

Knowing When to Re-evaluate Your Organizational Structure

Insights from Fast-Moving Churches on Where to Begin

By Kristin Walters

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The scenario is all too common: Your church's children's ministry is spread too thin, and your worship team is feeling overstretched. Your staff is facing burnout, and it seems like even the smallest decisions become battlegrounds.

From the outside, things look great. More and more people are entering your church's doors, and you're witnessing life change every week. But on the inside something's not right. The train seems to be moving in the right direction—but for some reason, you kind of want to jump off.

In many cases, the solution is a much-needed change in organizational structure. In this paper we've compiled some of the signs and symptoms that rapidly growing churches in need of organizational change have encountered, and what they've done to get started on a path toward change. In many cases, personal and professional stresses were big indicators that a change was needed. Another valuable point: Networking and advice from mentors and peers could make all the difference.

Mountain Christian Church: Watch out for Fake Fruit

Ben Cachiaras of Mountain Christian Church in Baltimore, MD



mountainchristian.org likens his church's growth situation to a bowl of fake fruit his mother kept on the kitchen table. "It was an impressive bowl of fruit," he says. "An orange, apple, banana, and a set of grapes. And we have some hilarious family stories—one guy actually chipped a tooth on it."

"It looked so real," Ben continues, noting times in his church's history where the external look of the ministry could have easily fooled someone into thinking all was well on the inside. "We could see the life change and the growth and it all looked great, but internally the leaders were going, 'Wow, is this really it?'"

At that time, though the church was growing, the staff was suffering.

"We had to acknowledge as a team that we were doing the work of God in a way that was killing the work of God in us," Ben says.

"There was a spiritual malaise in some of our key leaders, which started with physical fatigue and led to a kind of flatness. [Eventually] there became a low-grade resentment about keeping the machine going—even though the machine was this fast-growing Kingdom thing called the Church."

According to Ben, all of these symptoms were signs that it was time for an organizational restructuring, as well as the addition of a rest policy and spiritual formation for the soul of the staff. “Ignore those signs for a while,” he says, “and they’ll just smack you in the face,” he says.

Some of the steps that they took in moving forward were to hire first an administrator, and then later an executive pastor. All of these changes are made with the understanding that they’ll still have to re-organize, re-invent, and restructure in the future. That way, he says, “We enable the church to have a fluidity and to keep moving forward.”

Parkview Church: Surround Yourself with other Church Leaders

Tim Harlow of Parkview Church in Orland Park, IL (parkviewchurch.com) describes a time when his church was moving into a new campus—while at the same time he was finishing a doctoral dissertation. He was also dealing with the pressures of raising teenagers at home. One weekend, the stress all hit at once.

“I had no idea anything was going bad until one day when I was backstage getting ready to come out for a Saturday night service, and I literally thought, ‘I can’t go out there and do this,’ Tim says. “I’ve heard those stories [from other pastors] over and over again.”

What Tim soon realized was that it’s important not to become distracted by the adrenaline rush and everything else that comes with leading a rapidly growing church. “All of it can kill your soul if you’re not paying attention,” he says.

“It’s been really key for me to figure out how to get other people around



me,” Tim says. “It has helped me figure out how to retool and re-staff and do the things that I need to do.” The guidance and feedback that he received from peers was crucial in figuring out how to re-vamp Parkview’s organizational structure in a way that would allow him to lead according to his giftedness.

“We had outgrown our staff structure and I had outgrown my leadership ability,” he says. “We needed to hire an executive pastor and get some things set up so that I could figure out how to do the things God had called me to do.”

“I don’t think there’s any way you can figure out what needs to change on your own,” Harlow says. “You need a counselor, you need somebody that going to come alongside you and tell you: ‘This is what you need to do to get to the next step.’”

Seacost Church: Check the Oil before You Overheat the Engine

Pausing regularly to re-evaluate and restructure is something that former pastor of ministries at Mount Pleasant, SC-based Seacoast Church (seacoast.org) Geoff Surratt (now director of Exponential) highly recommends.

“I’ve blown three engines of cars in my lifetime, and it’s because I never had time to stop and change the oil,” Geoff says. “After I blew the third engine, I realized this is not smart.”

“As far as churches go,” Geoff continues, “the realization we came to at Seacoast was that every January, we needed to take time to sit down and ask ourselves, ‘Do we need to blow up the organization? Do we need to just tweak the organization? Or is everything flowing and we just need to keep going?’ We had reached the point where we knew every December or January, we were going to take the time to sit down for a couple of days and re-evaluate what the organization looked like.”

For a multisite environment, Surratt recommends monitoring the stress points to determine what might need to change. “I would recommend talking way down in the organization to the front line people to really understand



what they are experiencing,” he says. “For example, children’s ministry relies on the largest base of volunteers in ministry—I think one of the best things a senior pastor can do is actually sit down with the ‘boots on the ground’ staff and listen to how they are feeling.”

“From year to year as we’d look at change, we’d look at small groups and ask ourselves,

‘are small groups growing, are they being multiplied? And if not, is it an organizational problem?’”

“For children’s ministry, we’d ask, ‘are they starving for volunteers, starving for resources, and is that an organizational change that needs to be made?’”

Seacoast learned that they needed to take this “check the oil” approach early on, after growing to a church with five locations within a year of opening their first site. “From the outside, we were growing rapidly and we were adding sites rapidly, but I think the stress level on staff was pretty high,” Geoff says. “It was probably the second year of the process when we had to sit down and say, ‘this isn’t working at all.’ Even though we had growth and new campuses, we

weren’t effective or efficient in how we were leading.”

After a try or two at restructuring, they completely tore it apart and started over. According to Geoff, “We just put everything on paper and said, ‘in an ideal world, how would we structure this?’ At that time, we decided we needed a central support structure. We started by developing more positions and deciding which people should fill those positions— and then how to backfill off of that. And then we came back and implemented it. It wasn’t as neat and clean as it sounds, but that was the process we took in getting the whole church organized around multisite.”

Of course, no structure at Seacoast is a final solution. “I think for me, the important thing to note about organizational structure is that there is no perfect organizational structure,” Geoff says. “I think we’re mistaken if we sit down and say, ‘let’s go draw up the ideal organizational structure and then hold on to that.’ The ideal probably changes yearly, if not more, at least in a growing environment.”

LifeChurch.tv: Start by Structuring around Your Church’s DNA

Kevin Penry, operations leader at Edmond, OK-based LifeChurch.tv (lifetchurch.tv), has a background as an architect to help him look at the organizational structure of churches from a unique angle. “Because of my history in architecture, I have a real strong adherence to form following function,” Kevin says.

Kevin first joined the team when LifeChurch had approximately 1,200 attenders, with the goal of bringing systems to the church’s organizational structure. A year later, when the congregation had 3,500 people, they had the opportunity to merge with another church. Soon thereafter, a third location was opened 100 miles away in Tulsa. That is when some of their organizational challenges began. “It took every bit of authority I had to achieve some of those basic things I took for granted when we were one or two sites,” Kevin says.

“When we made the decision that we were going to be a multisite church, and not just a church that did multisite, two distinct paradigms began to emerge,” Kevin says. “After parsing the organization accordingly, the result was that about fifty percent fell into the central support side, and the balance into the campus-specific side. At that time, nobody really knew what to do with an organization that looked like that. They didn’t know how to effectively resource or evaluate it.”

“Most organizations around that time would have considered such an organizational change to be insurmountable,” he says.

“The changes we made 12 years ago formed the foundation that has allowed us to expand and multiply.”

Today, LifeChurch.tv has 15 campuses in 5 states and an average weekend attendance of 47,000. In addition, there are nearly 100,000 unique

visitors to Church Online each week. Like other churches mentioned in this report, LifeChurch.tv continually reviews its organizational structure, adjusting and changing where necessary. “If you’re feeling pain, to me it’s an indication that there is a lack of synergy or harmony in the way you’re structured,” Kevin says. “We have many things that we encounter where we simply need to move a piece or a role, or redefine it in some way. Often times we don’t feel like we have time to step back and evaluate that, but restructuring gives us the opportunity to look at it with fresh eyes.”

For Kevin, this form-follows-function perspective comes naturally. “I can usually recognize when the activities or the roles in an organization don’t line up with what their goals or their mission is,” he says. But he also realizes that not every church has people on its staff who look at things in that way, and recommends networking with other church leaders for insights and advice.

“It’s possible that a fresh set of outside eyes coming in may serve [other churches] well,” he says. “They need to discover who they are as a church and as an organization. How has God created them in a unique and different way?”

Understanding their church’s unique DNA will be foundational in knowing what to do next.

If a leader tries to structure his life or his organization or even his day around what somebody else does—if they’re not just like him, they’re going to be creating a whole incongruent situation.”

Find the Network You Need

Overall, a common theme among all of



Participants from eight different churches meeting at Leadership Network in Dallas, TX for a 3-day Rapid Growth Churches Leadership Community gathering. Each Leadership Community meets four times over a two-year period, fostering long-term relationships among peers.

the churches interviewed for this report was the importance of participating in a community of peers and/or finding mentors to help navigate through organizational changes and other church challenges.

Michael Fletcher of Fayetteville, NC-based Manna Church (mannachurch.com) spoke about the experiences he’s had in the communities available at Leadership Network. “My life has changed—individually—and my church has changed,” Fletcher says. “I came here not realizing that I was burned out. And then over the course of time I discovered that, and I didn’t know what to do with it.”

After some of the other senior pastors he had networked with suggested a sabbatical, Leadership Network helped Fletcher make a plan for one with the church’s elders. “I felt cared for—almost pastored, really—and so did our church.”

“They don’t teach you this stuff in seminary or Bible college,” Fletcher says. “But you get around some peers and some guys that have challenges where you’re strong, and you have challenges where they’re strong, and the fellowship that comes out of that is

almost equal to what you gain in terms of information, wisdom, and insight and energy.”

It doesn’t have to be a Leadership Network community, but it is important to look to outside resources in organizing your church’s structure around its individual DNA. Geoff Surratt mentioned a time when his staff took managerial-level leaders through a Dale Carnegie course, as well as insights gained from Jack Welch’s writings on leadership. Kevin Penry highly recommends tapping the expertise of others who may have marketplace experience in organizational structure.

These leaders have learned to stop regularly, and do the work of improving their organizational structure— as well as networking and collaborating with peers and mentors—and say that it can pay off on a personal level, too. Case in point: “My life has changed. My wife is happy, and I am happy,” Michael Fletcher says. “Somebody asked me the other day, ‘How are you really doing?’ I could honestly reply that I am happier and healthier than I have been in the last 15 years.”

About Leadership Network

Leadership Network’s mission is to accelerate the impact of 100X leaders. These high-capacity leaders are like the hundredfold crop that comes from seed planted in good soil as Jesus described in Matthew 13:8.

Leadership Network...

- explores the “what’s next?” of what could be.
- creates “aha!” environments for collaborative discovery.
- works with exceptional “positive deviants.”
- invests in the success of others through generous relationships.
- pursues big impact through measurable kingdom results.
- strives to model Jesus through all we do.

Believing that meaningful conversations and strategic connections can change the world, we seek to help leaders navigate the future by exploring new ideas and finding application for each unique context. Through collaborative meetings and processes, leaders map future possibilities and challenge one another to action that accelerates fruitfulness and effectiveness. Leadership Network shares the learnings and inspiration with others through our books, concept papers, research reports, e-newsletters, podcasts, videos, and online experiences. This in turn generates a ripple effect of new conversations and further influence.

To learn more about Leadership Network go to www.leadnet.org.



About the Author

Kristin Walters is a freelance writer living in Woodbury, MN. She is a former staff member of Eagle Brook Church, a multisite church with four campuses, and currently attends a two-campus multisite church in Woodbury called Crossroads.

Contact Us

Leadership Network welcomes your response. The primary writer is **Kristin Walters**. Editorial advice was given by Warren Bird, Director of Research and Intellectual Capital Support for Leadership Network. Contact them via stephanie.jackson@leadnet.org

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Rapid Growth Pastors on a Wild Ride: For many of today’s fastest-growing churches and their leaders, the explosive increases are like a wild roller coaster ride: they don’t quite know what they’re in for as they experience the joy of seeing hundreds of people coming to Christ and growing in their faith—all while navigating the challenges of being short on staff and resources and with ever-shifting systems and structures. Jim Kuykendall describes the challenges and questions these rapid growth pastors frequently experience.

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