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Elmer Towns, C. Peter Wagner & Thom S. Rainer

The Everychurch Guide to Growth

HOW MANY

PLATEAUED

CHURCH

CAN GROW

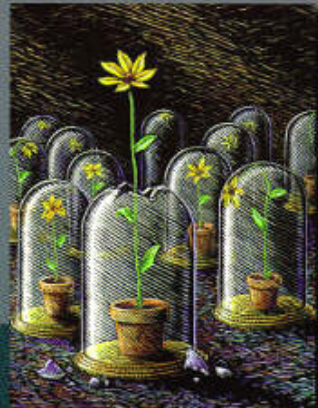


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OVERCOMING SMALL CHURCH BARRIERS OF 200 PEOPLE BY C. Peter Wagner

C. Peter Wagner has never stopped learning since he began. He learned a scientific orientation to growth at Rutgers University, Camden, New Jersey, majoring in agricultural studies. After graduation from Fuller Theological Seminary, he ministered for 16 years in Bolivia, directing the mission that is now called Andean field of SIM International. After a sabbatical back at Fuller in 1968, he became a life-long friend and student of Donald C. McGavran. Pete, as his friends call him, was invited back to teach at Fuller in 1971, and he completed a Ph.D. in Anthropology at the University of Southern California. McGavran and Wagner made Fuller the world leader in the Church Growth Movement and to know the movement, one had to study there.

Wagner has authored many of the foundational classics in Church Growth. His research has both deepened the movement in foundational studies and broadened the movement, especially in his research into new movements of the Holy Spirit in prayer and spiritual warfare.

C. Peter Wagner holds the Donald C. McGavran Chair of Church Growth and Missions at Fuller and is the Dean of the Colorado Extension of Fuller. But close to his heart is the work of the World Prayer Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where he is the Director. He has been on the cutting edge, writing several volumes on prayer and spiritual warfare.

Pete is married to Doris, who was instrumental in leading him to Christ, and mother of their children. She was an effective missionary with him in South America, and has developed an extensive prayer ministry around the world. They have 3 daughters and 6 grandchildren.



OVERCOMING MIDDLE CHURCH BARRIERS
OF 400 PEOPLE
BY
Thom S. Rainer

Dr. Thom S. Rainer, born in 1955, is the founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. His Ph.D. dissertation from the seminary is considered one of the most significant research projects about the Church Growth Movement: “An Assessment of C. Peter Wagner’s Contributions to the Theology of Church Growth.”

Thom S. Rainer came to the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as dean of the Billy Graham School after serving as senior pastor of four growing churches. The last church he served grew to nearly 2,000 in membership during his tenure there.

Since Rainer began leading the school, it has begun offering several degree programs: the Master of Divinity, the Master of Theology, and the Doctor of Missiology, the Doctor of Ministry and the Doctor of Philosophy, all in specific areas of Great Commission Studies. The Graham School has become one of the fastest-growing and most reputable schools in its field. Elmer Towns and Peter Wagner think Thom is one of the brightest new lights on the Church Growth horizon.

Rainer is married to the former Nellie Jo King. They have three sons: Sam, Art and Jess.



OVERCOMING LARGE CHURCH BARRIERS OF 1,000 PEOPLE

By
Elmer L. Towns

Elmer Towns wrote one of the first American church Growth books in 1969. The Editor of *Christian Life Magazine* described the book as “A thunder clap” that hit the evangelical world because the secular media had focused on struggling inner city churches and home Bible studies. Towns brought optimistic news to Bible believers that God was growing churches, and that the largest churches in America were committed to conservative beliefs and that multitudes were getting saved through these large churches.

There were only 97 large churches—those with 1,000 in attendance or more in 1969 when Towns published his book. Today there are over 6,000 in America. One out of every 100 churches in America is a super church of mega proportions. In this section, Towns tells why their number has increased, why some churches have difficulties breaking into this elite level and what a church has to do to break 1,000 and keep growing.

Elmer Towns holds a B.A. from Northwestern College, M.A., Southern Methodist University, Th.M. Dallas Theological Seminary, M.R.E, Garrett Theological Seminary, and D.Min, Fuller Theological Seminary. At age 65 he is returning to school to work on another doctorate degree in Church Growth because he wants to keep learning and everything he learns he will keep teaching, and everything he teaches, he will write. He lives with his wife Ruth in Lynchburg, Virginia, where he is dean of the School of Religion, Liberty University. They have three children and eight grandchildren.



Chapter One
WHY DO CHURCHES FACE A 200 BARRIER?
By
C. Peter Wagner

Over 90 percent of pastors here in America and around the world have come head-to-head with the 200 barrier. For some, very few as a matter of fact, this has been a challenge that they have overcome. For the great majority, however, it has become as much a passive part of life as never running a four-minute mile or never being invited to the White House or never owning a Mercedes. Nice, but that's what other people do.

Most of the time you have probably gone a whole week or a whole month never thinking once about breaking the 200 barrier. But the very fact that you have opened this book shows that, at least now, you are thinking about it. It goes without saying that, if you are ever going to break the 200 barrier, you have taken a good first step. By the time you read these first three chapters you will be well on your way.

Why a Section on the 200 Barrier?

Breaking the 200 barrier is the top agenda item of most pastors who have a heartfelt desire for church growth. It is not that important for all pastors, of course, because there are many pastors who care little or nothing about growth. This book is obviously not for them. But why do we start a book on plateaued churches with the 200 barrier?

First of all the 200 barrier is important because expansion growth is a part of the job description, either implicitly or explicitly, of those pastors who do care about growth. "Expansion growth" is a technical term describing the process of bringing new members into your local church. It is different from "internal growth" (helping believers mature in their Christian life), "extension growth" (planting new churches in one's own culture), and "bridging growth" (planting churches in different cultures). The chances are that you and your church members want to see your church growing in numbers.

Secondly, the vast majority of pastors everywhere have congregations of fewer than 200 active members. More than half of them pastor fewer than 100 active members. Because of that, some may well be asking why we do not start with breaking the 100 barrier instead of breaking the 200 barrier. That is a good question. The answer is that the essential characteristics of this barrier are present in a large degree under 100 and under 150 as well as under 200. For years I have been doing a seminar on this challenging subject that I now call "Breaking the 100/200 Barrier." In the beginning I called it "Breaking the 200 Barrier," but I soon discovered that many pastors whose churches were under 100 were staying away for the wrong reasons. Later on I will explain these numbers in considerable detail, but for now let me simply say that any church under 200 falls into the category of a small church.

Most practicing pastors, therefore, are small church pastors. A considerable number of them are asking: "How can my church become a middle-sized church or a large church?" This entire book is designed to give you realistic and practical answers to that extremely important question.

What I Hope to Do For You

In my section of this book, I hope that I will help you with five highly valuable pieces of information directly concerned with your leadership and your ministry.

1. I want to help you to recognize that there actually is a 200 barrier. This is not some kind of a slogan or rhetoric for a sermon point or figment of someone's imagination. It is almost as inexorable as the law of gravity. As astronauts know, humans can be exempt from the law of gravity at certain times and in certain places. Likewise, some megachurch pastors may never have been bothered with a 200 barrier. But astronauts and megachurch pastors are few and far between.
2. I want to help you understand why that 200 barrier is there. This is not a mystery that has to keep you puzzled all your life, but certain predictable sociological and psychological and behavioral and spiritual factors combine to make people actually prefer their church to be under, rather than over, 200 active adults. You will soon understand what these mindsets are.
3. Once you thoroughly understand the nature of the 200 barrier, I want to help you make a realistic assessment as to whether your particular church has a high probability or a low probability of ever moving through the barrier. This is very important because not every church can or will be able to do it. I refuse to engage in the kind of hype that implies that if you just do 1, 2, and 3 or if you get your spiritual act together or if you read this book, your church will certainly break the 200 barrier. A message like this puts you in the position that if your church does not break the 200 barrier, you have no one to blame but yourself. Clearly, in some cases the blame will be yours, but not in every case.
By the time you finish reading this book, you certainly will be well informed, and you may honestly be saying to yourself, to your spouse, and to God: "No way! This church will never break the 200 barrier!" If that turns out to be the case, then your options are very simple. You can decide to stay where you are and be a small church pastor for the rest of your life. This may well be God's will for you and your family. If it is, frustration will evaporate because you will thoroughly understand why the church remains the size it is, and you will be comforted to know that, in most cases, it is not because of anything you have done wrong. Be a good small church pastor. The other option, of course, is to send out your resume and look up U-Haul in the yellow pages.
4. On the other hand, if you finish this book and find yourself saying, "Yes! We can do it!" I want to help you comprehend as thoroughly as possible the dynamics of what it will be necessary for you to do in order to help make it happen.
5. Finally, I want to provide you with some practical conceptual tools that you can use to implement the process. I do not intend to give you some tried and true formula for growth, because I don't think there is any such thing. Breaking the 200 barrier will hardly ever be easy, but let's try to make it as easy as possible.

This Definitely Can Work

As I have done 200 barrier seminars over the years, I have received a good number of responses from pastors who have tried what my colleagues and I have suggested, and it has worked. Here are some samples.

A Baptist pastor from West Virginia writes: “It has been just under a year since I attended your seminar. Some very encouraging things have happened in our church. I believe a great deal of our recent success can be attributed to the skills and insights gained in the seminar. For the first quarter of this year, our average attendance in morning worship was 289 compared with 197 last year. Our Sunday School has gone from 154 to 185.”

A pastor from Texas writes: “I just wanted to drop you a note to let you know how much your seminar helped us. We had been between 130 and 160 for over a year. We came home and began to apply some of the principles we learned at the seminar. I’m happy to report that we have broken the 200 barrier!”

I love this letter from a pastor in Oregon: “The church I serve was running 200-225 for three years until I attended the seminar. The seminar was so liberating to me – it totally changed my ministry philosophy. In the last two years we have grown to over 400!”

Looking at Small Churches

There are two principal ways of looking at small churches. One is from the point of view of maintenance and the other is from the point of view of growth.

Both of these approaches are legitimate. Books on maintenance are valuable and I will quote from some of them in my chapters. But my focus in this book is not on maintenance, it is on growth. I like what Rick Warren says about church growth: “Since the church is a living organism, it is natural for it to grow if it is healthy. The church is a body, not a business. It is an organism, not an organization. It is alive. If a church is not growing, it is dying.”¹ Well, maybe not exactly dying; maybe surviving. There are churches in my rural hometown in upstate New York that have not grown for 100 years, but they are not dead yet. However, I can’t say that they are healthy.

In any case, there are many churches that have been plateaued under 200 members for too long a time which are living organisms and which should be growing. In those cases, the major function of this book will be to help leaders to identify and remove obstacles to growth. When it comes right down to it, that is all we can do. We don’t grow the church, God does. Paul said, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase” (1 Cor. 3:6). This can happen as we increase our ability to diagnose the health of our churches and work on curing any growth-obstructing diseases.

There are three books focused on the *growth* of small churches that have attracted my attention the most. I will come to books on *maintenance* later. The books I like the best are: *Get*

¹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p. 16.

Ready...Get Set...Grow! By Gary W. Exman (Lima OH: C.S.S. Publishing); *Ten Steps to Breaking the 200 Barrier* by Bill M. Sullivan (Kansas City MO: Beacon Hill Press); and *Turn Around Strategies for the Small Church* by Ron Crandall (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press). Since most rural churches are small, another excellent book on that subject is *The Lord's Harvest and the Rural Church* by Kent R. Hunter (Kansas City MO: Beacon Hill Press). All four authors are my personal friends, and they have first-hand experience in dealing positively with small churches

Quantifying Growth Barriers

A considerable number of researchers have recognized the existence of predictable, numerical barriers to growth. Notice especially the adjectives *predictable* and *numerical*. What this means is that a certain *number* of people in a church can, in itself, cause a slowdown of growth. This is not only true of the 200 barrier, but of other numerical barriers as well, as you will see later on in this book. The question does not necessarily involve the *quality* of the people, as some may wish to suggest. How much the church members pray or how holy they are or how many verses of the Bible they can quote or how much of their income they give to the church are important characteristics for believers, but in this case they are not very relevant. What counts is how many people are involved. This principle would apply as much to Christian Scientists or Jehovah's Witnesses as it would to Methodists or Assemblies of God.

First of all, let's look at the numbers themselves. Renowned parish consultant Lyle Schaller, looking at worship attendance, gives 35, 75, 140, 200, 350, 600, and 700+ as the potential numerical barriers.² David A. Womack of the Assemblies of God, counting believers, says that organizational shifts are needed at 50, 90, 120, 250-300, 600 and 1200.³ William C. Tinsley uses worship attendance as does Schaller, and he comes up with 40, 100, 250, 500, and 1000 as predictable barriers to growth.⁴

As these expert researchers, and others as well, have examined numerous churches, discerning certain numerical barriers to growth, some of them have also ventured to attach descriptive terms to churches in each of the resulting categories. I think it is very instructive to peruse the terminology they have developed. In fact, I suggest that you read these lists over two or three times because it will leave a very useful deposit in your mind.

Lyle Schaller (worship attendance)

| | |
|------|-------------------------------|
| 35 | fellowship group |
| 36 | small church |
| 37 | middle-sized church |
| 38 | awkward-sized church |
| 39 | large church |
| 40 | huge church |
| 700+ | minidenomination ⁵ |

² Lyle E. Schaller, *The Multiple Staff and the Larger Church* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1980), p. 28.

³ David A. Womack, *The Pyramid Principle of Church Growth* (Minneapolis MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1977), p.82.

⁴ William C. Tinsley, *Upon This Rock* (Atlanta GA: Home Mission Board, 1985), p. 83.

⁵ Schaller, *Multiple Staff*, p.28.

William Tinsley (worship attendance)

| | |
|------------|---|
| 40 ± 10 | core group |
| 100 ± 20 | congregational church |
| 250 ± 50 | multi-congregational church |
| 500 ± 100 | poly-congregational church |
| 1000 ± 200 | mega-congregational church ⁶ |

Douglas Walrath (resident members)

| | |
|---------|--------------------------------------|
| 75 | very small congregation |
| 75-200 | small congregation |
| 200-350 | middle sized congregation |
| 350-750 | moderately large congregation |
| 750+ | very large congregation ⁷ |

In my opinion, the best book to help us understand the internal dynamics of the small church was written twenty years ago by Carl Dudley, now teaching at Hartford Seminary. Many good books on the small church have been published since then, but Dudley's has not been surpassed. The fact of the matter is that small churches are not much different today than they were twenty years ago! This book, *Making the Small Church Effective*, is one of those books on maintenance, it is not a book on growth. Naturally, Dudley has to define somewhere precisely what he means by a small church and give some numbers. But one of his very important concepts is: "small is something more than a numerical description."⁸ The implication is that *smallness is essentially a state of mind*. Very well put!

Carl Dudley says, "But small churches are unique. They are not multicelled organizations with a common base. Small churches are a single, caring cell embracing the whole congregation."⁹ Almost everything I say in the rest of this chapter will be an elaboration of this crucial point.

Dudley only gives two numbers to define a small church, both related to what I have just quoted. His dividing line between small churches and others is 250. He doesn't state exactly what the number 250 represents, but it is safe to assume that he means 250 in the regular membership constituency of the church. His descriptive terms are very helpful for future reference.

Carl Dudley

| | |
|----------------|----------------------|
| Fewer than 250 | single celled church |
| 250 or more | multicelled church |

As I have studied and taught on these terms over the years, I have decided to develop my own ranges of size and descriptive terminology for each one. My numbers refer to active adults.

⁶ Tinsley, *Upon This Rock*, p. 83.

⁷ Douglas A. Walrath, *Planning for Your Church* (Philadelphia PA: The Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 24-26.

⁸ Carl S. Dudley, *Making the Small Church Effective* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1978), p.19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

Peter Wagner (active adults)

| | |
|--------------|--------------------------------|
| 40-80 | fellowship group |
| 200 and less | small church |
| 150-350 | awkward size (Schaller's term) |
| 400-750 | large church |
| 750-2000 | super church |
| 2000-20,000 | megachurch |
| 20,000 + | metachurch |

Just as a note of interest, some readers might be wondering if there is any such thing as a “metachurch,” since at the present time there are no churches in the United States or Canada over 20,000. Yes, there are, and they are located in Africa, Latin America and Asia. On a recent trip to Korea, for example, I was conversing with Myung Sung Hoon, who is considered to be the Mr. Church Growth of Korea, and he matter of factly mentioned in passing a certain “moderate sized church of 10,000!” In five days on that trip I spoke in one church of 700,000, two of 80,000, and one of 60,000.

My section of this book is dealing with the 150-350 range, which Lyle Schaller first called the “awkward size,” a perfect description. It also includes churches between 80 and 150 active adults which face many of the dynamics of the awkward churches, and which will have to solve the problems involved if they are ever to break the 200 barrier.

The 200 Barrier

Now we are ready to define as precisely as possible just exactly what the 200 barrier is. First, make no mistake that the 200 barrier is by far the most consistent and the most predictable of all the numerical barriers we have reviewed. The essential reason for this is, using Carl Dudley's terminology, *crossing the 200 barrier represents the transition from the single cell to a multicelled church*. In many denominations, over 90 percent of the local churches have not crossed the 200 barrier. A few denominations come in at a bit less than 90 percent. Among the lowest are Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Evangelical Free Church, and Reformed Church in America with 72 percent each.¹⁰

Secondly, the 200 means 200 active adults. One of the interesting phenomena of our day is that many pastors now choose not to count “members” of their churches. On numerous occasions I have asked pastors how many members they have, and they have replied, “None!” This is a surprising response for those of us who are traditionalists, but it turns out that they have well thought-out reasons (which I will not go into here) for their position. But they will respond when asked, “How many adults do you have in your constituency?” or, “How many people consider your church their primary source of spiritual nourishment?” or other words to that effect.

Now the number 200 should not be taken as a precisely fixed number. It is the median point in a range which runs from approximately 150 to 250. Some have a certain combination of other growth factors which will allow it to push to around 250 before it begins to stall out. This

¹⁰ Lyle E. Schaller, *Tattered Trust* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), p.129.

was the case of the Oregon pastor whose letter I quoted earlier, and whose church was running 200-225 in attendance. He undoubtedly had more than 225 active adults in the church.

Other churches have different growth factors which cause them to buck up against the “200 barrier” at around 150. Your five-year graph of growth will show this in most cases. The top of your graph will be jagged. It will go up until it hits your barrier level, be it 150, 200, 250, or whatever, then it will go down temporarily and start up again. Incidentally, such a graph can be a very valuable instrument as you present what you learn in this book to your church leaders.

Why would I have said that even a church of 100 or slightly fewer can be at the 200 barrier? It is because when I mention such a number, many church leaders are thinking attendance rather than active adults. Suppose a church plateaus at the lower end of the 200 barrier range, namely 150 active adults. Usually, not all of them attend church on a given Sunday, meaning that attendance in such a church might be running around 100. This church could well be at the 200 barrier.

Why Do Most Churches Remain under 200?

It is a clear fact that the majority of churches never grow to more than 200. The Church Growth Movement, with which the three of us authoring this book identify, seeks to find the answers to the obvious question: why? We approach such questions with an admitted bias. We are not among those sociologists whose goal is to conduct value-free research for the sake of reporting good research to our academic colleagues. Our goal is to extend the kingdom of God. We believe that God wants His lost sheep found, and that He desires that every church be winning lost people to Christ, adding them to their fold, and consequently that churches be growing. Healthy churches should be growing. If a church is not growing, it is sick for some reason or another. If it is, let’s find out what is wrong and, if the particular disease is curable, let’s cure the illness!

Jesus’ great commission to spread His gospel to every nation and people group throughout the world were His final words on earth (see Acts 1:8). Elmer Towns, Thom S. Rainer and I feel that they are among His most important words, and we have given our lives to do our part in helping to fulfill that great commission. How will we go about getting this job done? We will do whatever it takes. On a regular basis through the years we have been accused of being “pragmatic,” as if pragmatism were some sin that we needed to confess. Accusing church growth leaders of being pragmatic would be like accusing the Pope of being Catholic. Part of our whatever-it-takes approach is to be very realistic about growth-inhibiting church diseases.

One of my latest books on this subject is *The Healthy Church* (Regal Books) in which I carefully describe what I have found to be the most prominent of the growth-inhibiting church diseases. I highly recommend it as a supplement to this book. In *The Healthy Church* I have chapters on seven curable diseases and how to diagnose and cure them. But I also have two chapters on terminal illnesses. I realize that it comes as somewhat a surprise to many when they hear that churches can contract terminal illnesses. But they obviously can, simply because so many of them die each year. If your church does have a terminal illness, my recommendation is that the sooner you find out about it the better. If you find out soon enough, you can make plans to die with dignity! Most churches don’t, and they tend to go out kicking and screaming.

Decide Whether Your Church *Can* Break the 200 Barrier

The first step toward approaching the possibility of breaking the 200 barrier is to determine whether your church might be afflicted with either of the two terminal illnesses. If so, the probability is that your church can never get past 200. I say “probability” because God is still on the throne, and He is a healing God. I am in touch with documented cases of cancer, which has been medically diagnosed as terminal, and which has been remitted through prayer without a trace. If this can happen to a terminally ill person, it can also happen to a church. But, let’s face it. Most terminally ill cancer patients die of the disease.

Without going into the detail that I do in *The Healthy Church*, I will summarize the two terminal illnesses here. Both of these illnesses are caused by *contextual* factors as over against the seven curable diseases which are all caused by *institutional* factors. These are technical church growth terms. Contextual factors are sociological factors which the church cannot change or control, but which are very influential in its growth or non-growth. Institutional factors are ecclesiastical factors which the church can change or control if it desires to do so. Because the two terminal illnesses are contextual, it is important, and at times comforting, to know that neither one has been caused by anything the pastor or the congregation did. The appropriate response is not guilt or blame-casting.

Ethnikitis

Ethnikitis is the church disease caused by a changing community. It is almost always an urban disease. The most susceptible churches are neighborhood churches, as contrasted, for example, to central-city old first churches or metropolitan regional churches. Typically, the church will draw its members from those living in the neighborhood in which it is located. Then, *due to circumstances beyond the control of the church*, the neighborhood begins to change. Those who have populated the neighborhood for years begin to move out to other neighborhoods. People from other ethnic, socio-economic, language, national, or educational backgrounds begin to move in. As this continues, and the rate of change will vary from place to place, the typical church finds itself a congregation of commuters, who used to live there, and senior citizens who cannot afford to move out. They are like an island in a sea of a different people group to whom they have few or no ministry bridges. With a rare but notable exceptions (usually when the pastor has the missionary gift), a church which fits this description will never break the 200 barrier because its days as a church are numbered.

Ghost Town Disease

The second terminal illness which may afflict churches is ghost town disease. Ghost town disease is caused by a *deteriorating* community rather than a *changing* community. People are moving out, but few are moving in. It is mostly a rural disease. The day of the family farm is virtually gone. Young people leave town for school, get married, and only return for holidays. Businesses close and schools merge to form unified school districts. Some rural communities give up the ghost. Others survive with a steadily climbing age profile. Churches begin closing their doors. Some, which may have picked up an endowment over the years, will survive. Most, however, will die of ghost town disease after a period of survival, short or long, on the functional equivalent of life-support systems. None can be expected to break the 200 barrier.

Five Institutional Factors Creating a 200 Barrier

Institutional factors are those that can be determined by the action of the pastor or the congregation, as I have said. Growing churches invariably are characterized by a combination of positive institutional factors. But they are not all that positive. I have found that five of them are especially determinative in creating a 200 barrier. Almost every church leader who has been wrestling with the 200 barrier for a period of time will immediately recognize not only that these factors exist, but how powerful they can be in keeping a small church small. One of the reasons they are so powerful is that, with the exception of blaming them for a low level of evangelistic zeal, none of these factors is, per se, bad or sinful or wicked or malicious.

Putting these five factors together, it is easy to see why almost all churches are under 200. In one sense, it is *natural* for a church to be under 200. Perhaps the church might not be very *healthy*, as we have noted, but it is doing what seems to come naturally. I will just touch these factors briefly at this point, because the rest of my section builds from them in more detail.

1. The desire to preserve social intimacy.

Here is what Carl Dudley says: “The basic obstacle to growth [in the small church] lies in the satisfactions of the present church membership. When the church is seen as one caring cell [Remember that Dudley uses the term “single cell church.”], the problem is neither complex nor judgmental. The small church is already the right size for everyone to know, or know about, everyone else. This intimacy is not an accident. The essential character of the small church is this capacity to care about people personally. The small church cannot grow in membership size without giving up its most precious appeal, its intimacy.”¹¹

If all the institutional factors, this is the most crucial. Notice Dudley’s operative words: “*essential character*” and “*intimacy*.” In the minds of almost all small church members, personal intimacy is what belonging to church is all about.

2. The desire to maintain control.

The small church usually has one power center. Sometimes it is as small as one person. Sometimes it is a family. Sometimes it is a clique. Identifying the power center can be tricky, because it is frequently located in the informal leadership structure of the church rather than in the formal structure of established boards and committees.

No matter how large it might be or where it might be located, typically these individuals have gained their power over a considerable period of time, and with what they consider to be a considerable amount of personal sacrifice. Once they have attained the power, they have decided that they like it and want to keep it. They have no interest in ever seeing their small church become a larger church, because they intuitively know that if the church grows they could lose their power.

A fail-safe device that many of them have perfected over the years is to change their pastor every three or four years. Research has shown that the effective years of pastoral ministry in an already established church *begin* between years three and six, so this method assures that no

¹¹ Dudley, *Small Church*, p. 49.

pastor will be truly effective and either assume power or reshape the power center. A by-product of this is that without effective pastoral leadership, scarcely any church could possibly pass the 200 barrier.

3. The desire to conserve memories.

This factor kicks in particularly when, as in many cases, a new meeting place will be necessary for the church to break the 200 barrier. Many church members can become very emotional over the physical church building and sanctuary, because it brings back so many memories. Here is where we were married. Here is where my uncle and aunt were baptized. My mother and father sat right over there in the second pew. Think of Edward's funeral and how practically the whole town crowded in that morning. Our children were born again in those Sunday School rooms downstairs.

Thoughts of leaving this place are out of the question. Even fiery sermons on outreach and evangelism do not usually change this strong, emotional feeling.

4. The desire to protect turf.

Even though it is hardly ever vocalized, the mindset of many influential persons in a small church is: "New people are a threat to what we have worked so hard to obtain."

I love the way that Lyle Schaller expresses this. Right after Carl Dudley's book, *Making the Small Church Effective* (Abingdon), I put Lyle Schaller's *The Small Church Is Different* (Abingdon) as the two most helpful and informative books on the maintenance of the small church.

Lyle Schaller says: "The strong commitment of the members to one another, to kinfolk ties, to the meeting place, to the concept that the congregation should function as one big family, and the modest emphasis on program tend to reinforce the single-cell character of the small church. When combined with the intergenerational nature of the typical long-established small church, these forces tend to enhance the caring nature of the fellowship, but *at the cost of potential numerical growth* [emphasis mine].

"These unifying principles tend to make the small church an exclusionary institution. While there usually is not a conscious effort to exclude strangers, there expressions of institutional commitment tend to make it difficult for the small-membership church to reach, attract, and assimilate potential new members, unless people have kinfolk in that congregation."¹²

This is so true!

5. The desire to remain comfortable.

Let's face it. Change is a threat. Since growth implies change, church growth, therefore, can be a threat.

When I first got to page 53 of *Making the Small Church Effective*, I was pleasantly surprised to find that Carl Dudley had written the first paragraph on Peter Wagner. He did an

¹² Lyle E. Schaller, *The Small Church Is Different* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1982), pp. 53-54.

excellent job of distilling the essence of my teaching on church growth into one paragraph. Then he followed with this well-advised statement:

“That’s the logic of church growth, and it works. But the small church must be ‘converted’ to believe that the change is worth the cost. One pastor at a conference on methods of evangelism observed that ‘any of these methods, if used conscientiously, would turn the small church into a large church, and *that’s the one thing most small congregations don’t want to see happen* [emphasis mine].’ Members of the small church know the alternatives.”¹³

While Lyle Schaller’s *The Small Church Is Different* is a book on maintenance, one of his excellent books on growth is *44 Ways to Increase Church Attendance*. In the introduction to the book, Schaller, with a characteristic touch of humor, says: “The most persuasive argument against reading this book can be summarized in eight terrifying words. *What if we try it and it works?* If a congregation tries a new approach to ministry and it fails, little harm is done. Usually everything soon returns to the way it was before, and life goes on. The great risk is to implement a new idea that may work if it does, the world will never be the same again!”¹⁴

Most people are comfortable with the world in which they now live. If some other church wants to experiment with a new world, fine. I like our church the size it is!

What Is the Right Size?

Why would so many people prefer the size of a small church to a larger one? I’m sure that many readers will be surprised when I agree with Carl Dudley whom I quoted earlier as saying, “The small church is already the right size.”¹⁵ Let me explain.

Have you ever heard of the “Rule of Forty?” This is another one of Lyle Schaller’s contributions. He claims that it is one of the most neglected rules of church administration, and says: “In general, whenever human beings gather in a voluntary association that emphasizes relationships with one another, there is a natural tendency to limit the size to fewer than 40 persons. Illustrations are numerous. Throughout history, all military organizations have limited the basic unit to fewer than 40. Major league baseball teams limit a team’s roster to 40 in the winter and 25 after the season begins. The Lion’s Club that wins the regional attendance award usually has fewer than 40 members. One-fourth of all Protestant congregations in North America average fewer than 35 in Sunday worship.”¹⁶

A recent study made by the Church Growth Research Center of the Church of the Nazarene reported, “It is tough for a small congregation to grow past 50 or 60 in attendance.” They studied congregations that had 30-50 in worship in 1985, and discovered that, five years later, fewer than one in ten had as many as 60 in worship. They concluded that “churches that have been under 50 for five years are likely to remain about that size for the next five.”¹⁷

What is the reason for these numbers? It is very simple. Under 40 every member is aware of every other member, over a reasonable period of time they can learn the names of all the others, and they can work together efficiently. A frequently unrecognized advantage of this sized

¹³ Dudley, *Small Church*, p. 53.

¹⁴ Lyle E. Schaller, *44 Ways to Increase Church Attendance* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), p. 14.

¹⁵ Dudley, *Small Church*, p. 49.

¹⁶ Lyle E. Schaller, “Why Forty Is a Fellowship Barrier,” *Leadership*, Fall Quarter 1984, p. 48.

¹⁷ Dale E. Jones and Richard Houseal, “Research & Trends,” *GROW*, Spring 1996, p. 44.

group over a home cell of, say, 8 to 12, is that every member does not have to be particularly fond of every other member for the group to function.

It should also be noted that churches of around 40, give or take, were the rule in New Testament times. Churches met for their weekly times of worship and fellowship in private homes. Each one was led by one or more elders. Sometimes we superimpose our own church experience on something like “the Church of God which is in Corinth” (1 Cor. 1:2), and imagine that every Sunday all the believers in Corinth got together in a worship center to hear the same preacher deliver the same sermon. But such was not the case. When Paul went to Miletus and called a conference for “the elders of the church” of Ephesus (Acts 20:17), he was inviting the pastors of the various congregations that met regularly in homes. Few of the homes in Ephesus would have held more than 40 at a time.

Moving Beyond Forty

Let’s suppose that winning new people to Christ is a high priority for our “ideal sized” church of 40. Let’s suppose that the 40 becomes 80. Eighty is twice the ideal, size, but it can work. At 80, not everyone will know everyone else’s name, but they learn to live with it. It is still a single cell church which will usually function quite well.

Now let’s suppose that new people are still coming to Christ and into membership in the church and the church grows to between 80 and 200. It is now oversized. It is a saturated solution. I well remember when, in chemistry class in high school, we each took a glass of water and stirred salt into it. The salt disappeared. We kept putting more salt into it until suddenly no more salt would disappear because it became a saturated solution. This is exactly what churches of 80 to 200 tend to become.

Carl Dudley describes this well when he says, “Small-church members unconsciously feel that they cannot absorb new members without changing the fabric of the group. According to the experts in group relations, the small church is already much larger than similar kinds of caring groups. Members often feel the strain. They feel that they cannot receive new members without losing touch with those whom they already know. *They cannot make a radical change in the size of the church without losing their motivation for belonging* [emphasis mine]. . . They cannot grow because, in a word, they feel ‘stuffed.’”¹⁸

Is Growth Possible?

In this chapter I have done the best I know how to help you understand the nature of the 200 barrier and why the great majority of churches find themselves under it. But this is not a book on information, nor does it intend to perpetuate the under 200 comfort zone. It is a book on fulfilling Jesus’ great commission, and therefore it is a book on growth. If there are unsaved people in your community, your church should be doing its part to reach them and win them to Christ. This is a book on breaking church growth barriers. I will now move to describe what needs to be done if your church is one of those destined to break the 200 barrier.

Towns, Elmer. *The Everychurch Guide to Growth* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers), 1998. All rights reserved.

¹⁸ Dudley, *Small Church*, pp. 49-50.