

# Changing Size

Over the past two decades, the Alban Institute has based a good deal of its work with congregations on several observations about size:<sup>1</sup>

- Congregations fall into distinctive size categories, and congregations of different sizes organize in different ways. Each has its own recognizable way of “being church.”
- Average sabbath attendance—all ages, all Saturday evening or Sunday worship services combined, over the whole year—is the best single indicator of size for Christian congregations.
- Congregations do not grow or decline smoothly, but tend to “plateau” at certain predictable levels of attendance.
- In order to break through an attendance plateau, a congregation must deliberately relinquish familiar patterns of behavior and begin to act as larger congregations act.

These descriptions of congregational dynamics relate to a growing body of theory about the way human beings organize themselves.<sup>2</sup> Humans tend to form primary groups of 12 or so, and clans of about 50. At about 150, a qualitative shift (the “tipping point”) occurs and a true organization comes into being with official roles and structures, formal communication, and explicit procedures. Larger organizations seem to work best when built of combinations of these natural-sized groups.

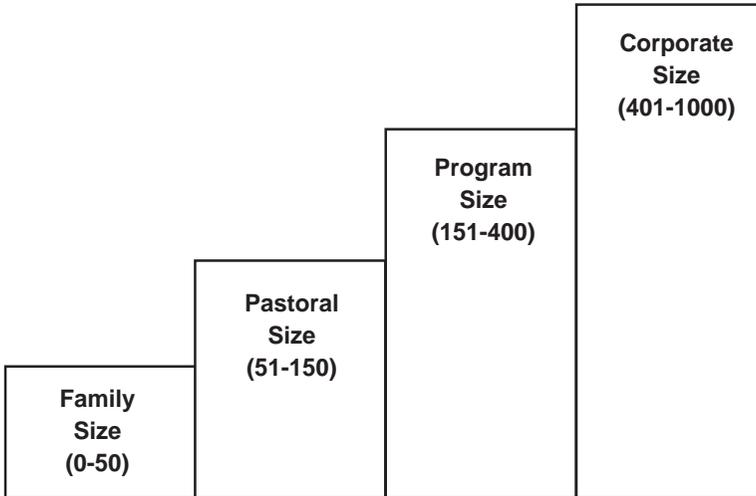
In the literature of congregation development, any of these three natural-sized groups might be referred to as a “cell,” though authors apply that term in different ways. When church growth specialist Gary McIntosh speaks of a “single cell” church, he means a congregation that has not yet passed the tipping point and become a true organization; for him, the term “cell”

corresponds roughly to the natural social unit of 150 or fewer.<sup>3</sup> When church sociologist Arlin Rothauge talks about cells, he means extended networks of family and friendship no bigger than about 50 people.<sup>4</sup> When consultant Carl George recommends that a church organize itself into cell groups, he means units no bigger than 12 meeting for “fellowship, accountability, instruction and identity.”<sup>5</sup>

## SIZE CATEGORIES

The numerical thresholds of 50 and 150 underlie the particular size theory most often used by Alban in its work with churches—a framework originally developed by Arlin Rothauge. Rothauge uses four names for church sizes, described below (see figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
**Size Categories**



**Family-size church (up to 50 adults and children at worship):** A small congregation that operates like an extended family (and may in fact *be* a biological family network). Just as in the famous tavern from the television series *Cheers*, “everybody knows your name.” This church is organized around one or two anchoring figures called matriarchs and patriarchs by Rothauge to indicate their tacit authority in the system. Such congregations often have part-time pastors, and their clergy tend to adopt a chaplain role—leading worship and giving pastoral care. A pastor who challenges the authority of a patriarch or matriarch, or who presumes to be the primary leader of the congregation, generally will not stay long.

**Pastoral-size church (51 to 150):** A coalition of two or three family and friendship networks unified around the person and role of the pastor. Clergy time is largely taken up maintaining a direct pastoral relationship with each member, coordinating the work of a small leadership circle, personally conducting worship, and leading small-group programs such as Bible study. The governing board usually operates like a committee, arranging much of the day-to-day life of the congregation. Members recognize each other’s faces, know most people’s names, and will notice if someone new is present at worship.

**Program-size church (151 to 400):** Known for the quality and variety of its programs. Separate programs for children, youth, couples, seniors, and other age and interest groups provide entry points for a wide range of people. The pastor’s crucial role is to recruit, equip, and inspire a small circle of key program leaders—lay and ordained, paid and unpaid. This ring of leadership might include, for example, the choir director, the church school superintendent, the youth group leader, the coordinator of lay visitors, and the head of a committee that tracks new member incorporation. Working as a team with the pastor, they reach out to involve others as program participants and as leaders. Decision making is broadly distributed within the wider leadership circle (perhaps 50 people) and pastoral care is shared by laity. While Rothauge originally identified the maximum attendance for program size as 350, I will be using a higher figure of 400.<sup>6</sup>

**Corporate-size church (401 to 1000):** Known for excellence in worship and music, and for the range and diversity of its programs. Specialized ministries are provided for narrowly identified groups of people; several of

these programs may be known beyond the congregation for their excellence. Often, distinct subcongregations form around multiple worship services. The senior pastor spends more time preparing to preach and lead worship than most clergy and must be skilled at working with a diverse staff of full-time professional leaders. Decision making is carried out by a multi-layered structure of staff, boards, and committees. While clergy continue to provide pastoral care, especially in crisis moments, most members find their spiritual support in small groups or from lay visitors. About a third of the corporate-size churches in the National Congregations Study<sup>7</sup> have at least 10 ongoing groups in addition to their classes, committees, and choirs. (Though the NCS did not collect actual attendance numbers, I believe that the 250 to 499 range of “regular attendees including children”—a size estimate provided by each congregation’s respondent—roughly corresponds to “program size,”<sup>8</sup> and that the 500 to 999 range roughly corresponds to “corporate size.”)

The first three of these size categories—family, pastoral, and program—include the vast majority (perhaps 90 percent<sup>9</sup>) of American congregations, but not the majority of church attenders. According to the National Congregations Study, half of those who participate regularly in the life of a congregation are found in congregations with 400 or more regular participants.<sup>10</sup> Some practitioners are calling these largest congregations “resource churches.” Not all congregations over 400 are the same “size”; Carl George offers further categories labeled super-church (attendances of 1,000 to 3,000), mega-church (3,000 to 10,000) and meta-church (10,000 and beyond).

Let’s look a little more closely at the character of the program-size church, using a few findings gleaned from the data set of National Congregations Study.

- *The impression of intense activity in the program church is verified.* Most program-size churches (about 60 percent) have at least 10 ongoing classes for children or adults; a similar proportion of program-size churches report at least four other ongoing groups—besides committees and musical ensembles. About 70 percent of program-size churches have at least two choirs or musical groups.
- *Remarkably, program-size churches have about the same number of committees as corporate-size churches.*<sup>11</sup> In each category, about half the churches have 4 to 10 functioning committees. Another third

- of the churches in each group have an even more extensive organizational structure with 11 or more committees.
- *The program-size church, however, draws from a noticeably smaller pool of leaders to support a similar number of committees*, not to mention all the other activities that require leadership. About two-thirds of corporate-size churches have 50 or more attendees serving in some sort of leadership role—a fairly good talent pool in relation to the typical number of committees. On the other hand, almost half the program-size churches report fewer than 50 attendees serving in leadership roles of any sort.
  - *Two-thirds of program-size churches operate with no more than three full-time paid staff of any kind*. This figure highlights another aspect of the size dilemma—lots of people and activities to manage but few full-time staff to handle the load. About 40 percent of all churches of this size make extensive use of part-time workers to fill out the staff roster (funding four to 24 part-time positions).

Gary McIntosh’s term “stretched cell”<sup>12</sup> captures the feeling of this bind experienced by many midsized congregations—with activity and structure expanding faster than the resources required to support them.

## GLASS CEILING

Between sizes, churches that have been growing steadily tend to hit an attendance plateau. Often they notice a mismatch between their flat year-to-year attendance chart and their other measures of growth—the number of visitors, members, or dollars contributed may keep increasing while attendance remains stuck.

Sometimes an attendance plateau is determined primarily by community demographics. In an isolated rural community with a fixed population, virtually every resident may have a well-established pattern of religious participation (or nonparticipation); life passages such as birth, marriage, childbearing, illness, and bereavement provide the primary openings for new or deeper relationship with God. Here a faithful, lively, and inviting congregation might take in or reactivate just enough members each year to replace those who die or move away.

Sometimes a flat attendance line is caused primarily by physical factors. For example, a worship service will tend to stop growing when 80

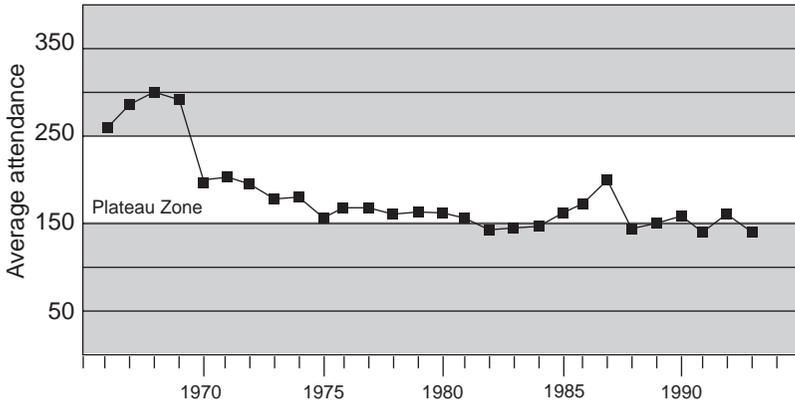
percent of the desirable seats are occupied on a regular basis. Because cultural norms about acceptable interpersonal distance are being violated, newcomers won't come back, or current members will attend less frequently. (When you calculate capacity, exclude inferior seating areas where regular members would never want to sit, and remember that these norms change from time to time; today's worshipers will probably feel cramped if they have less than 30 to 36 inches of space.) Some churches can break through an attendance plateau simply by adding more seating capacity, more parking spaces, or an additional service.

In contrast to plateaus created solely by community demographics or physical space limitations, the glass-ceiling effect of a size transition will occur even when there are lots of unchurched people around and plenty of seats left. Growth in attendance levels off because of a shortage in "sociological space"—the way the congregation arranges its life will simply not support the sustained involvement of more people than it already has. These size-related plateaus tend to be more mysterious to members and leaders because the causes are less visible and more cumulative in nature. At the boundary between sizes, many different hindrances converge to prevent the assimilation of new members and the full participation of those already on the rolls.

### THE PASTORAL-TO-PROGRAM PLATEAU ZONE

The simplified diagram of size categories in figure 1 implies that the boundary between sizes is a sharp line—that, for example, the fifty-first person automatically pushes a congregation from family into pastoral size. This is hardly the case. In fact, we see a "plateau zone" between one size and the next—a band in which attendance tends to wobble up and down until there is a definite move to the next size. The church whose attendance data is charted below saw an initial spurt of growth that matched the growth in its surrounding community in the late sixties. Attendance then dropped back into a plateau zone and stayed there for about 20 years, in spite of continued population growth in the town (see figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
**Attendance Chart of a Congregation**  
**in the Pastoral-to-Program Plateau Zone**



My recent research (reported in chapter 3) suggests that the pastoral-to-program plateau may occur anywhere between about 150 and 250. Churches with attendance in this zone often give an impression of being quite unsettled about which size they really want to be. Here are some typical expressions of that ambivalence:

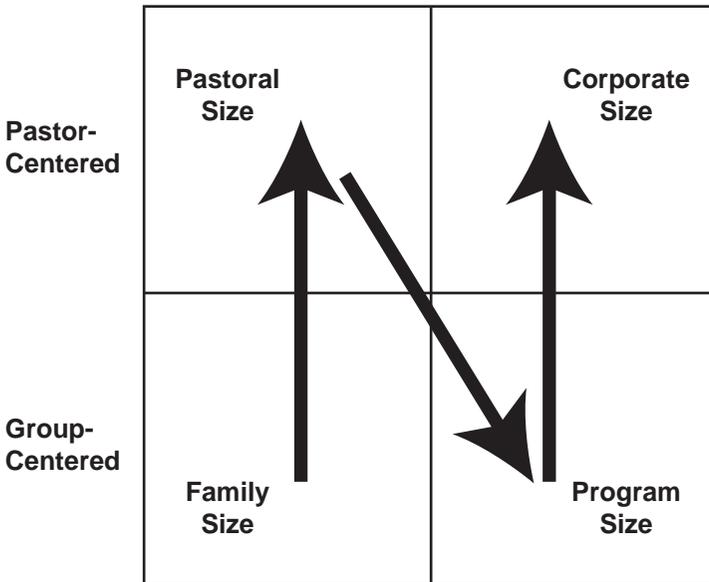
- While the pastor and evangelism committee work hard on growth and welcome, members frequently say that it would be best to remain small so that we can all know each other.
- Growth plans are presented primarily as medicine to cure a budget squeeze; leaders hesitate to say that the congregation might have a vocation to reach more people.
- Though members describe the church as welcoming to newcomers, leaders hear many complaints about plans to add capacity; for example, by adding a worship service, expanding the staff, or buying land for parking.

Life in this zone is a lot like straddling the San Andreas Fault: you can make better decisions if you know not only where the rifts occur, but also

what deeper movements of the earth are driving the surface eruption. It is true that congregations are changing and adjusting all the time; dozens of different factors are in play, moving in subtle gradations that make any size theory look oversimplified. Still, some of the forces at work are more powerful than others, more determinative of relationships and results. A two-dimensional model of size change helps to clarify the lines of demarcation.

One dimension of change, shown along the bottom of the chart, is described by the terms *organism* and *organization*. The vertical dimension is described by the terms *pastor-centered* and *group-centered*. As congregations move among Rothauge’s four sizes (family, pastoral, program, and corporate) they follow an N-shaped path across the fault lines (see figure 3).

**Figure 3**  
**Size Transition “N-Curve”**



## ORGANISM VERSUS ORGANIZATION

Family- and pastoral-size churches resemble an organism more than an organization. Congregations of these two sizes tend to be relatively homogeneous in make-up. Each revolves around a central relationship that can be apprehended immediately and intuitively: the familial bond among the members (family-size church) or the dyadic relationship between the sole ordained leader and the congregation (pastoral-size church). The congregation's identity is largely inherent in these central relationships. Ask the question, "Who are you as a church?" in a family-size congregation, and someone will probably introduce you around the whole circle of members. Ask that question in a pastoral-size church, and someone will most likely tell you about the congregation's relationship with its pastor, often symbolized by the rapport (or lack thereof) between pastor and board. In these two smaller sizes, the notion that a congregation might choose or shape an identity intentionally would probably seem odd; its identity is more of a "given" to be preserved and defended.

In program- and corporate-size churches, on the other hand, the variety and complexity of relationships require conscious attention to matters of identity, purpose, structure, role of leaders, and so on. Neither the members nor the pastor can intuitively grasp the wholeness of the system. The larger membership and the rich variety of programming will only cohere well if leaders "construct" a clear identity for the church and express it consciously in a mission statement, a vision, or a strategic plan. For newcomers raised in a smaller church, this work of construction may seem taxing and bureaucratic. On the other hand, the intentionality of the larger congregation in discerning God's purpose might stimulate their imagination about church life, clarify their reasons for participating, and provide rich networks of friendship, growth, and ministry.

The distinction between organism and organization is not absolute. Small congregations are still subject to the laws that govern not-for-profit corporations in the United States, and may be subject to lawsuits if they do not attend well to organizational matters like employment agreements, financial accountability, and policies for child protection. Larger congregations are still living systems held together by subtly balanced forces that we may only dimly perceive. Nevertheless, the difference between the two emphases is usually palpable.

## GROUP-CENTERED VERSUS PASTOR-CENTERED

The movement from family to pastoral size (the upward arrow on the left-hand side of the chart) involves a change in the way the system centers its life. The family-size church feels like a tribe or a “committee of the whole.” Not everyone on the committee has equal influence, to be sure, but the single circle of members works things through in its own characteristic way. A student minister or short-term pastor who tries to take charge of that tribe is in for a rude awakening because a family-size church does not usually revolve around the clergy.

When attendance exceeds 50, the congregation encounters a crisis—the unbroken circle of members no longer works well as the defining constellation of the congregation’s life. Members experience distress because they can no longer keep track of all the relationships. According to anthropologist Robin Dunbar, this discomfort has a biological basis in the limited capacity of primate neural networks;<sup>13</sup> we humans can only keep track of a certain number of face-to-face relationships in a given social system. In order to grow further, the system must allow the development of two or three different networks of family and fellowship—each of a mentally manageable size—and it must establish a symbolic center around which those networks can orient themselves. Typically, it becomes “pastor-centered.”

A great deal has been written about the dangers of clerical domination in churches, and many have questioned whether this shift to a pastor-centered system is desirable at all. I would not equate “pastor-centered” with “pastor-dominated.” The research of Speed Leas and George Parsons suggests that a greater proportion of members may actually participate in decisions at pastoral size than at family size. It may be that the heightened role of the pastor in relation to the board moves the congregation’s political center from the kitchen table to a more accessible public setting and requires that the ordained and elected leaders work as a team to move projects forward. The pastor’s central position as communication switchboard also allows for a great deal of informal consultation and problem solving. He or she can monitor key relationships (noticing when people are tense with each other, for example), initiate needed conversations, and anticipate likely clashes.

As attendance approaches 150, however, the congregation must become more group-centered once again because the pastor can no longer carry around the whole system in his or her head. There are too many

individual pastoral needs to track. The relationships among projects and leaders are becoming too complex to be coordinated solely through board discussion and pastoral diplomacy. A new kind of teamwork becomes necessary in an uneven matrix of leadership where some programs have paid staff, some have volunteer leaders so dedicated that they function like staff, and some have committees at the helm. Board and pastor must find ways to keep the parts connected with each other *directly* (in horizontal networks of collaboration) not just *indirectly* through board reports and liaisons. As in a spider web, the center of this leadership network does not consist of a single point (the pastor) but a small circle (half a dozen key program leaders—paid and unpaid, clergy and lay) led by the pastor.

In the move to program size, clergy must shift a good deal of their time and attention away from direct delivery of pastoral care toward assembling and guiding that team of program leaders. They must also find ways to offer spiritual enrichment to the board, whose job has become much more demanding. Skills for this kind of group-oriented ministerial leadership have not usually been emphasized in seminary or employed as primary selection criteria in the ordination process. Hence, many clergy find themselves poorly equipped for a pastoral-to-program transition.

To make things worse, this breakdown of the pastor-centered way of being church occurs at the same time as the shift from organism to organization. The congregation is now traversing the diagonal portion of the N-shaped path, crossing both the horizontal and vertical fault lines simultaneously. The pastoral-to-program change is doubly discontinuous.

In the corporate-size congregation, the need for more pastor-centered leadership emerges once again (note the vertical line on the right hand side of the chart). The program church's lively but lumpy network of staff, volunteer program heads, and committees can no longer provide the overview and strategic direction the system needs. At corporate size, complex networks of coordination are still required, but the central pastor must begin to project a large enough symbolic presence (through preaching, presiding, leading the board, and heading the expanded staff) to unify a diverse and energetic community. To be effective, this high-profile leader must find a reliable way to maintain spiritual perspective and must use the aura of headship to help the whole system grapple with its core identity and purpose.

## ESCAPING THE PASTORAL-TO-PROGRAM PLATEAU ZONE

In the pastoral-to-program plateau zone, many different hindrances converge to prevent the assimilation of new members and the full participation of those already on the rolls. In the next chapter, we will examine in more detail the passive barriers that keep congregations stuck at this particular level.