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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Do Your Mission and Method Fit Your Size?

Lyle Schaller pioneered research on congregational development and asserted that three factors predicted the development of any congregation:

- Who is the pastor and what does he or she know?
- What size is the congregation and how long has it been that way?
- What are the size limitations of the current facilities?

Building on these questions, Arlin Rothauge¹ used church size to categorize the ways of “being the church.” He named the church types as Family (49 or fewer active members), Pastoral (50 to 150 active members), Program (151 to 350 active members), and Corporate (more than 350 active members).

The Family Church

Typically, membership consists of two to four family trees. These churches exhibit resiliency, but two factors threaten this church type: location (places with extremely low or high mobility rates) and a member death rate that exceeds that of the general population. About 13% of congregations across the country, often outside urban areas, fall in this category. Today only 15% of the population still resides in rural counties.

What is the mission? These micro-churches tend to focus on offering a warm worshiping community, caring for each other, and being part of their neighborhood or town.

What are the methods? Joining this church is highly personal because a family is adopting you. Outreach methods might be asking people over for pie or inviting them to be part of a favorite activity. Members follow up with notes, phone calls, or visits. And just like families, it takes more time to make church decisions here than in larger congregations.

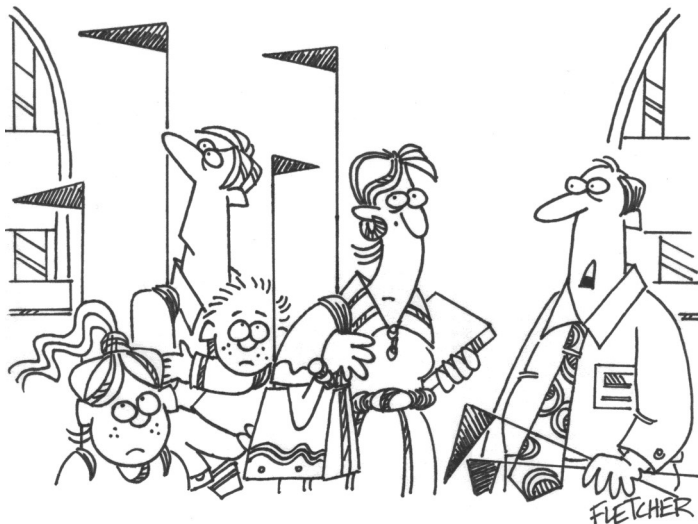
What are the key clergy skills? The pastor is the chaplain and spends the majority of his or her time on pastoral care. Clergy stay less than two years on average, making the church rely on strong lay leaders to ground the church and carry forward its collective memories.

The Pastoral Church

About half of all congregations fit in this category. In fact, two-thirds of America’s churches are either family or pastoral. Worshipers and staff highly value the personal relationships that are possible in a church of this size. Lay people expect to know the pastor and treasure the church family’s sense of oneness.

What is the mission? The pastoral church wishes to offer spiritually rich worship and opportunities for people of every age to grow in their faith, especially children and youth. Community outreach tends to be strategic because the church realizes it cannot be all things to all people.

What are the methods? About half of new visitors come to a worship service the first time because of an invitation from a church member. The second most important factor is curb appeal. About 25% of new members first visited after noticing the church when they passed by. Advertising helps raise awareness of a congregation of this size and can make current members feel proud of their church. However, only 6% of first-time visitors come due to advertising. Most new people visit between one and three congregations before choosing their new church. They will come back if they like the sermon, identify in some way with the



A LOT OF OUR FIRST-TIME VISITORS WERE GETTING LOST IN THE CROWD.

pastor, and experience friendly people. Visitors respond positively to a follow-up after they attend a service, from a member or the pastor.

What are the key clergy skills? The pastor has strong interpersonal skills and is someone who enjoys one-on-one work. In addition to strong preaching, members expect the pastor to be their primary teacher. In a church of this size, the pastor is involved in most of the congregation's activities. Clergy need an interactive leadership style that involves a team of lay people in decision-making.

The Program Church

This church size offers more programming than smaller congregations and is by definition a multiple-staff organization. In addition to just more members, multiple member constituencies hold diverse opinions about almost everything. Considered the "awkward" size, about one in five U.S. congregations falls in this range.

What is the mission? Through worship, group activities, and events, the church carries out ministries to help people grow spiritually, express love for neighbors, and offer Christ to people outside the church.

What are the methods? This church draws from a larger pool of gifts and talents to accomplish ministry. In addition to the pastor, other full-or part-time staff lead many cells of activity. More people also means first-time visitors can get lost in the crowd. Effective churches develop specific strategies to ensure visitors are welcomed: acknowledging their presence as part of the service; inviting them to fill out a "New Here" card with contact information; following up with a postcard, letter, or email; offering some kind of free gift and information about the church; and assigning pew monitors in the worship space who look for visitors to greet. Reaching out to people in the community can also take the form of advertising through a church website or Facebook page, door hanger invites, mass postcard mailings, yard signs, and radio ads.

What are the key clergy skills? The lead pastor cannot relate in depth to every member and must rely on trained staff and lay leaders to fulfill some pastoral functions. Clergy spend more time in planning with other leaders to ensure high quality programming and worship. Recruitment, training, and supervising others consumes more time.

The Corporate Church

People attending worship today are concentrated in larger congregations and that concentration is increasing.² Although only 14% of congregations

grow to this size, non-denominational churches are over-represented in this size group. One in four church visitors say denomination is not important and half of those under the age of 25 agree.

What is the mission? Offering exceptional worship is a top priority and vast effort goes into making certain it is a rich experience. Ministries are complex and diverse, meeting many niche member and community needs.

What are the methods? A major cause of growth is the congregation's positive reputation in the community. This causes members to spontaneously invite and more people respond to those invitations. Larger congregations are more likely to have a group for newcomers and invite them to take part in small groups or service opportunities. The resources of the corporate church allow for many types of mass marketing,³ public events to reach out to new people, multiple worship sites and times, and accessible facilities for sports and recreation.

What are the key clergy skills? Clergy, as the head of staff, must be able to manage multiple staff and foster collegial ministry. In addition, the lead pastor usually spends more time than other clergy in preparing for preaching and worship leadership.

Finding the Perfect Fit

When the pastor and lay leaders can answer these important questions about the church's mission and size, their efforts are more likely to bear fruit.⁴

- What size type is your congregation and how long has it been that size?
- How is your membership stability or decline related to community population mobility?⁵
- Do members and leaders have the motivation, skills, methods, and resources to grow a larger congregation?

1. Arlin Rothauge, *Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry* (Episcopal Church Center, 1986).

2. National Congregations Study, <http://www.thearda.com/archive/NCS.asp>.

3. See "Six Reasons Our Church Produced a Spring Catalog," <http://www.unseminary.com>.

4. Roy Oswald, "How to Minister Effectively in Family, Pastoral, Program and Corporate-Sized Churches," <http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org>.

5. Find your community mobility type at American Communities Project, <http://americancommunities.org>.