

Why Churches Get Stuck At 200

Stuck Churches In America

One might ask the question, “How does the stuck church scenario effect the church in general?” In other words, are there many stuck churches on the American scene, and how is this effecting Christianity in this country? It is interesting to look at the statistics of churches in America, because when you do, you become keenly aware that the American church generally is “stuck.” Look at some of the examples below.

Of the 25 denominations mention in “Church and Denominational Growth,”¹ including Roman Catholics and Mormons, only 13 of these are growing, 2 of these being Mormon and another being Roman Catholic. Among the Protestants, more are dying that growing. There are, however, 177 different denominations in America, but the number doesn’t seem to change the outcome.

In the following chart, I have decided to choose every decade from 1950-1990 to make a comparison. Of course, when the 2000 stats are in, they will need to be included. The shaded areas represent those denominations that are declining.

¹ Roozen and Hadaway, “Church and Denominational Growth”

Denomination	Church Name	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
Liberal Protestant	Episcopal	2,417,464	3,269,325	3,285,826	2,786,004	2,446,050
	Presbyterian	3,210,635	4,161,860	4,045,408	3,362,086	2,847,437
	United Church of Christ	1,977,418	2,241,134	1,960,608	1,736,244	1,59,9212
	Total:	7,60,5517	9,672,319	9,291,842	7,884,334	6,892,699
Moderate Protestant	Christian	1,767,964	1,801,821	1,424,479	1,177,984	1,309,692
	Church of the Brethren	186,201	199,947	182,614	170,839	148,253
	Evangelical Lutheran	3,982,508	5,295,502	5,650,137	5,384,271	5,240,739
	Reformed Church in America	284,504	354,621	367,606	345,532	326,850
	United Methodist	9,653,178	10,641,310	10,509,198	9,519,407	8,904,824
	Total:	15,874,355	18,293,201	18,134,034	16,598,033	15,660,358
Roman Catholic	Roman Catholic	28,634,878	42,104,900	48,214,729	50,449,842	58,568,015
Latter-Day Saints	Church of Latter Day Saints	1,111,314	1,486,887	2,073,146	2,811,000	4,267,000
	Reorganized Church of LDS	124,925	155,291	152,670	190,087	189,524
	Total:	1,236,239	1,642,178	2,225,816	3,001,087	4,456,524
Conservative Protestant	Baptist General Conference	45,413	75,056	103,955	133,385	134,717
	Christian and Missionary Alliance	58,347	59,657	112,519	189,710	279,207
	Cumberland Presbyterian	81,806	88,452	92,095	96,553	91,857
	Evangelical Cov.	51,850	60,090	67,441	77,737	89,735
	Lutheran Church	1,674,901	2,391,195	2,788,536	2,625,650	2,602,849
	N. American Baptist Conf.	41,560	50,646	55,080	43,041	44,493
	Seventh Day Adventist	237,168	317,852	420,419	571,141	717,446
	Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod	307,216	348,184	381,321	407,043	420,039
	Total:	9,578,150	13,119,723	15,649,398	17,744,386	19,418,752
PH/Protestant	AOG	318,478	508,602	625,027	1,064,490	1,298,121
	Ch of God (And)	107,094	142,796	150,198	176,429	205,884
	Ch of God (Clev)	117,025	170,261	272,278	435,012	620,393
	Ch of Nazarene	226,684	307,629	383,284	484,276	572,153
	Free Methodist Church of N. Am	48,547	55,338	64,901	68,477	74,313
	Salvation Army	209,341	254,141	326,934	417,359	445,991
	Total:	1,027,196	1,438,767	1,822,622	2,646,043	3,216,855
Total Membership All Families		63,956,335	86,271,088	95,338,441	98,323,725	108,213,203

US Population		<i>152,271,000</i>	<i>180,671,000</i>	<i>205,052,000</i>	<i>227,719,000</i>	<i>249,975,000</i>
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Since 10 years is a lot of time in the life of the church, I have included the number of churches in several key denominations from 1991-1999. This will show the trend of at least some of the more aggressive denominations:

Denomination	1991	1999	Perc. gain
Assemblies of God	11,385	12,051	5.8%
Christian & Missionary Alliance	1,813	1,963	8.27%
Southern Baptist Convention	34,975	41,099	17.5%
International Pentecostal Holiness	1,526	1,771	16.05%

Studying the churches in America helps us to determine where churches are most likely to get stuck. For example the Assemblies of God:

Assemblies of God

Attendance	# of Churches	Percentage
1-49	3,983	33%
50-99	3,555	29%
100-199	2,454	20%
200-399	1,215	10%
400-699	413	3%
700-999	130	1%
over 1,000	156	1%
Doesn't Report	149	1%

Since most of my research deals with the IPHC, I will include their stats. In the IPHC it looks like this:

IPHC

Attendance	# of Churches	Percentage
1-29	397	22%
30-59	340	30%
60-89	279	16%
90-179	340	19%
180 or more	216	12%

In the Southern Baptist, you get this picture:

(Still researching these figures)

Vineyards stats look like this:

489-1999

(Still researching this information)

This means there are more protestant in America who attend churches which are larger than 100 than those who attend the smaller churches of less than 100, even though there are more churches in the 100 or less category. Understand what I am saying: **While there are more churches in American of less than 100, there are more people in America attending the larger protestant churches of over 100.** If this is true, then this gives the small church even more reason to cross the 100 Barrier. If you have a church running less than 100 on an average Sunday you are less likely to draw families than if your church ran over 100. Is this true for “Home churches?” The facts are not yet available, but I would guess that it is a small minority who prefer the small churches that meet in the homes. **Obviously Americans prefer the larger churches.** We will explore why later.

Interpreting the Stats

At least 12 obvious conclusions can be drawn from these charts:

1. Denominations need to encourage churches to break the 100 barrier as soon as possible. Revitalizing stuck churches to cross this barrier is an absolute essential for denominations.
2. Planting churches that initially start with an average service of more than 100 is also important for the survival of that church and in turn for the continued existence of a denomination.
3. Most of the constituents of a denomination are in the larger churches.
4. Most of the pastors are in the smaller churches.
5. Most denominations are controlled by pastors who are more likely to be from smaller churches and are thinking “small.
6. Most leadership in the denomination come from small churches and so continue the small church mentality.
7. Pastors with larger churches will most likely become frustrated by the “small thinking” of a denomination leadership and become either independent or not get involved in the denominational operations.
8. Denominations controlled by the larger churches are more likely to keep these churches and will win other large churches into its denomination.

9. Pastors need to expose themselves to the mentality and operations of the larger church and thereby force themselves to break the church growth barriers that restrain them from becoming a larger church.
10. Denominations will need to help pastors receive large church training and exposure.
11. Church planters and pastors of small churches need to break growth barriers as soon as possible to avoid becoming stuck.
12. On going training in revitalization and church planting to have churches that break these growth barriers must be the constant diet of all churches but especially denominational churches.

Where do churches get stuck?

Every author who has written on this subject has given slightly different numbers as to when a church is most likely to get stuck. While these may vary, they can be generally placed around the following “magical-milestones” in church attendance.

1. The first milestone is the 50 barrier. This means that some churches are not able to sustain attendance beyond 50. While on special days they might go over this number, they always seem to flounder and end up running under the 50-attendance mark. Dr. Lyle Schaller says that about 11 percent of the American Protestant churches fall into this category (IPHC has as high as 50%, AG is 33%, etc.)
2. The next milestone for a church is the 100 barrier. Half the protestant churches in America seem to be unable to cross the

hundred barrier with their average church attendance. In fact, the average church attendance in America is around 70. What this means is that anywhere from 50 to 75 percent (50%-75%) of the churches in this country were never able to cross the 100 barrier.

3. The third milestone for churches who are able to cross the 50 barrier and the 100 barrier are most likely to get stuck at the 200 mark. Only nine percent (9%) of the protestant churches in America are able to pass the 200 barrier. This means that if you are in a church that averages more than 200, you are in the top 9% of churches in the country.
4. The fourth milestone that the protestant church faces, if it crosses the 200 barrier, is the 400 barrier. Around 3% of the churches in America have been able to go beyond this point.
5. The next milestone, encountered by only a few churches, is the 800 barrier. Often churches that have crossed the 50, 100, 200, 400 will find themselves being stuck at the 800 mark. One percent (1%) of the protestant churches in America are able to cross this mark. At the end of 1999, there were approximately 350,000 churches in the United States. This means that 3,500 of them were able to go beyond the 800 barrier.
6. The sixth milestone is the 1,000 barrier. Only half a percent (0.5%) of the churches in America have crossed this barrier.
7. The final milestone that is of importance in the American arena is the 3,000 barrier. In fact, if your church exceeds 3,300, Warren Bird

says that you are one of the one hundred largest churches in the United States.

Looking at these milestones as percentages makes one realize that there are very few mega churches – churches with over 1,000 attendees in them. A lot of churches will brag about their membership size, but this number does not represent the actual weekly attendance at the worship service. Many churches in America have four or five times as many members as they do church attendees. While membership does suggest an allegiance to the church to some degree, it does not reflect the norm in church going on Sundays, (or whenever the church regularly meets). When you transfer the percentage points into numbers you can see that three thousand five hundred (3,500) churches in America, which have crossed the 800 barrier, is quite a significant figure. When you translate this into numbers, 1% represents 3,500 churches that have at least 800 or more in attendance, this means that at least 2,800,000 people in America attend churches that have crossed the 800 barrier. Or another way to look at it is that over 1% (2.5 million) of the population in the United States; attend churches that have crossed the 800 barrier.

If these figures are correct for the 800 Barrier, never mind the 400, 1000, and 3000 then we can conclude that **most Americans would rather attend the churches that have broken the 400, 800, 1000 and 3000 barriers.** These churches are more popular.

What does this say to the churches in America?

1. To the church starting out it says they must have a goal not simply to cross the 100 barrier but to cross the 400 barrier as soon as possible.
2. To the church that is stuck it says, “Grow beyond the next barrier or loose your congregation to a church in town that does break that barrier.”

3.It suggests that unless Christians are actively involved in their local church these large mega churches will no doubt draw most of these non-involved Christians in that area.

Why Churches Get Stuck at the Different Barriers

I believe it is important to understand why these barriers exist in the church so that a church can determine how to cross each one of these milestones. Because it is impossible for a church to cross the 3,000 barrier until it has crossed the 50 barrier, it makes sense that we should start with how to cross the 50 barrier. After dealing with the 50 barrier, we will then deal with each of the milestones individually. Not only do we need to look at what causes the problem, but plausible solutions so that a church can become “unstuck”.