

# WHAT MAKES LARGE CONGREGATIONS DIFFERENT?

College Mennonite Church: Life Plus Wednesday      January 16, 2008

Centering on Christ: Colossians 1: 9-11

## *Congregational Size Dynamics* (average worship attendance)

up to 75/100	family/single cell
75/100 to 200/250	pastor centered
200/250 to 700/800	program centered
700/800+	large/regional congregation

- in the U.S.A 75-80% of churches are 75 members or less  
75-80% of church attendees, attend a church of 1,000 plus
- growth expectations :
  - under 250: less pressure to grow; plateau acceptable, decline tolerated
  - above 250: growth expected, non-growth creates unrest by some
  - 250-600: a) vast majority in this category struggle either by
    - reaching a peak, the long term decline or
    - wide fluctuations over several decades, with no long term net gain
  - b) very few grow steadily through this stage and beyond 600

## *Congregational Health Dynamics*

- Healthy churches grow both in spirituality and numbers.
- Change is normal in healthy, growing churches
- Health is the goal, growth is the result of pursuing that goal.

### **Two beginning points:**

- 1. Healthy, large churches understand themselves as a *congregation of congregations*.**
  - 2. Very large churches have been known to function like a small church.**
- “Small church” used in this document is more a state of mind than size.**

Definition of a healthy, large church: +600 worship attendance (including small churches who have a missional/growth/large church mentality) who experience steady/modest growth, including regular addition of new adult believers. The characteristics below tend to cut across demographic, socio-economic, geographic and cultural differences in North America.

### *Community Life*

Christian community in a congregation of 5,000 can be just as dynamic as in a congregation of 100, if “sub-congregations” are strategically utilized. An average person in a congregation can know: the names of 100, a little information about 50, but only 10-15 in

a personal way. The need to “know everybody” hinders growth.

When the “congregation of congregations” concept is not understood, people tend to:

- feel guilty about not being able to keep up with everyone
- reject the option of multiple services
- either devote too much energy attempting to keep up with too many people, or too quickly accept surface relationships as the norm.

### Communication

- High standards for communication: creative, concise, accurate, timely, newcomer friendly, efficient (technology use is maximized), effective, centralized policies.
- The extent of detailed information about people and some programming *that can be communicated to everyone*, declines as a congregation grows. Details are provided at the “sub-congregation” level.
- Individuals initiate effort to stay informed.

Small churches communicate informally, burden is on leadership to inform.

### Worship

- Use of time in worship is planned strategically: what belongs/what does not.
- Worship is led in a way that does not feel controlled by the clock.
- Worship hour is not necessarily the best way to give visibility to an issue

Small churches give visibility to high percent of congregational life in worship hour.

### Structure/Organization

**AUTHORITY is clear, everyone knows and accepts it.**

- It may be in the congregation, board, senior pastor, bishop, apostle, televangelist, Holy Spirit...

Small church thinking: let’s not clarify it because the person or people, or group that has inappropriately assumed authority will be offended.

**GOVERNANCE is accomplished through one “board.”**

- all matters are spiritual: no attempt to divide spiritual and administrative
- oversees pastoral team, vision and “big picture” budget, on behalf of congregation
- primarily future focused and pro-active, not reactive or problem-solving
- outside resources/consultation is valued: “We may be really good, but we can always be better by paying attention to and learning from what others are doing.”
- Strategic planning: revision every 3-5 years; annually evaluate and set new goals.

Small churches: tend to be reactive, keep it in house, little governance happens

**LEADERSHIP** [influencing, motivating, directing the entire congregation toward a congregationally owned vision] is **provided primarily by a team of professional pastors.**

- Pastoral Team is given authority to carry out their responsibilities.
- Equipping lay persons for ministry is a priority for the pastoral team
- Leadership is *the ministry focus* of the Pastoral Team: many traditional pastoral

duties are carried out by lay person with shepherding gifts.

Small churches: While “the pastor” tends to be viewed as the leader, in most situations, elders or a family system, or a patriarch or matriarch are leading by default by wielding veto power. “Pastors come and go, but we’ll be here a long time.”

**MINISTRY** [everything the church does] **is structured at a level that is accountable to “the board” and is carried out primarily by lay persons under guidance and authority of professional pastors.**

- Decision making for ministry is efficient through careful advance planning and preparation.
- Administration is centralized.
- Flexible structures are evaluated and revised if needed on an annual basis.
- Spiritual gift discernment is integral in congregational life: members are expected serving in an area of passion, using his/her spiritual gift.
- Leadership development is a priority
- Small groups (5-12 participants, with leaders accountable to pastoral team) are an integral part of congregational life in
- Sub-congregations (50-150 participants) provide a “small congregation” dynamic.
- Staffing: generally, staffing needs grow at a similar pace, since increased efficiency factors that come with size, are often offset by added complexity for communication, coordination, and strategic planning, etc.

Small churches: Pastors are the ministers, members assist. [Large churches: members do the ministry, pastors exist to equip members for ministry.]

### *Congregational Culture*

- Change is considered normal, not the exception: new ministries begin, existing ministries end.
- In many growth situations, the successful implementation of a “second service” is The point when a congregation shifts from change as the exception to change is normal.
- Conflict is expected, dealt with directly, and seen as opportunity for learning and growth. Grace flows freely. Mistakes happen.
- Policies are essential, accepted and followed.
- Leaders are carefully selected, trusted, and held accountable for results—not micromanaged.

Small churches: Conflict and change is viewed negatively and therefore resisted, rather than seen as inevitable and often growth producing.

### *Outreach*

- Per cent of members available for outreach increases as a church grows. Percent needed to take care of “in house” ministries declines.
- View sending out best leaders to start new churches as normal, not as critique of the mother church.

Small churches: allow “in house” ministries to expand exponentially to utilize new members resulting in inefficient, over structured churches.