

What Type of Church Is Yours?

Congregational size and its implications for pastoral ministry

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By Paul Beasley-Murray
Chair of Ministry Today

I recently read *Size Transitions in Congregations* (The Alban Institute, Virginia 2001), edited by Beth Ann Gaede. Many of the fifteen essays are based on the pioneering work of Arlin Rothauge, a professor of congregational studies at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, who, a number of years ago, wrote a booklet, *Sizing up a congregation for new member ministry* (Seabury Press, New York undated). I confess that I have not been able to get hold of this booklet, but from what I have gained in particular from the essay by the veteran American church consultant, Roy Oswald, *How to minister effectively in family, pastoral, program and corporate sized churches* (pp.31-46), Rothauge's analysis of church size is quite insightful.

In this essay I want to summarise these insights, and apply them to the British scene.

The cell or family-size church - also called the patriarchal or matriarchal church, has up to 50 active members.

"This small church.... functions like a family, with appropriate parental figures. The patriarchs and matriarchs control the church's leadership needs. What family-size churches want from clergy is pastoral care, period. For clergy to assume that they are also the chief executive officer and the resident religious authority is to make a serious blunder. The key role of the patriarch or matriarch is to see that clergy do not take the congregation off on a new direction of ministry. Clergy are to be the chaplain of this small family. When clergy do not understand this, they are likely to head into a direct confrontation with the parental figure. It is generally suicide for clergy to get caught in a show-down with the patriarchs and matriarchs within the first five years of the particular church"
[\[1\]](#).

As with families in general, family or patriarchal churches incorporate new members by birth, marriage or adoption.

The congregation or pastoral-size church has 50 to 150 active members.

"Clergy are usually at the center of a pastoral-size church. There are so many parental figures around that they need someone at the center to manage them. A leadership circle, made up of the pastor and a small cadre of lay leaders, replaces the patriarchs and matriarchs of the family-size church... A key feature of a pastoral-size church is that laity experience having their spiritual needs met through their personal relationship with a seminary-trained person. In a pastoral-

size church it would be rare for a Bible study or a prayer group to meet without the pastor. The pastor is also readily available in times of personal need and crisis... A second feature of the pastoral-size church is its sense of itself as a family in which everyone knows every else... Clergy begin to feel stressed when they have more than 150 active members whom they try to know in depth. In fact, this is one of the reasons why clergy may keep the pastoral-size church from growing up to the next larger size... 150 active members are about all one person can manage”[2].

People tend to join - or indeed leave - the church because of the pastor.

The programme-size church has 150 to 350 active members.

“The program-size church grows out of the necessity for a high-quality personal relationship with the pastor to be supplemented by other avenues of spiritual feeding. Programmes must now begin to fill that role. The well-functioning program-size church has many cells of activity, which are headed up by lay leaders. These lay leaders, in addition to providing structure and guidance for these cells, also take on some pastoral functions... Clergy are still at the centre of the program-size church, but their role shifts dramatically. Much of their times and attention is spent in planning with other lay leaders to ensure the highest quality programs. The pastor must spend a lot of time recruiting people to head up these smaller ministries, training, supervising, and evaluation them, and seeing to it that their morale remains high. In essence the pastor must often step back from direct ministry with people to coordinate and support volunteers who offer this ministry... To be sure, a member can expect a hospital or home call from the pastor when personal crisis or illness strikes. But members had better not expect this pastor to have a lot of time to drink coffee in people’s kitchens”[3].

People tend to be attracted to pastoral-size churches, not just because of the pastor, but because of the programmes the church runs.

Finally, **the corporate-size church** has 350 or more active members.

“The quality of Sunday morning worship is the first thing you usually notice in a corporate-size church. Because these churches usually have abundant resources, they will usually have the finest organ and one of the best choirs in town. A lot of work goes into making Sunday worship a rich experience. The head of staff usually spends more time than other clergy preparing for preaching and leading worship. In very large corporate-size churches, the head of staff may not even remember the names of many parishioners. When members are in the hospital, it is almost taken for granted that they will be visited by an associate or assistant pastor, rather than the senior pastor... Key to the success of the corporate-size church is the multiple staff and its ability to manage the diversity of its ministries in a collegial manner”[4].

How does this relate to the British scene? The family-size church is what we in Britain would call the ‘small’ church. According to the English Church Census of 2005, some 49% of all English churches come into this category. With the continued decline of churchgoing since then, we can say with certainty that now most English churches have

less than 50 people in worship on a Sunday. Indeed, as far as my own denomination is concerned, over half of the churches belonging to the Baptist Union of Great Britain have less than 40 members.

The pastoral-size church is what we might call a 'medium' size church. Most churches of this size would hope to have their own theologically trained pastor. Unlike the picture painted by Oswald, in Britain many of these churches would be quite used to meeting for Bible study and prayer without the pastor. Unlike family-sized churches which tend to be one cell churches, pastoral-size churches in Britain are likely to have a number of small groups meeting during the week for fellowship. Nonetheless the pastor is the king (or queen) pin to whom everybody relates. The pastoral-size church is a very comfortable place to be. Although in larger pastoral size churches not everybody will know one another, on the basis that most people can with relative ease know the names of 60 to 75 people, the likelihood is that there will be more people who are known than are not known. Nobody feels a stranger in a pastoral-size church. Furthermore, from the perspective of the pastor, it is an eminently manageable size of church. Once, however, the congregation grows beyond 150, that moment the effectiveness of most pastors is seriously decreased. For instance, in a survey of 350 English Baptist churches, Alan Wilkinson and I discovered that "A full-time pastor could cope with the demands of a growing church with a membership of under 150. But beyond that point, the strain and limitations begin to have an adverse effect on the potential for growth of the church" [\[5\]](#).

I am not sure what we in Britain would call a programme church. The Baptist Union of Great Britain, in developing a network for larger churches, has decided that churches with a membership of 200 or more are 'larger' churches. Strictly speaking, this is of course true: churches with more than 200 active members are indeed larger than others. However, I myself prefer to stay with the American nomenclature: a programme size church, for it is the programmes of such a church which are often the great attraction. People will often begin to attend programme-size churches because of the activities which they run for children or for young people or for young adults. These churches tend to have a second member of staff - in the British scene this second member is often a youth minister or worker. To my mind, a programme church begins to become a 'larger' church when it begins to seek to develop its staff team beyond just the minister, a youth worker, and perhaps a part-time church administrator. That seems to me to be the point when some programme churches begin the process of becoming a corporate church. At a guess I would therefore say that a 'larger' church is likely to have at least 250 people in worship on a Sunday, if not 300.

Finally, there is the corporate-size church. We tend to call them the 'large' churches. Corporate churches have got beyond the vicar and curate stage. They have staff teams - both pastoral staff (i.e. ministers) and office staff. There are, of course, different graduations among these corporate churches - clearly a mega-church with 1000 or more members is a very different animal from a church with 500 members. However, within the British scene, there is probably little reason to refine these distinctions. Some people in Britain would define a large church as a church with over 300 in worship, in which case around 6% of all English churches fall into this category. If, however, we define a large church as a church with over 400 at worship, then only 4% of churches

may be described as large - and many of these churches would be Roman Catholic churches. According to Peter Brierley, 1% (150) of Anglican churches and 2% of Baptist churches have 350 or more attending on a Sunday. These 200 churches respectively accounted for no less than 10% of all Anglican and 13% of all Baptist churchgoers in 2005^[6].

In the light of this analysis, what type of a church are you? My own church has over 350 members, and - on a good Sunday - we may have as many as 400 people in worship. If the truth be told, we are probably still a programme church blessed with a growing staff team, which may well become a corporate-size church, but still has yet to arrive.

Before I bring this article to a conclusion, I do wish to make one thing clear: no one type or size of church is necessarily any better than any other type or size. Alas, all too often value judgments are made. Larger is not necessarily better than smaller. Nor indeed is smaller necessarily more beautiful than larger. As a pastor of a 'larger' church, I am very conscious that certain of my colleagues in smaller churches can be very scathing about churches like my own. The impression, for instance, is sometimes given that smaller churches are likely to be more faithful to the Gospel, for it is argued, that only in smaller churches is meaningful community possible. This I believe is a travesty of reality. A community which reflects the person and values of Jesus is not dependent upon size. Churches of any size can be special.

Paul Beasley-Murray