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# The Real Church Growth Barriers

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Most books, articles, and podcasts addressing growth barriers deal with visible and tactical issues.

You'll read about changing worship style to attract a younger generation.

You'll read about adding service times when you're 80% full.

And while worship style, aging facility, service times, parking lot and website are important issues, these are probably not the reasons churches don't grow.

These are visible issues, but there are more important things behind the scenes. When you understand the foundational issues, the tactical decisions will become more obvious.

## *What are those real church growth barriers?*

### **#1 – People**

The church is about Jesus and people – and helping people follow Jesus. As simple as that is, it's amazing how easy it is to forget the people part of ministry.

- Church isn't about a building.
- Church isn't dependent on events and programs.
- Church isn't even about sermons and music.

Ultimately, what we do is meant to help people follow Jesus.

Pastors and church leaders are always looking to reach more people, going into all the world and make disciples.

And while evangelism, outreach, and inviting people to church should always be part of our strategy, from a leadership and stewardship perspective, it is wise to start with the people you already have.

There are already people connected to your church.

There are already leaders.

There are already volunteers.

Don't let the quest for more cause you to be a good steward of what God has already given you. You may have 1, 5, or 10 talents, but God wants you to be responsible for what He's provided.

You may not have enough leaders, but you have some leaders.

You may not have a big enough staff, but there is someone (even if it's just you).

You may need more volunteers, but there are a handful of people who care deeply about the church.

Start there.

Start with who you do have in your circles before we draw bigger circles.

Just like companies say people are their most important asset, churches must embrace this principle.

Your people are really important.

Let's dive a little deeper into the people you already have and how to best lead them.

First, there are staff.

Whether you have a big staff, a small staff, or volunteers acting as staff, the people in paid positions are really important to the health and growth of your church.

Whenever I think about church staff (and needing more people to do the work of the ministry), I am reminded of a message from Bishop T.D. Jakes. In a way that only he can say it, he talks about how all Moses had was a staff. God used that staff to perform a miracle.

He says, "The staff in your hand is enough."

He just says it way cooler than how you're reading it in your head.

You might have a small staff, a young staff, or an older staff, but God can use a church staff to do amazing things in your community.

You might need more of them, but let's commit to develop the people who are already there.

If someone is on staff, make sure they are trained, appreciated, and truly a part of the team. Developing your staff is one of your best opportunities to lead your church to growth.

The people in paid positions should be some of the most effective ministers in your church. But too many times, people in these roles coast by. We think because they are good Christians or good parents that automatically translates into being good employees.

The secret is not better people, it's better development.

Before we delegate, we need to develop.

Before we entrust more responsibility, we need to develop.

Before we try to start something new, we need to develop.

In order for this to happen, leadership development conversations and meetings need to actually make it to our calendar. We can't let the fact that leadership development doesn't feel urgent turn into a lack of importance.

We have two resources that can help you put this into action.

First, here are some ways to make your next staff meeting more engaging, more productive, and even more enjoyable. It's a free resource called [7 Staff Meeting Ideas](#).

Second, every pastor who joins Church Fuel gets instant access to our leadership development curriculum. This carefully-researched material will help you walk your staff through 12 key skills to help them lead themselves, lead others, and lead projects. You can teach this in a staff meeting, at a leadership retreat, or simply send the resources to your team.

As important as it is to have a called, committed, and caring staff to oversee the work of the ministry, you're never going to be able to hire people to do all of the ministry in your church. That's why you need lay leaders and volunteers.

When it comes to leaders and volunteers, I'm afraid we've made this too complicated.

There's a time to create pipelines and programs, but you can also start where you are.

There are a few people in your church who are almost ready to lead...they just need you to invest in them. There are people in your church who are ready to volunteer...they just need you to personally ask and train them.

The Volunteer System we teach at Church Fuel is simple but powerful. It consists of three parts.

1. Recruit. You need a calendar-based approach to inviting new volunteers to step up and serve. This isn't about announcements or pleas for help...we've got an intentional strategy you can follow.
2. Train. Once you have people express interest, you need to train them. But adults don't learn the way most churches try to train. There's a much better way.
3. Pastor. This is the most important part of the system. Your volunteers should be the happiest and healthiest group of people in your church, not those teetering on the edge of burnout. We will show you exactly what to do to make sure they are cared for and appreciated.

This volunteer system really works. And we'll teach it to you once you [join Church Fuel](#).

Staff, leaders, and volunteers...these three groups of people in your church can do more ministry than you can do alone.

With intentionality and good systems, you can break through the people barrier.

## #2 - Systems

*I think Life Church and North Point will thrive after Craig Groeschel and Andy Stanley are gone because both churches embrace team teaching,*

*develop leaders and establish healthy systems. Many large churches lack all three. – Tony Morgan*

A system is a documented process that leads to a clear outcome. Anytime you do something on a regular basis, you need a written process.

Before you write off systems and processes, recognize there are several examples in the Bible of God working through systems.

Exodus 18 describes how Jethro helped Moses create and implement a system for hearing people's cases. His system allowed him to better serve the people he was called to lead. Luke 10 describes how 72 people were sent ahead of Jesus to help prepare the places he was going to visit. Acts 6 describes the choosing of the seven...the results of this system and process is the gospel went further because the widows were fed. A system solved the immediate problem and enabled ministry.

I don't believe systems are unspiritual. Instead, they are part of God's created order. Ultimately, systems help us. They are for our benefit, not God's.

God can do whatever He wants, but human beings benefit from good systems. And when you have good systems in your church, good things will happen.

- Good systems solve problems.
- Good systems save money. This is when the church planters start paying attention.
- Good systems promote consistency.

A lot of the problems churches face are systems problems.

They are disguised as people problems, but in reality, they are systems problems. It's a broken system or a bad structure or a process that's missing key steps that is leading to breakdown.

And here's the deal with systems problems...

You can't solve them with more preaching. I've seen this happen so many times: Church finances aren't going well and the church is getting behind in budget. The Finance Team or the Pastor decide to preach a message on generosity to right the ship. So an "emergency sermon" gets preached that temporarily solves the cash-flow issue.

But a few weeks later, it's back to reality.

That's because low giving in a church is a systems problem, and it's not going to be solved with an amazing message.

You also can't solve systems problems with more vision. Too many pastors think casting vision for the future is a silver bullet that solves all problems. "If people just understood what we're trying to do, they would give more or volunteer or invite or whatever," is what pastors think.

But casting more vision isn't likely to change your culture or solve your issues. Because it's likely a systems problem.

Structural issues require structural solutions. Systems problems can only be solved by creating effective systems.

Here are the seven systems every church needs in order to grow healthy.

1. The Leadership System
2. The Stewardship System
3. The Follow Up System
4. The Preaching System
5. The Connections System
6. The Volunteer System
7. The Communications System

You need to design and implement systems that will sustain growth in the future. In other words, you need to structure your church not for the size you are now, but for the size you want to be.

Work on each of these systems, plus get practical training and templates, in the Systems Course. It's included for everyone who joins Church Fuel.

### **#3 – Culture**

The third driver of church growth is culture. It's often ethereal and hard to define, but culture is the overall environment of your church.

Just like you can't grow tomatoes in the desert or corn in a rain forest, culture often dictates what you can and can't do in a church.

Many churches struggle to attract new people because they don't have a welcoming culture. It's not one thing, it's a combination of all the things that subtly communicate the church isn't really set up for new people to fit in. If your church has a culture that values existing members far more than new people, you're going to struggle to grow, no matter what kind of Facebook ad you run or sermon series you preach.

Some churches struggle to reach the next generation because they don't have a culture that values the next generation. There's no silver bullet solution, but rather a host of structural, system and leadership changes that need to be made before the next generation will thrive in the church.

Culture is not something you can download, purchase, or upgrade instantly. It takes a lot of intentional work, hard conversations, and great leadership.

But there are things you can do to shift the culture from what you have to what might be more desirable. Even though culture is more esoteric, here are five tangible things you can use to create culture



- **Values**

– Your defined core values are a good place to start. Values define what is important to you. They can be descriptive but some can be aspirational. Once you define them, you can call them out when you see them lived out or broken. In this way, USING your values is almost more important than defining them.

- **Language**

– Language is one of the most important culture-creators and too many churches don't recognize this. You need to give words to things you think are important. "You know how we always say..." followed by a carefully worded statement is a powerful way to create culture.

- **Behavior**

– The actions you take on a daily basis, whether intentional or allowed, create culture in your church.

- **People**

– The people you have in leadership, whether paid or volunteer, create culture. Just like an employee with poor behavior brings down a culture and drives away good people, intentional behaviors that reflect who you want to become will create a healthy culture. Celebrate behaviors that reflect your values. Gently correct behaviors that detract.

- **Budget**

– Perhaps your biggest culture creator is your budget. Show me your budget and I'll show you what you truly value. A lot of churches say they value the next generation but their budget doesn't show it – which is why too many youth pastors are reduced to professional fundraisers.

## #4 – Strategy

*Ministry without strategy can be a waste of time. Your selection of ministries must be strategic, not random. Your ministries should be on purpose, not merely at the whim of anyone's ideas. Ministry is your heart and passion. – Dan Reiland*

Even though your church is much more than a business, this business-y kind of thing can help you grow.

There are parts of your church that would really benefit from good planning and strategy.

The problem is most ministry plans take a lot of work and produce few results.

An expensive consultant dazzles you with terminology and you're drawn into a comprehensive process, peppered with promises of change. But in the end, a fancy report is shared briefly in a meeting then ends up in a computer folder somewhere.

Nothing really happens. Nothing really changes.

You might pull it out next year to see just how much you DIDN'T do.

It's a double fail: Tons of work and minimal impact.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

And you don't need an expensive consultant to guide you through the process. You can achieve fresh clarity the Church Fuel way, with a simple two-page worksheet and an insanely practical course that will show you exactly what to do.

The [Two Page Plan](#) is our insanely practical tool that will help you clarify what's truly important in your church.

Don't decide to start a new ministry, hire a staff member, raise money, hold a leadership retreat, or make a ministry decision without first forcing this kind of clarity and alignment.

Get it right and it will solve so many problems.

- **More Ministry.**

It's likely you have ministry dreams and want to make a bigger impact in your community. What would your church do with more leaders or healthier leaders? What would it look like if every ministry and program was "fully staffed." A solid ministry plan is a great next step.

- **More Leaders.**

The difference between an army and a mob is a plan. That's why throwing more people at a problem doesn't make it better. In fact, it will likely make things worse (and run off potential leaders in the process). The Two Page Plan will help you get all of your leaders, whether they are staff or volunteers, on the same page.

- **Greater Confidence.**

A great ministry plan does not diminish the need for the Holy Spirit or God's blessing. The Church belongs to God and He can do whatever he wants. However, a solid ministry plan, and a team that understands it, is one of the biggest keys to confidence in ministry. You can trust God, rest in your calling, and believe that you're working on the right things.

Here are the things we will help you clarify on your [Two Page Plan](#).

- You've probably already got this, but we'll help you make it clearer and show you were to use it.
- This will likely be one of your biggest AHA moments. It can be a game-changer.
- We'll demystify this term for you and show you how it all fits together.

- More than just fancy words, we'll help you clarify and actually use your values to make actual ministry decisions.
- Big plans will never be accomplished without a corresponding strategy.
- Who are you really trying to reach? Spoiler: The answer can't be "everyone" and we'll show you why.
- What makes you truly unique?
- Keystone Ministries. What are the most important ministries in your church? And yes, this means some things you do aren't really important.
- Annual Events. What are the big church-wide events that need everyone dialed in?
- Key Metrics. What numbers are most important for you to measure. Every church is a little different but every church needs to be crystal clear.
- Key Processes. There are a handful of systems and processes in your church that will help you solve problems once and for all.
- Annual Goals. Goals inspire us toward a better future, and there's a way to set them so people are inspired not annoyed.
- Three Year Outlook. Imagine what your church will look like and feel like three years from now.

We helped a church in Littleton, Colorado create a ministry strategy. Their pastor, Cody, emailed to say this:

We finalized our ministry plan after chipping away at it for the last few months. Our leadership meeting yesterday featured the right amount of contentious and harmonious conversation 😊 Thank you once again for helping us get unstuck! We started this process with one group of leaders, and we actually changed out about a third of our leadership in January, and we were able to generate buy-in and receive meaningful ideas from the new group very quickly.

A thoughtful, written strategic plan can help your church experience healthy growth. Planning isn't just a task to be done by an organized person who

loves spreadsheets, it's a powerful ministry tool that should be embraced by all church leaders.

### **#5 – Spiritual**

Church planting, church revitalization, and church growth are inherently spiritual endeavors.

Strategy, culture, and leadership can make a huge difference and drive growth, but ultimately that growth is up to God. The church is not a business. The church is more than an organization.

You can do all the right things and not experience growth. And many churches experience growth despite problems with leadership.

Think about how these spiritual traits intersect with the organized ministry of a church.

- **Faith** – Pastors must trust God, not their own plans or skills. And losing faith is a terrible thing and can be a growth barrier in your church.
- **Prayer** – No church growth strategy should exist apart from prayer.
- **Gospel** – A real and deep understanding of the Gospel can not only refocus a church, it can re-energize a community. Churches that lose sight of the gospel are facing spiritual growth barriers and spiritual breakthrough is required
- **Loving Others** – The greatest commandment is to love God and part two is to love others. Churches who forget this will face barriers to growth that no tactic will help overcome.

Your church might be facing systems barriers, leadership challenges, and tactical obstacles, but you also are fighting a spiritual battle.