

EMPTY SEATS

Why People Say Yes to Your Church
and Never Show Up

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*For every pastor who ever sat in an empty room
on a Tuesday morning and asked God if He was still there.*

He was.

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

I did not write this book from a stage looking down. I wrote it from the floor.

There was a season in our church where we were doing everything right spiritually and everything right strategically, or so we thought. We were praying. We were preaching the Word without compromise. We were running ads, building our social presence, and putting real money behind reaching our city. And people were responding. They were filling out forms. They were saying yes.

But Sunday would come and the room would not match the pipeline.

Maybe your version of that story does not involve ads at all. Maybe it is the outreach event that drew a crowd and produced no new faces the next Sunday. The members who keep inviting friends who keep almost coming. The first-time guest who said they would be back and never came back. The shape of the effort changes from church to church. The wound does not. The seats stay empty in a way that does not match the work.

I remember sitting with that tension and honestly asking God if I had missed something. Not in a faithless way. In a real way. The kind of question a pastor asks when he is standing between what he sees in the Spirit and what he sees in the natural. And what I saw in the natural was empty chairs.

What God showed me was not a problem with His calling. It was a problem with our infrastructure. We had built a front door but we had no hallway. People were saying yes and then walking into nothing. No system. No preparation. No bridge between their decision and their Sunday morning.

This book comes out of building that bridge. And I want to be careful with how I say this. I am not writing to you from a finished victory, and I am not selling you a theory. The system in this book is running at One Way Church right now. We track the numbers every single week. Some weeks confirm the system and some weeks correct it. What you are holding is what we are learning while the machine is running, not a trophy from a race already won.

If you are a pastor with a vision that is bigger than your current attendance, this book was written for you. It does not matter if your church is 75 people or 750. If you just launched and the attrition has been mind-boggling, this is for you. If you have been established for years and the growth has quietly flatlined, this is for you. If you are scratching your head trying to figure out what is happening between your outreach and your Sunday service, keep reading.

With you,

Pastor Jeremy Gibson

Lead Pastor, One Way Church | Suwanee, Georgia

The Tuesday Morning Question

When the room is empty and the doubt is loud

There is a moment that most pastors have had and very few will talk about.

It usually happens on a Tuesday. Sunday is far enough behind you that the adrenaline has worn off, and far enough away that the preparation anxiety has not kicked in yet. It is quiet. You are sitting in your office or maybe at your kitchen table. And the weight of what you saw Sunday morning is sitting right there with you.

The seats were not full.

Not just empty in a launch-phase-we-are-still-growing kind of way. Empty in a way that does not match the effort. You prayed. You prepared. You put the invitation in front of your city, however you do that, through ads, through outreach, through your people inviting their people. And some of them said yes. They told you they were coming. And then Sunday came and the chairs told a different story.

***"Am I doing something wrong? Did God actually call me to this?
Where are the people?"***

I know those questions. I have sat in that exact space. And I want to tell you something before we go any further in this book.

Those questions do not mean your faith is weak. They do not mean your calling is wrong. They do not mean God has abandoned your church. They mean you are a pastor who cares deeply about the people he was sent to reach, and the gap between what you see in the Spirit and what you see in the natural is creating very real pain.

That pain is actually holy. It means you have not gotten comfortable with empty seats. You have not adjusted your expectations downward. You have not made peace with a room that should be fuller.

Good. Do not let that go.

God wants His house full.

That is not a motivational statement. That is Scripture. In Luke 14 Jesus tells a parable about a man who throws a great banquet and sends his servant out with one instruction when the invited guests do

not come. Go out into the roads and the country lanes and make people come in so that my house will be full.

Make people come in so that my house will be FULL. That is the heart of God for His church. Full. Not at capacity someday. Full. The impulse you have been feeling to fill those seats is not ambition. It is alignment with the heart of the Father.

So the question is not whether God wants your church to grow. He does. The question is why it is not. And I want to tell you what I discovered when I stopped asking the spiritual questions and started asking the operational ones.

For us, the problem was not attraction. It was everything after the yes.

At One Way Church, people were responding. They were clicking. They were filling out forms and saying they would be there. The front end was working. What was not working was everything that happened after someone said yes.

There was nothing. No confirmation. No preparation. No bridge between their decision on a Wednesday night and their walk through the doors on Sunday morning. We had built a front door and then left them standing in the street for days with no map.

Your church may be losing people in that same place. Or your church may be losing them earlier, before anyone says yes at all, because not enough people ever hear the invitation. Those are two different wounds, and by the end of this book you will know exactly which one is bleeding, or whether it is both.

That is what this book is about.

CHAPTER 02

The Wrong Diagnosis

Why the problem is not what you think it is

When the seats stay empty long enough, every pastor reaches for an explanation. And almost every explanation we reach for first is wrong.

Some pastors decide it is a preaching problem. So they study harder, restructure the sermon, sharpen the delivery. The preaching gets better. The room does not.

Some decide it is a spiritual problem. So they call the church to more prayer, more fasting, more intercession over the empty chairs. Hear me clearly, I will never tell you to pray less. Prayer is not a growth tactic, it is the life of the church. But many praying churches are still sitting half empty, and the answer to that is not that God is withholding. It is that something operational is broken, and God is not going to automate what He told us to steward.

Some decide it is a people problem. The members do not invite. The congregation is not passionate enough. So the pastor preaches on evangelism and pushes invite cards, and for two weeks it works, and then it fades, because guilt is not infrastructure.

And some decide it is a marketing problem. The ads are weak. The creative is off. The budget is too low. So they hire someone to fix the ads, or spend more, or switch agencies. And sometimes the leads go up. The form fills increase. The pipeline looks busier. And then Sunday comes and the same percentage of people show up as before.

Every one of those diagnoses feels right in the moment. Every one of them can consume a year of your leadership energy. And every one of them misses the actual mechanics of how a room gets full.

A full room is not one miracle. It is two mechanisms. Interest has to be generated, and interest has to be converted into attendance.

The two-part machine

Strip away all the noise and filling seats comes down to two questions. First, are enough people finding out about your church and responding? That is traffic. Ads, outreach, invitations, your building on a busy road, your name coming up in a conversation at work. Second, when someone responds and says yes, does that yes actually turn into a body in a chair on Sunday? That is conversion.

Most churches have never separated those two questions. So they treat every empty seat as the same problem, when in reality there are two completely different failures that produce the same empty chair. A church with no traffic has seats that nobody ever intended to fill. A church with traffic and no conversion has seats that people said yes to and never sat in. The first church needs more interest. The second church is generating interest and bleeding it out before Sunday morning.

Many churches are living both failures at once. Not enough people responding, and the ones who do respond dissolving somewhere between their yes and your service. Until you can see which half of the machine is broken in your house, every fix is a guess.

What the industry gets wrong

Most church growth services measure their success by the number of leads they generate. They will show you how many people clicked your ad. How many filled out the form. How many were added to the pipeline. They will present those numbers on a report and call it growth.

But here is the question none of them are asking: how many of those people actually showed up on Sunday?

I have looked at what other services report and what they do not report. The silence on attendance conversion is deafening. They will tell you everything except the one number that matters. Because the one number that matters would expose the half of the machine they never built.

We built GrowChurch around the opposite philosophy. We do not measure leads. We measure Show-Up Percentage. How many people who said they were coming actually sat in a seat. That is the only number that tells you whether the whole machine is working.

15-20%

AVERAGE SHOW-UP RATE WITHOUT A SYSTEM

40%+

GROWCHURCH TARGET SHOW-UP RATE

That gap is not small. It is not a rounding error. It is the difference between a church that is growing and a church that is spinning its wheels. The rest of this book will show you where that gap lives, how to measure it, and what closes it.

CHAPTER 03

The Gap Nobody Talks About

What happens between the yes and the seat

Picture this. It is a Thursday night. Someone in your city hears about your church. Maybe they saw an ad while scrolling after putting the kids to bed. Maybe a coworker invited them. Maybe they drive past your building every morning and something finally made them look you up.

Something about it stops them. Maybe it is the message. Maybe it is the location. Maybe God is stirring something in them that they have not been able to name yet. Whatever it is, they take the step. They go to your website. They fill out the form, or they text back, or they tell your member they will be there. They say they are coming Sunday at 10 AM.

And then what?

In most churches, the answer is: nothing. The yes goes into a spreadsheet or a pipeline or somebody's memory and sits there. Maybe someone sees it on Friday and sends a generic email. Maybe there is a text that goes out Saturday morning. Maybe nothing happens at all until after the service when the church realizes the person never showed up.

Meanwhile that person spent Thursday night through Sunday morning without a single touch that prepared them for what they were walking into. They do not know where to park. They do not know which door to use. They do not know what to do with their kids. They do not know how long the service runs or what to expect when they walk in. Life gets in the way on Saturday. Sunday morning they wake up a little later than planned. The logistics feel complicated. The friction wins. They stay home.

The seat was never the problem. The days between the yes and the chair were the problem.

This is the gap. And it is entirely fixable.

What a system does in those days

When we built the Street to Seat System at One Way Church, we mapped every single friction point between the moment someone says yes and the Sunday morning experience. And then we built

automated sequences that addressed each one.

The moment someone plans a visit, they get a personalized confirmation within 30 seconds. Not a batch email the next morning. Not a generic auto reply. A real text that uses their name and tells them exactly what service they are confirmed for.

Over the next several days they receive messages that build anticipation and remove confusion. Where to park. Which door to enter. What the kids check-in process looks like. How long the service runs. What to expect when they walk in. An arrive-early note the night before. A morning-of reminder on Sunday.

By the time Sunday morning arrives, that person is not wondering what they are walking into. They have been prepared. They feel expected. They feel welcome before they ever set foot in your building. And that feeling is what gets them out of bed.

We went from guessing who was coming to knowing who was coming. And we went from watching people not show up to tracking exactly why they did or did not. Show-Up Percentage became the number that told us everything.

CHAPTER 04

Show-Up Percentage

The only number that tells you the truth

There is a metric that almost no church is tracking, and it is the most important number in your entire growth strategy.

It is not your social media reach. It is not your ad click-through rate. It is not your pipeline size or your lead count or your cost per form fill. Those numbers are all real but none of them tell you what you actually need to know.

The number you need to know is this: of every 10 people who said they were coming to your church, how many actually sat in a seat?

That is Show-Up Percentage. Attended divided by Planned Visits times one hundred. One number. Complete clarity.

Attended	divided by	Planned Visits	x 100	Show-Up %
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If people are saying yes to your church and you have no system in place, your Show-Up Percentage is probably somewhere between 15 and 20 percent on a good week. That means for every 10 people who said they were coming, 8 stayed home.

Think about what that costs you. Not just in outreach dollars. In momentum. In faith. In the energy of your team. In your own spiritual and emotional reserves. You are celebrating pipeline activity while the real outcome is being swallowed by a gap you cannot see because you are not measuring it.

What this looks like in a real church

I am not going to hand you a hypothetical. I am going to hand you last month.

In June, 56 people planned a visit to One Way Church. More than 4 out of every 10 of them walked through our doors on a Sunday morning. And several of those people are now taking next steps toward joining the church.

56

PLANNED VISITS AT ONE WAY CHURCH IN JUNE

40%+

SHOWED UP ON A SUNDAY MORNING

Now let me tell you what those numbers are and what they are not. They are one month, at one church, with a system running behind every planned visit. They are not a promise that your church will see the same numbers, and anyone who promises you that is selling something. Every city is different. Every church is different. Some months will beat that number and some months will correct us.

And notice what the number admits. A Show-Up Percentage over 40 percent still means most of the people who planned a visit did not come. I am not hiding that. That is the point. Because we measure, we know exactly how many we lost, when we lost them, and what to adjust next. A church that does not measure loses more people and never knows it. The number is not a trophy. It is a flashlight.

Why this number changes everything

When you start tracking Show-Up Percentage, everything shifts. You stop celebrating leads and start evaluating systems. You stop asking how many people saw the invitation and start asking how many people sat in the chair. You stop measuring activity and start measuring outcomes.

Most pastors are making growth decisions based on feelings and anecdotes. A few people said the service was good. It felt like a decent Sunday. The offering was up. But feelings are not data and good vibes are not a growth strategy. Show-Up Percentage is data. And data moves churches forward.

"Planned visits are not the win. Attendance is the win."

CHAPTER 05

What a System Actually Does

Removing friction before Sunday arrives

People do not not show up because they changed their mind about God. They do not show up because the friction of showing up for the first time at an unfamiliar place felt bigger than their motivation on that particular morning.

That is the real competition. Not other churches. Not other religions. Sunday morning friction. The not knowing where to park. The wondering what to wear. The trying to figure out where to take the kids. The not being sure what time to leave to arrive on time. The quiet background anxiety of walking into a room full of strangers who all seem to know each other.

Every one of those friction points has a solution. And a system delivers those solutions before the person ever has to ask.

The five friction points every first-time guest faces

01 Logistics

"Where do I park? Which door do I use? What time should I arrive?"

02 Kids

"Where do my kids go? Who watches them? Is it safe? Will they be okay?"

03 Expectations

"How long is the service? What happens during worship? Will I feel awkward?"

04 Belonging

"Will anyone talk to me? Will I feel invisible? Will I feel like an outsider?"

05 Commitment

"If I go once, are they going to pressure me to come every week?"

A system addresses all five of these before Sunday morning. Not through a single email blast. Through a timed, personalized sequence that drips the right information at the right moment in the right tone.

Parking information goes out several days before so they can plan. Kids check-in details go specifically to families with children. Service length and what to expect goes out mid-week. An arrive-early encouragement goes out the night before. A warm same-day reminder goes out the morning of.

None of this requires your team to do anything manually. It runs automatically every week anchored to your service time. You set it up once and it works forever. No date updates. No manual sequences. No week where it accidentally does not go out.

That is what a system does. It removes the friction so that the only thing standing between that person and your church is their own choice. And when you remove the friction, more people choose to come.

The Complete Machine

Traffic and conversion, the two halves of a full room

Before we get to what happens next, I need to talk to you the way I would want another pastor to talk to me. Plainly, and with your church's future in view.

Everything I have described so far, the sequences, the preparation, the friction removal, the Show-Up Percentage, all of it converts interest into attendance. None of it creates interest out of thin air. A conversion system with nobody entering it converts nobody. If your church has no traffic, the most beautifully built bridge in the world stands over a dry riverbed.

You deserve to hear that before you spend a dollar or an ounce of hope on any solution, including mine. Too many pastors have bought half a machine without being told it was half. Some bought traffic and watched most of it evaporate before Sunday. Some bought software and watched it sit empty. Then they blamed themselves, or worse, they quietly wondered if God had stopped moving. The machine was incomplete. Their calling was never the problem.

Half a machine produces whole disappointment. A full room requires both halves running at once: traffic coming to the door, and a system that carries people through it.

The two halves, honestly

Traffic is everything that makes a person in your city aware of your church and willing to respond. Consistent, targeted advertising is the most controllable and measurable form of it, which is why we run ad campaigns for every church we serve. Organic reach, community presence, and personal invitation all feed the same pool. Traffic answers the question: are enough people saying yes?

Conversion is everything that happens after the yes. The confirmation inside 30 seconds. The preparation messages across the week. The friction removal. The reminder on Sunday morning. The attendance tracking that turns a guess into a number. Conversion answers the question: are the people who said yes actually sitting in seats?

So here is what I want you to do, and I want you to actually do it, not just nod at it. Sit down this week and ask those two questions about your house. Are enough people saying yes? And are the yeses

becoming faces on Sunday? Write the honest answer down. Plenty of yeses but empty chairs means your traffic is fine and your conversion is broken. Almost no yeses at all means traffic is the first problem to solve. Weak on both means the machine needs to be built whole. And it can be. None of those answers disqualifies you. Every one of them is a starting point I have seen churches move from.

Why we build both halves

GrowChurch runs the complete machine because I could not, in good conscience, hand a pastor half of one. We generate the traffic through managed ad campaigns, we convert that traffic through the Street to Seat System, and we report the one number that holds both halves accountable: Show-Up Percentage. If the traffic is weak, that number exposes us. If the conversion is weak, that number exposes us. We built our company inside that exposure on purpose, because I believe a vendor who cannot be measured should not be trusted with a pastor's hope.

And hope is really what we are talking about. Behind every growth decision you make is a congregation you love and a calling you have carried through seasons nobody applauded. You have been faithful with the part only you can do. Praying. Preaching. Shepherding. Standing back up on the Mondays you wanted to quit. The machine is the part you were never meant to carry alone, and building it is not a lack of faith. It is what faithfulness looks like when it picks up a tool.

You have diagnosed the wound. You have seen the gap. You know the number that tells the truth and you know the machine has two halves. There is one question left, and it is not whether any of this works. It is what you are going to do about your empty seats. The next chapter is that decision.

What Happens Next

How to move from empty seats to a full room

I want to be honest with you about something before we close.

Reading this book will not fill your church. Understanding the problem is not the same as solving it. And knowing that a machine exists is not the same as having one. Lots of pastors know they need a system. Very few have actually built one.

The difference between the churches that grow and the ones that stall is not knowledge. It is execution. It is the willingness to stop doing church growth by gut feel and build something that runs with or without you managing it every week.

We built GrowChurch so that you do not have to figure out the execution alone. The complete machine described in this book is running at One Way Church right now, with my own people, on my own budget, measured every single Sunday. I am not asking you to trust a theory. I am inviting you into something I am living.

What the system includes

- + Managed ad campaigns that generate consistent traffic for your church
- + The complete Street to Seat automation from the yes to the seat
- + Guest preparation sequences that remove every friction point before Sunday
- + Kids segmentation so families with children get specific preparation
- + A monthly Show-Up Percentage report so you always know the truth
- + Onboarding and training for the one person on your team who runs it

What your team does is simple. One person. Ten minutes after service. Mark who attended. That is the only ongoing requirement. The system handles everything else.

And whichever church you are, this fits. The established church with names in the pipeline and a frustrating gap between the yes and the seat. The church planter who needs a room full of people before launch day. The relational church that grows through invitation and wants to strengthen that without losing its soul. The machine is the same. The shape it takes in your house is what we figure out together.

If you are ready to stop guessing and start measuring. If you are ready to build the bridge between your outreach and your Sunday morning. If you are ready to know your Show-Up Percentage and

watch it move in the right direction. Then the next step is a 30-minute discovery call.

Not a sales call. A conversation. We figure out which half of the machine your church needs first, what the system requires from your team, and what results you can realistically expect. You walk away with complete clarity before you ever make a decision.

GrowChurch prepares people for Sunday before they ever walk in the door.

Book your discovery call at:

growchurchhq.com/apply

The seats are waiting. The system is ready. The only thing left is the decision to build the bridge.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeremy Gibson is the Lead Pastor of One Way Church in Suwanee, Georgia, and the founder of GrowChurch, a church growth infrastructure company built around the Street to Seat System.

He planted One Way Church with his wife Gabrielle and has led the church through the exact challenges described in this book. GrowChurch was built as a direct result of confronting the systems problem at One Way Church, and the complete machine described in these pages runs there every week, measured every Sunday, before it is ever recommended to another church.

Jeremy also leads Jeremy Gibson Ministries and Capacity Leadership, both focused on developing leaders and building the infrastructure that sustains long-term ministry impact.

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