

Church Size and Expectations

Way back in 1986, the Episcopal Church did a study on how church size effected the way that congregations reached new members. The research was written up by a man named Arlin Rothauge, in a booklet called *Sizing up a Congregation for New Member Ministry*. The purpose of the book was to recognize that different sized churches and their pastors recruited and assimilated new members differently. But the theory of different church sizes and how they functioned that Rothauge outlined was so insightful and so helpful that it was readily adapted to describe other aspects of a churches life and work.

Rothauge argued that there are four basic congregation sizes, each one demanding a specific set of behaviors from its clergy. The number of people attending each week and the attitude of the church as well as the amount of money that they have determined what size a church thinks it is, and it sets forth the expectations of what the members and the leadership want their pastor to do with their time each week:

The Family Church (Typically fewer than 50 active members)

In a family sized church, there are easily identifiable patriarchs and matriarchs who take care of all of the church leadership needs. A church of this size wants pastoral care, period. This is the sort of church that wants to see the pastor to drop by their members house for coffee. The key role of the matriarch and the patriarch are to see that the pastor does not take the church off into a new direction of ministry, since they like where they are and they plan to stay there. Since such churches usually cannot pay for a full time pastor, they hang on for decades, managing themselves through a succession of pastors who stay for a short period of time and then move on to other fuller ministries. These churches have learned not to trust clergy, but only themselves and their very capable lay leadership. Roy Oswald of the Alban institute says of Family Churches,

"Sometimes, through the sheer force of personal persuasion, a pastor will talk a [family sized] congregation into trying a new program or two. Pretty soon parishioners find themselves coming to church events much more than they really need to or want to. As they begin then to withdraw their investment from these new programs, the clergy inevitably take it personally."

In order for a family sized church to grow, they first have to decide to do so and to let others into their tight circle. This means letting go of the idea that everyone

who is leading or participating fully in the church will either be related to someone or will have been part of the church for years. It means doing the hard work of trusting an outsider with the future of their preciously guarded church and really investing themselves new programs. Changing from a Family Sized church requires a lot of personal sacrifice and shared leadership.

The Pastoral Church (Typically 50 to 150 active members)

Clergy act as the center of a Pastoral Church. It would be rare for a Bible Study or a Prayer Group to meet without them. In this size church, there are so many maternal and paternal figures around that someone needs to coordinate and manage them. The pastor and a group of Matriarchs and Patriarchs function as the leadership circle, and they communicate and delegate authority, assign

responsibility and recognize others. If the pastor cannot delegate responsibilities, in a pastoral sized church, it is a complete recipe for burn out.

Growth in a pastoral sized church is mainly due to the popularity and effectiveness of the pastor. Visitors like to see the interaction between the pastor and the people and they want to be a part of it. Pastoral churches value intimacy and sometimes get frightened by new faces that appear. They may unconsciously not reach out to newcomers because they don't know them. This will stop any growth and frustrate their leadership.

The Program Sized Church (Typically 150 - 350 members)

In a program sized church, there are many cells of activity, each being run by a lay leader. The pastors job then becomes educating, equipping and managing the groups of lay leaders to effectively run those ministries. In a program sized church, in order to see the pastor, typically, an appointment would be made a week or two in advance, and if the pastor dropped everything to actually see you in the hospital, it meant that your condition would be so life threatening you probably wouldn't live until the morning.

In a program sized church, the pastor becomes more of a chief administrator rather than spending their time doing direct pastoral care. The pastoral care becomes the work of the staff and the lay leaders. Many programs function almost autonomously in a pastorally coordinated Program sized church. Meetings with committees takes up a lot of the pastors time in this sized congregation.

The Corporate Sized Church or Mega Church (350 or more members)

The first thing that you will notice about a corporate sized church is the quality of their worship service. The finest musicians are employed to use the best equipment available to provide a professional quality worship experience. In a corporate sized church, the head pastor will not know most people by name. The head pastor will do almost no pastoral care, very little administration and spend the majority of their time creating sermons and planning exquisitely choreographed worship experiences.

In a corporate sized church, the pastor takes on almost a legendary quality, paying attention to the marketing of their image and finding that their television interviews or book tours or speaking engagements taking big chunks of their calendar. They are CEO's of a very complex organization .

All successful corporate churches will have multiple staff and will need to effectively delegate authority and manage smooth coordination between multiple clergy and the different program camps which are continually vying for the same financial resources and CEO attention.

If this author and description of the way that churches function is correct, here are some questions for you to consider:

- Which size of church do you think 1st Presbyterian Church of Allegan is at?
- What size church did you come from and does that influence your expectations of how a church should function?
- What size Church do you envision 1st Presbyterian to be in the future? What would you be willing to give up in order for that to happen?
- If you could choose to have the pastor drop by your house for coffee or to spend more time on sermon preparation, which would you choose?
- Would you rather your pastor ran a youth group activity or visited a shut in, which would you choose?
- Given these four churches sizes, which would you most like to be a part of?
- Would you rather have a host of programs, run by excellent lay people, or have your pastor run everything that happens?
- Is it more important for you to be able to have coffee with your pastor, or for you to have your pastors most recent book on your coffee table?

The answers to these questions are as much driven by individual preferences as they are to what you grew up with and are used to. But they form the underlying

structure of expectations and work that your church actually does. It is something worth thinking about.

--Reverend Karen Fitz La Barge

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