

Staying Small on Purpose

The longtime church member calmly stated, "I can't say that our lack of growth bothers me. I remember how it was ten or twelve years ago when we had visitors and new members flocking in here. We had to go to two services on Sunday morning and it was hectic. The music and several other things were changed as well. Now that we have been able to go back to one service, and there are very few new people, things have slowed down, and I am able to know everyone who comes. Things are just more comfortable now like they used to be."

This gentleman reflects an all too common attitude among many church members today. Because visitors and new members are viewed as a source of discomfort, witnessing, and outreach become unnecessary. Growth will only lead to a disrupting of the safe, predictable traditions that make our church more like an exclusive club and a place of social safety. Visitors are ignored and allowed to feel unwelcome if they do dare to venture in on their own. Conversations, committees, and business meetings are filled with discussions of ways to keep things the way they always have been as the congregation ages and marches toward death together. Meanwhile, the younger generation avoids the church and even the members' children and grandchildren attend elsewhere or have left religion altogether.

Churches and members like the one described here seem to be almost "Staying Small on Purpose". If so, what is it that leads to this becoming the purpose of a congregation? The rest of this ministry monograph lists some of the causes of the stay-small DNA that courses through the veins of too many Evangelical churches today. These can serve as diagnostic tools to evaluate the direction of our church as well.

- **Unchallenged Sin**
As Joshua learned after the battle of Jericho and the defeat at the little town of Ai, God will not bless a people who harbor willful sin. Sometimes this sin rests within individuals through their attitudes or deeds, and sometimes it can be a corporate selfishness shared by the body as the members think they own and control their church. This attitude gets lived out in church decisions that ignore or disobey the Great Commission of outreach and growth for the church.
- **Short Term Pastors**
Church growth requires confidence and trust in pastoral leadership. It is very difficult to lead a church into dynamic growth in 2-3 years. Mobilizing people to make changes, take social risks, and reach people for Christ takes time. Short term pastors do not have enough time for the leadership process to be worked out and leadership credibility earned. Consequently, there will be a tendency to resist changes that are necessary to grow.
- **Bureaucracy Build-Up**
When a church has experienced either (or both) unchallenged sin or a series of short term pastors, they can enter into the process of amending their constitution and practice to give greater authority and responsibility to boards and committees. Refuge is taken in more group decision making in order to try to prevent individual leaders from disappointing or misusing the church again. In practice however, the bureaucracy build-up usually creates more frustration, strife, and a slowed response to opportunities to grow. Consequently, the church may feel safer in maintaining the status quo, but eventually shrink in size.
- **Fearing the Past Rather than Trusting God**
Fearing the past and potential repeated failure can keep a church immobilized and small for generations. Budget planning is usually done on the basis of what came in the last year. New outreach ideas and changes are not attempted because of fear. Since God has not given us a "spirit of fear", a church needs to pray for God's power to defeat that fear and move forward.
- **A Failure to Plan Strategically**
If a church's vision has been reduced to maintaining things as they are or simply survival, outreach, and growth seldom become a priority nor are planned for. Churches who do have a strategic plan and are reaching growth goals are often viewed with suspicion or rejection by the "Staying Small on Purpose" churches.
- **Prayer for the Medical and Material**
The weekly prayer sheets of a "Staying Small on Purpose" church will usually be dominated by requests for physical healing, the earthly challenges of life, or the gaining of financial security and safety in decisions. Prayer requests for visitors, lost people, or those witnessing to them are usually found in very small quantities and sometimes not at all. The purpose of prayer becomes safety and security for the lives of the Christian members.

- **Not Understanding God's Purpose for the Church**

Jesus said that He would build His church (Matt. 16:18), His followers would populate it by making disciples from the lost (Matt. 28:18-20) and that a major purpose of the coming of the Holy Spirit was to mobilize and enable believers to spread the Gospel (Acts 1:8). This pattern was then demonstrated and experienced throughout the book of Acts. Churches that seem to be "Staying Small on Purpose" are churches that live and operate while ignoring God's purpose of outreach and growth.

This very brief account of a pervasive pattern among Evangelical churches today is offered as not only a reminder of what can happen to a church that starts well, but also as a tool for use. These seven characteristics can be used to evaluate a church to see if it is on its way to "Staying Small on Purpose". There are legitimate reasons why churches may be small in a certain context or period in their development. But the scary thing is to realize that my mature church may actually have the attitudes and actions that will keep it from growing "on Purpose".

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