



# LEVELED OFF...

*Is Your Church Growing or  
Plateauing?*

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A CHURCH EXTENSION MINISTRIES RESOURCE

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## How to Use This Booklet

- This booklet is informational and to be used by the leaders in the church to evaluate the church's decline and/or plateau. *It is only a tool and not an offering of solutions.* In Revelation, Christ evaluated each church and offered unique solutions. The same is true today. Jesus Christ is the One who can offer the solutions for the church in your care. The leaders need to pray and seek the Lord for answers.
- Note the listed warning signs and reasons why churches plateau or are in decline. Do any of these exist in your church?
- Pass the booklet out to the leaders in the church. Then gather together to discuss what is relevant to your church.
- Pray and decide what things need to be addressed in your church and what can be done to change or tweak things.

## Introduction

Church “surveyors” estimate that between 65% and 85% of American churches are declining or plateaued. This booklet is focused on churches that are on a growth plateau but what is shared here is also helpful to churches in decline. The information here is especially drafted for Bible Fellowship Churches that are on a growth plateau and/or in decline.

Over a three-year span from 2016 - 2018, the five largest BFC churches with more than 500 in Sunday AM attendance experienced a collective loss in attendance of 127. One of these churches had no increase in attendance. Two had increases of 11 and 14 and two had decreases of 108 and 44.

**In other words, of the five largest BFC churches, two are in decline and three are plateaued.** *(Note: This analysis does not take into consideration today’s trend of part-time attendees. The national average for church attendance is 1.8 weeks per month).*

BFC church plants also experience a level of slow growth and/or plateauing. This is a concern since church plants need to add new attendees in order to reach the status of a particular BFC church.

**This booklet should not be seen as another “how to” book on church growth.** Rather, it is an assessment tool for pastors and leaders who want to know if their church is currently plateauing and in danger of declining. This booklet will examine the warning signs of plateaued growth. It will also delve into the reasons for plateaued growth and offers some solutions that may help the church grow again.

Also included in this booklet is a bibliography of some helpful books with key insights on turning plateauing or declining churches around. Some things you may not agree with, but all is worth thinking about.

**There have been a couple of success stories in Church Extension’s experience of working with churches that are plateaued or in decline.** Yet some churches never did turnaround even after significant time, energy, and resources were poured into the attempt to restore the church. However, do not lose hope!

The challenges that face a church seeking to move off a plateau are formidable but not hopeless.

In Gary McIntosh's book, *There's Hope for Your Church*, he concludes his preface with this forward thinking conclusion:

*So picture your church in the not-too-distant future. Imagine a gradually changing attitude reflecting a new sense of expectancy. Imagine people with a contagious enthusiasm for Christ and your church. Imagine classes pulsating with new life. Imagine a new spirit of hope in your church. Is it possible? The answer...a resounding yes! It is possible. Indeed, God very much wants to see it happen...There's hope for your church!"*

## Warning Signs of Plateauing

### **1. VOLUNTEER NUMBERS HAVE DECREASED OR STALLED**

Do you have fewer volunteers actively serving now than three months ago? If so, it may be time to focus on volunteer mobilization and recruitment.

Don't know how to recruit more volunteers? Does it feel like everyone already does too much? Try creating new volunteer opportunities or train those who are currently serving in how to oversee groups of volunteers.

### **2. YOU SPEND YOUR TIME PUTTING OUT FIRES RATHER THAN PLANNING FOR GROWTH**

Most people struggle to quantify this one, but in an average week, how much of your time do you spend planning versus putting out fires? Look for a general tone of tyranny of the urgent vs. careful thinking about ministry direction.

### **3. STAFF ARE LEAVING AND NOT DEVELOPING**

How long has it been since one of your staff members left? Do you develop your staff? Do your staff members develop and train volunteers?

For the overwhelming majority of churches, adding more and more staff members will not grow the ministry. Developing your staff and training your staff to develop your volunteers will position your ministry for growth.

### **4. FACILITY ISSUES ARE DISREGARDED TO HANDLE URGENT SHORTFALLS**

Have you noticed a few cracks in the wall in one of your buildings? Does your facility need some additional TLC?

A rundown facility often indicates a church or ministry that has plateaued, is in decline, or may soon begin to hit a church plateau.

### **5. THE CHURCH'S VISION LOOKS BACK MORE THAN IT LOOKS FORWARD**

When you talk about vision, do you primarily remind people of the past? Or do you paint a picture of a future that they haven't yet experienced?

Remember the past and thank God for what He has done, but don't let gratitude for the past usurp future vision clarity.

### **6. THE CHURCH'S CORE VALUES ARE MORE ASPIRATIONAL THAN ACTUAL**

Be careful with this one. Very few churches can truthfully say that all their values manifest as actual core values.

Do your core values reflect your present identity or what you aspire to become? A core value of evangelism comes to mind when I think of aspirational values. Many churches claim to value evangelism, but few of their main leaders shared their faith in the last year. I would call this an aspirational value.

Don't use this warning sign as an excuse to judge or criticize others. We all have values that are more actual and others that are more aspirational. As we help church leadership teams clarify their actual and aspirational values, we see excitement among the leadership as they uncover new areas of focus.

## **7. YOUNG FAMILIES SEEM TO FLOCK TO ANOTHER NEARBY CHURCH**

This painful warning light happens all the time. If you find yourself thinking, "why do all the young families go to *that* church?" then this warning sign likely applies to you.

## **8. EVALUATION IS PUSHED OFF TO THE FUTURE**

When your church focuses primarily on survival, evaluation gets pushed aside.

Evaluation and debriefing create a culture of excellence because ministry quality gets the attention it deserves.

## **9. THE CONCEPT OF SMALL GROUPS DOESN'T EXTEND BEYOND "SUNDAY SCHOOL"**

God is using thousands of Sunday School classes all over the world. This warning sign is not a call to eliminate Sunday School.

However, if the only context for community, spiritual growth, and service is through your Sunday morning Sunday School classes, you need to reassess your approach to community, discipleship, and service. Small groups held outside of Sunday mornings create an additional context for spiritual growth and guest assimilation. Small groups make the church a growing place that feels like family.

## **10. GUESTS ATTEND, BUT OFTEN DO NOT STAY**

Do you wonder why your guests continue to visit, but don't stick around? Plateaued churches battle this reality week in and week out. Set up a first impressions ministry that directly addresses guest assimilation. If you don't view your church through the eyes of a guest, your onboarding process will likely discourage them from deepening their involvement.

*from Aubrey Malphurs, The MalphursGroup*





## The Truth about Plateauing

### **1. Plateaus are natural.**

No need to freak out! Plateaus are just a state of little or no change. Everything stops growing at some point. It happens all of the time in nature. It shouldn't surprise us when it happens in our churches. *It will happen in our churches.* You can count on it.

### **2. God created every organism to have a maximum limit on its growth.**

Even redwood trees, which grow to 400 feet tall and live for 2,000 years, have a growth cap. Your church does, too. You can't use it as an excuse, though. You don't know what the limit for your church is.

### **3. The average church grows for 15 years, plateaus, and then eventually dies.**

Not every church does this. Some churches have a longer growth span. Others have a shorter one. But on average, a church will stop growing at 15 years old—unless renewal comes. This is just an average, of course. It doesn't mean *every* church will plateau at 15 years and then eventually die. With renewal, a church will grow.

### **4. Plateaus can happen anytime.**

You can plateau in year one of a church or year 40. You'll typically plateau multiple times in your church's history.

Churches often plateau at 75 and 150 people. The hardest plateau to overcome is usually 300. If you can get past 300 people, you'll likely have solved many of your most difficult problems. The larger your church gets, the easier it will get to break plateaus because you will have developed the skills needed through earlier growth and plateau cycles.

### **5. Some plateaus are uncontrollable.**

You may be the greatest leader since Abraham Lincoln and still go through a plateau. You simply can't control all of the factors that cause your church to stop growing. For instance, if you're in a typical small town and a large factory closes and the members move away, that's not your fault. You're not a failure. It's just a fact of life.

### **6. Plateaus can happen in one purpose while you're growing in the other purposes.**

According to Rick Warren's *Ministry Toolbox* there are five purposes of the church: worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and evangelism. You can certainly grow in one of those areas as you're plateauing in another. You could be bringing people in the front door but sending them out the back door. To be healthy, you need to do all of the purposes.

## **7. The longer a church is plateaued, the more energy it takes to get it growing again.**

It's a matter of momentum. It's clearly easier to keep an active object moving than to get a static object to move. If your church hasn't grown for the past six months, or a year, you'll have challenges as you try to restart growth. If it has been five years, you'll have a bigger challenge. If your church has been plateaued for 20 years, you'll have a real problem. It's not impossible though. With God's help, you can break through it.

## **8. Some plateaus are actually seasons.**

Every church goes through seasons in its life. Everything grows during springtime. You start harvesting in the fall. Then winter comes along. It's cold. It's dark. The days are shorter.

Your ministry may be in the winter right now. Hang on. Springtime's coming. It may be just a season.

## **9. A plateau doesn't have to be a dead end! It can be a gateway to the next level.**

Growing churches have figured out how to break through the inevitable growth barriers that come along. You can break them, too. Often, once you break through, you'll experience a new season of growth.

Rick Warren says this at Saddleback Church. The church hit a plateau between 2005 and 2010, so they made some structural changes. The pastor learned some new skills and they started growing again.

God will finish what he started in your church. It's what he does. Just remind yourself of Philippians 1:6: *"I am sure that God, who began this good work in you, will carry it on until it is finished on the Day of Christ Jesus"* (GNT).

*[10 Reasons Churches Plateau](#), by [Pastor Rick Warren](#), from [Pastors.com](#).*

## Reasons Why Your Church May Be Plateauing

### **1. There is insufficient attention to leader apprenticing and leader development.**

This pertains to both staff members of the church and lay leaders. If the staff are unable or unwilling to grow their ministry teams, the church will not grow.

### **2. There is no accountability for the leaders.**

For example, a small group leader should be accountable to someone to make sure anyone in his or her group is contacted if they miss consecutive weeks.

### **3. There is insufficient physical space.**

Statistics show that your main worship room is full when it is at 80 percent capacity at the prime worship hours. Your nursery or children's classes will also need sufficient space. In a young church, overcrowding in the nursery rooms alone can slow down the growth of the entire church. Also, don't forget the parking lot! There needs to be enough room for everyone to park.

### **4. There is inadequate leader capacity for Sunday morning children's ministry.**

Even if there is physical space for the children, if there are not enough leaders, the church will not grow. This issue goes back to leadership training and development.

### **5. Small groups are not a priority.**

Your church may be plateauing if you don't have new groups starting in order to involve new people. Those in small groups are five times more likely to be active in the church than those who attend worship services alone.

### **6. There is a pastoral turn-over.**

Stable pastoral tenure is a critical piece for growing ministry. Young church participants are more likely to fall out of participation during pastoral transition today than in years past.

### **7. There is inadequate follow up with worship guests and regular attenders.**

Most seminaries teach absolutely nothing about this. Pastors ten years out of school are utterly clueless that you have to follow up with visitors in order to grow a church. Follow up is important for regular attenders as well. For example, one church contacts anyone that has missed small group for two

consecutive weeks. This contact will show the attender that you care and will give insights into pastoral needs and hurts before the attender drops out of church life. This system needs to be put in place on the organizational level. It's not enough to just hope someone will pick up the phone and call.

**8. The preaching and teaching is not Biblical, relevant, and challenging.**

This applies to the pastors and the lay leaders teaching the various classes at all age levels. Teacher training needs to be a part of developing the leaders in the church—staff and lay leaders, men and women.

**9. The organization and functions of the church are not done with excellence.**

This includes keeping good records of worship service and small group attendance. When you have this data, you will be able to recognize an attendance problem in time to take action.

**10. The church is not organizationally a high expectation church. The best way to address member expectations is through a required new members' class.**

[www.thomrainer.com](http://www.thomrainer.com) - April, 2015  
[paulnixonepicentergroup.blogspot.com](http://paulnixonepicentergroup.blogspot.com) July 26, 2018

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**Which of these reasons is true of your church?**

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## Stop Plateauing and Start Growing

### Start with Prayer

In the Bible, all movements forward began with **prayer**. This is true whether the movement was growth, restoration, or spiritual revival.

Consider Nehemiah's lament over the condition of God's people when they returned to their homeland. Note how Nehemiah reacted (Neh. 1:3-6):

*They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire."*

*When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. I said, "I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant."*

When Paul wanted "open doors" to spread the Gospel and expand the Church, he asked for believers to pray (Colossians 4:2-3):

*Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ*

### Take Action through Change

Next, if a church is to move forward and off its plateau it will need to go from its knees to its feet and hands and **take action**. In many cases this means change.

Change evokes fear and anxiety. It's hard to admit that maybe we have been doing things that aren't working and have put us on this current plateau. Anxiety comes when we have to admit we were wrong even though we thought we made a good decision at the time.

**In essence Christianity is all about change. Repentance turns us completely from a wrong direction to the right way. Sanctification is a progressive process of change and becoming more like Christ. The transformation of our mind is the result of obedient study and applying the Word. The result is a new man.**

## How can you lead your church through change?

Here are *8 Stages of Leading Good Change in the Church*, from Eric Geiger, LifeWay, that are interesting points to consider:

### 1. Stop to pray.

You are reading this because you either want to lead change or be a part of leading change. But leaders tend to want to see tangible results right away. That might be the biggest mistake you could make. Leading change begins in the power and strength of God. Pray for God's wisdom, God's courage, and God's strength. Pray for the congregation, and pray for those who oppose and criticize you.

### 2. Confront and communicate a sense of urgency.

We must face and share the brutal facts with the congregation. Many church members don't see the need to make changes because they don't see reality. They don't see the decline, the worn facilities, or that the church is not reaching unbelievers as it once did. You have to lead the congregation to face reality, communicate that reality, and communicate a sense of urgency. We must remind people again and again that John 14:6 is true, that Christ is the only way of salvation.

### 3. Build an eager coalition.

We can't lead change on our own. Lone Ranger leaders only have one opinion: their own. And if they start having challenges and problems, they have no one to turn to. Gather a coalition and meet with them to get their buy-in for the impending change. Do not merely form a committee or task force, but strategically include the right people, taking into consideration chemistry, position, influence, expertise, and leadership.

### 4. Become a voice and vision of hope.

Change agents are agents of hope. Leaders who embody hope in their churches have three clearly defined traits:

- They read their Bibles daily.
- They choose to communicate hope.
- They look for low-hanging fruit, seeking and celebrating even small victories in their church.

### 5. Deal with people issues.

Change is all about people, so leaders must have the courage to handle "people issues." This requires loving people, expecting opposition, building a team of like-minded leaders in your church, leading change one step at a time, not delaying difficult decisions, expecting some people to leave, and lots of prayer.

## **6. Move from an inward focus to an outward focus.**

A church begins with a desire to reach its community with an urgency to get the message of the gospel and the new church to those in the community. Over time, the efforts of the church move inward. Most of the ministry, financial resources, and leadership time are for the members. The church that just a few years earlier proclaimed the Great Commission is now focused on the great comfort. Change will require intentionally outward focused movement.

## **7. Pick low-hanging fruit.**

Small change victories are necessary to sustain positive momentum toward larger change. Picking low-hanging fruit demonstrates the change direction is worth it, affirms the change leader, clarifies strategies and tactics, overcomes resistance, and builds momentum toward the larger change.

## **8. Implement and consolidate change.**

Implementing and consolidating change requires over-communication, transparency, dealing with success, dealing with dissenters, and dealing with complacency.

Many of our congregations need to change in one area or another. It can seem impossible or overwhelming. But our churches need courageous leaders. The first step is to pray for God's wisdom, courage, and strength. No matter the circumstance, that is a right place to begin, so let's start there now.

The next foundational principle after prayer and taking action through change is *faith and trust*.

## **Faith and Trust**

Although this is listed third in the process, having faith to see God work and grow the church is essential from beginning to end.

**No effort to grow the church will succeed if it doesn't begin and continue with faith; believing that the Lord will empower the prayers and the actions taken to move from plateau to growth.**

*"So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17).*

Faith is intrinsically established and sourced by the Bible. We don't conjure up faith through some emotional subjective means but rather by the objective preaching and teaching of God's Word. The efficacious faith that saves sinners is a result of the elect hearing the Word of God (The Gospel), the Holy Spirit convicting and regenerating the dead sinner, and the sinner crying out for salvation. Faith then grows in Christians as they remain in His Word seeking to know Him through study and hearing the preaching and teaching of His Word.

With this in mind it is essential that a church seeking to move off a plateau and grow evaluates its preaching and teaching. Is the church's focus and faith in the preaching and teaching of the Word? Does it do its work of equipping its people to do the work of ministry in and beyond the doors of the church?

The first church in Jerusalem gives credence to the idea that church growth comes by means of prayer and action and is empowered by a growing faith that is grounded in the preaching and teaching of God's Word (Acts 2:42-47):

*They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*

*Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

**In summary we must determine that if a church is to move off its plateau and grow it must *prioritize prayer*. It must also *equip the church to change and empower the church through a revitalized dependency on the Word of God*.**



## How Pastors & Leaders Can Counter Plateauing

How does a church move off a plateau and begin a pattern of growth? This is one of the main questions being considered in this informational manual. The answer to the question begins with the leadership in the church. Leaders must lead the revitalization process and this means a willingness to follow whatever the Lord may ask the leaders to do even if it means change, sacrifice, and refocusing the church's mission and vision.

Here are "*Eight Common Characteristics of Successful Church Revitalizations*" from Thom Ranier, [www.thomrainer.com](http://www.thomrainer.com), May 11, 2015:

1. **The pastor formed an alliance of key influencers in the church.** This group is not informal, nor is it closed to others. It begins when the pastor identifies those in the church whose voices are most effective in leading others toward change. I cannot remember a revitalization effort that succeeded without an alliance.
2. **The alliance of influencers recognized the need for church revitalization and made a commitment to pray for it daily.** Please don't let the last part of the preceding sentence escape your notice. Each of the influencers committed to daily prayer for revitalization. They realized it could not take place in their power alone.
3. **The leaders and a growing number in the congregation made a commitment to move the church to look more like the community.** Such a commitment naturally involves an outward focus, because declining churches are not reaching all segments of their communities. The leadership within the church begins to look at the demographics of their community. They are willing to face reality only where the church is falling short.
4. **The church began to confront the issue of sacred cows.** I know of one church that had a two-hour "town hall" meeting of the members of the congregation. The leaders made a list of every preference and church activity they could recall. For example, one of the items on the list was "11 am worship." They then labeled each activity as either biblically essential, contextual, or traditional.
5. **The leadership began to work with the congregation to form a clear and compelling vision.** One church, an all Anglo congregation, cast a vision to have 20 percent Hispanics in the worship attendance in one year because the community was 40 percent Hispanic. They did not reach 20 percent in year one, but they did in year two.



## A Brief Suggested Strategy

- ✓ Using the assessment lists in this manual, the Pastors and Elders determine if the church is in decline or on a plateau. If so, they must also decide whether or not they will commit to revitalization.
- ✓ A “*Prayer Team*” is commissioned to strategize how to move ALL the church to pray for revitalization
- ✓ A “*Growth Team*” is organized. The Team will need to learn about church revitalization, do a church analysis seeking to learn the reasons for the plateauing or decline, and then formulate a plan to present to the Elders for consideration. Change and how to lead the congregation through change is key! Outside assistance can be used for the church analysis i.e. NCD (Natural Church Development) or The Unstuck Group.
- ✓ A “*Demographic Team*” could be organized to do a current demographic survey of the ministry target site using Church Extension’s “*Demographic Survey Manual.*”

These teams may be able to give the church the needed information to move forward with a strategy for growth and revitalization. Much can be gleaned from this booklet regarding how to develop a plan, but it may also be helpful to have a revitalization consultant meet with the Elders to discuss a strategy.

## Resources

**There's Hope for Your Church: First Steps to Restoring Health and Growth**

Gary L. McIntosh

**The Unstuck Church: Equipping Churches to Experience Sustained Health**

Tony Morgan

**Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can, Too**

Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson

**Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You Here Won't Get You There**

Gary L. McIntosh

**Turn-Around Churches How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and bring New Life to an Established Church**

George Barna

**The Turnaround Church: Inspiration and Tools for Life-Sustaining Change**

Mary Louise Gifford

**Leading Turnaround Churches**

Gene Wood, Kimberly Miller, et al.

**Turnaround Pastor**

Donald Ross

**Revitalize Your Church: A Biblical Blueprint for Church Turnaround**

Dan Eymann

**Can These Bones Live: A Practical Guide to Church Revitalization**

Bill Henard

**Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again**

Andrew M. Davis

**Nine Marks of a Healthy Church (3rd Edition) (9Marks)**

Mark Dever

**Becoming a Healthy Church: Ten Traits of a Vital Ministry**

Stephen A. Macchia

**Who Moved My Pulpit?: Leading Change in the Church**

Thom S. Rainer

**The U-Turn Church: New Direction for Health and Growth**

Kevin G. Harney