

The Comfort Levels Churches Reach

Introduction:

We have heard about personal comfort zones. This refers to the work one is willing to do, how well he gets along with others, etc. Were you aware churches have comfort zones? That is, churches grow until they max out their comfort level and then stop. While church growth is not an exact science, there are many perceivable trends indicating the growth a congregation will comfortably attain. To avoid hindrances to evangelism and growth, we need to be aware of the perceivable levels, recognizing the obstacles they present and the keys needed to overcome them. As you listen, see if you know congregations that fit these levels and also determine for yourself where you believe we are.

Discussion:

I. The four levels of modern churches.

A. Patriarch/Matriarch Church:

1. This church's leadership is made up of a single family. The membership is often made up of extended family and a few others compatible with them. It is often overconfident because the "Patriarch" is convinced he knows all there is to make a church successful. This congregation will rarely make it much past 40 members.
2. Obstacles to growth are inherent in this congregation's leadership. The dominant family is often consciously or subconsciously threatened by growth for two reasons. 1) More people are harder to control. 2) More people means more capable leaders which threaten to take the reins from the Patriarch or Matriarch.
3. To break through this level, the leading family must learn to trust others, developing leaders outside the family. They must also learn to accept wisdom from outside sources.

B. One Group Church:

1. This church has two or three leaders with a few quiet workers. It is called "one group", because it is made up of one large social circle, wherein everyone is fairly close to everyone else. Additionally, everyone is expected to be involved in every aspect of the church's work. This church may get up to a little over 100. However, it will typically hover around 75.
2. Obstacles to growth are inherent in the relational aspects of the one group. Members worry if they are not close to everyone. Since the practical limits of this kind of closeness cannot extend much past 70 for anyone, the church is limited to that number.
3. To break through to the next level, leaders must work to develop new layers of leadership. The church must be willing to let go of the "everybody does everything" one group mentality and allow for open subgroups. The members must learn that they will not be close to everyone else and everyone else will not be close to them. However, they must not allow that fact to cause them to isolate themselves or form closed cliques.

C. Preacher Dominant Church:

1. This congregation typically has multiple leaders but with little experience. Therefore success comes and goes depending on the preacher. The work the church performs, the goals the church sets, the programs the church organizes are instigated by the preacher. Since most preachers desire elders, these churches will typically have elders. This church will grow to the number that the preacher and a few volunteers can maintain through counseling and study, plus a few "low maintenance" members. Typically, this church will not grow past 150.
2. Obstacles to growth in this congregation are inherent in the ability, talent, work and stamina of the preacher. One man can only serve so many. The early years of this church's growth are filled with personal work Bible studies. After a few years, the needs of the early converts become so great the preacher is spending his time maintaining. Growth plateaus. Eventually, the preacher burns out, moves off or dies. Then the church declines. If the church then gets a dud preacher, it can go into a tailspin.
3. The keys to getting past this level are training and leadership development. Instead of the preacher running things and doing the work, he needs to train others to "run" the church without needing him as the center of learning and progress.

D. **Process Church:**

1. This church has good, strong, steady leadership and is held together by its “processes”. That is, the leadership has implemented processes or programs by which the continuing work of the congregation is accomplished. There are personal work programs, new converts programs, group programs, Bible class programs, etc. With these processes in place, the membership is confident in the local leadership and not nearly so focused on keeping the present preacher. Since good, supported leadership is necessary to establish these processes, these churches will typically have elders, but they are overworked. These elders usually feel the need to be personally involved in most decisions made, from hiring the preacher to buying the brooms. This group may stretch as far as 350-400 but will typically come back to 150-300 members.
2. The obstacles this congregation faces are twofold. First, there is the similar problem to the “Preacher Dominant Church”. A small group of elders can only do so much work. Since they are directly involved in all of the processes from air conditioner maintenance to personal work to spiritual development, the church can only grow so large before their abilities are maxed out. The second obstacle is the danger of being “institutionalized” (not to be confused with the false doctrine of Institutionalism). By this, I mean this church often gets in the rut of performing the same activities over and over. In time, the activities become the purpose of the church’s existence. How many churches continue holding gospel meetings the same way simply because that is what has always been done? Instead of viewing the processes as means to the goals, this church may view accomplishing the processes as the goal. Then those processes lose their effectiveness.
3. Keys to breaking into the next level for this church are learning to divide labor. Training up members to be more specialized in their focus within the congregation. Elders must move into a leadership role and allow others to manage the work. The work of the congregation must be given to the congregation and not accomplished by the staff or officers.

II. The Biblical level we must attain: **The Bible Church.**

- A. I have called this level the “Bible Church” because this is the level described by the numerous passages that reveal the practical workings of successful churches.
- B. This church understands the need for division of labor. Not every one can be an eye, a hand, a foot or an ear (**I Corinthians 12:17-18**). This church recognizes people with different abilities have been placed in the congregation by God so the church can grow properly (**cf. Ephesians 4:16**). We have noticed this in the working of the Jerusalem church in **Acts 6:2-3**. When the Hellenistic widows were overlooked, the apostles didn’t call for all the members to do better, they set up a specialized group to accomplish this work, while the apostles devoted themselves to their specialized work.
- C. This church recognizes the need for multiple full-time workers. I can’t help but wonder what would happen in a modern congregation if Barnabas showed up like he did with the Antioch congregation in **Acts 11**. The church was started by a few who were scattered from Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church then sent Barnabas to help the congregation grow. He encouraged the congregation, but seemingly very quickly left to bring back another full-time worker—Saul (**Acts 11:25-26**).
- D. This church recognizes the work of service and ministering belongs to the members, not to the “officers” (elders, deacons and evangelists). **Ephesians 4:11-12** demonstrates those who hold an official position in the church do so not to accomplish the work of the church, nor to serve the members of the church. Rather, they hold office in order to equip us to do the work.
- E. This church recognizes we are one body (**I Corinthians 12:12**), but our needs for growth, development, chastisement, companionship and community will not just take place in the context of the whole body. Never forget the Bible statements about all that was done from house to house. In **Acts 2:46-47**, the Christians spent time with one another socially and spiritually from house to house, eating together and praising God together. When Peter was delivered from prison, he found some Christians gathered in Mary’s house praying (**Acts 12:12**). While in Ephesus, Paul taught not only publicly, but from house to house (**Acts 20:20**).

- F. This church recognizes a need for layers of leaders and greater leadership development. We often equate leadership with eldership. We become concerned when people refer to someone other than an elder as a leader. But the fact is there are leaders other than elders. Keep in mind the Biblical pattern. Elders have oversight over the whole congregation. They lead the entirety of the group according to Biblical mandates. But they develop others within the congregation to lead in specific areas. For instance, in **Acts 6:3**, the apostles appointed seven men, not to perform a task but to be in charge of the task.

III. Common obstacles for this kind of growth.

- A. One advantage the early churches had is they didn't carry any baggage from previous "church experiences." They were not bound by habits formed when they were "brought up in church." Nor were they bound by what they had always done. Nor were they gun-shy because of previous failed attempts. They had not developed comfort zones. So, they just did the work, and it worked. Christians in America, on the other hand, face all of these obstacles. We must determine that the souls of the lost in middle Tennessee are far more important than our comfort zones and habits. Allow me to share with you the comfort zone obstacles we face. When we know the obstacles, we can overcome them more readily.
- B. Comfort zone obstacle #1: Our comfort zone is for elders to be managers in the church. We don't feel comfortable asking them to step away from the role of managing and simply do the leading, setting the tone, casting the vision and establishing the guidelines. We want the elders to be directly involved in all decisions. We don't mind if elders delegate tasks, stipulating how to accomplish them. But we get nervous if they delegate responsibilities, simply telling somebody what the outcome needs to be and then setting them free to scripturally fulfill the responsibility.
- C. Comfort zone obstacle #2: We are comfortable when the "officers" do most of the work. We are comfortable when the preacher does most of the evangelism. We are comfortable when the elders do most of the leading, the caring for and serving of the members' spiritual needs. We are comfortable when the deacons accomplish all the maintenance and other functions. We get quite uncomfortable when they begin to ask us to do those things under their leadership. Two obstacles occur here. First, the preachers, elders or deacons are afraid they are not accomplishing their duties when they are doing more training of others and less of the work themselves. But, in fact, they are more than accomplishing their work. They are making sure the work is done now and establishing a perpetual pattern, seeing that the work will be accomplished even when they are gone. Secondly, the membership of the church wonders what is the point of appointing officers or paying preachers if they are not doing the work themselves. But, we must all remember **Ephesians 4:11-12**, recognizing that the work of officers in the church is not to do all the work, but to equip us to do the work together.
- D. Comfort zone obstacle #3: We are comfortable with one local full-time worker. We are uncomfortable if that one or the elders start talking about getting multiple full-time workers. That isn't done very often. We are afraid we will end up with the denominational "youth minister" program going. We wonder what on earth more than one preacher will do since he only has to preach twice a week anyway. Not to mention wondering how we are going to pay for it. However, the Biblical precedent is quite clearly multiple workers. The Jerusalem church began with 12 (**Acts 2**). Antioch, in **Acts 11:20-25** had more than one. By **Acts 13**, they had five. When the missionary journeys were accomplished, the evangelists always went out at least by twos (**Acts 13:2, et al**). We need to remember that an evangelist's job is not just to preach sermons. According to **Ephesians 4:11-12**, the evangelist's job is to equip the members to work. That might mean we even have full-time evangelists that rarely get any pulpit time.
- E. Comfort zone obstacle #4: We are comfortable when we can go to one man or group of men and have any question answered about any aspect of the practical working of the church. We are uncomfortable when we ask a preacher or an elder a question and he says to check with someone else. But after **Acts 6**, if someone came to the apostles asking a question about the ministrations of food to the widows, you can be sure they were directed to talk to Philip or Stephen or Nicanor. We are comfortable when we want something done in the church to be able to go the preacher or elders and ask them to do it and they do. We become uncomfortable if they say, "I don't have time for that. That is not my responsibility. You need to talk to _____."

But that is exactly what the apostles said in **Acts 6**. We must recognize that no one person or group can accomplish everything in the church or even know about everything that goes on. We must be willing to be told to see someone else without getting our feelings hurt.

- F. Comfort zone obstacle #5: We are comfortable depending on the collectivity to accomplish everything. We are uncomfortable being challenged to do it ourselves. We are comfortable when we can hire a preacher to conduct personal work programs. We are uncomfortable when we are asked to learn how to teach people ourselves. We are comfortable when we hire preachers to visit the sick and shut-in. We are uncomfortable when we are asked to visit them. We are comfortable when the church sets up a new converts' program. We are uncomfortable when we are challenged to study personally with new converts. We are comfortable when the church takes charge of some activity, because in the midst of the collectivity our personal responsibility is diminished. We are comfortable for the church to establish programs and to see to needs, because then a few volunteers do the work. And we can be satisfied that we attended, put some money in the plate and therefore were a part of the work. We are uncomfortable when challenged to sacrifice some of our personal time to do this work ourselves. We are uncomfortable when we recognize we may have to give up some TV time, the softball league or our second job for extra money. Frankly, this is one reason why so many churches give in to the pressures of a social gospel. People are much more comfortable when the church will sacrifice time and resources, hiring a "minister" to get teenagers together for a party or to host a family potluck than they are with having to do it themselves. We must never be more comfortable with that. No doubt, there are some programs that are scriptural for a church to operate and some that are not. But the comfort zone is the same. Of course, when it is unscriptural for the church to run some activity, we as individuals must do it. But even if there is a scriptural program in place, we as individuals must not be comfortable with the collectivity accomplishing everything. We must work ourselves.

Conclusion:

No matter in which comfort level you believe we are, our goal is to be what God has patterned in His word: A Bible Church. As demonstrated in this lesson, we are facing some obstacles. But we can do it. It is going to take a lot of prayer. It is going to take a lot of Bible study. It is going to take a lot of time together with one another. Most of all, it is going to take dedication to the fact that our comfort and conveniences are less important than the souls we will save by stepping out of our comfort zones. We have to have a hunger to save the lost. I believe we have it. I believe we will break these barriers and step into the level of church growth the Bible describes.