

THE TOP 28 REASONS WHY CHURCHES GET STUCK

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THE
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It's possible to grow a church that's not healthy. It's also possible for healthy churches to get stuck. The only real win is for there to be both health and growth in a church. When that happens, we get to celebrate as churches continuously fulfill the Great Commission and make more disciples.

I want all churches, regardless of their size today, to be healthy and to experience growth.

In this resource, I share the top seven reasons why churches of four different sizes commonly get stuck. My purpose for putting churches in these categories is to help you determine what your priority focus needs to look like. All churches are not the same. Different churches wrestle with different issues, and many times those challenges are a reflection of the church's size. But these are tendencies: Not all churches in these categories will be impacted by every factor I highlight.

Let me give you one example:

"Systems" are a big deal for large churches. Systems are important when churches are smaller, too, but they're not as important as they are for larger churches because everyone tends to know everyone. More happens through relationships and word-of-mouth communications. As churches grow larger, it's impossible for everyone to know everyone. These churches have to establish healthy systems to help people take their next steps.

In other words, systems may be an issue in small or mid-size churches, but they may not necessarily limit health and growth at that stage. On the other hand, lack of systems will certainly become an issue that limits the health and growth of a large church.

I'm not suggesting that all churches in a particular range of attendance are stuck. "Stuck" means different things for different churches. Some are not seeing new people, particularly young adults. Some are not seeing people accept Christ and begin their faith journey. Some are not seeing disciples become disciple-makers. Some are not experiencing growth as expected.

I believe there's hope for all of them. Change starts by getting perspective—by trying to understand why you got stuck in the first place.

Before we get started, let me also note it would be easy for any of us on this side of a prolonged global pandemic to assume our church's stuckness is rooted in the challenges we faced in 2020 and 2021, but that would be woefully naive. The issues I'm outlining in this resource were true before the pandemic began, and if anything, have only become even bigger issues because of it.

Now, let's unpack some of the most common reasons why churches get stuck.

— Tony

7 REASONS WHY SMALL CHURCHES GET STUCK

For the purposes of this conversation, we will include churches of 200 or less. More than the number, the key factor that drives the small-church mindset is the value that everyone should know everyone. That value impacts just about everything the church does. The good news is that this value can also be leveraged to produce both health and growth in a way that larger churches can't really reproduce.

There are some challenges, though, that seem to be common in small churches:

1) They maintain an insider-focus.

Everything they do is designed with the person who already attends the church in mind. They use insider language. It's reflected in the design of the worship and teaching. The ministry programming is for insiders. Guests in any of the church's ministry environments really aren't expected.

As you might imagine, the perception that church is for people who already attend church really limits the incentive to invite someone new. You can't fix that with evangelism programs and training.

2) The senior pastor does all the ministry.

This is a key distinction between small and mid-size churches. When a church is small, the senior pastor can greet every person, know everyone's name, attend every family celebration, pray for every meal, make every hospital visit and teach every Bible study. The pastor is expected to do everything.

To grow beyond the small-church mindset, the pastor has to take the lead in equipping God's people to do the work of God. The senior pastor must learn how to give ministry away to others.

3) They value busyness over relationships.

Even small churches can quickly become over-programmed with Bible studies, men's or

women's gatherings, services on Sunday and Wednesday, all-church events, etc. The challenge in small churches is the expectation that everyone will attend every event. That can quickly become overwhelming. All that activity also limits the amount of time people have to build relationships outside the church.

4) Everyone has a vote.

That's the way decisions tend to get made in small churches. Even with decisions that don't actually involve a vote, everyone still has a voice. In instances where there are dissenting voices, even if they're the minority, that's enough to veto and stop a decision. Why? Because there's an expectation that you need consensus from everyone for change to be implemented.

Unfortunately, getting consensus often prevents good ideas from moving forward.

5) They're unwilling to move to two services.

This is a tough one, but it's probably one of the keys to moving beyond 200 people. You can't do this too soon because you'll lose critical mass. Getting to two services, though, will help with several of the key attributes of healthy churches.

First, it gives people options. This is important particularly for guests. You also open up opportunities for people to both attend a service and volunteer. Additionally, you begin to move beyond the limiting mindset that everyone needs to be in every gathering together.

6) The teaching doesn't provide life application.

It's purely focused on imparting biblical truth. I'm a fan of biblical truth, but it needs to also lead to practical next steps. The challenge is that teaching that offers life application is harder than teaching just to increase knowledge. I can give you facts all day long, but helping you put that knowledge into action so it leads to transformation is completely different.

The good news is you don't have to get consensus to change the way you teach. You can begin this Sunday.

7) They want different results without any change.

That's not going to happen. I could give you all kinds of biblical references to new wine in old wineskins here, but that probably won't help either. At some point, the pain of staying the same needs to be greater than the pain of change. Let's pray it doesn't take a crisis to get to that point. When the right group of people in the church feel that type of pain, though, there's hope.

7 REASONS WHY MID-SIZE CHURCHES GET STUCK

We'll assume for this discussion that mid-size churches are between 200 and 800 in attendance. By the way, before the pandemic 60% of churches in America were already under 100 in attendance, so churches in this mid-size range are in reality relatively large. Here are some of their most common challenges:

1) They are governed by large boards and many committees.

As an example, we once worked with a mid-size church that had more than 50 people on its board and more than a dozen different committees. Their structure for decision-making was so complex that they had a committee for finding people to serve on committees.

We try to help churches shift to only one board that includes seven to nine people. The goal is to get everyone else serving on a ministry team rather than participating in committee meetings.

2) They don't leverage volunteers.

The first goal is to get staff leading ministry teams rather than reporting to committees (see above). Once that shift happens, the next goal is get staff to start building volunteer teams to do the ministry.

It's not unusual, though, for staff to hold on to doing all the ministry in mid-size churches. Think children's ministry. Think pastoral care. Staff need to equip God's people to do the work of God.

3) They're unwilling to address facility constraints.

Sometimes those constraints happen because of limited seating for adults. More oftentimes, though, the constraints aren't as visible because they impact guests more than they do people already connected to the church. Those hidden constraints may include a lack of parking, welcoming and obvious entrances, children's ministry space, adequate lobby space, clear directional signage, etc.

The key question should be, "How is the guest experience impacted by our facility?"

4) Children's ministry doesn't become a priority.

Ironically, churches tend to hire a youth pastor before they hire a children's ministry pastor. Part of the reason why is that they're really only focused on babysitting kids. The better space and the stronger leaders are focused on adults and students. The challenge is that unless churches give their best to children's ministry, they'll never reach their parents. That's one reason why some churches have a chasm of missing 25-to 35-year-old adults.

5) They haven't identified their primary purpose and distinctives.

Once you start reaching hundreds of people, it's very easy to continue adding programming. Before you know it, things become very complex with multiple ministries competing for volunteers, leaders, money, space, promotions, etc.

Mid-size churches need to define their mission, vision and strategy to be in a better position to focus resources on the areas of ministry that define who they are as a church. It will create a filter for leaders to say no more often. This focus increases ministry effectiveness and leverages resources for greater impact.

6) The quality of weekend environments doesn't reflect the church's size.

For good or bad, as the size of the environment grows, so do quality expectations. Of course, the primary place this will be felt is with the worship service environment for adults, but the same principle will apply in every environment, including children's ministry, students, guest experiences, classes and so on. With worship, though, there needs to be more intentionality around planning, preparation and execution. That includes not only the teaching, but everything else that happens during the service.

7) They don't hire leaders.

At this stage, it becomes more and more important for churches to hire leaders rather than doers. You'll need to focus on staff who can grow ministries and reach more people. That means support roles (assistants, custodian, bookkeepers, associate pastors, etc.) may have to wait. Those roles become great opportunities for volunteer engagement or outsourcing.

The priority needs to be on finding staff leaders who can build volunteer teams, build healthy ministries and build a strategy to reach new people.

7 REASONS WHY LARGE CHURCHES GET STUCK

Let's define large churches as those between 800 and 3,000 in attendance. These congregations reflect less than 5% of all churches nationally. There's nothing magical about 3,000. It's really more of a mindset that churches need to transition through if they're going to continue growing. There are some churches with a larger attendance that I'd still put in this category because they haven't appropriately wrestled with these challenges yet. Here are the common challenges we find in large churches:

1) They have a complex organizational structure.

Over time they have added boards and committees as the ministry has grown, rather than unifying under the oversight of one board with a clear understanding of its role, empowering staff to lead the day-to-day ministry, and developing a pathway for the right leaders to join the board.

2) The spiritual formation path is not defined.

When the church is smaller, the path doesn't necessarily need to be defined. In small churches, next steps are driven relationally—people develop a relationship that leads to a next step. In large churches, people will need to take a step before those relationships develop. It's essential to clearly define a path, supported by systems and leadership, and routinely communicate it.

3) Too many programs and events compete for attention and resources.

An ill-defined path typically compounds the problem of over-programming. That said, it's not enough just to clarify the path. Large churches must also get focused with their programming and events. This becomes particularly necessary if the church is going to embrace a multisite strategy.

4) Systems and strategies are missing, particularly for communications.

I mentioned the need for systems above as it relates to spiritual formation. The reality is

that healthy systems need to be developed around every key touchpoint within the church. Examples of touchpoints include connecting new guests, registering new kids, connecting into a Sunday School class or small group, volunteering, etc.

A communication strategy and systems may be the most important need because it touches every area of ministry. Without a solid communication strategy, churches either try to give every ministry an equal voice or the ministry with the loudest voice wins. In either case, the most important next steps don't get the priority messaging and promotion they deserve.

Also important to note here: Most of the systems churches do have are focused on people already connected to the church and to faith. Very few large churches have developed effective "reach" strategies and systems—that is, strategies for connecting with people far from God or spiritually curious—and this easily becomes one of the reasons they get stuck.

5) The model is built on large gatherings that don't foster relationships.

It is really impossible to engage discipleship outside of relationships. The challenge is that when churches are smaller, most of the environments were small enough to foster relationships. As the church grows, there needs to be a strategy to encourage people to step into environments where relationships can develop. That may be small groups, ministry teams, one-on-one mentoring or some combination of the three.

Eventually, people will become dissatisfied if their only connection to the church is a large group gathering or service.

6) They haven't shifted to a staff-led structure.

As churches grow, the demand for paid professionals to drive day-to-day decision-making also increases. At some point, it becomes impractical for volunteer lay leaders to continue making day-to-day decisions regarding people, property and money. By the time most churches get to this size, they've already eliminated ministry-specific boards or committees.

At this size, the next step is for lay leadership teams to release day-to-day decisions to the staff and instead elevate their focus to overarching mission, vision and ministry resourcing.

7) They don't have a clear digital ministry strategy.

Beyond posting a video of each service online, they don't have a strategy for reaching new people or engaging people already connected to the church using digital tools. And, they also haven't shifted finances or staffing to support digital ministry.

Since the front door of the church is now online, the lack of a clear digital ministry strategy becomes a major gap that inhibits future growth online and in-person.

7 REASONS WHY VERY LARGE CHURCHES GET STUCK

We'll define very large churches as 3,000 in attendance and larger. This category reflects less than 0.5% of all the churches in the country. The team at The Unstuck Group actually has quite a bit of experience in these churches. By my count, 13 of the 19 people on our team either serve or have served on staff teams of very large churches. We've also been provided coaching and consulting to many other churches that reach well into the thousands. Churches this large have some unique opportunities and obstacles.

Here are some common challenges:

1) They are typically personality-driven.

By the way, it's not a sin to have a big personality with lots of charisma. If God's given you that unique wiring, you should leverage it for Kingdom purposes. The challenge, though, is that if everything revolves around the personality of the senior pastor, it makes it very difficult to engage people in next steps beyond the weekend service.

One key to turning the corner is to develop a teaching team to model what team-based leadership and ministry looks like.

2) The leadership culture is top-down and authoritarian.

There are many examples of very large churches, on the contrary, that have a collaborative, team-based approach to leadership. One way to begin this culture shift is to develop a strong senior leadership team. This team-based approach to leadership needs to be reflected throughout the ministry.

As the church grows, leadership needs to be less focused on execution of details and more focused on empowering leaders to use their gifts to engage a clear vision and strategy.

3) There's not an intentional strategy for leadership development.

This challenge becomes pronounced as very large churches launch multisite locations. As the number of locations increases, the number of leaders required, both staff and volunteers, increases dramatically. An if-we-build-it-they-will-come approach may work

to get new people to attend your church, but I've never seen that strategy work to increase the number of leaders.

Very large churches need to be proactive in helping future leaders develop spiritually, relationally and in the required competencies to lead well.

4) They hold on to traditions.

Very large churches typically have experienced some run of growth in the recent past. The challenge is that not everything a church did in the past will necessarily lead to future health.

Many times it's the very large churches that have the biggest challenge re-embracing new. They become too big and lose their ability to be nimble and welcome change. They get predictable. It may take a new set of voices, either inside or outside the team, to bring a new perspective.

5) They haven't developed a sustainable financial model.

Growing churches tend to spend every dime they take in to keep up with the growth. This challenge is compounded if the church is reaching many people outside the faith or many people who have recently accepted Christ. There is generally a lag between giving and spiritual maturity.

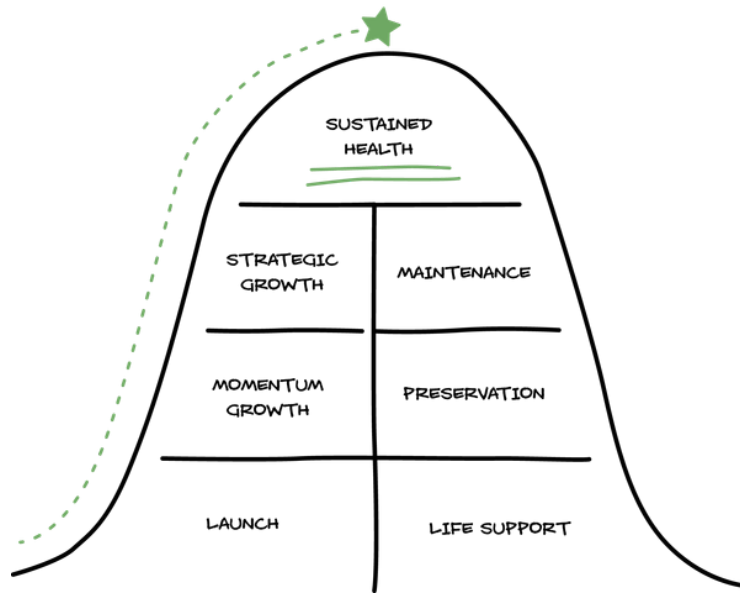
With that in mind, very large churches need to establish new financial disciplines where they regularly spend a percentage less than they anticipate receiving in offerings. This may necessitate a one-time adjustment in staffing, typically where the biggest financial investment occurs, in order to create margin. But with financial margin, you create flexibility to fund future vision expansion.

6) They don't deal with the complexity creep.

As attendance increases, the complexity of ministry programming, calendaring and communications also grows. The challenge, of course, is that you can't develop a focused communications strategy unless you begin with focused ministry programming and calendaring. Very large churches need to become more adept at saying no to good opportunities that will pull for mission priorities.

7) Ministry silos begin to develop.

A natural outgrowth of the increased number of people and ministry programs is a tendency toward silos. Rather than focusing on the overall health and growth of the church, ministries become very protective of their own programs. They begin competing with other ministries for leaders, volunteers, finances and attention. The only way to combat this is to embrace a collaborative effort to develop unified vision and strategy.



Most organizations start, grow, thrive, lose momentum, decline, and eventually end. That doesn't have to be your church's story. Over more than a decade, we've helped 500+ churches clarify the vision (where they believe God's called them to go) and their strategies (how they are going to get there). We believe God desires every church to live out its purpose at the pinnacle of sustained health.

You can lead an unstuck church. We can help you.

>> Learn more and start a conversation at theunstuckgroup.com.

ABOUT TONY MORGAN:



Tony was the Founder and Lead Strategist of The Unstuck Group. Started in 2009, The Unstuck Group has served 700 churches throughout the United States and several countries around the world. Previously, Tony served on the senior leadership teams of three rapidly growing churches including NewSpring Church in South Carolina. He has five published books including, *The Unstuck Church*, and, with Amy Anderson, he hosted the The Unstuck Church Podcast which has thousands of listeners each month. Tony passed away in 2024, leaving behind a legacy of thought leadership, innovation, and a deep commitment to helping churches thrive.