

5 BAD HABITS THAT KILL CHURCH GROWTH AND HOW TO BREAK THEM



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THE OVERARCHING STRUGGLE WITH CHURCH GROWTH 4

BAD HABIT #1:

LACK OF INVESTMENT IN STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS 6

 Growing your potential 6

 Managing your staff and volunteers 8

BAD HABIT #2:

YOU HAVEN'T IDENTIFIED YOUR TARGET DEMOGRAPHIC 9

 Choosing your target audience 9

BAD HABIT #3:

YOU DON'T HAVE AN OUTREACH STRATEGY

FOR YOUR TARGET DEMOGRAPHIC 11

 Reaching out to your target audience 12

 Using all the tools in your toolbox 12

BAD HABIT #4:

YOU HAVEN'T PRIORITIZED TEACHING ABOUT GENEROSITY 14

 Taking away barriers to giving 15

BAD HABIT #5:

YOU'RE NOT MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE DIGITALLY 16

 Embracing mobile technology 17

 On the road to growth 18

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." – Matt. 28:16–20

When Jesus gave the Church the commission to make disciples, he gave us growth as a metric. Part of the disciple-making process is inspiring people to make more disciples. Hopefully our churches are places where people are coming to learn what it means to follow Jesus.

It's not that we want to grow for growth's sake or that we want to build the largest edifice with the biggest budget. We want to create a life-giving culture that points people to Christ and releases them to share his message of reconciliation with the world.

It's completely natural, however, that churches sometimes internalize and exhibit characteristics that challenge their ability to grow. Our desire isn't to shame struggling churches! We want to help with the sometimes difficult process of self-evaluation and hopefully point out some fixes that can get them back on track.

THE OVERARCHING STRUGGLE WITH CHURCH GROWTH

We recently released the [5 Principles of Fast Church Growth](#) based on research and interviews with the 100 fastest-growing churches in America. And while it's full of powerful insights to help grow your church, there's always the potential that readers will fall into the same quagmire: they want a silver bullet that will grow their church overnight, and when they don't find it, they give up.

Lack of focus and follow-through is one of the most consistent struggles in growth-driven churches. They'll discover a technique being used successfully by a church and attempt to implement the same idea, but after a couple of weeks or months with no measurable growth, they throw in the towel and move on to something else.

I've talked about church growth to despondent and frustrated pastors who respond to every idea with, *"Yeah, we tried that, and it didn't work."* But as I ask them more questions, I discover that they tried an idea for a little while, looked for changes in their attendance, and when they didn't see any real growth, abandoned the idea as worthless.

We may be able to look at growing churches and identify some of the amazing things that they're doing to grow. But it's easy to forget that these techniques and practices are the fruit of deeply embedded principles and convictions. These convictions lead to practices that translate to growth. Trying to appropriate the practices without internalizing the perspectives that birthed them almost guarantees failure.

When we read about the successful practices of growing churches, we seldom hear all the ways they've had to tinker with those practices to adapt them to their environment and demographics. Almost every rewarding routine practiced by any church has more than one trial-and-error story.

Adopting the practices of another church requires a cursory understanding of why they do that thing, and a commitment to stick with an idea and figure out unique ways to make it work for you.

For instance, you might discover that a church is having a lot of success through community service. But this involvement springs from a deeply held belief that

the church is here to serve the community and not the other way around. For your church to see the same kind of results, you might need to first teach your congregation to think about its community differently, and then you might need to overcome the community's opinion of the church. You can't put a time limit on this.

If you try and adapt service as a simple church-growth strategy, you're setting yourself up for failure because you're not really serving. But if you adopt serving the community as a conviction, and begin to serve out of that principle, that can make all the difference. Your congregation sees the difference, and your community will, too.

To run from practice to practice hoping to find a quick-fix growth strategy will only exhaust you and make your church skeptical and resistant to change. By constantly instituting changes that don't last, you're immunizing the church against lasting change.

As you read through these bad habits, remember that you can't just flip a switch to change them. It often requires some meditation on the underlying attitudes that helped a bad habit take root. Once you have that figured out, it's going to take some effort, time, and training to turn these things around. If you don't give up, you'll be amazed by the change.



BAD HABIT #1: LACK OF INVESTMENT IN STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

People who have made the choice to invest in your vision are your volunteers—the time and energy you spend on them will be paid back with dividends. They're the ones who will multiply your ministry. On the other hand, your lack of investment in their care and development will only diminish your returns.

Growing your potential

Ineffective pastors often develop a “nuzzle-the-shepherd” style ministry. These leaders are so busy focusing on sheep that come and nudge them with their issues and problems that they don't have the time to invest in the more independent people in their care. They're training the needier sheep to continue to prod at them for attention, which is actually making them more dependent—not less. But if they focused on developing the leaders who've already stepped up and taken on responsibility, they could create a broader leadership base to deal with the needier sheep.

It can be intimidating for some pastors to invest in the people with the greatest potential. These volunteers and staff might have strong Type A personalities, or they might be better educated and have more experience. Very few seminaries and Bible schools are training pastors to manage people.

Invest in your leadership and management skills. There are no substitutes for these skills in church leadership. The better you get at leading others, the larger your capacity grows, because new leaders can take up the slack of leadership and development. The church is people—people who need to be developed, matured, and released into ministry.

There's always room to grow in this area. Here are some places you can start:

- ▶ **Reach out to other pastors who are strong in this area:** It's not comfortable to admit your weaknesses, especially to people you might feel you're in competition with. Asking a local pastor with a leadership gift to mentor you is still a good idea—and it will help you develop key relationships.
- ▶ **Go to conferences:** There are tons of leadership conferences and workshops in your area. Request a stipend from your church to start attending them.
- ▶ **Become a reader:** Every single organizational leader I know is constantly reading about leadership. Find some leaders you admire and follow their blogs, follow the people they admire, and read the books they're into.

Managing your staff and volunteers

One of the biggest frustrations heard from church workers has to do with the lack of interest and involvement in the work they're doing. You might think that your people thrive under autonomy, but most of the time, they don't. Struggling churches are often a collective of satellite ministries that are loosely related to each other.

Staff appreciation picnics are wonderful, but one of the best things you can do to encourage your staff is get involved with them. Take interest in their ministries. Spend a day in the children's department. Go on youth retreats. Attend Bible studies.

Your presence lets them know that their work is important in the life of the church, and that their work is playing an important part in the overall mission of the church. And having a greater awareness of what's happening in various church departments gives you the ability to mold and shape workers and their ministries.

Let's face it—many of the problems that are stopping churches from growing aren't happening in the greater Sunday service. They're a collection of little things occurring in Sunday school classes, worship teams, youth group, kids' ministry, etc. When you get involved, you are better prepared to offer encouragement and guidance, getting every ministry in the church pulling in the same direction with shared vision.

You might think that people in your church will consider it meddling, but a majority of them won't. Most people want to know how they're doing and how they can improve. Sit down with every ministry leader and genuinely ask how they're doing and where they might be struggling. Take some time to find out if their idea of success meshes with yours. Help them set some goals, and make it your job to cheer them on.



BAD HABIT #2: YOU HAVEN'T IDENTIFIED YOUR TARGET DEMOGRAPHIC

When you start talking about a church's "target demographic or audience," some people get really uncomfortable. "The gospel's for everyone, right?" they might say. "Christ's salvation isn't a product to be marketed to a specific audience. Are you suggesting that we exclude people?"

I want to let you in on a little secret: you have a target audience, whether you know it or not. Everything your church does or says is going to appeal to one group more than another. It just is. People don't all enjoy the same kind of theology, music, decor, or preaching style. Some people like little plastic communion cups, and others prefer intinction.

The choices you make are excluding people who would prefer something else. If they don't like drums in the worship service, and your church uses drums, in some fashion you're excluding them. If they don't like drums but stay anyway, of course you'll welcome them. It's not like you're putting a sign on the front door that says, "If you don't like drums, go away!" But some of the choices you make will potentially turn some people off—and that's okay.

One thing stagnant churches haven't realized yet is that by not choosing who they intend to appeal to, the choice is being made by default. Everything from the interior design to the music is being chosen by different people using their own preferences as criteria. What you often end up with is a strange quilt of elements that might not necessarily appeal to anyone.

Choosing your target audience

You want to make a decision to appeal to a certain demographic. When you decide what that target is, you begin to look at everything in your church

through their eyes. How would the lobby change? Should we be greeting people differently? Is there a way we can adjust the decorative elements to appeal to that demographic?

When churches begin going down this road, they'll often decide that their church demographic is something like *"young families."* This is a good place to start, but isn't quite as dialed in as you would like. If you can be even more specific and say, *"young families with infants"* or *"families with elementary-aged kids,"* it's much easier to understand how things could change to be more welcoming for them.

Some churches have had great success focusing on groups like unchurched men, musicians, cowboys, military families, etc.

Some questions you can ask that will help you figure out where your focus should be include:

1. Who do we appeal to right now? Why?
2. Who do the other churches in our city appeal to?
3. Is there an underserved demographic in our community?
Who are they?
4. What does our community look like?
5. What is the average income in our community?
6. What is the average educational level in our community?
7. What kinds of jobs are represented in our community? White collar? Blue collar? Developers? Musicians? Young entrepreneurs?
8. What kind of lifestyles are represented in our community?
Outdoorsy? Runners? Sports fans?
9. What kind of worship experiences aren't represented in our community?
10. What are our strengths?

Prayerfully, going through these questions with your leadership team will help identify who your target audience should be. Once that's done, you can start thinking about how to appeal to them—and how to remove impediments that might be turning them off.



BAD HABIT #3: YOU DON'T HAVE AN OUTREACH STRATEGY FOR YOUR TARGET DEMOGRAPHIC

Maybe you chose a demographic a couple years ago and made some big changes to your worship service and decor, but it hasn't made any difference in your attendance. That's completely understandable. Choosing a target and hitting that target require two different skillsets.

The overarching bad habit here is thinking that people are going to come to you, and you just have to be there to appeal to them when they show up. A lot of money gets spent on sound equipment, carpeting, chairs, wall treatments, and other accoutrements that people will never experience because churches haven't developed a strategy to bring them in.

Growing churches know that it's their responsibility to go out into their community; they don't expect their community to come to them. By identifying their target audience, growing churches can focus their energy and marketing budget in one specific direction instead of diffusing it by trying to reach everyone.

Reaching out to your target audience

The first step to reaching your target demographic requires that you answer questions like:

- ▶ What's important to them? Values? Beliefs? Interests? Behaviors?
- ▶ What do they do for fun?
- ▶ Where do they spend time?
- ▶ What are their challenges and frustrations?
- ▶ What media do they use? What music do they listen to?
- ▶ What would they look for in a church?
- ▶ What meaningful ways can our church serve them?

Once you have a clear understanding of the persona you want to appeal to, you can develop a strategy for building relationships. While you certainly can identify and adopt strategies that other churches have used successfully, the key will be in thinking outside the box. You'll really want to zero in on the legitimate or felt needs of this group, finding interesting ways to address them.

Putting together fun events to attract your target audience is another way to introduce people to your church. If you decided that your demographic was unchurched men, this could include a family picnic with lots of outdoor activities, hiking, or maybe even a job fair. You want to be careful not to jump on the first, most obvious idea. A Super Bowl party seems like a no-brainer, but it has to offer something pretty amazing to overcome the barrier most men would feel at spending that day with a bunch of strangers.

Using all the tools in your toolbox

There are plenty of marketing tools available to help get your message out to your audience. Identifying your demographic is incredibly helpful in church marketing because it helps you weed out unhelpful or needlessly expensive ideas.

I worked with some leaders at a smaller church who had their hearts set on paying for commercials on the local Christian radio station. They did a huge drive to raise the money for the spots, had them professionally recorded, and aired them for a couple months. They saw absolutely no return on their investment. Why? They didn't ask the question, *"Is the audience we want to reach listening to Christian radio?"*

If they had thought about who they wanted to reach and had used that information as a guide for their marketing, they would have likely ruled out Christian radio. Most Christian radio listeners are already committed to a church, so right out of the gate, you've ruled out a large portion of the listening audience. If they wanted to reach disillusioned believers who had left the church, but still cared enough about their faith to listen to sermons and Christian music, they might have had some success with an ad featuring a very targeted message—but instead their ad tried to appeal to everyone and fell through the cracks.

When you're thinking about spending money on marketing, make sure that you are aiming at the right target!

Social media: While most churches have a Facebook presence, very few are using it as the marketing tool it's intended to be. You can promote your church with extremely targeted ads and content without spending a lot of money. It is a great tool for churches who have done the hard work of identifying the audience they intend to hit.

Invitations: Personal invitations are [still the most valuable way to get visitors](#). Training your congregation to build relationships with the unchurched and invite them to attend your church is the best way to grow your church.

Opportunities: Make sure there is a framework in place to get visitors plugged in as soon as possible. Their first visit is not too soon to be sharing various service opportunities and potential classes and groups they can attend. When people feel that their presence will make an immediate difference in the life of your church, they're more likely to imagine themselves as regular attendees.



BAD HABIT #4: YOU HAVEN'T PRIORITIZED TEACHING ABOUT GENEROSITY

The topic of money might be the most important discussion that churches aren't having. The sad truth is that we're often reinforcing the idea that Christianity is based on assenting to a belief system, but we're hesitant to be too vocal about how that affects someone's pocketbook. In the end, Martin Luther was right: *"There are three conversions necessary to every man: the head, the heart, and the purse."*

Because so many churchgoers get sensitive when money comes up on Sunday mornings, pastors feel the need to tiptoe around topics related to giving and generosity. This guarantees that the topic isn't discussed nearly enough.

Jesus discussed money constantly. Even when it wasn't the topic at hand, he used it as a prop in parables to make other spiritual points. It makes complete sense; our priorities are manifested in the way we spend, save, give, and value money. There isn't a better indicator of our true spiritual state than how we use our resources.

If churches aren't regularly talking about money and finances, they're not only hurting themselves because people aren't giving enough, but they're also negatively impacting the spiritual development of the people in their care. Christians desperately need to see how their beliefs impact their views of money, and vice versa.

Jesus wasn't kidding when he said, *"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"*— Lk. 12:34. When people give more to their church, they become more emotionally invested. When people are more emotionally invested, the church grows. It really is that simple. Your church probably isn't struggling because you don't make enough money from offerings; it's struggling because people don't feel the sense of responsibility and ownership of the ministry that comes from giving.

The only way to get over people's sensitivity in talking about money is to address it regularly. If people are sensitive about a subject, it's a sure sign that they need to hear about it more.

Taking away barriers to giving

It's not enough to get people comfortable with the idea of giving. The next hurdle is in getting them to actually give. You need to do what you can to remove the obstacles between stimulus and response. If someone is inspired or convicted to give, they should be able to do so right away and not excuse themselves with the fact that they don't have any cash or checks on them.

If you haven't started moving towards a mobile giving solution, it's time to start. This generation is used to getting on their Amazon app and buying something with a single tap or buying music that populates their iTunes library immediately. We shouldn't make charitable giving a complex and difficult process. Make it as simple as downloading an app on a smartphone.

With a service like [Pushpay](#) brought to you by eChurch, churches have a full digital giving solution. Users can give from any device without needing to touch their purse or wallet, and they can give whenever they want, wherever they are.

Churches love it because eChurch powered by Pushpay's engagement strategy helps inspire generosity from the 80 percent who don't give regularly. [Many churches who have adopted Pushpay](#) have seen their giving increase by double—or more.



BAD HABIT #5: YOU'RE NOT MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE DIGITALLY

I did some consulting for a church that was close to splitting over whether they needed a website or not—this was in 2009. The church-at-large isn't known for responding quickly to cultural changes.

If you were to ask me to name one major difference between churches that are growing and ones that are stagnant, I'd tell you that growing churches have trained themselves to recognize opportunities more quickly. They tend to be early adopters of ideas and technology.

Many churches, on the other hand, take a wait-and-see approach to change. It isn't until they see other churches having success with a new idea that they decide to jump in. But by that time, every church is on that bandwagon, and a lot of the opportunity has dissipated.

Early adopters often have a competitive edge. Take social media, for instance. Many of the churches who jumped on Facebook when it was first introduced weren't competing with a million church pages. They had time to really discover their unique voice and grow a large following and platform. Now having a Facebook presence is obligatory for churches, and it takes a lot more effort to stand out.

It's important to develop a mindset that asks, *"How can I capitalize on this for the gospel?"* Learning to see new ideas and technologies through an opportunistic lens is a church growth superpower. You might assign a negative undertone to the word *"opportunistic,"* but I assure you that it's this mindset that drives entrepreneurial church growth.

Embracing mobile technology

The mobile computing revolution is as profound as the rise of the personal computer. My phone has more computing power than my computer did ten years ago. In his book *Physics of the Future*, scientist Dr. Michio Kaku says, “*Today, your cell phone has more computer power than all of NASA back in 1969, when it placed two astronauts on the moon.*”

We are literally walking around with gadgets that will let us access all of the world’s knowledge. It’s changing the way we shop, get directions, and even how we take part in community.

If your church doesn’t have an app yet, you’re simply putting off an inevitability. Enter the word “*church*” into an app store, and you will see tons of apps from local churches who want to use the mobile revolution to share the gospel. They’re capitalizing on the fact that more than 70 percent of their congregants have smartphones with them all the time.

The nice thing about church apps is that they’re a really easy way for your congregants to share the culture and teaching of the church with others. People don’t think twice about downloading an app to check it out. This gives people an opportunity to discover and visit your church before they ever walk in the door.

Companies like [eChurch](#) are making it easy for churches to create their own apps, which consolidate all of their elements into one easily accessible tool. Their congregants have instant access to:

- ▶ Sermons / teachings
- ▶ Giving software
- ▶ Church calendar
- ▶ Events
- ▶ Church bulletins
- ▶ Social media integration
- ▶ And more!

If you’re interested in finding out more about getting your own church app, [contact eChurch](#) for a free demo now!

On the road to growth

Many of the changes that churches need to make to start experiencing growth are small and incremental. They don't require tons of capital or excessive energy. They often require a change in perspective.

- ▶ You need to see people as your most important resource.
- ▶ You need to choose who you're trying to reach.
- ▶ You need a plan for how you'll reach them.
- ▶ You need to talk about giving—a lot.
- ▶ You need to make it easy to give.
- ▶ You need to always be looking for opportunities.
- ▶ You need your own [church app](#).

Once you make these adjustments in practice and perspective—and commit to them—you'll start seeing dramatic change.

A lot of the growth game is a matter of momentum. Once your church starts making some positive movement forward, it becomes easier to mobilize for bigger wins in the future.

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