

Ten common barriers to growing your church

by Rick Warren

*This article is adapted from the **Purpose-Driven® Church Seminar**.*

For almost thirty years I've been a student of church growth, and I've noticed there are ten common obstacles to growing a healthy, vibrant church.

1. Not bringing friends to church

We pray, we ask, we pressure, we motivate, we emphasize, but members still don't bring friends to church. Why? Often, the truth is they're embarrassed. They instinctively know that the services are not designed for unbelievers, for seekers, for the people they know from work. They're thinking, "The weekend service meets my needs, but it doesn't meet my neighbor's needs, and so I won't ask them to come."

The **antidote** to this is to offer at least one service on the weekends designed with unchurched friends in mind.

2. Fearing growth will ruin the fellowship

Even though your members may not say this, some of them will subtly fight growth because they fear that when the congregation gets bigger, they won't know everybody anymore. So they say, "I like the way it is; I know everybody. If we get bigger, I'm afraid I'll just become a number."

The **antidote** to this fear is building affinity groups or small groups within your congregation. At Saddleback we say it this way: our church must grow larger and smaller at the same time.

3. Clinging rigidly to tradition

Traditions are actually rooted in success. Something becomes a tradition because it works in the first place. And because it works, we repeat it over and over again.

Unfortunately, the tradition then begins to drive us. There are two dangers with traditionalism. The first danger is when we make the methods sacred. The second danger is when we forget why we do things.

The **antidote**: Become purpose-driven. Your purposes will never change; they are eternal. But your methodology will need to be ever-changing.

I suggest you periodically review – at least once a year – all your programs and then assign them to one of three options:

- 1. Reaffirm it** – *yes, it's still working.*
- 2. Refine it** – *we need to tweak it so it will become more effective.*
- 3. Replace it** – *You can't use yesterday's tool in today's ministry to meet tomorrow's challenge.*

4. Trying to appeal to everybody

You cannot appeal to everybody. It simply won't work. If a radio station in your community played Bach, followed by the Beatles, followed by a Polka song, do you

think it would please everybody or actually please no one? Radio stations niche because they understand people are attracted by different styles.

Now, I'm not talking about presenting a different Gospel; what I'm saying is define your target (the **antidote** to this barrier) and then do everything you can to hit that target.

5. Being program-oriented rather than process-oriented

Having a lot of programs can look impressive, but unless you have a specific plan for helping your members grow, they can end up just attending a lot of classes. I believe this is part of why we have people in our churches who have been members for years, yet they show little fruit in their lives.

The **antidote** is to use a life development process, similar to the one we use at Saddleback. We use a baseball diamond to illustrate the process of our members growing deeper in faith, encouraging them to move around the bases as they move toward greater maturity. You don't have to use Saddleback's model, but it has proved successful for twenty years.

6. Emphasizing meetings rather than ministry

In my opinion, you're making a mistake when your number one measurement for health is attendance. If the only thing you ever talk about is how many people you have in attendance, then, frankly, you're a meeting-focused church. Yes, attendance is one of many measurements to use, but it should NEVER be the only one. For one thing, focusing on meetings tends to produce passive spectators who have little time for ministry.

The **antidote**: Turn everyone of your members into a minister. We don't need more meetings; we need to meet more needs!

7. Preaching without application

Preaching without application merely informs rather than transforms.

The **antidote** is what I call behavioral preaching. This is preaching that focuses on obedience. The Bible tells us to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. In every weekend message, and in every Bible study group, and in every Sunday school session, moving people into doing ministry should be the bottom line – what are we going to do as a result of what we heard.

8. Not trusting the leaders

If people don't trust your leadership, then you won't accomplish much at all. You have to build credibility, and you have to earn the right to lead.

The **antidote** to this barrier is authentic leadership. This means leadership that is humble, vulnerable, persistent, willing to risk failure – and willing to believe God for great things.

9. Legalism

Legalism strangles the growth and the health of a lot of churches. Many churches are more interested in keeping rules than they are at winning people to Christ. This will inevitably kill any growth you've gained.

The **antidote** to this barrier is a climate of acceptance, which meets people where they are and where you want them to be. By meeting them where they are, you can eventually lead them to where they need to be.

10. Being structured for control rather than for growth

Many churches today are over-programmed and over-structured, and the structure is strangling them to death.

The **antidote** here is to keep the structure simple, flexible, and ready to meet the all the challenges that the future may hold.