

Leadership and Church Size Dynamics

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BY

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I. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CONCEPT

One of the most common reasons for pastoral leadership mistakes and missteps is blindness to the significance of church size. Size has an enormous impact on how a church functions; that being said, the "size culture" profoundly affects how decisions are made, how relationships flow, how effectiveness is evaluated, and how its staff operates. We tend to think of the primary differences between churches in strictly denominational or theological terms, but that underestimates the impact of size on how a church operates. The difference between how two Presbyterian churches, one of 100 people and one of 2,000 members, function may be greater than the difference between a Presbyterian and a Pentecostal church of the same size. The staff person who goes from a church of 400 to a church of 2,000 is making a far greater change than if he or she moved from one denomination to another.

When Lyle Schaller gives names to the different church-size categories, he deliberately chooses completely different "orders of being." He calls a church of less than 35 members a "cat" and a church of 100-175 a "garden," and a church of 225-450 a "mansion." Why? Because a larger church is not simply a larger version of a smaller church. The differences in communication, community formation, and decision-making processes are so great that the leadership skills required in each are almost of a completely different order.

II. A BALANCED VIEW OF A CHURCH'S SIZE

Every church size presents the pastor with particular obstacles and opportunities for biblical functioning peculiar to the category. For example, smaller church sizes make discipline and accountability far easier than it is in larger churches. However, it is easier

to practice lay ministry and the priesthood of all believers in larger churches, where pastoral care must be done on a large scale by lay leaders. Smaller churches tend to acquiesce to clericalism. To use another example, larger churches in general have something of an advantage in evangelism; they can provide more “doors” into the church through their numerous programs. Also, many (not all!) non-Christians feel too visible to visit smaller churches.

A. Every church has a “size culture,” which must be accepted. Most people probably have a size-culture they prefer. However, many people moralize their favorite size culture and treat other size categories as spiritually or morally inferior. They may insist that the only biblical way to do church is to practice a different size-culture despite the fact that the church itself is much bigger or smaller than they desire it to be.

For example, if some members of a church of 800 feel they should be able to get the senior pastor personally on the phone without much difficulty, they are insisting on getting the kind of pastoral care that an under 200-size culture provides. Of course, the pastor will soon be overwhelmed. The members may insist, however, that if he can't be reached, he is failing in his biblical duty to be their shepherd, though there is a lack of biblical warrant for this claim.

Another example is that of a new senior pastor of a 1,000-member church insisting that virtually all decisions be made by consensus of the whole Session and staff. Soon the elders are meeting every week for six hours each time! But the pastor may insist that for staff members to be making their own decisions means they are acting without accountability or that the staff lacks community. But to impose a size-culture practice on a church that does not have that size will wreak havoc on it and eventually force the church back into the size with which the practices are compatible.

Another example is that of new members who have just joined a smaller church after years of attending a much larger church. They may begin complaining about the lack of professional quality in the church ministries and insisting that this shows a lack of spiritual excellence. The real problem is that in the smaller church things are done by volunteers that in the larger church are done by full-time staff. Also, the members might complain that the pastor's sermons are not as polished and well-researched as they have come to expect from that of a larger church. But while a large-church pastor with multiple staff can afford to put 20 hours a week into sermon preparation, the solo pastor of a smaller church can devote less than half of that time each week.

This means a wise pastor may have to sympathetically confront people who are just not able to handle and live within the church's size-culture (just like many people cannot live within different geographic cultures.) Some people are organizationally suspicious (often for valid reasons); others can't handle not having the preacher as their pastor. We must suggest to them they are asking for the impossible in a church our size. We must not imply that it would be immaturity on their part to seek a different church, though we should not encourage anyone to leave.

B. Every church has aspects of its natural size culture, which must be resisted. Just a few brief examples:

Larger churches have a great deal of difficulty keeping track of members who begin to drop out or fall away from the faith. This should never be accepted as inevitable. Rather, the large church must continually struggle to improve pastoral care and discipleship.

Out of necessity the large church must use organizational techniques from the business world, but the danger is that ministry may become too results-oriented and focused on quantifiable outcomes (attendance, membership, giving) because of the natural tendency of management-by-objective. The goals of holiness and character growth can be overlooked. Again, this tendency should not be accepted as inevitable; but rather, new strategies for focusing on love and virtue must always be generated.

The smaller church by its nature gives immature, outspoken, opinionated, and broken members far more power over the whole body. Since everyone knows everyone else, when a family or small group of members express strong opposition to the direction set by the pastor and leaders, that small group's misery can hold the whole congregation hostage. If they threaten to leave, the majority of people will urge the leaders to desist in their project. It is extremely difficult to get complete consensus from a group of 50-150 people about program and direction, especially in today's diverse, fragmented society. Yet in smaller churches there is an unwritten rule that most everyone must be happy with any new initiative in order for it to be implemented. Leaders of small churches must be brave enough to lead and to confront immature members in spite of its unpleasantness.

C. There is no "best size" for a church. Each size presents great difficulties and also many opportunities for ministry that churches of other sizes cannot realize (or, at least, not as well.) If you truly think there is an ideal size, it is most likely because you tend to emotionally value some biblical aspects of the church more than others or because you are unbalanced in your own concept of what Christ desires from the church. Only together can churches of all sizes be all Christ wants the church to be.

III. CHURCH SIZES: GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Reading books on church sizes can be confusing because everyone breaks down the size categories somewhat differently. This is because there are many variables in a church's culture and history that determine exactly when a congregation gets to a new size "barrier." For example, it's easy to recognize that at some point a church becomes too large for one pastor to handle. People begin to complain that they are not getting adequate pastoral care, and the time has come to add staff. But when does that happen? In some communities that may happen when attendance rises to 120, while in others it does not happen until the church has nearly 300 regular attendees. It depends a great deal on expectations, on the mobility of the city, on how fast the church has grown, and various other factors. Despite the variables, the point at which a new

pastoral staff member must be added is usually called “the 200 barrier.” While this represents a good average figure, keep in mind that your own church might come up against that threshold at some different attendance figure.

Following are some general trends that occur as a church grows in size:

A. Increasing complexity.

The larger the church, the less members have in common. The congregation experiences greater diversity in age, family status, ethnicity, etc., and thus a church of 400 needs four to five times more programs than a church of 200 (not two times more, as one would naturally project.) Therefore:

1. Larger churches are disproportionately more complex than their smaller counterparts. They have multiple services, multiple classes, multiple groups, multiple tracks, and eventually they really are multiple congregations.
2. Larger churches require more staff per capita. Often the first ministry staff persons are added for every increase of 150 to 200 in attendance. For example, a church of 500 may have 2 to 3 full-time ministry staff. But eventually ministry staff could be justified (even if you don't have the money for it!) for every 75 to 100 new persons. Thus, a church of 2,000 may have 25 staff. This creates a great burden on large churches, because unless you have a wealthy congregation, you can't add staff as fast as you need to. And, therefore, a very competent volunteer recruitment, support and deployment program becomes critical.

B. Shifting lay-staff responsibilities.

1. On the one hand, the larger the church the more decision-making falls to the staff rather than to the membership or even to the lay leaders. The bigger the church the more items have to be given to the staff to determine or execute on their own. The elders or board must increasingly deal with only top level, big-picture issues. So the larger the church, the more decision-making is pushed up toward the staff and away from the congregation and lay leaders. Needless to say, many lay people feel extremely uncomfortable about this.
2. On the other hand, the larger the church the more the basic pastoral ministry (hospital visits, discipleship, oversight of Christian growth, counseling) is done by lay leaders rather than by professional ministers. So the larger the church, the more shepherding, teaching, and discipling are pushed down toward the lay leaders and people and away from staff. Pastors must teach lay shepherds and teachers how to fulfill this role.

3. In summary, in small churches policy is decided by many, and ministry is done by a few. In large churches ministry is done by many, and policy is decided by a few.

C. Increasing intentionality.

1. The larger the church, the more it needs systematic and redundant communication. Without multiple forms and repeated messages, people will feel left out and uninformed. Informal word-of-mouth communication loses efficacy the larger the church grows.
2. The larger the church, the more it requires systematic and deliberate assimilation of newcomers. Newcomers are less visible in larger churches, and new people are not spontaneously welcomed or invited in. Assimilation must become systemic, and pathways must be identified by asking, "How will newcomers get here?," "How will they be identified by the church?," and "Where will unbelievers learn Christianity's relevance, content, and credibility?"
3. The larger the church, the more it needs well-organized volunteer recruitment. Generally, the larger the church the harder it is to recruit volunteers. The difficulty lies in that it is much easier to say no to someone you don't know than to someone you know well, and the likelihood of an unknown person approaching you to volunteer is much more likely in the big-church setting. Secondly, it is easier to feel less personally responsible for the ministries of a larger church and to think the church has lots of people and "they don't need me." Therefore, the larger the church, the more well-organized and formal the recruitment of volunteers must be.

D. Increasing quality of production.

1. The larger the church, the more it requires formal and redundant communication. You know when you've crossed into a higher size category when you get constant complaints that people feel left out and uninformed. Informal communication networks (pulpit announcements, newsletter notices, and word-of-mouth) are insufficient to reach everyone. It also means that decisions have to be made in a more deliberate and formal way to ensure that timely and important information is reaching its proper recipients.
2. The larger the church, the more planning and organization goes into its events. In general, a higher quality of production is expected in a larger church, and therefore events cannot be thrown together willy-nilly.
3. The larger the church, the more it requires high-quality aesthetics. In smaller churches worship is based mainly on horizontal relationships with the other

people present. For example, musical offerings of singers who are novices are nonetheless appreciated because "we all know them and they are members of our fellowship." But in the larger church context, worship is based on the vertical relationship, on a sense of transcendence. If an outsider comes in who doesn't know the musicians, mediocre quality of production will distract from their worship. (They don't have a relationship with the musicians which, for those who know and love the ones presenting the music, off-sets the lack of giftedness.) So, the larger the church, the more the music becomes an attractor on its own, an assimilation measure on its own.

E. Increasing openness to change. The larger the church, the more it is subject to constant and sudden change. There are a couple reasons for this:

1. Smaller churches do not change rapidly and experience less turnover because individual members feel powerful and necessary.
2. One of the reasons that decision-making moves away from the congregation to the staff in large churches is because too much is going on for lay people to stay on top of. Only the full-time staff are informed enough (about who is out in the congregation to be recruited, etc) to make good decisions. And when decision-making power moves toward staff members (away from individual members), change happens more quickly.

F. Losing members because of changes. The larger the church the more it loses members because of changes.

1. Smaller churches seek to avoid losing members at all costs, thereby allowing individuals and small groups to exercise power far greater than their numbers. Someone always experiences change as loss, and since the smaller church has a great fear of conflict, it usually will not institute a change that may result in lost members. Thus smaller churches do not lose members very often.
2. But in larger churches individual members or smaller groups have far less ability to exert power or resist changes they dislike. And (as noted above) since larger churches experience constant change, they regularly lose members who feel overcome by church growth or upset with the changes. Leaders of churches that grow large are more willing to lose members who disagree with procedures or philosophy of ministry.

G. Shifting role of the ministers.

1. The larger the church, the less available the main preacher is to do pastoral work. In smaller churches the pastor is available at all times for most all

occasions and needs to any member or unchurched person. In the large church, there are sometimes more lay ministers, staff, and leaders than the small church has people! So the pastors must recognize their limits and spend more time with staff and lay shepherds, and in prayer and time with God.

2. The larger the church, the more important are the minister's leadership abilities. Preaching and pastoring are sufficient skills for pastors in smaller churches, but as a church grows, the minister's leadership skills become critical, especially those of vision casting and strategic planning.
3. The larger the church, the more then ministry staff moves from being generalists to being specialists. Everyone from the senior pastor on down must focus on certain ministry areas and concentrate on two or three main tasks. The larger the church, the more the senior pastor must specialize on preaching, vision casting, and identifying problems ahead of time before they become disasters.
4. The larger the church, the more important it is for ministers, especially the senior pastor, to stay put for a long time. As noted above, smaller churches do not change rapidly and have less turnover. The innate stability of smaller churches can thus absorb the change of minister every few years if necessary. But in the large church context, the staff in general and the senior pastor in particular are the main source of continuity and stability. Rapid turnover of staff is therefore much more detrimental to a large church.

H. Structuring smaller. The larger the church, the smaller the basic pastoral span of care.

1. In smaller churches the classes and groups can be larger, because virtually everyone in the church is cared for directly by full-time trained ministry staff, each of whom can care for 50-200 people.
2. In larger churches, however, the internal groupings need to be smaller, because people are cared for by lay shepherds, who can care for only ten to 20 people if given proper supervision and support. Thus, in a larger church, the more groups you have per 100 people in attendance, the better cared for people are and the faster the church grows.

I. Emphasis on vision and strengths.

1. The larger the church, the more it tends to concentrate on doing few things well. Smaller churches are generalists and feel the need to do everything, a result of the power of the individual in a small church. If any member wants the church to address some issue, then the church makes an effort to please them. The larger

church, however, identifies and concentrates on approximately three to four major things and works to do them extremely well, despite calls for new emphases.

2. The larger the church, the more its vision becomes important to members. The reason for being in a smaller church is relationships. The reason for putting up with all the changes and difficulties of a larger church is to get mission done. Therefore people join the church because of the vision, so the particular mission needs to be clear.
3. The larger the church, the more it develops its own mission outreach rather than support existing programs. Smaller churches tend to support denominational mission causes or contribute to other existing parachurch ministries. Larger churches feel more personally accountable to God for the kingdom mandate and seek to start their own mission-ministries or form partnerships in which there is more direct accountability and responsibility.
4. The larger the church, the more its lay leaders need to be screened for agreement on philosophy of ministry, not simply for doctrinal and moral standards. In smaller churches, people are eligible for leadership on the basis of membership, tenure and faithfulness. In larger churches (as we just noted), the distinctive mission and vision of the church becomes increasingly important. Therefore, it is important to enlist (without apology) leaders who share the philosophy of ministry with the staff and other leaders.

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