

TEACHER'S GUIDE

A "Choice Points" Theory of Church Size

Chapters One to Four

From

New Perspectives on Breaking the 200 Barrier

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Lesson one

Ideas to emphasize:

1. Most churches are small.
2. Leadership alone is insufficient to break the 200 Barrier.
3. Do not to shift responsibility for growth from the pastor to the laity.
4. The gate of change is locked on the inside.
5. Give a clear definition of Choice Points.
6. Explain the six common Choice Points.

Session Outline

I. Introduction

A. Prayer

B. Teaching Plan

II. Small Churches

A. Graph

B. Reveal difficulty of breaking barrier

III. Choice Points

A. Definition

B. The gate of change is locked on the inside

IV. Decision occasions

A. Points in time

B. Opportunity

C. Crisis

D. Issues

E. Preference

F. Risk

V. Common Choice Points

A. Action vs. Inertia

- B. Comfort vs. Discomfort
- C. Release vs. Control
- D. Progressive vs. Conservative
- E. Participant vs. Spectator
- F. Clergy vs. Laity

VI. Case Study

- A. Discussion questions
- B. Discussion and feedback

VII. Conclusion

- A. Prayer
- B. Dismissal

Lesson Content

Introduction

Begin with a time of prayer. Ask God to enlighten your minds and give you receptive hearts to any truth He chooses to reveal to you and the church. You will need God's help to truly deal with this topic.

It is recommended that the pastor intensively teach "Choice Points" theory to one or two key laypersons until it is clear the laypersons have full understanding of the theory and accept its premises. *When and only when* that is accomplished these key laypersons should proceed to teach the theory to several lay leaders in the church. Finally, a saturation strategy should be formulated to teach the entire congregation "Choice Points" theory and seek to inculcate a strategy for reversing the decisions that are negatively affecting the growth and size of the church.

This Study Guide may be used by the pastor to teach the key layperson/s, and it may also be used by the key layperson/s to teach several other laypersons. Beyond that point a different approach should be used to disseminate "Choice Points" theory to the entire congregation. General suggestions are given in the book and other helps may be available on the <200barrier.org> website.

Obviously, the laypersons trained in "Choice Points" theory will be key leaders in instilling the concepts into the culture of the congregation.

Begin the first session with a brief description of the study plan. Explain the number of sessions and the amount of time involved in each session. Give the meeting details to the participants so they will have a clear understanding of what to expect. Make it clear the sessions will continue until there is complete comprehension of the theory and how it applies to their church.

Begin the presentation of the topic by explaining the study is primarily about Choice Points and how they affect congregation size. Choice Points will be defined and explained later. What is important here is for the participants to understand that this series of sessions is primarily about how Choice Points impact the size of a church.

Small Churches

An explanation that most churches are small needs to be made. This is counter-intuitive. It will be difficult for people to accept. Display the *Graph of churches, distributed according to the percentage of churches in various size categories, for several denominations* to make it clear many, if not all, denominations have a similar *percentage* of small churches.

Explanation of Graph:

1. Percentage of churches in a denomination—not number of churches
2. Worship attendance of churches—not membership
3. Size categories are in increments of 25, but labels are only of 50
4. All churches over 1,000 are grouped together at last point on graph
5. Denominations are:

AoG = Assemblies of God

ELCA = Evangelical Lutheran Church of America

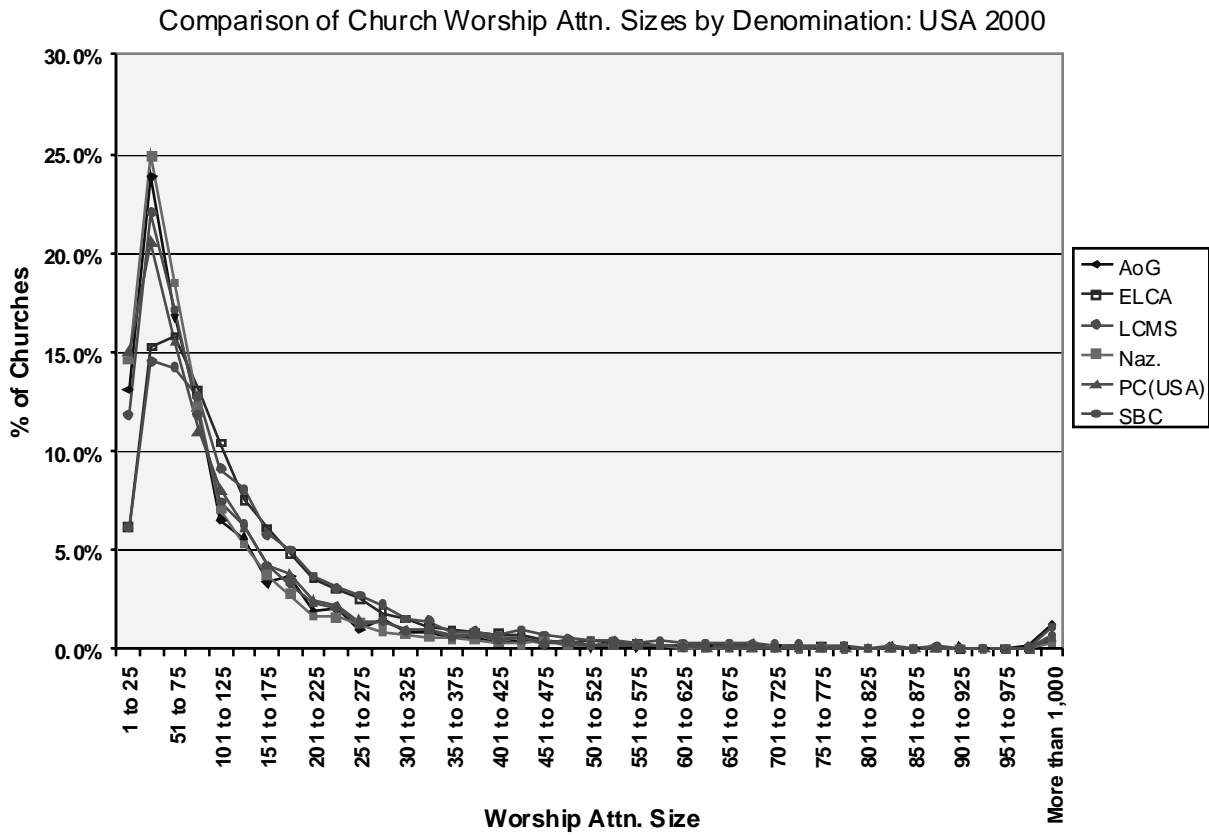
LCMS = Lutheran Church Missouri Synod

Naz = Church of the Nazarene

PC (USA) = Presbyterian Church (USA)

SBC = Southern Baptist Convention

It is obvious from this graph that most, if not all denominations have a similar percentage of small churches.



Discuss the fact so many churches are small. The purpose of this discussion will not be to help people resign themselves to the reality of small churches. Rather, it will be to help them understand the enormous difficulty of growing larger churches. This is why a study of “Choice Points” is so important. A new program, or some strategy imported from a large church, will probably not result in growth that advances a church to a considerably larger size.

Leadership

Explain to the person/group that church size and congregational growth is almost universally attributed to clergy leadership. “Every thing rises and falls on leadership” is the way it is expressed proverbially. While this is generally true, there is more to church size than leadership.

Demographics

Make clear that population within a reasonable driving distance has a bearing on church size. Other demographic factors such as population mobility also impact church size.

Choice Points

Explain that this study is going to focus on an aspect of congregational size that has previously only been touched on lightly. While the importance of congregational involvement has been understood, it has been given limited attention in comparison to the importance assigned to leadership. This study seeks to give significant attention to Congregational “Choice Points” as a factor appreciably affecting church size.

Important Clarification

Be sure to make it clear that focusing on the role of the congregation in the determination of church size is not intended to shift responsibility for size and growth from the clergy to the laity. Leadership is still vitally important and accountability for growth ultimately rests with the pastor. The idea is not to lay blame but to help the people understand more completely the dynamics of growth.

Explain that “Choice Points” theory reveals how congregations make decisions that neutralize the impact of leadership. Only exceptionally gifted leaders are able to overcome these growth limiting decisions.

Show the ideal situation of having both strong pastoral leadership and informed laity who make decisions that affect growth positively instead of negatively.

Now define “Choice Points.” They are *decisions affecting church size lay leaders and the congregation make and live by.* They are unstated assumptions that remain fixed and unresponsive to change; they are values, preferences, and priorities widely believed and firmly held.

This study provides an understanding of these factors so the responsibility for growth is not placed on pastoral leadership alone. It recognizes

“The gate of change is locked on the inside.”

This is why pastors experience so much difficulty in attempting to lead their churches in breaking the 200 Barrier. Leadership alone is seldom sufficient to accomplish the task. The congregation is equally important in unlocking the gate of change.

“Choice Points” are *occasions* when congregations make *decisions* about *factors* that tend to determine church size. It is important to know the “occasions,” understand the “factors” and recognize the “decisions” that affect growth.

The “occasions” may be:

- *Points in time*, such as back to school
- *Opportunity*, for example a rapid increase in population
- *Crisis*, for instance if the church burns down
- *Issues*, like when to hire additional staff
- *Preference*, typically style
- *Risk* for example, a building program or programmatic venture

Churches often fail to recognize “occasions” when “decisions” are made. Unfortunately, congregations don’t just miss an opportunity to make a positive decision; they unknowingly make a decision that negatively impacts growth.

These decisions are seldom made by any kind of formal action. Usually they are put in place by an informal act of consensus. They are culturally intuitive, i.e., they are the logical conclusion of cultural perspective.

Common Choice Points

The “factors” that affect church size and growth are many and varied. Six are listed in the book but there are many more. The following paragraphs concisely describe the six “Choice Points.” Each factor is presented in greater detail in the book.

Action vs. Inertia

People don't often think they make a decision about whether they will be active or passive. They may be aware of their involvement or non-involvement. However, the *action vs. inertia* Choice Point is quite subtle. Inertia describes the present state and may be active or passive. There are usually a few energetic and overworked people in any congregation, but congregational inertia is usually fairly passive.

Hardly anyone is aware of an occasion when they made a conscious decision to remain passive. Yet, an unconscious decision not to take action on any of the many practices that produce a climate for growth, has a negatively impact on church size.

Beginning to act gives life to any endeavor, but activity alone is not the goal. Progress is made by taking action on *growth producing tasks*.

Congregations possess a propensity to maintain the status quo. Accepting the status quo as normative may be an unconscious decision that prevents the church from initiating actions that would produce impressive growth.

Comfort vs. Discomfort

Similarly, congregations are seldom aware of when they made a decision for comfort in preference to discomfort. It is only natural to prefer comfort to discomfort. However, there are times when discomfort is important to growth. Meeting and conversing with visitors at church is only one example of discomfort, but there are many more.

There are specific *places* where we feel very relaxed and calm. Certain *practices* are easy for us. We are comfortable with *people* we have known for an extended period of time. These are *comfort zones*.

Comfort zones are structured into the congregational life of churches. People are comfortable in their church building, with people they know well, taking part in familiar practices of worship and fellowship. But visitors are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with these places, people, and practices. Christians must move out of their comfort zones in order to ease the discomfort of visitors. Congregations that allow their preference for comfort to prevent them from making visitors comfortable have faced the *comfort vs. discomfort* Choice Point and decided against growth.

Release vs. Control

The *Release vs. Control* Choice Point has enormous impact on church size. The desire for control is buried deep in the DNA of human beings. A person is affirmed when they are given control over something or someone. Organizations, including churches, need people who will accept responsibility for certain aspects of the operation. People occupying those positions enjoy the power and recognition that are part of such a responsibility.

A decision to remain indefinitely in a leadership position blocks opportunities for others to serve in that role. It prevents the development of new leaders and sends a signal to newcomers that there is little openness to change and limited opportunity for involvement. This causes new people to look for another church where they sense there is a place for them.

These decisions to remain indefinitely in a position of responsibility and control are usually conscious choices. However, the people making the decisions are not usually aware of the negative impact on the growth of the church.

Progressive vs. Conservative

Small churches are particularly susceptible to a conservative mentality. Resources have been scarce during most, if not all, of their history and that has created conservatism in the congregation and especially among the lay leaders. While this has been necessary for survival, the current mentality presents a wall of opposition to new people who want to see innovative and exciting things happen. This *Progressive vs. Conservative* Choice Point is an area where decisions are unwittingly made. Conservative thinking filters throughout all the aspects of the church. Progressive thinking is either ignored or labeled as unrealistic or impossible. Such a response stifles creativity, diminishes hope for change and reduces individual and congregational morale.

Participant vs. Spectator

The *Participant vs. Spectator* Choice Point is an area where many churches decide to remain small. Larger churches require significant numbers of people to participate in the ministries and activities of the

congregation. Leaders who allow their people to be spectators instead of participants are permitting a decision that will severely restrict the development of the church—to say nothing of the people.

Even in small churches there are numerous opportunities for involvement. People can reverse their decision about being a spectator and choose to become a participant in the activities of the church. Their participation will increase the ministry of the church and make possible increased growth.

There are many benefits from increased participation by the people of the congregation. More than numbers participating is involved. Improved teamwork, increased morale, new resources, fresh encouragement, and greater unity all contribute to expansion of the church.

Laity vs. Clergy

The *Laity vs. Clergy* Choice Point involves other Choice Points,” particularly *Release vs. Control* and *Participant vs. Spectator*. Yet, the major issue is whether the ministry of the church will be performed primarily by the laity or by the clergy. Many congregations see the pastor as someone who has been engaged to perform the religious practices of the church. They think of the laity as volunteers for various other responsibilities. This results in an operation that has limited potential for growth. Certainly both clergy and laity will be involved to a significant degree. Consistent expansion of a church requires not only an increasing number of the laity involved in ministry but *lay ministers in major positions of leadership*.

Clergy must be willing to release leaders in important roles. Often laity quietly retreats from leadership because they perceive the pastor wants control of everything. Delegation is more than giving a person a job to do. It involves granting freedom to be creative with the task. If a pastor is a “switchman” leader the laity will provide only minimum service rather than risk displeasing the pastor.

Laity must perform the ministry and release the pastor to lead according to his/her strengths. The pastor must provide vision and direction for the congregation as a whole. He/she must also demonstrate total commitment and involvement in the work of the church. While the pastor may not have time to shepherd all of the people of the congregation he/she must exhibit a

pastoral spirit and demonstrate the wisdom of when and how to engage in that role.

Getting the clergy/laity roles right is essential to the growth of a church. If a church is to increase in size it is essential for the laity to accept responsibility for ministry and the pastor to give spiritual and organizational leadership.

A Case Study

At the completion of the material in the first lesson, the following case study is provided to generate discussion of Choice Points in a real life situation. Be sure to provide adequate time to read, consider, and discuss the case study. Several questions are provided at the end of the case study to help initiate discussion.

Case:

Harley and Edith slid into the booth with Al and Jean at Tommy's Restaurant, their favorite meeting place. They often met there for the Saturday morning breakfast buffet or for pie after church Sunday night. The two couples were longtime members of Southside Church. Harley was a trustee on the Church Board and Al had worked with the teens until last year. Both Edith and Jean were Sunday School teachers. Since so much of their lives circled around the church, their conversation often included activities and concerns of the church.

When the conversation lulled for a moment, Harley said, "Well, I just learned the Simpsons are leaving the church." Al and Jean reflected immediate disappointment. "Why?" Jean asked. "I thought they really liked our church." "Oh, I think they do", said Harley, "I don't believe they are leaving because they don't like us." "So, why are they leaving?" Al asked. "In a way it's kind of hard to understand," Harley said. "They said they just never really felt accepted." "But they were so excited about the church when they first came last year," Jean said. "I remember Beverly telling me they had found their church home. I distinctly recall her saying how friendly everyone had been to her and Buster. What happened?"

Al, thinking out loud said, “I wonder if it is because of their kids? I think there may have been some kind of problem between their son Jason and the Larson boys.” Edith, who up until now had not expressed an opinion, said “Yes, I told Harley about that situation, but he said that wasn’t the problem. I still can’t believe what they said was the problem.”

“So what was the problem?” Al asked. “Well,” Harley said, “It seems they felt only a few people in the church were actually running the church. Specifically, two or three people filled all the positions of significance and made all the decisions about the future of the church.” “Sounds like a spiritual problem to me,” Al replied. “May be,” Harley said, “But, I wonder if we should ignore the possibility that they have identified a real problem in our church.”

Edith seemed deep in thought. “Remember,” she began, “we have had several families leave our church across the last few years. I think I recall one of them—wasn’t their name Madsen, or Mason, or something like that—I think they said something about there not being any place for service in our church.” “No place for service,” exclaimed Jean, “there are all kinds of places for service in our church. At least half of the ministries in our church are understaffed.”

“But Jean,” Harley responded “If you were only asked to do menial tasks and never allowed to be involved in the significant programs of the church, wouldn’t you feel like a second class citizen?” “I don’t think so,” replied Jean. “At one time or another I’ve done most of the menial tasks of the church.” “But you have also been deeply involved in most of the significant programs of the church,” Al declared.

“May be we are all guilty,” Edith mused. “May be we are so protective of the church that we hold new people off at arm’s length.” “Or, is it possible, Harley added “that we enjoy positions of leadership so much that we just hang on to them and never make room for new people?”

They sat there in stunned silence for what seem like a very long time. Finally Jean broke the silence. “You may have defined the problem, Harley. May be instead of the Simpson’s having a spiritual problem about how they serve in the church, may be we are the ones who have a spiritual problem of possessiveness and control.”

Discussion questions:

1. Has Jean analyzed the situation properly or are there other explanations for why the Simpson's left the church? What are the other possibilities?
2. Explain the differences between "menial tasks" and involvement in "significant" programs and ministries.
3. If several families have left the church across the last few years why are they just now beginning to accept the fact that they may have a problem?
4. Do churches tend to blame the people who left their church rather than themselves? If so, why?
5. What could the church do to salvage the situation with the Simpsons?

Conclusion:

Agree on the next time and place of meeting. Explain what will be involved in the next session. List any outside reading that may be helpful. Pray and ask for God's help in comprehending the ideas considered in this session and in the sessions to come.

As you end the session give a positive and encouraging word to those who attended.