

Developing Ministry Teams

When we see a clergy person as "the" church leader we naturally have a ministry revolving around relationships with that leader. This limits the growth of the church because a limited number of people can relate with a single leader.

The challenges of church growth beyond a pastoral size of about 150 regular participants are well known.¹ Sociological research demonstrates growth barriers beyond 150 active participants. Malcolm Gladwell's rule of 150 as presented in The Tipping Point² shows that a relationship-oriented organization becomes unstable once it approaches 150 active participants. A rule of twelve suggests why this occurs. The rule of twelve provides that an individual can maintain up to twelve close personal relationships. Each of those twelve can themselves be close to twelve, so a total of 144 individuals can feel close because they have less than one degree of separation. Both theories suggest comfort with 150 active participants around a single leader.

Many churches attempt to cross this barrier by adding clergy. If the first leader appoints, and the church accepts the appointment of, associated leaders we see mathematical growth. Because each of the two clergy leaders share certain overlapping relationships, the church does not grow to $12 \times 12 \times 2 = 288$ as one might expect, but instead grows in a range from 192 to 240 active participants. With three leaders, the church tends to grow to about 300 active participants and continues to grow at slightly less than 100 with each addition of an associate leader.

This type of clergy centered growth presents challenges. Each of the seeming strengths of the church community also limits its growth. The closeness of family type relationships is comfortable to insiders and a barrier to outsiders. Clergy centeredness in pastoral care, worship, Bible studies and leadership limits development of everyone's gifts in the body of Christ. The church governing board generally focuses as an ad hoc committee on concrete, immediate problems – rather than having active structural decision-making and a big picture focus. A church with clergy conflict or departures may see a rapid loss of active participants whose relationships are centered in the clergy.

The heart of the answer to growth is not to add clergy or structures, though this will inevitably become necessary, but to become a multiple cell church. A multiple cell church is not focused on a single leader or group of leaders but on growing through ministry teams and small groups. When leadership is driven by ministry teams rather than a few individuals, discipleship is active. There is active discernment of call, for it is understood that all are gifted and all are called to use those gifts in ministry. A church begins a cultural shift from maintenance-oriented hierarchical thinking, to mission-oriented team driven thinking. Clergy may depart but the work of the church will go on and the church will continue to grow. The corollary to the rule of 150 and the rule of twelve is that a relationship building organization can grow almost limitlessly as long as all sub-relational groupings are themselves below 150.

¹ See, e.g., Arlin J. Rothage, Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry (New York: The Episcopal Church Center); Alice Mann, Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-To-Program Size Transition (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2001).

² Malcolm Gladwell, The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference (Back Bay Books, 2002).

In a multiple cell church, gifted and passionate ministry teams take care of functions such as evangelism, Christian formation, pastoral care, stewardship, outreach ministries, finance, and buildings and grounds. People understand their roles in terms of their ministry teams and small groups rather than in terms of their relationships to particular leaders. Decisions made by ministry teams are only reviewed by the church governing board in terms of the community's overall vision, not for approval. In this model, structures change and become more intentional, leadership roles are defined and boundaries are recognized, and more is expected of more people, so ministries expand.

The biggest challenge for the clergy and governing board is to empower, rather than control, ministry teams. Ministry teams are often ruined by having to spend too much time reporting. Committees report; teams do ministry. Once a team has its mission to accomplish, the governing board must give up control and let them work without trying to coordinate the team's activities. Pastors and staff do not need to go to team meetings unless they have something to contribute. The individuals gifted in the particular area will determine what is best. If they get in trouble or need help, they should let the governing board know and seek additional help or information. God can do amazing things through trusted ministry teams.

The governing board then has a broader role of discerning the vision toward which God is calling the community, articulating and communicating the vision, holding the community accountable for its realization of the vision and keeping the mission of the church clearly before the church community. The governing board needs to focus on its oversight and leadership of the spiritual development of the community – in evangelism, Christian formation and pastoral care – acknowledging its role as apostolic leaders (in the nature of Ephesians 4:11-12), its responsibility for equipping all members of the church for ministry and mission, for the work of the church. Part of this is looking for opportunities to share and delegate and to avoid over-functioning. Each leader has a role of identifying gifts and calling people into ministry.

For any living organism to grow (whether a tree, a human body or the church), structures must grow and change. We need to change form to change size. The best way to do this is by growing through gifted individuals in dedicated ministry teams. This also brings spiritual growth as we strengthen our relationships with God and help others do the same.