



GROWING PAST THE 200

ATTENDANCE ROADBLOCK

(What you didn't know)



SOLUTION GUIDE

The ministry ideas, how to's, tips and advice you need to Step over the 200 attendance mindset. PLUS... how our software, RealM®, can help you achieve this ministry goal.

If this is the first resource you've consumed aimed at boosting your church attendance beyond the mythical 200 person barrier, then you've missed a lot. Every other writer, blogger, pastor, and company selling church resources has written something about it. And many have provided solutions.

The reason for this guide is not to disagree with what's come before it - most of the commonly accepted "systems" are good and fruitful. Nor is this guide positioned to be another echo in a ministry landscape of banging gongs.

This guide has been created to help you find what works for you, knowing that every church context is different, every culture nuanced, and outcomes vary widely.

Too many ministry leaders and pastors get discouraged when their formula doesn't work or when their expectations fall flat. They start to wonder, "What's wrong with this plan?", "What's wrong with these people?", and sometimes, "What's wrong with ME?"

Growing your church past 200 has more to do with a mindset than a method. This guide will explore how to develop a churchwide mindset as a foundation for growth.

Let's start by establishing some common values:

1. **Surpassing 200 in weekly attendance does not mean your church is healthy.**
2. **Many smaller churches meet needs more efficiently than bigger churches.**
3. **And yet, healthy things should be growing things.**
4. **Growth fuels fruitfulness.**
5. **The numbers matter.**

That last one needs some clarification. OUR arbitrary expectations for certain numbers do NOT matter. But God's desire that we would reach more people should compel us to reach as many as possible, leading to growth. In that context, numbers matter because every number represents a name and every name matters to God.



So what's with the 200 barrier?

Statistics show that 90% of churches never get past a very elastic 200 (or so) barrier between 150-350 people. For some reason, 200 seems to be the agreed upon magic number. “They” say that once you get past 200, it’s easier to grow; economies of scale, shared resources, stuff like that. The point is, 200 isn’t a magic number. What’s more important is the barrier that comes with moving past a certain way of doing things and moving on to a new way of doing things.

If your church is small, you run it like a small organization. For it to be big, you have to run it like a big organization. MUCH has been written on how to run your church like a big, successful, well-oiled machine that is poised for growth. So we’ll skip that part.

For all “their” posturing and presuppositions, - most with amazing insights and tools and resources to help your church grow - the majority of people who’ve tackled this topic miss (or pay little attention to) the biggest barrier of all: your church mindset.



Mostly a Mindset

From my experience in growing our church (just) past 200, and after consuming dozens of books and blog posts - and even paid courses - on the topic of the 200 growth barrier, I've found that all the good advice in the world won't move your church if it's not ready to move.

Romans 12 tells us that we are transformed by a renewed mind. In other words, **change requires a shift in thinking**. Before you can implement x, y, and z systems and strategies, **you have to get your church thinking differently about growth**. Chances are, many of your people came to your church because it was small.

I used to cringe when new people would tell me that they “loved how small the church is.”

Nonetheless, they were zeroing in on a key obstacle to church growth, a small ministry mentality. This mentality tells people that smaller is comfortable, low performance is acceptable, and it's better to be cute and cuddly than bold and dynamic, metaphorically speaking.

If you're going to get your church thinking that growth is good and reassure them that you can scale community and relationship even while you're growing, you have to cast a compelling vision that includes them in the story, providing safety and a shared future.

Implementing whatever you need is infinitely easier once your people believe that the things they love most about a small church won't disappear, that there is room for them in the new world, and that they just might have a bigger purpose and role, even if it means changing positions or stepping down. The key here: cast vision well, create buy-in, and eliminate the obstacles to change.



Vision

The lead pastor (or pastoral team) is the chief standard-bearer when it comes to casting the vision for your mission, values, and culture. However, vision must be cast, not kept. You can't just think about it and mention it in an email from time to time. Even more important, you can't be the only one talking about it. Entrust it to your team and let them get it out there for all to see.



To cast vision so thoroughly that it changes the hearts and minds of onlookers, you must:

- **Phrase it succinctly, in a memorable way.**
“Life. Change. In Christ.” instead of “We want to see people be changed as they live their lives for Christ in this community.”
- **Explain it to your leaders, teams, volunteers, and members.**
- **Teach on it biblically. If your vision isn't rooted in Scripture, it stinks. Since it is rooted in Scripture, use that Scripture to reinforce the vision publically.**
- **Highlight the vision in action. Share real stories of how your intent is coming to pass in the lives of your members.**
- **Reinforce it with examples, in messages, during groups, and on your website.**

Talking about the vision, mission, values, and culture of your church should become so second nature that it starts to create language at your church. Before you know it, everyone will be talking about how this church is all about x, y, and z.

Buy-In

Doing connects hearing to the heart. A great way to reinforce the vision you're casting is to get people to actually do what you're talking about, together. And let them know, through no uncertain terms, that they are living out the vision in real time.

If your vision is to impact the city by forming relationships with the homeless, then cast the vision, teach on it, explain it, get your leaders in on it, then plan an event where you actually go out and connect with the homeless people in your area. While you're at it, film a video explaining how you're fulfilling the vision of the church.

Once people start participating in the vision, casting it becomes easier, and a cycle begins to take root.

Next thing you know, your biggest job will be curating and refining the vision that's taken flight. And then, you have buy-in: people sold out for the vision because they've lived and seen the fruit that it produces.



Obstacles

You know the Enemy isn't going to let you start your church on fire without a fight. There will be mentalities, perspectives, experiences, history, and ornery people that will pull out all the stops to get in the way of the mindset momentum your vision is creating. Here's how to deal with a few of them:

- **Small-minded people** - Give them a chance to come around by explaining from the Scriptures and real life examples why the vision holds merit. This is Church, after all. You have a duty to edify and exhort. But... If they insist on bad theology that causes division and stagnation, let them know they can stay and keep quiet, or find a church that better suits their expectations. You'll lose some people over this; be okay with that.
- **Past failures** - Many of your people will remember the last thing you tried that failed. "Why should this be different?" they'll ask... with merit. People don't want to invest in something they think is destined for doom. So, address past failures in straightforward fashion. Admit to what hasn't worked, then highlight why this will work. But more importantly, why this matters. It's not just about a new way of doing things, it's about holding new values for a higher calling. Be willing to eat some humble pie but don't let it hush your appetite for moving forward.
- **Well-intentioned "alternative facts"** - Some people will just disagree with your perspective. It won't be the first time it's happened in the Church. Take a moment to hear them out. Honor their commitment to the church by taking the time to actually listen. Then pray about it. Sometimes, even if they are wrong, they can bring up a new thought that might help refine the vision. I'll give you an example:

Our follow-up process used to be (like every other church since 1985) called "assimilation." We were making some changes to improve our assimilation track when a new team member said that word was "harsh." I thought she meant that it was too "businessy." But she meant it was offensive because of the connotation it held for Native Americans. I rebutted that our use of the word was simply to indicate assimilation into our church culture. She pushed back. After thinking about it for a day or two, I realized that one of our values is to remove barriers for people coming to Christ, even if it's just what I consider to be semantics. A new name was proposed, "Belonging," which fit way more with our culture anyway. It had the added benefit of better branding and name recognition. So, while I still don't fully "agree" with her position, changing mine was the better move. Which brings me to another tip...





***Letting people shape
the peripherals helps
create buy-in and
ownership of the vision.***

Look, it's not easy to change a mindset that's been ingrained for years or even decades. But we serve a God who's in the change business. In fact the life He's responsible for creating has one constant, change. Embrace it, and help your people embrace it by providing ample amounts of grace, lots of humility, and a deep conviction that the vision God has given your church needs to be promoted, defended, refined, and lived out to the fullest.

More than a Mindset

Despite the obstacles, most people in your church are in favor of growth, and they want to see the ministry flourish. However, many are afraid of what change might bring. They aren't sure where they'll fit or if the things they really like will be cancelled or morphed beyond recognition.

Providing good systems to support a new mindset is critical for helping change take root and have positive effects.

Again, much has been written on “how” to do all the following. I'll let you do your own research with this encouragement: do what works for you and supports your values. Even more, do something that can be supported by your values. Don't try to be a media-driven church if potlucks are your thing. And don't try to be “intimate” if theatrics are where you shine. Find your unique calling, then answer the “why” of what you'll do to determine the “how.”



Structure

People want to know where they fit in, who can help them, where to find information, and how things will get done. Creating a good organism chart (remember the church is a body, not a business) that lays out the teams, boards, leaders, and ministry areas of your church will help everyone - especially your leadership team - understand what makes up your Body.



Providing a visual representation of who you are provides opportunity for talking points, reinforcing the vision, and a way for everyone to understand who's doing what and why.

In addition to providing role descriptions, provide ministry descriptions that tell the “why” behind all the “what” that you do. Why does the greeting team do x, y, and z? Why is it important? This kind of definition of your structure will help people believe that it has purpose, that what you’re building matters, and is properly formed to get the job done.

Training

Expectations can be a real let down. But not having expectations leaves people in the ditch. Your teams - leaders, staff, and volunteers - want to know what’s expected of them. Chances are, what you’re expecting of them is either new to them or a new way of doing things. Regardless of how confident they seem, they want direction. Why? Because they need to know what a win looks like, then be assured they’ll have what it takes to deliver one.

I pride myself on empowering leaders. I give people a lot of rope to explore a variety of ideas. I let them take the credit (in fact, I often give them more credit than they are due) and provide lots of freedom to push back and do things differently. Because I thought this was a virtue (when really, it’s just a personality trait), I was surprised when a young man on our leadership team came to me and said that he wished I’d tell him what to do more often. I thought, “But you’re a leader, certainly you enjoy the freedom I bless you with.” But after a long and awkward breakfast meeting I began to realize that leeway is a consideration, not a rule. In other words, we give people freedom to roll with the waves, not to change the direction of the ship.



Too much freedom without enough training produces leaders and teams without direction who feel ill-equipped for the ill-defined tasks before them.



Provide training that sets clear expectations and resources to help your team meet your goals.

Communication

This is simple; people need to know what's going on so they can find out where they, and their efforts, fit. I'll give you another example:

Our youth group usually worships in the main auditorium before breaking off during the message to have their own teaching. Why? Because we value multi-generational church and sharing the sacraments and traditions among families. Communion used to be something that was planned by the lead pastor team. That meant, the worship leader and me. This practice created a silo of communication that sprung communion on our other leaders in a way that we thought would be delightful but turned out to be disastrous. This was amplified by the fact that the youth leader didn't communicate with me that they wanted the kids to be able to have communion with their parents. So when they missed it the first time, I had no idea it was a problem. When they missed it the second time, it was brought to my attention, and because we didn't have systems in place (see below), I forgot to let them know the third time. Before we knew it, we had upset parents and disappointed youth. Why? Because we didn't communicate clearly and systematically as a team.

What I learned from that experience is that every church needs to establish regularly recurring communication that reaches the people it needs to reach. Not everything needs to (or should) be churchwide. And most things need to be communicated to more than one person or team. Figuring out who needs to know what, and setting up consistent communication to that end is essential in casting vision and developing leaders and teams to fulfill it.

Systems

People need to know the "how-to." Much has been written on how to do church well. But why is it necessary? Selling the why is essential if you're going to get your team and church to actually adopt a new system. We tried 4 or 5 very valid systems that never took flight because people didn't understand why we needed them. More so, they didn't understand how they would help.

After 4 years of floundering around trying one good system after another, only to have amassed a history of failed launches, we finally got something working. The key difference was NOT that we found a better system, but that we trained people on WHY we needed better systems in the first place. Remember, change and growth starts with a mindset.



When your team knows why the system matters, and what the system will produce, they'll start adhering to your plan.



But if you can't explain why it's important, and if the outcomes seem dubious or unclear, people will be disincentivized to add some new duty or obligation to their way of doing things.

Create systems that work for you, then teach on why they matter and what they'll produce.

Mastering the Mindset

This last part is for the vision-creators. If you're going to see this thing through, and if you're going to finally move your church - or ministry within the church- from it's stagnated state to break barriers and see real growth, you have to own it right down to your bones. It's one thing to adopt another person's successful strategy after they hand off a healthy culture in a good trajectory. It's quite another to shift one entirely. If you're reading this and you are stuck seeing little or no growth, you know all too well that new ideas won't suffice for a complete mindset shift. You're going to have to bleed for this one. So...

Before setting on a vision or rolling out a plan, spend a lot of time in prayer. Talk to your leaders, and pray with them. Read some stuff together. Google words such as "building culture," and "breaking 200," and "healthy church systems" and see what you come up with. Whatever your method is, make sure you're willing to take it all the way. Because it starts with you.



To shift the mindset of a church, the chief vision-casters must believe it, exemplify it, think about it all the time, weave it into teachings, highlight stories that illustrate it, and just be all about it.

If you're not moved to your core by your vision for change, nobody will be. Find something that moves you, create a vision around it, get some buy-in, and develop the tools and systems you need to support it. Don't make the mistake that so many before you have made (including me). That is, don't copy someone else's system and try to apply it to your context before you've challenged your core values. Let it start with you, absorb through your team, and expand to your church and beyond.

Finally, be encouraged by this: it's Jesus' job to build the Church. Your job is staying obedient, living in love, and making disciples. As you let Him put passion in your heart, it'll turn to vision that will create impact beyond your ability to "think it through." Your church has something that no other church has, YOU; and it has something every church needs, the Holy Spirit. Get your vision and get it in gear to let your church be transformed by a new mindset for growth. And remember, we're rooting for you!



About the Author

Ben Forsberg is a content contributor for ACS Technologies® who is also a full-time pastor of a growing church in Phoenix, AZ. Ben and his wife planted the church in 2013 with just one other family after moving to north-central Phoenix. In the last 5 years, the church has experienced slow but steady growth and is just recently, as of 2018, experienced church attendance exceeding 200 people on regular Sundays. These concepts are tried and tested and fresh in his mind, supported by research in the field and anecdotal evidence.



Throughout this guide, you have seen several ways that Realm helps churches reach new people and manage the life and operations of a church. We're excited to share more about our revolutionary ministry tool, Realm.

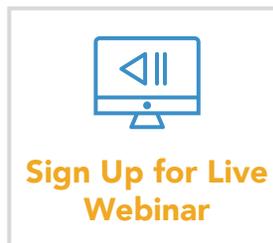
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