

Bad Math Lie No. 2: Worship Capacity and Options for Growth

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When I was a kid, my sisters and I usually only went to church when we stayed at one of our grandparents' homes on a Saturday night. One set of grandparents went to a large Baptist church that had just built an amazing new building. The seats were like the ones in the movie theater down the street from our house. They were just big and comfortable enough for my Sunday morning nap. Our other grandmother went to a church that had a much older building. They had pews. Although there was more room to stretch out for the nap, they had a funky smell and were covered in a really ugly orange fabric that was not comfortable to lie on. I wondered why they just didn't get rid of them. After all, everyone knew they were bad and stunk; "pews" was an appropriate name.

It wasn't until much later that I discovered they weren't named pews because of their smell or their look. And while I still do not know how or why they were given such an unfortunate name, I am certain of a few things: First, they are everywhere. There must have been an era when building church pews was a lucrative business. Second, I have learned that not all of them smell. Third, some of them can be beautiful and very appropriate for a room's style and architecture. Fourth, they have inadvertently contributed to Bad Math Lie No. 2.

Bad Math Lie No. 2

When your church's auditorium reaches 80 percent of its capacity, it is full..

As a young pastor, I remember being told this again and again. It was drilled into my head that once the room reached 80 percent, we had to make a change. The change could mean only one of two things: going to two services or relocating.

As a church consultant, I cannot tell you how many times I have seen churches that reach the 80 percent, believe the lie and go to two services. Within a few weeks, the church had to double its ability to lead worship, teach, do kid's ministry and greet. The hope in making these huge leadership decisions is that by adding a second service, the church will begin to grow because of the new space that's available. While this may be true, the immediate reality is that the church now has one service in prime time and one service in not so prime time. For example, when going from one Sunday morning service that meets at 10 a.m., to two services that meet at 9 a.m. and 10:30 a.m., the main service will most likely be viewed as the 10:30 service. The 9 a.m. service becomes the "practice" service and, on average, will

attract only 20 percent of the main service and will grow at a much slower rate.

Let's look at how this plays out practically:

Your church runs 240 people on a Sunday morning. Your auditorium seats 300 people. This means that according to Bath Math Lie No. 2, you are at capacity. You decide to go to two services. After the initial excitement, you find that your first service is attracting 48 people and your second, 192 people. Both services take the same number of people to lead. The first service will most likely grow at a much slower pace. It is usually viewed as the backup service that people go to on a Sunday when they can't go to the main service. The second service will grow more rapidly. It won't take long to gain just 48 people, which means you're back where you started but with fewer options.

The cost for starting a second service is high and ongoing. (Bad Math Lie No. 3 deals with making the move to two services – look for it later this year). So, all of this begs the question, "What do we do when we reach capacity?" And maybe the next question is, "What is capacity?" This takes us back to the smelly problem of the pews and beyond. Pews are undefined space. Chairs are defined space. The average church chair gives each person about 21 inches of space. The average folding chair gives people 18 inches of space. In a pew, people take as much space as they want. I don't know about you, but given the chance, I am going to take more space rather than less. Can you imagine what it would be like to have an airplane full of pews? I am quite sure I could figure out how to take up the entire pew row on the plane.

I am not advocating the banishment of pews. Some church buildings would look all wrong with folding chairs or theater seats. I am, however, saying that your seating style plays greatly into determining capacity. If your auditorium has pews, your capacity percentage drops. For example, if you have pews, you may find that your room capacity is actually closer to 70 percent, not 80 percent. If, however, your church has chairs, your capacity can be much higher.

The Who and Where Factors

There is another factor that needs to be taken into account when determining capacity – the age of your crowd. Simply put: The older the congregation, the lower the capacity. As we age, our need for personal space grows. Our cars, houses and even bodies tend to get bigger. If you lead a church of young adults, the capacity of the auditorium can potentially exceed 100 percent. Capacity can not only go beyond its limits, but also it can serve a great purpose for it to go beyond its limits. To young adults, the crowded room is comfortable, and it communicates that the place is alive. To have a standing-room-only auditorium for a time can build the momentum, create a sense of excitement, encourage your crowd to arrive early to get a good seat, and help create a sense of urgency to make a move or a change.

Other factors need to be taken into account when determining capacity. Is there a balcony? How many of the seats are in the balcony? How many seats are under the balcony? Generally speaking, balcony seats are not considered prime locations. They can be good for overflow seating, but most people choose balcony seats as secondary seating. Likewise, seating under the balcony is not a hot commodity. In many older churches with balconies, the switch to projecting words on a screen was made, but often the screens can't be seen when standing at a seat under the balcony. So, if your church has ample balcony seating and lots of under-balcony seating, your capacity is going to be lower.

What's Good Math?

If your auditorium has pews and your average crowd is older than 40, your capacity could be as low as 70 percent. At this point, there are many possible solutions. If it's appropriate for your room, converting from pews to chairs can buy you time and space. If this isn't an option, consider adding a second venue within your building at the same service time to accommodate overflow. This is a good interim step before going to a full-blown second service. The overflow service can follow any format you want, including a hybrid of live worship and a video feed for teaching. This can help people feel as though they are more engaged in the service, as watching an entire service via video feed can make a room feel disconnected.

If your auditorium has chairs and your crowd is older than 40, your capacity can be stretched to closer to 90 percent. Try removing 10 percent of the chairs from the back of the room prior to the start of the service. This will force people to sit closer to the front. As the front chairs fill up, you can add back in the 10 percent you removed. This does three things. First, it controls the seating dynamic by forcing people to sit closer to the front. Second, it creates an air of excitement that seats had to be added. Third, it provides specific seats for those who arrive a little late. Again, once you've reached capacity, look for other venues within your building to conduct overflow services.

Finding Your Own Solution – Quickly

No matter the age of your crowd or the type of seating, it's crucial to make a specific determination as to your capacity. Once you've reached that capacity, it's vital to put a plan into place. Even in a younger church, people will only endure the cramped seating for a while (maybe six months). People usually don't leave a church because they can't find a seat. However, as time goes on, they will become less faithful. They'll begin to think that if they can't get to church early or on time, they may as well not go. They'll also shy away from inviting new people, not wanting to navigate the seating difficulties with guests.

Once you've determined your capacity, do everything you can to find any and all solutions. Starting a second service should be your last choice. Other viable options

include: using secondary venues, changing the seating, asking your leaders to give up their seats, getting people in pews to move to the middle, keeping your choir in the choir loft throughout the service, or starting a children's church that runs the entire time of your adult service.

Regardless of the type of seat I was sleeping in on a Sunday morning as a kid, my grandma would always poke me and tell me to sit up straight and pay attention – which I did. She would then poke my grandpa and tell him to do the same. (Grandpa usually just went back to sleep.) Today, I'm wondering why we insist on making up one-size-fits-all numbers -- and worse, one-size-fits-all solutions. The thought of finding our own solutions to these mathematical church challenges – rather than relying on bad math lies – makes me sit up straight in my chair and take notice. Grandma would be proud.

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