

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



== 5 Church Growth Hacks ==
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(BUT SHOULDN'T!)

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Healthy things grow and multiply. It's a fact in the natural world but it's also a fact when it comes to churches. **Many church leaders want their churches to grow but they feel stuck.** In fact, your church may have plateaued or be in decline while you seek to understand what other churches are doing to grow.

In my book, [UNREASONABLE CHURCHES](#), I explore the fact that 94% of churches are losing ground against the growth of the communities they serve. **I believe it's more important than ever for us to study the churches that buck that trend and find transferable lessons for all of our churches.** Every week on the unSeminary Podcast, we talk to the leaders on the inside of some of the fastest-growing churches in the country and dive deep into what they are learning. Many of the churches are listed on *Outreach Magazine's* "[100 Fastest-Growing Churches in America](#)" ... the definitive guide to the churches we should be looking at.

I've pulled together 5 growth hacks from the last few years of lessons from these churches. Your church should think about the following if you want to reach more people in your community:



1) Aggressively Engage People into Community

Contrary to the popular notion that large and fast-growing churches are shallow and lack community, they are actually obsessed with plugging people into smaller sub-communities.

These churches understand that the way a church scales to reach lots of people is by ensuring they have a quality small group experience. The path to growing large is getting small.

As an example, [Layne Schranz from Church of the Highlands](#) talks about the “free market” approach to small groups. His church worked hard to create a system that quickly connects everyone to a group.

- **Connect people in relationships.** // Most people would look at Church of the Highlands and think that 31,000 is a massive number of people to get plugged in beyond weekend services. Layne explains that they work very hard to connect people in relationships outside of Sunday because that is where real life change happens. The beauty of the system that Church of the Highlands developed for their small groups is that it’s effective (they have more people coming to small groups than the weekend services!), completely scalable and can be used by other churches – whether they have an attendance of 80, 800 or 8000.
- **Ask your members to turn their lives into ministry.** // Human beings naturally group, Layne points out, within work and all areas of life. It makes sense to use small groups in ministry as well. But don’t ask your members to stop their lives to join a small group; instead, help them strategically turn their lives into ministry using small groups. Church of the Highlands uses what they call a “free market” system for groups, where they allow small groups to reflect people's passions and interests. For example, people who have a passion for working with the elderly can use that focus to minister in nursing homes. Let your members determine what their group looks like and when and where they meet instead of dictating what you think it should be.

- **Spiritually identify and move one step.** // The overriding expectation of every small group at Church of the Highlands is that the leader spiritually identifies every member. In other words, where is that person with God? As Layne says, a small group may have someone who has come to church all their life but doesn't have a relationship with God as well as a seasoned believer. Once the small group leader has spiritually identified where each person is at the moment, their task is to help the people in their group to take one step. That looks different for each person – it could be making a decision for Christ or encouraging someone to start serving at church or leading their own group.

Fast-growing churches work to move people into groups because they understand that people who are engaged in these communities are more deeply committed to the church. In turn, they invite people and push the mission of the church forward.

2) Build Growth-Oriented Teams

It's the teamwork that makes the dream work. At the core of all fast-growing churches is a solid team that pushes the mission forward. **Typically, these are "staff-led" churches where the team is filled with competent specialists in a wide variety of ministry areas.** Rather than a collection of "jack-of-all-trades," these staff teams have subject-matter experts that apply their competence toward the mission.

[Bob Smith from 2|42 Community Church](#) talked about church team dynamics that help fuel growth in a podcast episode earlier this year. Here are a few lessons we pulled from our conversation with Bob:

- **Think like a new church plant.** // As Bob says, one of the ways 2|42 Community Church keeps things simple is to think like a new church plant and value people on the edges of their ministry. With about 50% of their attendees being spiritually curious but having no real relationship with God yet, 2|42 is laser-focused on the mission to reach the lost rather than engage people's personal preferences. They keep asking themselves, "What does it look like to start a new church and reach people who are far from God, rather than expanding an already established church by transferring people?"
- **Have a church-wide focus.** // 2|42 is a staff-led church. They have a team of leaders who guard the mission and keep things running in the direction where the church wants to focus. But the lead team is focused church-wide rather than on individual campuses. This means that everyone works together to ensure the success of the entire church and no one on the lead team has a stake in just one campus.
- **Find new ways to grow in an entrepreneurial spirit.** // Bob reminds us that it's easy to keep up an entrepreneurial spirit with a new project. People get excited about starting a new church or a new mission project and will give their time and money. But that spirit wears off so you need to find new ways to grow and revive that excitement. While 2|42 Community Church is centrally controlled and its campuses operate more as "company stores" than franchises, they realize future growth requires them to create systems that empower campuses to think more like entrepreneurs. Campuses need to come up with their own ideas while still maintaining and distributing high-quality centralized content. Part of that is establishing goals at the central level and then allowing ministries and campuses the liberty of figuring out how to execute on them. This helps keep everyone engaged, builds excitement and encourages leadership.

- **Think about cultural fit.** // When adding new people to your staff or volunteer teams, Bob says that we need to think about “cultural fit” – more well-known as “chemistry.” Determine how the person fits, not only into the overall staff but into the department they’ll be joining. Also, consider what sort of entrepreneurial skills they have. What kind of a problem-solver and self-starter are they?



3) Defer to the Next Generation

One of the universal truths across fast-growing churches of any "flavor" is that they all have a robust ministry to the next generation. They all work actively to pass the message along to the upcoming generation of believers. **Fast-growing churches never stop asking what they can do to reach younger people.** In fact, one of the signs of a plateauing church is its average age creeping up with every year. Finding ways to defer to the next generation is critically important.

[Chad Fisher from Rock City Church talked through the factors in leading a millennial mega-church](#) earlier this year and I love so much about what he had to offer. His church is a living example of successfully reaching out to a demographic that many churches struggle with.

- **Engage young people while also pulling in older generations.** // Chad believes that it's harder for older churches to engage young people. Younger pastors and leaders have an advantage when drawing in young people and really reaching them, while also bringing in the older generations. One way to do this is to reach out to the older generations by asking for advice and using them as teachers and guides to the younger generations. This requires an intentional focus.
- **Use creativity and branding to reach the young.** // Rock City Church recently did a survey asking young people what it is at the church that they believe reaches their generation the best. The most common responses had to do with creativity and branding — things that don't seem very spiritual but which can have a big impact. Young people are bombarded daily with graphics, videos and music from companies marketing their brands. Churches can use these same techniques to reach out to young people. It's something they can relate to and part of the world they know.
- **Embrace simplicity and generosity.** // The 2 things that Chad believes define Rock City Church's appeal to younger generations are simplicity and generosity. The message is simple. The worship experience is simple, without a lot of stage props and flash. The service is simple, focused on the message of Jesus Christ. Young people are looking for simple truths, a clear explanation of what it means to follow Jesus and exactly what the Word of God says. On the subject of generosity, Rock City has a program called One For One, in which they set aside \$1 in honor of each person who walks through the door. They then use that money to bless others. The heart of God is generous — He generously gave His Son to us to save us. Churches should demonstrate that generosity to others and model the heart of Christ through giving.
- **Avoid disconnect.** // Chad thinks that a lot of churches lose people by having too many videos, announcements and other things that disconnect or distract the audience from the simple message of Christ. Let people hear the Word of God and what it means without too many distractions. Invite them to join ministry teams or small groups and they can then live out the teachings of Jesus through their work.

4) Help People Constantly Take Next Steps

Why do people connect with your church? People find "value" in a church when they grow there. If they aren't being challenged and taking new steps, they just won't plug in. **Growing churches present clear and obvious next steps for people to develop their faith.** They focus on "next steps" constantly as they interact with people regardless of where they are at in their spiritual journey.

Earlier this year, [Ryan Britt of Church of Eleven22 talked about next steps in a young church with explosive growth](#) and I found it an enlightening conversation.

- **Move beyond a goal of growth.** // How did the Church of Eleven22 connect so many people and gain 6,000 attendees in just 3 years? Ryan says that growth was never the goal. The Church of Eleven22 has never done outside marketing or sent mailers out to advertise themselves. Instead, their growth came from word of mouth, with hundreds of first-time visitors coming each month. As Ryan says, "That foundation of people being missional and inviting their neighbors is key to assimilation." Once they get to church, visitors already have a relationship and the beginnings of connection.

- **Assimilate and grow through next steps rather than a formula.** // Church of Eleven22 is located in an old Walmart. It doesn't do light shows or anything fancy to draw in people. Ryan says that it really is an encounter with God that the church gives them through His Word that keeps people coming back. Church of Eleven22 doesn't preach a formula that people need to follow but instead they preach verse by verse with steps connected to each other.
- **Work together to move people along the journey.** // The Church of Eleven22 is all about helping people take their next steps. In the example of baptism, getting baptized is not the end of the journey, it's just another step along the way in your relationship with Jesus Christ. It's very easy for the baptism committee to be focused only on baptism, but forget to remind people that this is only one piece of the overall puzzle. Ministry leaders need to work together to help others remember to take their next steps even if that "next step" isn't in the area they manage.
- **Use response cards for assimilation at services.** // Church of Eleven22 uses their [response cards](#) each Sunday as a way for people to take next steps. Prior to the message, one of the pastors will talk through announcements and remind people to fill out the response cards as the Lord leads them during the service. Response cards contain a place for prayer requests, but also ways to take a next step, such as becoming members, giving their hearts to Jesus or learning about serving or giving opportunities. There is always a focus on "How will you respond?" that encourages people to do what God is calling them to do at that moment.



5) Seek to Learn (and Network) With Other Church Leaders

This is probably the most "meta" of all the ideas in this list. The fact is that growing churches are led by growing leaders. **These churches are all led by leaders who network and learn from other church leaders.** Rather than waiting until these lessons end up in books or as talks at conferences, they reach out to other growing churches to explore what they can apply.

Listen in as [Darin Poli from River Valley Church](#) talks about [networking with other leaders to accelerate your ministry](#). He gives some clear lessons and examples on how learning from other leaders helps his team grow!

- **Find similar people around the country and network with them.** // In order to work with excellence as an executive pastor in a growing church, Darin challenges his own personal growth. He does this by networking with other people in similar positions around the country to learn from their experiences and share ideas. This type of networking doesn't mean just following their blogs or social media, but actually communicating with these individuals, getting to know them and building relationships. Darin calls these people peers in position but not peers in influence. This means that there may be an executive pastor who has been in a similar position for much longer or someone who works with more campuses than Darin does. Learning from those connections is a huge part of Darin's growth in his role and he models that for the staff at River Valley as well.
- **Chase people.** // When asked how he finds these people to create strong network connections, Darin's answer is that he chases them. "I believe you gotta chase people," he says with a laugh. He doesn't just have his assistant send one email to try to make a connection. Darin tries to get into their world personally. He'll attend their conferences and speak with them face-to-face, asking them to have coffee with him. This helps Darin determine if there's a true relational chemistry. Sometimes the timing isn't right and that's okay. If he wants someone in his life, he believes the responsibility is on him to chase them and pursue that connection.
- **Ask a clarity question.** // There is a fine line between chasing someone and harassing them, so it's important to tread that line carefully. Darin makes a couple of connections with the person and then asks what he calls the clarity question: "Do you have time for another network connection in your life?" Most people want to know what the other person expects from the connections they make. It's important to let that other person know that you want someone to share ideas and experiences, but it has to be something you both want. Let the person know if you want to talk on the phone a few times or trade emails. Make it clear that there is no pressure and that you will accept it if they say no or if it isn't a good time at the moment.

Who are you learning from these days?

I'd love to hear which churches you are learning from at the moment! unSeminary is always on the hunt for churches and church leaders who are doing something unique in their community to reach people.

Leave a comment at unSeminary.com with your suggestions for churches that we should be talking with regarding what's happening in their neck of the woods!

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