



**BIG**  
CHURCHES  
GETTING

**BIGGER**

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## **BIG CHURCHES GETTING BIGGER**

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# INTRODUCTION

People have been writing about the end of the “megachurch” for years. The funny thing is, research continues to confirm that megachurches are healthy, with more and more people attending them. And this is true even in recent tough economic times.

It’s not by chance, gimmick, or popularity contest that big churches keep getting bigger, even though many critics might want you to believe that or would *still* say that megachurches are just a fad. The reason large churches continue to grow and thrive is they are strategic in their approach to alignment, adaptability, leadership, and reach.

As you read this eBook, take note of which factors are in play at your church and which ones need to be incorporated so you can continue to be the vibrant, strategic, growing church necessary to reach more people for Christ.

## [ PART ONE ]

# WHY BIG CHURCHES KEEP GETTING BIGGER

In November 2010, the Leadership Network released its “Large Church Economic Outlook Report.” This report, which compiled research from a survey of large churches, found that “generally, the larger the church, the more likely it is to have experienced an increase in attendance and giving from 2009 to 2010.”

In very difficult economic times, when you might expect “big church” to experience the same downturn as “big business,” just the opposite has been the case. Bigger churches are healthier than ever.

This comes on the heels of *Outreach* magazine finding that the fastest-growing churches are growing faster than they have in the past. Also, the Hartford Institute for Religion Research has documented that the number of megachurches has grown from 350 in 1990 to 600 in 2000. Today, they are tracking more than 1,400.

It’s interesting to me that the voices talking about the decline of the megachurch seem to get more vocal as the number of big churches continues to increase. Have you noticed that? With that in mind, let’s look at four factors that are foundational to so many big churches that keep getting bigger and stronger.

## [ PART TWO ]

# THE ALIGNMENT FACTOR

In churches that have stopped growing or have started to decline, you are likely to find people just trying to “do church.” They’re doing what other churches have always done—hoping (and praying) that their repeated efforts generate different results.

Typically the larger the church I go into, the more aligned the church body is. You’d expect the opposite. You’d expect that smaller churches would be more focused and have less complexity because they have fewer people and resources. Honestly, though, there’s usually an inverse relationship. Larger churches are more focused and more aligned, and smaller churches haven’t clarified their purpose and are often very complex in both structure and ministry programming.

Here’s a picture of what it looks like to be fully aligned as a church:

- The primary purpose or mission of the church is established.
- A focused ministry and/or discipleship strategy has been established to accomplish its vision.
- All of the church’s ministries and programming are intentionally designed to fit into that strategy.
- The church is structured with staff and volunteer leaders and teams around its strategy.
- Resources on the master calendar—such as money, facilities, and space—are distributed to maximize impact rather than maintain fairness.
- There’s a Web and communications strategy in place to keep everyone focused and moving in the same direction.
- The teaching includes life application that identifies specific next steps to engage people in a discipleship journey that mirrors the overall strategy of the church.
- Rather than celebrating large attendance numbers, the success of any special event or initiative is measured by how they helped people engage in the journey.
- The church is capturing stories and measuring data to determine if the strategy is working as intended.

Being fully aligned begins with the end in mind. We have to identify what we ultimately want to accomplish as a church. And we have to identify what we ultimately want people to look like at the conclusion of our discipleship process. Again, most churches don't do this. They just do what other churches have always done. Here's a little secret: What churches "have always done" isn't working.

The only way things are going to change is if churches clarify where they're heading and then make sure they're fully aligned to experience the intended results. Most larger churches are willing to engage the difficult and time-consuming process of ensuring full alignment of everything they're doing behind a big vision.

Critical to alignment in any organization is routinely saying no to good ideas. In an October 12, 2004, *BusinessWeek Online* article, here's how Steve Jobs explained this critical piece of the culture at Apple:

*Innovation comes from people meeting up in the hallways or calling each other at 10:30 at night with a new idea, or because they realized something that shoots holes in how we've been thinking about a problem. It's ad hoc meetings of six people called by someone who thinks he has figured out the coolest new thing ever and who wants to know what other people think of his idea. And it comes from saying no to 1,000 things to make sure we don't get on the wrong track or try to do too much. We're always thinking about new markets we could enter, but it's only by saying no that you can concentrate on the things that are really important.*

In order to maintain alignment, many times you have to say no to expanding the vision. Many times you have to say no to adding a new ministry. Many times you have to say no to doing another special event. Many times you have to say no to communicating something to your entire audience. Many times you have to say no to good people with good ideas. Big churches get that. They understand that saying no helps the organization maintain alignment and creates opportunities to say yes to the things that will make a bigger impact.

## [ PART THREE ]

# THE ADAPTABILITY FACTOR

One of the factors I believe leads to a growth momentum for big churches is their adaptability factor. You would think that a larger church would find it more difficult to embrace change. The reality is that large churches have become large for a number of reasons, and one of them is because a willingness to change methods is built into their culture. Not every large church has this in their DNA—and that's why not every large church is growing—but I truly believe the vast majority of large churches are willing and able to ebb and flow as necessary.

So, when people think church services are boring and irrelevant to their lives, churches adapt and begin changing their worship services to reach new people. When the ministry environments have so many people that gatherings seem impersonal, churches adapt and begin offering a path for people to connect in small groups and serving teams.

When the culture shifts and raises the value of serving the hurting and the hopeless, churches adapt and begin engaging missional communities and strategies to impact people outside the walls of the church.

When it seems people are less likely to attend services in auditoriums that seat thousands, and when creating bigger buildings exceed financial feasibilities, churches adapt and begin gathering in multiple locations in smaller venues.

Throughout the years, there have been many folks who have talked about the eventual demise of the megachurch, assuming these churches would never shift tactics and philosophies. The reality is, one of the reasons they became large in the first place was because they were willing to shift tactics and philosophies. The megachurch today is not the same megachurch it was ten, five, or even two years ago.

When a church becomes married to its methods rather than its mission, the church plateaus and eventually declines. Typically, large churches don't experience this because they have the adaptability factor. They're willing to change and try something new, even if some of those new initiatives fail.



## [ PART FOUR ]

# THE LEADERSHIP FACTOR

I'm in the camp that believes leadership is a spiritual gift. Romans 12:8 tells us, "If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously." One distinctive of large, growing churches is that they value leadership development. That's not the case in small, declining churches.

In many small churches, leaders are controlled. This typically happens through the way churches are structured. Instead of giving pastors and other ministry leaders the freedom to make decisions and make ministry happen, churches add layers of boards and committees and create rules and processes to prevent leaders from doing just about anything on their own. Typically, the smaller the church, the more complex the structure.

In growing churches, what I usually find is that leaders have been released to lead. Boundaries are established to create a framework for making decisions and taking actions, but within those boundaries is the freedom for leaders to leverage their spiritual gifts. Unfortunately, many churches are willing to embrace shepherds, teachers, and pastors . . . but they're unwilling to embrace *leaders*.

Churches that understand the leadership factor share these characteristics:

- They are staff-led and not committee-controlled.
- They empower the senior pastor and the spiritual authority of that position.
- They see leadership as critical not only at the very top of the organization but in every layer of ministry.
- They know leadership is a gift and that it must be developed.
- They understand not everyone is a leader, and they're intentional about moving people into ministry that best fits their gifts.
- They embrace both staff and volunteer leaders (paid staff are not the only people with the leadership gift).

- They recognize leadership isn't just for men over the age of 40.
- They are careful to prioritize the character of a leader over skill.

The bottom line is that it's impossible to grow a healthy church and have an environment that values control over empowerment. Show me a large church that continues to grow, and I'll guarantee you it's a church that values, encourages, and develops the gift of leadership.

# [ PART FIVE ]

## THE REACH FACTOR

I have the great fortune to work with churches across the country on a regular basis. Within many of those churches are ministries that combine to form a church. This is what I call “The Reach Factor.” Not every church has it—and not every ministry within a church shares it. In fact, many churches might have what you could call “The Keep Factor,” which is an entirely different approach to ministry.

When churches value *keeping* who they have over *reaching* people outside the church and outside the faith, their thinking, language, and actions tend to look like this:

- They program for people who already attend church.
- They create environments that assume only Christ followers will be present.
- They use insider language that’s confusing to people new to church.
- They assume any growth that happens will be initiated by a heart-change outside the church rather than one inside the church.
- They never stop ministries for fear of offending someone inside the church.
- They are slow to do something new because they fear the unknown.
- They think they must choose between “going deeper” and “reaching the lost” when they can actually do both.
- They choose personal preferences over potential ministry impact.
- Ultimately, they make decisions based on who they’ll keep rather than who they’ll reach.

There are a couple of ways to know whether or not your ministry has “The Reach Factor” in play. One way is to think about this scenario: Suppose someone was just hired as the student pastor (or any other ministry role). If one of the key objectives in his or her first days on the job is to try to get people who have left the church to return, that’s a good sign your church or ministry is more about “The Keep Factor.”

Another way to determine which of these two factors is at play within your church is to use an exercise I often utilize while consulting. List every single ministry environment at your church. Then create two columns, one titled “Reach” and the other titled “Keep.” Go through the entire ministry list, moving each ministry to either one of the columns. You’ll soon discover whether your church believes it’s better to reach people outside the church or keep people already in attendance. I’ve noticed that churches that aren’t growing tend to have an overabundance of “Keep” ministries. Sure, healthy churches need to have ministries to help people take their next steps toward Christ, but it’s not healthy when almost every ministry is a “Keep” ministry.

Oh, and one more test . . . How you emotionally react to this section is probably also a good sign of where you and your church stand. In my experience, churches that are healthy and growing almost always have “The Reach Factor.”

## [ PART SIX ]

# PUT IT INTO ACTION

I don't believe healthy churches are necessarily big churches. However, I do believe that healthy churches are growing churches. Whether your church has 100 people or 1,000 people or 10,000 people, are more people becoming Christ followers and taking steps in their faith? Are you hearing more stories of life change?

It might be appropriate for you to break away as a leadership team to get off-site and really dig into these four factors.

- 1. Assess yourself.** As a team, talk through each section and then rank your church on a scale of 1 to 10 in each area.
- 2. Identify next steps.** Starting with the area with the lowest score, what are some specific action steps you could take to bump the score by a couple of points in the coming six months?
- 3. Assign ownership.** Don't establish a game plan without giving someone the ball. Figure out who is going to own the next steps. Who will make it happen? Who will report back to the team?
- 4. Schedule checkups.** Don't wait until the end of the six months. Schedule checkups every month or two to make sure the action plan is working and to discuss any tweaks that may be needed.
- 5. Measure results.** Don't measure activity. Figure out a way to measure whether or not your changes have actually made an impact. Is your church growing? Are you seeing more life change?

I'm praying this eBook helps you consider how your church can have a bigger impact in your community and in the lives of people who connect with your ministry. When that happens, I hope you'll email me at [tony@tonymorganlive.com](mailto:tony@tonymorganlive.com) and share your story.

# CONCLUSION

So now you see there's no one, mysterious "it" factor for big churches that continue to get bigger. Instead, there are four key factors that have proved to be invaluable to their strategic growth and increased overall health.

If your church is experiencing great vitality and growth, that's great! Keep moving in the direction you're going. Hopefully you've picked up a few things in this eBook that will strengthen you even more. If you know your church is not as healthy as it should be, though, then you and the leaders around you may need to examine your church's approach to alignment, adaptability, leadership, and reach.

Use the study questions that follow to examine your church's DNA, and discuss with your leadership team what steps you need to take to be more effective in furthering the gospel and developing disciples.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How aligned is your church when it comes to purpose and programming?
2. Where is your church heading, and how do you intend to get there? Is the “end” in sight? Are you on track? If not, what adjustments do you need to make?
3. In what ways are you married to your methods rather than your mission? If it’s the other way around, why is that?
4. How well has your church embraced change in the past? Do people look forward to it or dread it?
5. In what specific ways does your church embrace its leaders and give them the freedom to lead?
6. In what ways has your church been guilty of having “The Keep Factor”?
7. What tough decisions has your church made to operate under “The Reach Factor”?
8. What is the first “factor” your church needs to focus on changing so it can experience greater growth and better health?

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## THE UNSTUCK GROUP®

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Tony Morgan is founder and lead strategist of The Unstuck Group, a company that helps churches get unstuck through consulting and coaching experiences designed to focus vision, strategy, and action. He's written several books, including [The Unstuck Church: Equipping Churches to Experience Sustained Health](#), published by Thomas Nelson, as well as articles that have been featured with the Willow Creek Association, Catalyst, and [Pastors.com](#). He writes about leadership and strategy regularly at [tonymorganlive.com](#). Prior to starting The Unstuck Group, Tony was a pastor and served on the senior leadership teams at West Ridge Church in Georgia, NewSpring Church in South Carolina, and Granger Community Church in Indiana. Before full-time ministry, he served for approximately ten years in various local government roles. Tony lives near Atlanta, though his heart is still in Cleveland, Ohio, where his family has its roots. He's been married to Emily for more than twenty-five years, and they have four kids: Kayla, Jacob, Abby, and Brooke. To learn more about Tony and The Unstuck Group, visit [TheUnstuckGroup.com](#).

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