

The 80% Rule... Myth, or Fact?

By Gary Nicholson

“When a church building reaches eighty percent of its capacity, it is effectively saturated and growth will cease.”

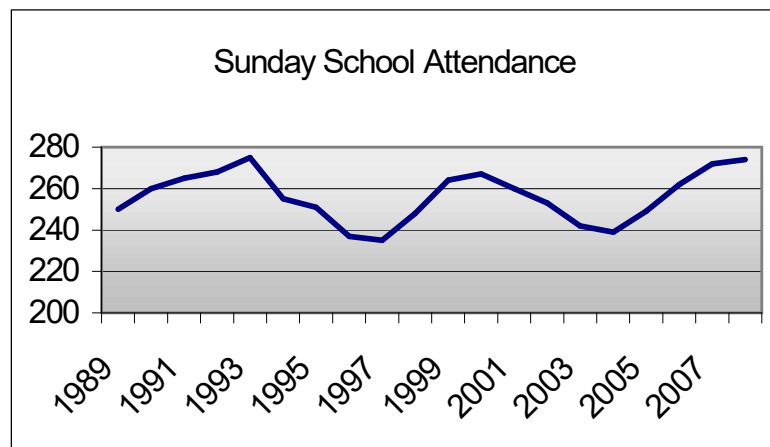
Is this statement fact or fiction? Is this an iron-clad rule that churches need to heed or face a plateau in growth, or is it a rumor promoted by overzealous church builders who just want to construct new buildings for their own glory or profit?

After hearing the 80% rule for years as a staff member in churches, I had grown to accept it as fact, but when I began to professionally consult with churches and advise them on their buildings, I was hesitant to quote this as gospel. What proof was there? I began an investigation. I looked at churches that were growing and those that were not. After visiting over one hundred churches, looking at worship and education space, the answer was very clear.

The principle did hold water. I saw church after church which had reached a plateau in its growth, sometimes over a period of many years. Each time, the attendance plateau was almost exactly 80% of the lesser of education or worship capacity of the facilities, regardless of the capacity of the other. A church might have more capacity in the worship, but it was clear the education facility was holding back its growth because it had reached some practical limit to growth. In other cases the education capacity might be available, but the worship space was saturated, and so the growth had slowed, or even stopped. Saturated education space was the most frequent offender.

There are exceptions. For churches in some cultures the pressure might not be the same, however, there seems to be a saturation point with all congregations. These were mostly white, middle class churches in suburban America. The comfort limit for each congregation might be a little different, but in these churches I was serving, it was consistently about 80%.

In a small Georgia town I worked with a church that had been through many staff changes, and for a time had seemed to stretch the limits of the building to break the 250 attendance barrier, but eventually the attendance came back to level off at that same 80% level where it had been before.



For over thirty years, this church had struggled with the question of why it couldn't seem to get past this growth barrier. It seems when a new staff member, or big events happens, there is a temporary increase, but if nothing is done to offer relief from the crowding and congestion, it will not last. Congregation members would point to a time when they were running more in attendance than they are now, but for some reason it was not sustained.

Sometimes space has been lost or reassigned to storage, offices, or other uses and is no longer available for growth. This must be taken into consideration when evaluating the current capacity and comparing it to previous experience. What is 80% of capacity now, might only have been 50% of the former capacity.

When growth plateaus, staff members might leave in frustration, or the church may blame them for the lack of growth, and ask them to leave. A new staff might generate a temporary spurt, but soon reality sets in and the cycle starts again. The roller coaster of up and down attendance is characteristic of a church with a saturated facility that has reached the 80% threshold. Although there can be other causes for growth plateaus, there is no denying that this one demands action to remedy before other solutions can have their desired affect.

This does not mean that growth stops as soon as the attendance reaches 80% for the first time. It is only an estimate of the sustainable average attendance.

Of course, to average 80% of capacity, there will be times when the attendance is considerably above 80%, and times when it is below that mark. There are ways to stretch the envelope such as going to multiple services, or Sunday schools. Never tell a church they cannot grow beyond this number, because that can become a self-fulfilling prophesy. They need to be given a solution and helped to understand how they can grow beyond this limitation. That might entail bringing in additional space, multiple use of space, renting or borrowing space, or construction of new space.

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The rule applies to worship as well as to education space. I have seen many worship centers that reach the 80% mark and feel full. Some church members have a hard time understanding this. Here is what happens:

Let's say the capacity of a worship center is 500. There are 44 seats in the choir and 456 in the congregation. With 80% of the seats full, there will be 400 in attendance. Looking at the distribution of the people, you might see 40 in the choir and 360 in the congregation. So where are the empty seats?

Keep in mind that growth means new people. These visitors are the ones who will be looking for your empty seats: There are four empty seats in the choir loft. (Good luck getting visitors to sit there!) The remaining 456 seats are in 38 pews, with each pew seating 12 people. But, of course, nobody sits on the first row, so that is 24 empty seats. If the remaining 36 pews each has two empty seats, that will be 72 empty seats distributed throughout the room. Together with the front row and those in the choir loft, that accounts for all 100 empty seats.

Now visualize that room, two empty seats on each pew. Perhaps some are together in the middle of the row, others are distributed with one empty seat at each end of the pew, etc. Now, your guests walk in with a family of four... where will they sit? It will be very hard to find four seats together, unless you have very good ushers who help them find a place,



or your people are ready and willing to give up their favorite seats and rearrange themselves to accommodate them.

Even though regular attenders might not notice it, you can imagine the scenario I just described might happen week after week in a church averaging 80% or in its worship center. Eventually it will find a level that is comfortable for the congregation. That number, historically, is 80%. It feels full, but not too full. That becomes the sustainable average attendance over time. A church may be able to grow beyond it for a time, but it will not be likely to sustain it.

In education space, the same principle applies, but may look a little different. Let's say the young adult group has a great week, and fills up their class room 100%. There are lots of babies and other preschoolers, too, so these areas are crowded, perhaps 95% full. Yet, there is room to grow in the senior adult men's class. You can't put young adults or preschoolers in the senior adult men's class, so there remains open, unused space there this week.

You might try to rearrange the space to give the young adults the larger room, but the next week, the senior adults have a great week and they are the ones who are crowded and there is room in the student's space. And so it goes, from week to week it changes, but always someone is crowded and some space is less crowded. You could never assign the space to be 100% efficient, even if you reassigned classes every week!

Most churches can only reassign space once a year, and sometimes, or for some spaces, less often than that. The result is that on any given Sunday, the available space will do well to achieve 80% full. Any one area may not be 80% full every week. Some areas may have lots of room, but there is no way to balance these areas out due to the distribution of the age groups and irregular attenders. Experience and research shows saturation occurs at the 80% mark in most churches.

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Other factors can effect the practical limit of a facility to contain growth, too. The quality of space has some bearing on this. If the space is of lesser quality than the people are used to, it may never get to 80% full, and so would have to be discounted when calculating the capacity of the church to grow. The parking lot can be another limiting factor that may mean that 80% is not achievable.

Is the 80% rule real?

Yes.

Can you do something about it other than build?

Churches have been very successful at "cheating" the 80% rule by offering multiple seevices and/or multiple Sunday schools. But there is another principle to remember when considering these strategies.

Balance must be considered. For some churches, worship attendance will not benefit from dual services unless there is capacity for the people in small groups. That limitation



alone has been responsible for the failed attempts of many churches to successfully implement dual services. They decide to test two worship services to see if it helps, but do nothing to increase the capacity for Sunday school (or small groups), and the church does not grow, or may even lose attendance! The congregation sees it is not working and abandons the idea saying “we tried it, and that won’t work here”, never to attempt it again.

The principle of balance also applies to education space. If the church attempts two Sunday schools, but does nothing to increase the preschool capacity, that is probably doomed to fail as well, due to a lack of balance. Since preschoolers are in their rooms during both Sunday school and the worship time, dual Sunday schools usually does nothing to increase preschool capacity, while everyone else’s capacity has doubled by going to two sessions. Some rooms must be converted to preschool use, or enough preschool space added to balance with the new capacity in order for dual Sunday schools to be an effective strategy for a church.

Multiple-service churches probably will not achieve 80% in both sessions. A more realistic goal would be to achieve 80% full in one session and 70% full in the other. This yields an attendance of 150% of the capacity of the building. That is significant growth!

The 80% rule is a great preliminary tool to assess the constraints on your growth, but a closer look may be needed to assure that overall balance is also achieved between the worship, and small groups, the preschool, children, students, and adults in education capacity as well as parking. Everything must have room to grow to maximize the growth potential of the church.

If your church is at or near 80% of capacity in one or more areas here are some steps to take:

1. Monitor your attendance in worship, each small group or Sunday school class, and in the parking lot. Know when to anticipate the need and plan alternatives to alleviate the pressure growth will bring.
2. Never tell a church they cannot grow beyond this number, because that can become a self-fulfilling prophesy. Instead, let the congregation know there will be constraints to growth that can be dealt with. Churches can be successful at growing beyond the 80% mark for a time, and if other accommodation is made, the growth may well be sustained without an inevitable plateau.
3. Take action. Multiple services is usually the most cost effective and quickest way to resolve some capacity issues. If that option is exhausted, a building project may be needed. Start now to begin the planning and building process!

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