weaknesses and exhaust its people before starting to grow. The Bible says, “Whatsoever things are lovely...of good report...think on these.” I have found as I have built on the strengths the weaknesses disappear naturally. If the strength of this little church is one of the three areas mentioned in IA above, then build on these. If it is something besides, for example the New Small Church has a good children’s program, then this may need to be the place to start. Let us begin with three characteristics mentioned in IA:

i.) The people who attend this New Small Church are attached to the pastor. This attachment comes in three forms:

a) They are related to the pastor and therefore want to help him build the church.

b) They like the pastor and feel a burden to try and help him.

¹ Swartz , Natural Church Development.

- c) They are excited about the vision the pastor has for a church in the community and they believe they need to be a part of it.

Whichever the allegiance a person has to the church planter or the pastor of this little church, it can be used to help grow that church. People with this type of allegiance can be asked by the pastor to help him and in most cases they will. Capitalizing on this area means that the pastor should use this allegiance to help these people bring in their friends and relatives to the small church. They must realize that the friends will not come because the church has a great program or tremendous facilities, but that those who come will come for the reason they themselves are coming—they want to help the pastor build this church. The conversation in visiting with their friends should be something like this: “God has given us a great pastor and we really believe God wants him to build a church, we need you to come and help us get this church going”. Those that respond to such a plea know up front that they are coming to be a part of growing a church.

Another way the pastor can capitalize on this allegiance is for him to do what he initially did to get the people that he already has—make friends with new people and sell them on the vision God has given him. In fact, of all the ways of growing a small church this is the best. When a pastor of a small church makes friends in the community and brings these friends into the small church as his friends, the church will receive them because these visitors are the

pastor's friends. **Pastors must remember that most of their time needs to be spent making friends with the world as Jesus did.** This is still the best way to grow a church.

i.) **The church has a building it can afford.** The way the church can capitalize on this is to excite the congregation that this is just the beginning. This is just a start. The building they now occupy is not going to reach the city for Christ the way they need to. The pastor needs to constantly say something like this, “We need to be looking for bigger facilities, and we need to find a nice place where we can invite our friends and relatives. We need to find a place where we can have room for a children and youth ministry.... etc.” The idea here is that the pastor must make the church realize they have not arrived. The church must think bigger! The pastor and people must constantly be aware of what buildings and properties are available so they can move to something better. Often the small building or facilities is a “turn off” to visitors. It does not encourage new people to come.

iii.) **The group of people who helped start the church or who remained and want the church to survive:** Here the allegiance is slightly different than the one above. **The allegiance of the people in this scenario is their commitment to having a church.** It might be that this church exists because of a church split or because the group was started in the home and then called in a preacher. It may be that this group got together around a cause—whether it is a

theological, political, or another reason—this is why these people gather together.

The pastor needs to capitalize on this fact. He needs to encourage the people to bring in their friends and their relatives to be a part of who and what they are. If they want the church to survive, they will need to do this. **You might remind them that 80% of all churches that fail are churches that run less than 50.**² The pastor of this new small church must realize that he will never get a full time salary, nor will this church keep the people and their children for very long unless they come up with and implement ideas to grow the church. **The pastor has to teach the people against the idea of staying small.** He needs to help them understand that the church is not just a preaching pulpit for him and he is not simply the pastor of the small crowd that is there, **they have to be city-minded: “How can we reach our city for God?”**

b.) How to break the 50 barrier, the Established Small Church:

The established small church exists because of the six points that Dr. Schaller mentioned earlier. Each one of these need to be addressed if the established church is to overcome the 50 barrier. First let us remember that every stuck church has to deal with the “Deceptive Characteristics” factors and the “Determinative Characteristics” with which we have already dealt, especially the “**DEFOLD**” areas. The established church is far more likely to have these **DEFOLD** problems than the new church. The established

² Study of the IPHC Churches

church is more likely to lose **direction**, excitement, avoid doing follow-up and **outreach** and will many times ignore **leadership** development. However, the sixth point is the area where they lack the most... “**Developing** or enlarging faith.” They have to believe that God will give them a larger ministry and bigger and better facilities. They must believe that God wants them to conquer their part of the city for Christ.

I need to comment on Dr. Schaller’s 6 points:

1. **They were established many decades ago and so have remained in existence through the allegiance of a few committed people.** Schaller is right to put this as the first number, for it is the biggest problem in the Protestant churches. Many of the churches that are stuck behind the 50 barrier fall into this category. They have a few committed people who have been a part of this church for years. It has become their little church. The church leadership has the mentality that the church is just for them. Now they will not always admit this, but this is the way the congregation acts and responds. When they look for a pastor, they look for a pastor willing to be a part of their small church. Many times they are not too excited about growing. They would like to keep things just the way they are. It is at this point that the pastor can show them the futility of their ways. **No church can stay just the way it is.** If it does not gain any new people, it will die for three reasons:
 - a) Because people will move away and leave the community and therefore the church.

- b) The congregation within the church will grow old and die off.
- c) There are always those who become discouraged and transfer to other churches in the community or simply stop coming.

Therefore, the pastor of the small church has to make it clear to the congregation that the future of the church exists, not in the status quo, but in reaching new people for Christ. I have never taken a church if the people did not want to grow. They have the philosophy I call the “the holy huddle syndrome.” As long as the same few people were coming they were happy. It is like one family. If such a church is not willing to grow, in my estimation and all research substantiates this, there is no future for this church anyway. Why should I tie myself, as a pastor, to a church with a philosophy that will cause the church to die?

Denominational leaders need to sit down with leadership in these types of churches to make it very clear that they are not willing to put a pastor in a church with such a philosophy. To do so will not only see a church die but often this scenario will destroy a pastor. The church must want to grow and be willing to pay the price for growth.

2. These churches normally own a completely paid for parcel of land with a reasonable adequate building structure.

More than not it is the building that keeps a church congregation in existence. This has both a positive and negative value.

“Positive,” because:

- a) It gives a church identity and value.
- b) It gives ownership to those who maintain it.

- c) It offers a facility through which the church can minister to the community.
- d) It could become a cause around which others can be reached for the church.

A building becomes a “Negative” factor when:

- a) The church’s identity becomes scandalized and the church carries a bad name in the community. Some times in these circumstances, a name change is necessary. Other times advertising a change yields results: “We have changed...” “The new little church on the corner...” “New pastor new passion...”
- b) The building becomes the “end” instead of the means to the “end”. What I mean by this is, instead of using the building to carry out ministry to the community, the programs and ministry exist to give purpose for a church building. “We have the space so lets use it for something.” **The church building exists to aid the church to win and disciple the lost.** This is the main purpose of a church building. *Any other reason is wrong and if allowed it will eventually suffocate the main purpose.* I realize that sometimes rallying people around a building can grow a church, but the church needs to quickly switch that emphasis into ministry as soon as it ties visitors in. There is a beautiful looking church in Chesapeake, Virginia that because of its looks and visible location draws many visitors. However, very little is done to tie these visitors into ministry.

What a missed opportunity! How much more could be done if ministry –“works of service” was encouraged. How quickly this church will lose people when a church comes along that does offer ministry or something more attractive for visitors.

- c) The building becomes run down or is no longer reaching the community. For whatever the reason the building no longer reaches the community. Either it is run down because the congregation no longer has the funds to maintain it, or the congregation over the years has moved away and did not try to reach the new residents moving into the community. After a while only a handful are left who keep on attending the services held in the building. It would seem obvious that in this situation the church leaders need to try to reach the new residents coming into the community or sell the building to some other group who will. Because of this church illness, which Dr Peter Wagner calls “Ethnikitis,” the church will normally die rather than change and do this.

While being a professor of Church Growth at Regent University, I was asked to help such a church. They had large facilities which could handle 1000 people but only a handful were left and the congregation needed to do something or lose its facilities. I agree to take the church if I could use it as a lab to show my student how to revitalize a dying church. I encourage the congregation to borrow \$44,000 to renovate the property so that it looked

like the church was growing instead of everything appearing to be run down and dieing. They agreed and we began the process of reaching the community who were mostly military families. In three and a half years the church had over 1100 on Easter Sunday with around 1900 members. We had also helped to plant or start 7 other churches for some of my students to pastor. To say the least, it was an exciting church revitalization program. This church decided they were not going to die from Ethnikitis. They had a building and they were going to use it to reach their community

3. They largely rely on kinship and friendship ties to keep the attendance where it is and to keep the church going.

It is common in this type of church of under 50 that everyone is related or is close friends. **The reason the congregation keeps coming has very little to do with the churches program and ministry or who the preacher is or what he does.** These people come together to be with each other and church is a worthy way to do so. The pastor gets frustrated because he often finds couples talking in the halls rather than being in church. Other times he finds them skipping out when its time for the sermon. Their part is over and so they go home or have to do something “more important” like shopping. It is not that they are not worshiping or doing ministry, it is that this is not the main reason for coming. They are there to support or be with mom or brother or friend. They enjoy each other and so “doing church” together is meaningful and relational. The church no doubt did not start out this way but over the years this is how it has ended up. *Those who stuck with the church had strong*

bonds between them and so they often, unintentionally, made a church for themselves.

The pastor who tries to change this church has to be very careful. If he makes it too uncomfortable for these people to have this relationship at church, they will leave and this could become a chain reaction with many leaving. The church cannot afford to lose anyone. What does a pastor do? Here are some suggestions:

- a) The pastor builds on the relationship factor. He encourages them to reach even more of their family and friends. He becomes the catalyst and even goes with them to invite these family and friends to come to church. When they do, the pastor develops a pastoral relationship with these new families. He teaches them how to grow the church and how to be involved in true worship and ministry.
- b) The pastor develops a strong relationship with the new families so that he becomes not only their pastor but also their friend. This is very necessary in growing a small church. People keep coming to a small church not because of its ministry value but because of friendship ties. They can often get better ministry from larger churches in the community, but they don't have this relationship with the pastor. I must add that as the church gets larger the pastor will need to change this approach to leadership and these friendship ties. **I have found in my ministry that every barrier requires a slightly different pastoral leadership style:**

In the church of 50 or less the pastor develops a close friendship to everyone especially visitors.

In the church of 100 the pastor develops relationships with leaders.

In the church of 200 the pastor develops relationships with the staff and a few key leaders.

In the church of 400 the pastor develops staff who intern develop their leaders.

In a church of 800 the pastor develops staff who work with him to develop leaders over structured small groups like cell leaders or care leaders or individualized ministries etc.

In the church of a 1000 the pastor develops multi ministries beyond the local church: television, radio, crusades he is doing, church training for other pastors and churches etc. He brings in big names to motivate and excite his people and to invite the community to experience his church.

In a church of 3000...I have not taken a church to average 3000 or more—the most I have had is just over 2000 at a large meeting we put on in my church in Louisville. However, as a student and professor of church growth I have watch and studied some of these churches that have crossed this barrier and I have noticed the following:

- 1) Churches that grow beyond this barrier normally do so rather rapidly. It has taken Victory in Oklahoma City less than 2 years to go from 800 Barrier to 3000 Barrier.
- 2) In these churches, momentum is at an all time high. There is what I call the “Wave effect” in which people in the church are so excited they are inviting friends who come and get excited and they invite their friends

and a wave of visitor keep coming to see what is going on.

- 3) These churches have the facilities to handle the crowds or quickly acquire such facilities to keep the momentum and growth.
- 4) These churches see great enthusiasm in the pastor and the people involve at the pulpit.
- 5) Such a church normally, there are exceptions, evolves in a section of the city or area where this type of church of 3000 plus has not occurred before.
- 6) The 3000 Barrier most often is crossed with the aid of television exposure that helps create the excitement and momentum.
- 7) Often such momentum comes through a revival service or event that gets the congregation so excited they begin the process of the “Wave effect”. For example Toronto and Brownsville revivals.
- 8) Many 3000 churches have started and have grown almost over night, through what I have called the “Renowned leader” as the pastor.³ For example: A Larry Lee, a Chuck Swindoll, etc. who were well known before they began or took over such a church.

³ For more on this type of pastor see my book on Churches Mothering Churches, Lifespings Press, GA

- c) The pastor finds a strong unique ministry that the little church can do reasonable well and uses this as a cause to rally the forces around. Maybe the pastor is both a preacher and dynamic musician or perhaps this 50 Barrier church has a good children's worker or choir director or youth person that they can use to begin or continue a corresponding ministry. This ministry is emphasized and used to bring others into the church and to help everyone in the church to be a part of this program. It does two things:
- i. It gives the church a ministry to work with is that is yielding results.
 - ii. It gives the church an outreach program through which to reach the lost and unchurched and in so doing it grows the church.

I remember my first church. I was in Seminary at the time and pastoring this little church. It had 34 in attendance and had run this number for the last 3 years. All but four of these were adults the rest were children. After studying the community I discovered that there were many children around this church. What everyone thought to be a negative I realized was a plus. I announced to the four adults that we should make children our main emphasis. Their mouths dropped open and they protested that this is all the church has ever had. "We need adults," they declared. I persuaded them that if we did a children ministry the right way we would get adults. They agreed. Up until this time they had basically been baby sitting the

children. Mom and Dad sent them so they could have a morning of peace and quiet at home. However, starting the next Sunday after I took the church we changed how we did children's ministry. I told the children's worker from what scripture I was going to preach and on Wednesday they made up a drama out of my sermon for the children to act out on Sunday. I sent notes home inviting the parents to come and see their child perform in our fantastic children's program. The children acted out my sermons before I preached. The children sang the specials and took up the offering. Before long we had adults standing around the walls of our poorly renovated, 3-car garage sanctuary, watching their children tell them the Gospel. Needless to say that little church did not stay little very long and we walked off with every Church Growth award the denomination had to offer.

3. There might be local traditions or geographically defined constituency that keeps the church functional.

While I am sure that this has helped keep open some of the small churches that Dr. Schaller has seen, over the last 25 years I have not found it to be a major factor with the churches in which I have worked. I will therefore skip this one and go onto those that I find more prevalent.

4. Often there is a fair level of inherited denominational loyalty that holds that collection of people together.

A lot of congregations have stayed in a building because some great denominational leader started it many years back or it has

been a denominational church for decades. Most of these buildings are old and unattractive and many times they cannot hold more than 80 to 100 people. Unless such a building is in a good location, on about 3 acres and can be restored to encourage visitors to attend or it is a historic building, I feel it should be sold, torn down or it should be given to the denomination for historic preservation. *No church building exists for the buildings' sake but for the ministry and outreach it can create in a community.* I visited a church in Boston. It was a great, grand old building. It had well kept grounds and quite a history of who once preached from the pulpit. I eagerly asked the maintenance man giving us the tour, as to how many attended this huge church? He said on good Sundays they may have a crowd but mostly they would have a dozen or so. I asked how they could afford to keep the doors open and pay a full-time pastor? He quickly informed me that the church had endowments that would keep the doors open forever and could pay a dozen preachers without any congregation. I felt dismayed. All this money provided for a building but not for ministry and outreach through this building. **Man is forever building pyramids about the Kingdom instead of building the Kingdom.**

5. Such churches comfortably affirm the limited time given them by a part time ordained minister or lay pastor.

There are two reasons churches that are under 50 with a part time pastor seem to continue to exist:

- a) The pastor needs a pulpit to speak from every Sunday and such a scenario would allow him to fulfill this desire. He has no real burden to build the church. He only wants a

place to preach. He does not want to visit the lost or administrate any type out reach program. He simply wants to preach.

- b) The next reason such a church survives is that through the pastor the congregation is affirmed as a church. He is their preacher for their little church. As long as they have a building and a preacher they have a church.

In both these situations the church has to ask themselves: Is this what God really wants of us? Are we truly being obedient to the great commission? Are we reaching the lost in our community? Will we lead our family, friends and city to Christ doing church this way? These questions asked sincerely, will at least lead the church to pray and may even be the start of revival. *The only difference between revival and revitalization is that the latter gives a methodical plan of action to carry out the changes the revival has revealed.* But both require revelation from God to cause change. **I feel revival without revitalization is an exercise in religious futility.** This is why I have tried to teach Evangelists who travel around preaching one revival service after another, how to solidify their “Revival meeting” by implementing Revitalization strategy. If God shows us something we better put together a plan of action to carry it out. If such a church we are discussing sees they need to change then they will need to implement some of the procedures we have already addressed in the first two points mentioned above in this section.

Whatever the reason a church stays under 50 in attendance, it must be pointed out that such a church is most vulnerable to closing or collapsing. A study of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church shows churches with an average worship attendants of **50 or less are 80% more likely to close** compared to **churches of 200 which only have less than a 1% chance of failing.**⁴

⁴ See appendix