

# **LEADERSHIP AND CHURCH SIZE DYNAMICS (Part I of II)**

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Article presented at the Next Level Conference, Redeemer Church Planting Center, Sept. 2006.

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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.