



How facilities can stop growth

by: Bob Whitesel



The church facility was scarcely nine years old. It enjoyed an idyllic, serene setting, encased by rows of trees and surrounded by subdivisions of expensive homes. To many congregations, this was the location they dream about: clean, modern and securely situated in an upscale community.

Yet, the church was dying. Nine years earlier, more than 3,800 people worshiped in rented facilities. Now, fewer than 900 attended at the spacious facility it had built. On weekends the sanctuary (with seating for 4,500) felt cold and bare. The pastor who had led the congregation for 19 years had recently departed.

"Joel [the former pastor] just got too frustrated," began Tim, a lay leader. "He couldn't figure out what went wrong, so he blamed himself. None of us could figure out the cause of our attendance decline, but to me, it has always seemed to have to do with this building." After more discussion, it appeared Tim's analysis was correct.

Mount Sinai Church had begun growing about two years after Joel arrived. Once plateaued, with Joel's help it slowly embraced new ideas. Soon the facility was too small to house the growing congregation. They renovated it twice while also utilizing a nearby school and community center. Meanwhile, an empty downtown store housed the youth ministry.

Then, when the church's sanctuary became too small, it held multiple services at different times. When that became insufficient, the leaders rented a local gymnasium for services. Under those circumstances, the church had sped along contentedly and saw significant growth.

Less than 18 months after the congregation moved into the new facility, though, attendance plateaued. Over the next two years, it declined. After four more years of decreases, the pastor resigned, heartbroken over waning attendance and unable to understand the forces involved. The church was on the verge of bankruptcy. Although a weekly attendance of 900 would be a sizable number for most churches, for this one it was inadequate to pay the mortgage.

Factors that caused initial growth

There were three notable causes of growth at Mount Sinai Church:

1. Initially, the availability of funds to launch new ministries and hire new staff had driven expansion.

Financial flexibility allowed the church to adapt more quickly to community needs. Driven by rapidly increasing attendance, leaders used their mushrooming budget to hire more staff, renovate facilities and start new ministries. The fiscal freedom contributed to flexibility, satisfaction and growth.

2. The location of the original facility, on a corner of a busy city street, had been a plus.

Many people knew Mount Sinai because they passed by it daily. Rented youth facilities in the downtown area further increased community awareness. And, because the church services were eventually held in the local school auditorium, it advertised heavily in the media. All of this created community awareness of the church, which in turn resulted in increased visitor flow.

3. When it renovated its facilities early in the growth cycle, the church intentionally created multifunctional space.

In the sanctuary, it eschewed pews in lieu of movable seating. It removed permanent walls to link classrooms, allowing them to also be utilized for larger gatherings. Everywhere around the cramped and confined facility, it created flexible spaces.

Erroneous decisions that led to plateauing

At Mount Sinai Church, erroneous decisions beset leaders as they made plans to build. Under the tutelage of an architect/builder of other large church facilities, they made erroneous missteps that soon stunted their growth and eventually reversed it. Their missteps may be categorized into seven "don'ts."

1. Don't build too soon. Often a rented or paid-for facility will be less expensive to operate than a new facility. Building cautiously and patiently can help generate fiscal reserves.

2. Don't build too big. On the advice of their architect/builder and based on their own overly optimistic projections, church leaders built a facility that was

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oversized for their congregation's size and budget. Multiple weekend celebrations can give a church more options for attracting community residents. Four Sunday services at Mount Sinai provided this benefit. Yet, naively, leaders decided to hold one large, combined service in the new facility. Thus, they robbed Sundays of their flexibility and convenience, which undermined attendance.

3. Don't build without flexibility. Renovated and rented facilities had given Mount Sinai Church needed flexibility. If the church needed to change usage or space requirements, it could rent a different site. In addition, cramped facilities mandated multi-functional areas. However, when they built their new facility, leaders segregated many ministries into activity-specific spaces. They installed immovable pews in the auditorium and designed small classrooms separated by load-bearing cement walls. Creating these private enclaves weakened the flexibility that had contributed to growth.

4. Don't use a plateaued church for your model. Mount Sinai's leaders had visited several seemingly successful churches in the region. Unfortunately, they did not ask if the churches were plateaued or declining. Of the five churches they visited, two were declining and two were plateaued. Their impressive facilities kept Mount Sinai's leaders from looking closer.

5. Don't build in a detached location. The building site was in an area where many leaders would have liked to live and worship. But unlike their first facility (and the rented spaces downtown), it lacked visibility. Visibility is a key to outreach. Unfortunately, churches often link their destiny to a parcel of land that is convenient for current attendees, but in a detached location that slows or undercuts growth.

6. Don't forget to seek information from the right experts. Church leaders thought they were getting the best advice available when they hired the architect/builder of another large, prestigious church. Indeed, he had built dozens of churches. But because most of the churches in America are declining or plateaued, the architect/builder was inadvertently experienced in building facilities that had contributed to these declines.

7. Don't expect new facilities to increase the church's attendance. Related to errors two and six, this is worth mentioning again because it is so prevalent in the sales pitch of many architect/builders. As I noted earlier, Christians are an optimistic lot. In my experience, architect/builders succumb to this malady just as easily. Together they can give overly aggressive projections.

Excerpt from [Growth by Accident, Death By Planning: How Not to Kill a Growing Congregation](#), by Bob Whitesel (Abingdon Press).
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