

stuff you wish they taught in seminary

A blurred background image of a church service. In the foreground, the silhouettes of several people's hands are raised in the air, some with fingers spread, some pointing upwards. In the background, a person is visible on a stage, possibly a pastor or musician, with a microphone. The scene is lit with warm, orange-red light, creating a bokeh effect with horizontal light streaks.

7 Pivots Churches Make
TO BREAK THE 1,000 BARRIER

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What got you here won't get you there.

As churches approach the 1,000 mark in weekend service attendance they can often find that their growth slows down. This is often identified as a “barrier” to growth that many churches can't seem to get over. In fact, only 2% of churches grow beyond the 1,000 barrier. [ref] There are twice as many churches in the 500-1,000 size than those who break through and move above 1,000.

I've had the privilege of serving in three different churches over the last almost 20 years that have all broken the 1,000 barrier. Through the coaching I've conducted, I've also been up close with a bunch of other teams as they cross over this barrier. As well, through [the unSeminary Podcast](#), I've talked with hundreds (really 200+) leaders from churches, mostly those who have crossed this barrier. All of these churches have made some significant changes in the way they perform ministry as they cross this barrier. Here I talk about just seven of the pivots necessary for churches, as they attempt to reach and serve more people beyond 1,000 people in attendance.

Hiring Randomly to Building the Ideal Team

Early on in a church's development, you are just so happy that you hire anybody to help with the mission. Often, proximity to the key leader is highly valued because typically, people within close relational circles are hired.

However, as the church grows you start to see the leaders slowing down and making more deliberate hiring choices. Rather than just “filling holes” these churches are now attempting to strategically build a team that helps them grow into the future.

More specialization occurs as the leadership attempts to drive up the quality and execution in various vitally important areas of ministry. There can be a sense that they are “buying clothes they need to grow into” at this phase. Oftentimes, as a church is attempting to break the 1,000 barrier the hiring is done in a growth oriented need for the church to reach out to more people and get plugged in.

Learn from This Church // I love what [Dan Zimbardi from Sandals Church](#) has done with their “[Ethos Document](#)” that helps shape the kind of team they are wanting to be!

General Dream to Laser Focused Vision

As churches move beyond 1,000 people they develop a deep sense of their “big why”. Their points of differentiation come into sharper focus as the leadership moves to achieve breakthrough clarity on the vision for the church. In fact, it's difficult for a church to move beyond 1,000 people unless the entire leadership core (volunteers & staff) and large portions of the general church can articulate the unique mission of the church's calling.



Sometimes church leaders at smaller churches are worried about being “better” than the other options available to people in town. Although it is not appropriate to weigh how one church is “better” than another church, (unfortunately) at times some leaders do it! One of the common traits for church leaders as their ministries break the 1,000 barrier is a quiet confidence, which settles over them that their ministry isn’t better than others in town but just different. This confidence comes from a deeper understanding of the mission that they are called to and clarity that other churches aren’t called to the same mission. Rather than looking sideways at other churches, the leaders in these churches get a deeper sense of God’s calling in their Church’s mission.

Learn from This Church: River Valley Church in the Twin Cities of Minnesota is one of the most vision driven churches I know. [Terry Parkman is a great leader to lean in with and learn from](#) on how to move the vision into reality with clear systems.

Good Messages to Movement Generating Teaching

Teaching leads your church. It shapes the culture of your community. Good teaching sets the level of transparency that people are willing to engage in themselves. It’s the most accessible communication channel at your church. It drives the discipleship discussion across people’s lives. The importance of teaching cannot be overstated or overemphasized.

In a recent study, it was found that 3 out of 4 church attendees state that sermons are the major factor influencing their church

attendance. [\[ref\]](#) Although church leaders instinctively know this to be true, as their churches begin to grow beyond the 1,000 barrier there is a renewed focus on the teaching aspect of the weekend service as a tool to augment this movement. Leaders begin to have the time and ability to double down on their teaching responsibilities and often the quality and depth of the messages is deliberately increased.

Often you’ll see churches attempting to cross the 1,000 barrier; starting to leverage their core message content across new platforms. They’ll make renewed efforts towards spreading the message online through various digital outreach efforts or maybe dabble with some traditional broadcast mediums to reach more people. At the core of these actions is an increased understanding that content production and distribution is a core activity of the church as a spiritual teaching organization. Messages are important and these churches are learning to increasingly leverage them to reach more people.

Learn from This Church: There is no better example of a church “doubling down” on message content than Liquid Church of New Jersey. [Lean in to learn how their team invests tremendous effort every week to ensure the message is as good as it can be through something called “Thursday Night Gospel Hour”.](#)

Random Giving to Purposeful Generosity Building

Moving people towards a life of generosity is a key discipleship outcome that we need to help individuals come closer to and inculcate in their lives. When we are able to do that at scale and move an entire church towards a lifestyle of generosity, the positive momentum generated holds the power to transform the church into an unstoppable force for good in the community.

As a church approaches the 1,000 barrier often practical implications of being a growing church can push in and force the church to ask strategic generosity questions. Some-

times they are faced with a capital expansion project that requires them to take a deeper look at how to mobilize people towards financially engaging with the mission. Increasingly, churches of this size are looking to do multisite campuses, which require an injection of financial resources for a successful and widely impactful launch. The skills and abilities acquired through these processes are often applied to a broader approach to raising financial resources for the mission beyond the immediate need. These new skills help the church generate all kinds of positive momentum as they reach more people.



If your church isn't facing an immediate financial need like this but you are bumping up against this ceiling, it's time to consider mechanisms to raise resources to fund the mission. Often times, smaller churches don't have a documented approach towards systematically communicating the vision of the church in a way that moves people towards generosity. In such circumstances, you need to assign a senior leadership team member to look closely at this process and track how resources are being raised to fuel the future of the church.

Learn from these churches: [Download this FREE digital magazine](#) all about increasing generosity at your church. It's filled with articles and interviews to help you take this area of your church to a new level.

Haphazard Assimilation to Clear & Obvious Next Steps

Most churches don't have a problem getting first-time guests to show up ... the real problem lies in getting them to stick and stay, i.e.

sustain the momentum.

It's easy to be distracted by the "reach" efforts that larger churches invest in. Often, those efforts are easily seen and understood. However, as you look closer at churches who have been able to cross the 1,000 barrier they have typically made significant strides towards making assimilation of guests much more clear and obvious.

Our world is oversaturated with choices and people need us to help them narrow their focus and show them exactly how to take the next step and proceed towards a better life. Growing churches typically make it 'over the top' obvious on how to take a simple first step into the community. They repeat that step over and over and over to help people plug in. Narrowing the choice is based on a human behavioral insight called analysis paralysis. The more choices you give people, the less people choose anything because they are stuck weighing the options. Here's a vivid example of this from the marketplace:

Sheena Iyengar from Columbia University set up a table laden with jams outside of an upscale grocery store in Menlo Park, CA. Over a period of two consecutive Saturdays, research assistants dressed up as store employees offered samples of either 6 or 24 flavors of [Wilkin and Sons Jams](#), a British jelly purveyor known for exotic flavors.

Prior to this study, the common marketing theory was that more choices are better for customers. People like more options, so providing more flavors should lead to more sales. The results from this study proved otherwise.

During the time periods when 24 flavors were offered, it was observed that 60% of people stopped to sample the jams, compared to 40% when only 6 flavors were offered. These numbers seem in favor of more choices, but the important question is this: which group purchased more?

The final result shows that of the customers who sampled 24 flavors, only 3%

purchased, but of the customers who sampled 6, 30% did the same.

If you run those numbers based on 100 people, 60 would stop when 24 flavors were offered, but less than 2 purchased (1.8 to be exact). When 6 flavors were sampled, 40 stopped at the table, and 12 purchased. [ref]

This sort of conversion math is central to the churches who grow beyond 1,000; who spend their time thinking through this concept. Time and again churches have tested various approaches and come back with a clear simple step or two, for first-time guests' show the best "conversion ratio" for seeing people plugged into the community.

Learn from this church: [Eastside Church in Anaheim, California](#) has a very simple "First Step with Gene" where they invite all of their new guests to attend.

Whatever Location to Strategic Facility

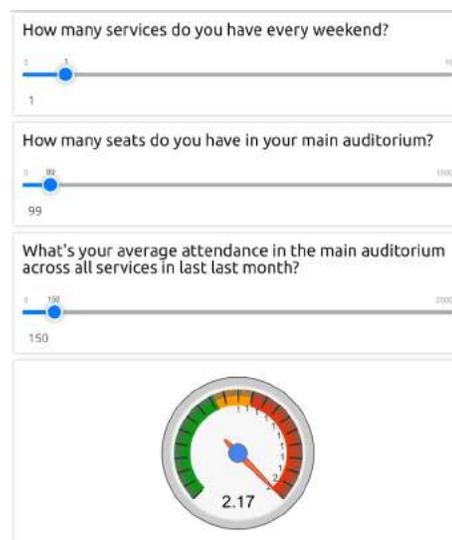
We all know that the church is the gathered people of God. That is, we know the church isn't about the physical building that we meet in. However, where we meet does have a profound impact on our ability to serve the people that God is sending to us.

Often churches, as they approach the 1,000 barrier, are facing physical constraints on their facility that might be limiting their ability to reach more people. Often, this is the first time in the church's history that they can step back and ask strategic questions around how they can leverage their physical location for the mission.



Your church building needs to have empty space in it to signify room for growth. Although the positive dynamics of a "full room" do help drive a fun and engaging public worship experience, but if there are no open spots for you people's friends to sit, they won't get invited.

Use the simple calculator on unSeminary.com to determine if you need to find bigger space or launch more services.



This calculator attempts to visualize when your church should start to look for a new building or add new services. Here's the key to interpreting the results:

- In the green // Your church has space to grow and at this point, you should focus on filling the services that you already have.
- In the yellow // You need to start looking for expansion solutions because you are at risk of turning people away as you're too crowded.
- In the red // You don't have enough open space in your services to encourage new people to attend. [Expand services by adding new service times](#) or find a new physical location soon!

Churches that move across the 1,000 barrier have looked closely at their facilities and are looking for ways to create more spaces for more people to connect with the

ministry. A few expansion opportunities are:

- Multiple services // Expand the number of times your church meets on a weekly basis. This is the most straightforward way to expand, however, every other service time off of the “prime inviting hour” will be more difficult to fill.
- Multisite expansion // Most churches that have gone to multisite have been driven by this dynamic. It enables a church to expand its ability to care for people while at the same time get closer to new pockets of people and retain the “prime inviting hour”.

Learning to Being Coached

Finally, the leaders in churches who are able to break the 1,000 barrier go from simply being active learners to seeking out coaching to help them grow.

Only 2% of churches have ever broken the 1,000 barrier and therefore generic books, podcasts and blog posts (ahem!) about this topic are found to be often too generic to be of any help to a specific leadership team. I’ve found that wise leaders (leading churches) attempting to break this barrier begin to regularly access direct leadership coaching in a wide variety of areas to help them take their leadership to the next level.

Here are five things to look for when looking for a leadership coach for your church:

- Actual Experience // Have they led a church from 750 to over 2,000 people?
- Deliverables // Is there an optimal match between your area of need and their area of skill?
- Different Enough // Are they sufficiently enough outside your “tribe” to give you a fresh perspective?
- Regular Process // Are you able to connect regularly with them to get answers to real life situation in your ministry?

- Long Term // Are they available for 6+ months? Rarely will you be able to nail down all the issues required in a single conversation or one session.
- Likeability // Do you enjoy spending time with them? It matters, believe me.

I’d be honored to coach your church through the 1,000 barrier. I provide highly personalized, in-person coaching for senior leadership teams. [Drop me an email and we can talk.](#)

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