



**FOR YOUR
CONSIDERATION**
April 2017

“*For Your Consideration*” is an occasional information piece about people in mission. Its purpose is to help connect people with other people as they fulfill their ministry. Please feel free to reproduce and distribute as appropriate for your congregational setting. Suggestions for future articles may be sent to:

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What SiZe is Your Congregation?

The information cited below is from “Raising the Roof” – 2006 The Alban Institute

In 2006, the Alban Institute made the following observations about the size of congregations:

- Congregations fall into distinctive size categories, and congregations of different sizes organize in different ways. Each has its own recognizable way of “being church”.
- Average Sabbath attendance—all ages, all Saturday evening or Sunday worship services combined, over the whole year—is the best single indicator of size for Christian congregations.
- Congregations do not grow or decline smoothly, but tend to “plateau” at certain predictable levels of attendance.
- In order to break through an attendance plateau, a congregation must deliberately relinquish familiar patterns of behavior and begin to act as larger congregations act.

A Family-size church (up to 50 adults and children at worship): A small congregation that operates like an extended family. This church is organized around one or two anchoring figures called matriarchs or patriarchs. Such congregations often have part-time pastors, and their clergy tend to adopt a chaplain role.

Pastoral-size church (51 to 150): A coalition of two or three family and friendship networks unified around the person and role of the pastor. Clergy time is largely taken up maintaining a direct pastoral relationship with each member. The governing board usually operates like a committee, arranging much of the day-to-day life of the congregation.

Program-size church (151 to 400): Known for the quality and variety of its programs. Separate programs for children, youth, couples, seniors, and other age and interest groups provide entry points for a wide range of people. The pastor’s crucial role is to recruit, equip, and inspire a small circle of key program leaders. Working as a team with the pastor, they reach out to involve others as program participants and as leaders.

Corporate-size church (401 to 1,000): Known for excellence in worship and music, and for the range and diversity of its programs. Specialized ministries are provided for narrowly identified groups of people. Decision-making is carried out by a multilayered structure of staff, boards, and committees. While clergy continue to provide pastoral care, especially in crisis moments, most members find their spiritual support in small groups or from lay visitors.

Some ambivalence about church growth includes:

- While the pastor and evangelism committee work hard on growth and welcome, members frequently say that it would be best to remain small so that we can all know each other.
- Growth plans are presented primarily as medicine to cure a budget squeeze; leaders hesitate to say that the congregation might have a vocation to reach more people.

- Though members describe the church as welcoming to newcomers, leaders hear many complaints about plans to add capacity; for example, by adding a worship service, expanding the staff, or buying land for parking.

Group-Centered versus Pastor-Centered

The movement from family to pastoral size involves a change in the way the system centers its life. The family-size church feels like a tribe or a “committee of the whole.” Not everyone on the committee has equal influence, but the single circle of members works through in its own characteristic way.

When attendance exceeds 50, the congregation encounters a crisis—the unbroken circle of members no longer works well as the defining constellation of the congregation’s life. Members experience distress because they can no longer keep track of all the relationships. In order to grow further, the system must allow the development of two or three different networks of family and fellowship—each of a mentally manageable size—and it must establish a symbolic center around which those networks can orient themselves. Typically, it becomes “pastor-centered.”

As attendance approaches 150, however, the congregation must become more group-centered once again because the pastor can no longer carry around the whole system in his or her head. There are too many individual pastoral needs to track. A new kind of teamwork becomes necessary in an uneven matrix of leadership where some programs have paid staff, some have volunteer leaders so dedicated that they function like staff, and some have committees at the helm.

In the move to program size, clergy must shift a good deal of their time and attention away from direct delivery of pastoral care toward assembling and guiding that team of program leaders. They must also find ways to offer spiritual enrichment to the board, whose job has become much more demanding. Skills for this kind of group-oriented ministerial leadership have not usually been emphasized in seminary or employed as primary selection criteria in the ordination process. Hence, many clergy find themselves poorly equipped for a pastor-to-program transition.

In the corporate-size congregation, the need for more pastor-centered leadership emerges once again. The program church’s lively but lumpy network of staff, volunteer program heads, and committees can no longer provide the overview and strategic direction the system needs. At corporate size, complex networks of coordination are still required, but the central pastor must begin to project a large enough symbolic presence to unify a diverse and energetic community. To be effective, this high-profile leader must find a reliable way to maintain spiritual perspective and must use the aura of leadership to help the whole system grapple with its core identity and purpose.

Reflection Questions

1. What size is your congregation and how does it behave?
2. What steps does your congregation need to take in order to become the next size congregation?
3. In what ways does your perception of your congregation’s size keep it from growing?