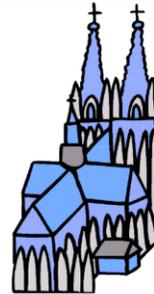


Overview of Church Size Theory

Understanding the basics of Church Size Theory can help us see our own situation anew and better plan for the future.



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Church Size & Its Implications

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Suggested reading for reflection: Acts 11:19 – 30

As the early church grew, it faced different issues of inclusion, acceptance, new member incorporation, and leadership. So, too, present day congregations face different issues and congregational dynamics depending upon their size. Looking at the theories and data of church size, along with our own experience and that portrayed in scripture, helps us to understand better the living work of the Spirit in our midst and better prepare us for ministry.

Note: It is important to note that while attendance figures are one thing, the congregation may behave as if it were a different size parish. This is particularly true as churches grow/decline from one size to another. Size transitions in either direction are hard. Another challenge is that “church size theory” was developed years ago and is based mostly on suburban, white congregations. Many ethnic congregations may be of one size in actual numbers on a Sunday, but function in the manner of a different size. Finally there is some new research that indicates that size of BUDGET may be as much of a contributing factor in determining size as the more traditional Average Sunday Attendance (ASA).

Size is only ONE aspect of congregational culture, although an important one. Where a parish is in its life cycle and whether its size is stable, growing or declining can have a major impact on how the congregation sees itself and on the pressures being placed upon it. For purposes of this discussion, however, the focus is on size only. The size categories are taken from the research report “Congregational Size and Church Growth in the Episcopal Church” by C. Kirk Hadaway, Director of Research at the Episcopal Church Center.

Questions to Get Us Started

- What was the size of your formation (home) church?
- How does that compare with our congregation?



Church Size & Its Implications- 2

Fresh Start.

Talking Points

Helping people think about the size of the churches they have attended helps contextualize the theory in the experience of those present. Early experiences with church often inform one's expectations of what "church" is like. The discussion also helps group development as people learn new things about each other and their expectations of "church."

How large was the church you grew up in or that formed you?

How about our congregation? Is it similar or different in size to the one that formed you?

In your experience, what difference does size make in the role of the rector or other leaders, governance, conflict, or relationships among members?

Facilitate a general discussion.

Let's take a look at church size theory.

Family Size Church

(under 75 Average Sunday Attendance)



- Single cell and Group-centered
- Strong lay leadership. Often power and authority vested in a few individuals (matriarchs and patriarchs)
- Rector often a “chaplain ” -- usually history of short pastorates
- Often successful “niche” churches with vital ministries within their community
- Fights are like family feuds
- Opportunity for new leadership models, not just “one priest-one parish”

Church Size & Its Implications- 3

Fresh Start

Talking Points

When we talk about this size church, we are talking about established congregations not start-ups. About 47% of Episcopal churches fall into this category, though they represent only 15% of the worshippers on Sunday. They are centered around the “group” rather than the rector and tend to be fairly homogeneous in their membership. If the rector is not careful she/he can often function largely as a chaplain.

- Governance is usually in the hands of a key family or families, and new member incorporation may come through them – often by birth or marriage. Change as well comes from the bottom up, initiated by these key members.
- These churches are disproportionately located in towns, villages or rural areas, though some are found in inner city urban areas. While vulnerable, many family size churches have a realistic and healthy sense of mission and ministry (for instance small churches that see their ministry as supporting clergy early in their career, ethnic churches reaching a specific population or rural congregations serving an important role in the community).
- Family size churches often have trouble retaining clergy and turn-over is high. This leads to lay leadership taking on a strong role; lay sacramental leaders are common in this size church, as are part-time rectors. New models of shared leadership are beginning to emerge church-wide to help these congregations.
- While we often think that success for small congregations would be to grow to the next size, success might be a deeper sense of the congregation’s ministry - its purpose as a member of the body of Christ, the discovery that its reason for being is larger than serving as a chapel to a small number of people.
- Fights in this size congregation are like family fights – and often literally so.

Pastoral Size Church

(76-140 Average Sunday Attendance)



- Single cell – stretching at upper end of size range
- Rector-centered
- Power and authority still in hands of few, but shifting
- Clergy at the center of program and new member incorporation
- Rector as personal pastor
- Fights – over the pastor

Church Size & Its Implications- 4

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Pastoral size churches are about 25% of Episcopal congregations and have about 22% of the worshippers on Sunday.

As a Family Size Church grows to Pastoral Size, the center shifts from a “tight” group of lay leaders to the rector, who assumes responsibility for program and new member incorporation. Clergy are still very much involved in hands-on ministry, particularly at the lower end of this size range. As the congregation grows it becomes more difficult for the rector to have the kind of one-on-one pastoral relationship with members that the smaller congregation enjoyed.

At the higher end of this size range, the congregation begins to move from being a “single cell” to a “multiple cell” organization – for the first time, subgroups without overlapping membership form for purposes of mission and ministry. It becomes increasingly difficult to know everyone – you frequently hear comments like “I don’t recognize people here anymore.” Because intimacy and being known are frequently high values for a small congregation, there is a high cost associated with their loss. All of this can lead to a “push back” from established members trying to return to the older, more intimate style of relationship.

Fights are often over the rector’s time and attention.

Transitional Size Church

(141-224 Average Sunday Attendance)

- Stretched cell
- Rector-centered, but moving to group-centered
- Power and authority shifting to subgroups; individuals outside of key family(ies)
- Change & new member incorporation -- joint rector/lay group responsibility
- Rector stretched – additional staff needs
- Fights – over inclusion, information, attention of rector

Church Size & Its Implications- 5

Fresh  Start.

Talking Points

The Transitional Size Church is a relatively new category in church size theory – it accounts for 15% of Episcopal congregations representing 23% of worshippers. It used to be thought that these congregations were merely in transit between Pastoral and Program Size. However, a number of congregations are stable and healthy in this size range.

There is increasing evidence that these parishes have a style of congregational life that is truly somewhere between the relative intimacy of a pastoral size congregation and the more subgroup-oriented nature of a program parish. While still relatively homogeneous in membership, congregations of this size experience increasing diversity. According to Malcolm Gladwell (*The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*) at a group size of about 150 it becomes difficult for people to know each other, so subgroups form. Because it is difficult for everyone to know everyone else the fights are over inclusion, who is in the know and who will get the time and attention of the “spread thin” clergy. Particularly at the upper end of the size range, direct interaction with the rector of the type experienced by members in smaller size congregations is not possible. The addition of other staff and/or increasing reliance on lay leaders (under the close supervision of the rector) become necessary if the congregation is to have sufficient programming to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse membership or to grow. Whether to spend the money needed to staff for growth and how to maintain democratic processes and communication become areas of contention.

These congregations are what Gary McIntosh, an expert on church growth, calls “stretched cell” churches – struggling to meet all the demands of their members with insufficient resources to become truly a “multi-cell” congregation.

Program Size Church

(225-800 Average Sunday Attendance)



- Multi-cell
- Group-centered
- Power and authority in committees; vestry shifts to oversight
- New member incorporation through groups
- Change driven from middle or top
- Rector as administrator
- Fights – over resources and priorities

Church Size & Its Implications- 6

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Program Size churches account for 15% of the congregations and 23% of the worshippers.

At this size resources are available to create a variety of programs and multiple member staffs are common. This is a truly “multi-cell” organization. The shift to this level is very difficult, often requiring more resources than are immediately available. One clergyman uses the analogy of the first attempts at supersonic flight, when planes shook so violently approaching the sound barrier that people thought it would be impossible to break. When Chuck Yeager managed the feat, however, he found that it was smooth flying on the other side of that transition. Many congregations feel “stuck” at the transitional size, unable to fly past the turbulence to program size.

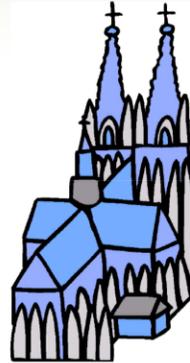
In program-size parishes the role of the rector shifts from one of being a hands-on pastor to managing a staff and delegating much of the responsibility. The role of the vestry shifts as well, with that body exercising oversight and relational authority, rather than focusing on tasks. Much energy in a program size church is spent on recruiting, training, equipping and empowering both volunteers and additional paid staff. Clergy and lay leaders alike may or may not be comfortable in their new roles – and at the cusp between transitional and program sizes they need to begin building the infrastructure that will allow them to step into these new responsibilities.

New member incorporation takes place through the groups. But unlike the Family Size church with a single group, Program Size congregations have multiple groups. It is no longer possible for everyone to know everyone else. Equipping and letting go are inherent challenges for this church size. Having more active members generally means needing more diverse programming. Fights are over the identification of priorities and the allocation of resources.

Resource Size Church

(801+ Average Sunday Attendance)

- Multi-cell
- Rector-centered
- Power and authority in staff
- New member incorporation through groups
- Change driven from top down
- Rector as CEO
- Fights – between program units and staff



Church Size & Its Implications- 7

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Churches of this size comprise 0.5% of Episcopal congregations and have 4.5% of the worshippers. Like the Pastoral Size congregation, these churches are rector-centered with the rector often a charismatic preacher or one with a prophetic ministry. However the relationship of the rector to members is not personal as it is in the Pastoral Size congregation. Pastoral care is provided by a large and diverse staff. Because there are so few congregations of this size very few rectors called to a Resource Size church have experience serving in a church of this complexity. Rectors are often challenged to learn the management component of the job “on the fly” as they enter as the spiritual leader of the congregation.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *The Tipping Point*, argues that large organizations succeed when they cluster people into affinity groups of no more than 150. In this size congregation these affinity groups are the avenues for new member incorporation and pastoral care and support.

Fights are often between program units or between staff – or various groups – and can resemble the family feuds of the much smaller Family Size congregation. In this size church, the “small group infighting” might mean 50 to 100 people - this is a family or pastoral size church fighting within a larger community.

Though there is no research on what the upper limit of a Resource Church should be, most church size theorists place it at around 2000 average Sunday attendance, calling congregations of that size or larger “megachurches”. The most recent data from parochial reports indicate that only a handful of Episcopal Churches approach the 2000 ASA level, and none exceed it.

Some Further Caveats . . .

- Research based on white, suburban congregations
- Impact of culture
- Size and behavior may differ
- Influence of life cycle

Talking Points

Remember that size theories have largely been developed based on research done in suburban white congregations. Some ethnic congregations have significant numbers of people worshipping on a Sunday, but the culture and tradition of the population demands that the church function more like a family or pastoral size congregation. And congregations of any size may act more like congregations of another size.

Another factor is where the congregation is in its life cycle. Is it stable at its current size? Is it declining in membership? Or growing? Such changes can often explain why the congregation presents itself as one size, but behaves differently as its structure and assumptions about “how things are” are based on the size it once was.

Impact of Size

Family  Resource

- **Focus:** Relationships – Programs – Organization
- **Role of Rector:** Chaplain – Administrator – Leader
- **Role of Vestry:** Doing – Leading – Visioning
- **Decision Making:** Informal – Formal
- **Change:** Bottom-up – Middle – Top-down
- **Tone of Conflict:** Emotional – Subjective

Church Size & Its Implications- 9

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Size impacts governance and roles. **(Note: The “Overview of Church Size Theory” Tool is an expanded version of this chart.)**

In smaller congregations relationships are the focus, as congregational size increases the focus shifts to programs with people increasingly knowing only those who are involved in the same subgroups or activities. In the very largest congregations organization becomes the focus of energies – it takes a lot of management skill to keep a complex, busy congregation functioning.

Not surprisingly the role of the RECTOR shifts as well from being almost a family chaplain in the smallest size congregations to serving as a mid-level manager overseeing increased program activity and staff to, in Resource Size congregations, being a leader or visionary.

The VESTRY’S role also changes from one in which they typically run the few programs or activities of a small congregation to serving as liaisons or perhaps committee chairs in medium-size churches to setting general direction and providing oversight of the significant resources of the largest congregations.

Some experts contend that as church size increases, the size of the vestry should DECREASE as too large an oversight body hampers the kind of decision-making needed to provide strategic direction and respond to changing circumstances. As congregations increase in size decision making becomes increasingly formal, with decisions and change coming from committees as the size increases and eventually shifting to a more top-down model as the interests of individual members and subgroups become more diverse. A very large congregation can hold diverse interests within its borders, able to provide “something for everyone” – small and medium congregations find that difficult to do.

True to type? What does it mean for us?

- Where does our congregation seem true to its size type?
- Where is it different and why?
- When we think about our congregation's future, what impact does our size play? What might we want to take into consideration?

Church Size & Its Implications- 10

Fresh  Start.

Talking Points

Note: history, change in church size, ethnic or cultural make-up of the congregation, generational differences of members – all can be reasons for size/type anomalies.

Looking at the various continuums on the previous slide, where does your congregation fall? Is it of one size – but behaving like it is something different? If different, what about its history or generational or ethnic make-up may be contributing to how it behaves (e.g., is this a congregation that has a long history of being pastoral size, but is now a program-size church or vice versa)?

Facilitate a general discussion.

Follow up with one of these questions as appropriate.

- Thinking about where we are as a congregation, what impact does our size (or our changing size) have on our governance and structure? Our vision and plans for the future?
- As we think about calling a new rector, what does our church size tell us about the qualities and experience we might want to look for?

Facilitate a general discussion.