

Want to grow your church? Watch out for these pitfalls, Part 1

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One of the most discussed and analyzed trends within the American church has been the steady decline in church attendance.

One [Gallup study](#) compared church involvement between 1998 to 2000 to church involvement between 2016 to 2018. The study found church attendance decreased across every age group, and overall church attendance decreased 20 percentage points “since 1999 [with] more than half of that change occurring since [2010].”

Other research confirms Gallup’s findings. A [Pew Research Center study](#) found in 2009, 52 percent of Americans said they attended a church service at least once or twice a month. In 2019, that number fell to 45 percent.

Declines also have been seen among Baptists. A [June 2020 report](#) from the Southern Baptist Convention disclosed a 2 percent loss in membership and a 4 percent loss in baptisms over the previous year. The 2 percent drop in membership represents 288,000 individuals.

This stagnation and decline have led to a plurality of church growth books, programs and conferences. These resources are well-intentioned. Every pastor and church member desires for the church to grow as the message of the gospel is proclaimed throughout the world, as well as for his or her local church to grow as the gospel spreads within the local community.

However, one question we must ask is: Should we try anything and everything in order to produce growth? Or are there dangers and pitfalls

we need to watch out for?

Pitfalls of church growth

Let's examine seven pitfalls of church growth based on the seven pitfalls to sustainable growth within companies outlined by Bill George in his book on corporate leadership titled [*Authentic Leadership*](#).

Admittedly, we must be cautious about making parallels between the principles of a profitable business and the principles of a healthy church. Arthur Boers urges us in his book *Servants and Fools: A Biblical Theology of Leadership* to be cautious in this area, while admitting "there is much to learn from the business world, even matters we had *better* learn."

We want to listen to George, a Christian writing to business leaders, and hear what principles he has for the church.

1. Lack of a clear mission

George says, "The most frequent reason companies get into trouble is trying to grow without a well-understood mission."

Without a properly defined and understood mission, companies eventually cease to exist. The company may still have a building, employees and a product, but it has no purpose and therefore no clarity about "what [the] company stands for or where it is going."

When a company has no clarity about its purpose, leaders have no guiding principles for how decisions are made. They end up navigating aimlessly until employees, customers or shareholders give up and leave to seek the missing mission.

As Christians and church leaders, we should understand this longing for

mission, because as Scott Sunquist wrote in *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory*, mission “is from the heart of God.” Mission is a part of God’s character, and as human beings created in the image of God, we know we are drawn to work bigger than ourselves.

Just like some companies, churches can lack a clear mission. In one sense, the mission of every church is the same. It is what we read in Matthew 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8.

Churches become aimless in carrying out their biblical mission when they fail to contextualize the biblical mission to their local situation. In other words, they fail to localize the Great Commission.

To localize and contextualize involves our churches asking a few basic, yet vital questions: Who constitutes my local community? What are their spiritual needs? What can our church do to engage them with the gospel in images and with a language they understand?

2. Understanding your core business

The second pitfall George outlines that stunts growth in corporations is “underestimating the growth potential of your primary business.” When a company’s market share in a particular product begins to stagnate or decline, many see this as a sign the company must transition to another product to maintain profitability.

Instead of abandoning the core business, George encourages corporate leaders to think creatively to find growth opportunities within their core business.

The core business of the church, given by Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20, is to make disciples. Dallas Willard defines discipleship as becoming “apprentices [of Jesus] in eternal living.”

Making disciples—or apprentices of Jesus—involves adding new believers to the church and helping current believers grow in maturity. In the same way companies move on to new products if they see their market share stagnate or decline, church leaders will abandon unfruitful evangelism and discipleship efforts and seek another product to offer.

Churches may turn their attention to the products of worship music, building aesthetics or promotional gimmicks. If, however, we see discipleship as developing apprentices of Jesus, we never can cease or transition from that core business. Church leaders must become creative in ways to promote growth within all parts of the body.

3. Depending on a single product line

As dangerous as abandoning its core business can be to a company, companies also can be “so invested in the success of their core business that they allocate no funds to creating new businesses.”

When a product’s market share stagnates or declines, George calls for creativity in order to find new markets for the product. The reality, however, is the business still must be financially viable. If a company has no other products “when the slowdown occurs, it is too late to broaden their strategy, and they are forced to curtail investments in order to survive.”

For most churches, the product requiring the most time, money and energy is the Sunday morning worship service. Though our core business is making disciples, in practical terms, the Sunday morning worship service often takes its place.

The worship service becomes the single product line church leaders believe will bring growth to the church. When this fails or ceases to produce the expected results, churches have too much invested in this one product line

to broaden their strategy.

Church leaders must understand two truths. First, the church is called to make disciples. That is our calling and our assignment. Second, discipleship involves a wholistic strategy.

A holistic discipleship strategy involves building discipling relationships. Those relationships simply cannot be built within in the “single product line” of the Sunday morning worship service.

We will look at the remaining four pitfalls in [Part 2](#).

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