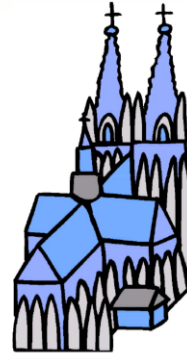


## Church Size & Its Implications

Remembering the basics of Church Size Theory during a time of transition can help us see our own situation anew.



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Church Size & Its Implications - 1

Fresh Start

### Talking Points

As the early church grew (see, for example, the Book of Acts), it faced different issues of inclusion, acceptance, new member incorporation, and leadership. So, too, present day congregations face different issues and congregational dynamics depending upon their size. Looking at the theories and data of church size, along with our own experience and that portrayed in scripture, helps us to understand better the living work of the Spirit in our midst and will better prepare us for ministry.

It is important to note, however, that while attendance figures are one thing, the congregation may behave as if it were a different size parish. This is particularly true as churches grow/decline from one size to another. Size transitions in either direction are hard. Another challenge is that “church size theory” was developed years ago and is based mostly on suburban, white congregations. Many ethnic congregations may be of one size in actual numbers on a Sunday, but function in the manner of a different size. Finally there is some new research that indicates that for larger congregations, size of BUDGET may be as much of a contributing factor in determining size as the more traditional Average Sunday Attendance (ASA).

Size is only ONE aspect of congregational culture, although an important one. Where a parish is in its life cycle and whether its size is stable, growing or declining can have a major impact on how the congregation sees itself and on the pressures being placed upon it. For purposes of this discussion, however, the focus is on size only. The size categories are taken from the research report “Congregational Size and Church Growth in the Episcopal Church” by C. Kirk Hadaway, Director of Research at the Episcopal Church Center.

There are a number of different size theories used in assessing congregational culture. For simplicity we have used just one set of size categories.

*Note: Some people react strongly to the labels used in this theory and may find other size language more helpful. You might ask what language your participants use to describe congregational size. Use what works – don't let the language get in the way of the learning.*

## Questions to Get Us Started

- What was the size of your formation (home) church?
- What is the size of your current congregation?
- Is it growing, declining or at a plateau?



Church Size & Its Implications - 2

Fresh Start

### Talking Points

How large was the church you grew up in or that formed you? How about the congregation where you currently serve? Are they similar or different in size? Is your current congregation growing in number, declining, or on a plateau? From your own experience in various size congregations, what difference does size make in the role of the rector or other leaders, governance, conflict, or relationships among members?

***Facilitate a general discussion.***

Let's take a look at church size theory.

## Family Size Church

(under 75 Average Sunday Attendance)



- Single cell
- Group-centered
- Power and authority vested in a few, often related, individuals (matriarchs and patriarchs)
- Change and new member incorporation comes through these few
- Rector as “chaplain”
- Fights are like family feuds

Church Size & Its Implications - 3

Fresh Start

### Talking Points

When we talk about this size church, we are talking about established congregations not start-ups. About 47% of Episcopal churches fall into this category, though they represent only 15% of the worshippers on Sunday. They are centered around the “group” rather than the rector and tend to be fairly homogeneous in their membership. The rector functions largely as a chaplain.

Governance is usually in the hands of a key family or families, and new member incorporation comes through them – often by birth or marriage. Change as well comes from the bottom up, initiated by these key members.

While the newly ordained person’s first position is often in a Family Size church, that is not necessarily a good match. The newly ordained clergy person is usually filled with excitement and ideas for innovation and comes in ready to make changes – the congregation either resists mightily or goes along knowing that when this clergy person is gone they will go back to their old ways.

Fights in this size congregation are like family fights – and often literally so. What characterizes a family fight?

***Some possible answers: emotions, subjective, name-calling, personal in tone, can be challenge to clergy or to position of matriarch/patriarch.***

## Family Size Church



- History of short pastorates
- Strong lay leadership
- Lack of investment in relationship to clergy
- Issues of continuity and stability
- Clergy staying leads to different situation
- Often successful “niche” churches

Church Size & Its Implications - 4

Fresh Start

### Talking Points

These churches are disproportionately located in towns, villages or rural areas, though some are found in inner city urban areas. While vulnerable because they lack the resources of larger congregations, many family size churches have a realistic and healthy sense of mission and ministry (for instance small churches that see their ministry as supporting clergy early in their career, ethnic churches reaching a specific population or rural congregations serving an important role in the community). These small congregations are more likely to grow in urban areas because the population itself is frequently growing; rural churches are more likely to decline.

Family size churches often have trouble retaining clergy and turn-over is high. This leads to lay leadership taking on a strong role; lay sacramental leaders are common in this size church as are part-time rectors. Because clergy turn-over tends to be high, congregations typically do not get very invested in the relationship they have with the rector. When someone feels called to small church ministry and stays, a very different level of investment can occur – once people get over the shock of “you mean you’re going to STAY more than 5 years?”

While we often think that success for small congregations would be to grow to the next size, success might be a deeper sense of the congregation’s ministry - its purpose as a member of the body of Christ, the discovery that its reason for being is larger than serving as a chapel to a small number of people.

## Pastoral Size Church

(76-140 Average Sunday Attendance)



- Single cell – stretching at upper end of size range
- Rector-centered
- Power and authority still in hands of few, but shifting
- Clergy at the center of program and new member incorporation
- Rector as personal pastor
- Fights – over the pastor

Church Size & Its Implications - 5

Fresh Start

### Talking Points

Pastoral size churches are about 25% of Episcopal congregations and have about 22% of the worshippers on Sunday.

As a Family Size Church grows to Pastoral Size, the center shifts from a “tight” group of lay leaders to the rector, who assumes responsibility for program and new member incorporation. Clergy are still very much involved in hands-on ministry, particularly at the lower end of this size range. As the congregation grows it becomes more difficult for the rector to have the kind of one-on-one pastoral relationship with members that the smaller congregation enjoyed.

At the higher end of this size range, the congregation begins to move from being a “single cell” to a “multiple cell” organization – for the first time, subgroups without overlapping membership form for purposes of mission and ministry. It becomes increasingly difficult to know everyone – you frequently hear comments like “I don’t recognize people here anymore.” Because intimacy and being known are frequently high values for a small congregation, there is a high cost associated with their loss. All of this can lead to a “push back” from established members trying to return to the older, more intimate style of relationship. Fights are over the rector’s time and attention.

## Transitional Size Church

(141-224 Average Sunday Attendance)

- Stretched cell
- Rector-centered, but moving to group-centered
- Power and authority shifting to subgroups; individuals outside of key family(ies)
- Change & new member incorporation joint rector/lay group responsibility
- Rector stretched – additional staff needs
- Fights – over inclusion, information, attention of rector

Church Size & Its Implications - 6

Fresh Start 

### Talking Points

The Transitional Size Church is a relatively new category in church size theory – it accounts for 15% of Episcopal congregations representing 23% of worshippers. It used to be thought that these congregations were merely in transit between Pastoral and Program Size. However, a number of congregations are stable and healthy in this size range.

There is increasing evidence that these parishes have a style of congregational life that is truly somewhere between the relative intimacy of a pastoral size congregation and the more subgroup-oriented nature of a program parish. While still relatively homogeneous in membership, congregations of this size experience increasing diversity. According to Malcolm Gladwell (*The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*) at a group size of about 150 it becomes difficult for people to know each other, so subgroups form. Because it is difficult for everyone to know everyone else the fights are over inclusion, who is in the know and who will get the time and attention of the “spread thin” clergy. Particularly at the upper end of the size range, direct interaction with the rector of the type experienced by members in smaller size congregations is not possible. The addition of other staff and/or increasing reliance on lay leaders (under the close supervision of the rector) become necessary if the congregation is to have sufficient programming to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse membership or to grow. Whether to spend the money needed to staff for growth and how to maintain democratic processes and communication become areas of contention.

These congregations are what Gary McIntosh, an expert on church growth, calls “stretched cell” churches – struggling to meet all the demands of their members with insufficient resources to become truly a “multi-cell” congregation.

## Program Size Church

(225-800 Average Sunday Attendance)



- Multi-cell
- Group-centered
- Power and authority in committees; vestry shifts to oversight
- New member incorporation through groups
- Change driven from middle or top
- Rector as administrator
- Fights – over resources and priorities

*Church Size & Its Implications - 7*

Fresh Start

### Talking Points

Program Size churches account for 15% of the congregations and 23% of the worshippers.

At this size resources are available to create a variety of programs and multiple member staffs are common. This is a truly “multi-cell” organization. The shift to this level is very difficult, often requiring more resources than are immediately available. One clergyman uses the analogy of the first attempts at supersonic flight, when planes shook so violently approaching the sound barrier that people thought it would be impossible to break. When Chuck Yeager managed the feat, however, he found that it was smooth flying on the other side of that transition. Many congregations feel “stuck” at the transitional size, unable to fly past the turbulence to program size.

In program-size parishes the role of the rector shifts from one of being a hands-on pastor to managing a staff and delegating much of the responsibility. The role of the Vestry shifts as well, with that body exercising oversight and relational authority, rather than focusing on tasks. Much energy in a program size church is spent on recruiting, training, equipping and empowering both volunteers and additional paid staff. Clergy and lay leaders alike may or may not be comfortable in their new roles – and at the cusp between transitional and program sizes they need to begin building the infrastructure that will allow them to step into these new responsibilities.

New member incorporation takes place through the groups. But unlike the Family Size church with a single group, Program Size congregations have multiple groups. It is no longer possible for everyone to know everyone else. Equipping and letting go are inherent challenges for this church size. Having more active members generally means needing more diverse programming. Fights are over the identification of priorities and the allocation of resources.

## Resource Size Church

(801+ Average Sunday Attendance)

- Multi-cell
- Rector-centered
- Power and authority in staff
- New member incorporation through groups
- Change driven from top down
- Rector as CEO
- Fights – between program units and staff



Church Size & Its Implications - 8

Fresh Start

### Talking Points

In Arlin Rothauge's original work on church size, this was known as the "Corporation" or "Corporate" size parish to reflect that it was large enough to act like a secular corporation. There has been some reaction to use of this term, however, so many people are using the term "Resource Church" to de-emphasize any comparisons to the secular model of the corporation.

Churches of this size comprise 0.5% of Episcopal congregations and have 4.5% of the worshippers. Like the Pastoral Size congregation, these churches are rector-centered with the rector often a charismatic preacher or one with a prophetic ministry. However the relationship of the rector to members is not personal as it is in the Pastoral Size congregation. Pastoral care is provided by a large and diverse staff. Because there are so few congregations of this size very few rectors called to a Resource Size church have experience serving in a church of this complexity. Rectors are often challenged to learn the management component of the job "on the fly" as they enter as the spiritual leader of the congregation.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *The Tipping Point*, argues that large organizations succeed when they cluster people into affinity groups of no more than 150. In this size congregation these affinity groups are the avenues for new member incorporation and pastoral care and support.

Fights are often between program units or between staff – or various groups – and can resemble the family feuds of the much smaller Family Size congregation. In this size church, the "small group infighting" might mean 50 to 100 people - this is a family or pastoral size church fighting within a larger community.

Though there is no research on what the upper limit of a Resource Church should be, most church size theorists place it at around 2000 average Sunday attendance, calling congregations of that size or larger "megachurches". The most recent data from parochial reports indicate that only a handful of Episcopal Churches approach the 2000 ASA level, and none exceed it.



## The Impact of Budget



- Demands of non-worshippers on infrastructure
- Complexity demands of endowment
- Impact of being budget-poor

### Talking Points

Susan Beaumont, a Senior Consultant for the Alban Institute, has begun to question whether ASA is the best indicator of growth transition points for congregations, particularly large ones. She thinks the size of the operating budget may be a more important indicator of how a congregation functions. Large congregations (over 250 ASA) often have programs – a day school, recovery programs, etc. – that attract many people who never become regular worshippers. These beyond-Sunday-morning programs put demands on the parish infrastructure without increasing membership or pledge income. Congregations of any size that are well-endowed may have a larger staff and more complex organizational structure than would be indicated by their ASA. On the opposite end of the spectrum, congregations which experience large numerical growth without a concomitant growth in pledging or other income may find themselves unable to meet the complex demands that increased membership brings.

## Looking More Closely at Program and Resource Size Congregations

- **Multi-cell Congregation:** operating budget of \$400,00 to \$1,000,000 (typically 250 – 400 ASA)
- **Professional Congregation:** operating budget of \$1,000,000 to \$2,000,000 (typically 400 – 800 ASA)
- **Strategic Congregation:** operating budget of \$2,000,000 to \$4,000,000 (typically 800 – 1200 ASA)

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Fresh Start

### Talking Points

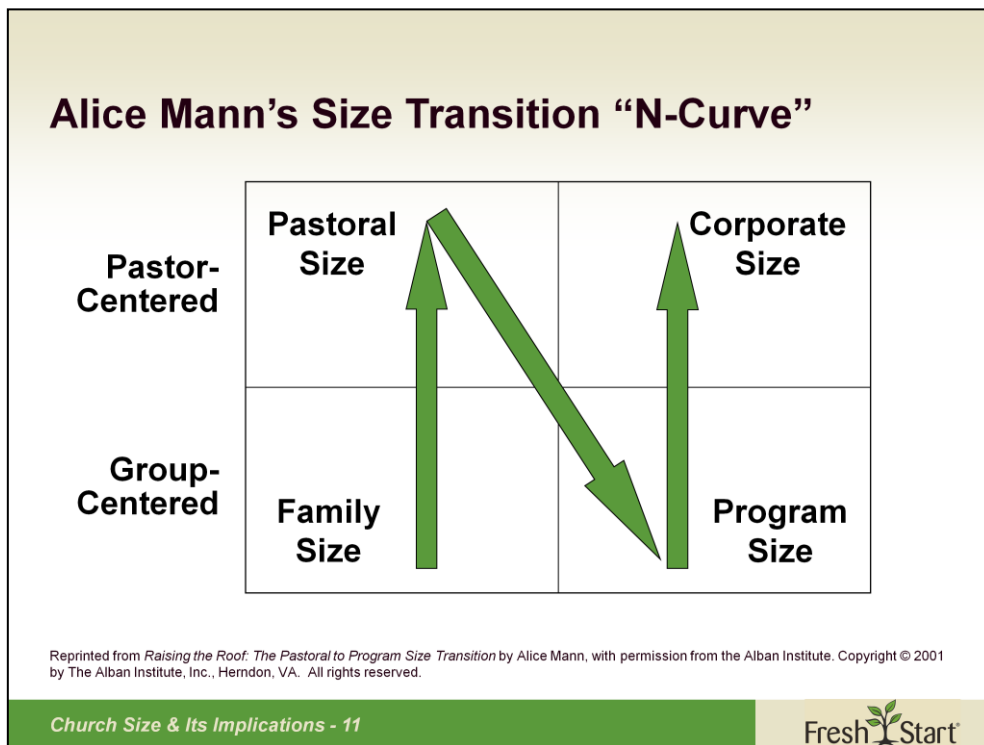
Using operating budget to look at the organization of congregations, Beaumont has created three new subcategories – the first two (multi-cell and professional) fall into the Program Size ASA, while the Strategic is at the low end of the Resource Size ASA.

**Multi-cell:** becoming more complex, but lay leadership still provides most of the guidance with support from a staff team; leadership development is critical because this size congregation struggles to create and manage the programs demanded by an increasingly large and diverse membership; the rector is the visionary, but also primarily responsible for getting the vision enacted; staff are mostly generalists though a few specialists (e.g., youth director) may also be present.

**Professional:** programming has outgrown the capacity of volunteer lay leadership; if the budget keeps pace, staff will become a team of specialists able to coordinate distinct aspects of mission and ministry; capacity of the staff team and the facility are the primary limitations to growth; engagement of members, particularly new ones, is critical as congregation can seem quite anonymous; rector becomes more of a manager and coordinator; Vestry gives up day-to-day management role and becomes more visionary and policy-focused.

**Strategic:** with increasing numbers and diversity of programming, drifting from a central vision may be a challenge; alignment becomes the focus of leadership; although well-resourced, congregation cannot do everything, so setting priorities and sticking to them is important; intentional paths for assimilation of new members develop; rector focuses on preaching, public speaking, fund-raising; staff team divides into smaller groups, often under an “executive pastor” who handles the day-to-day operations.

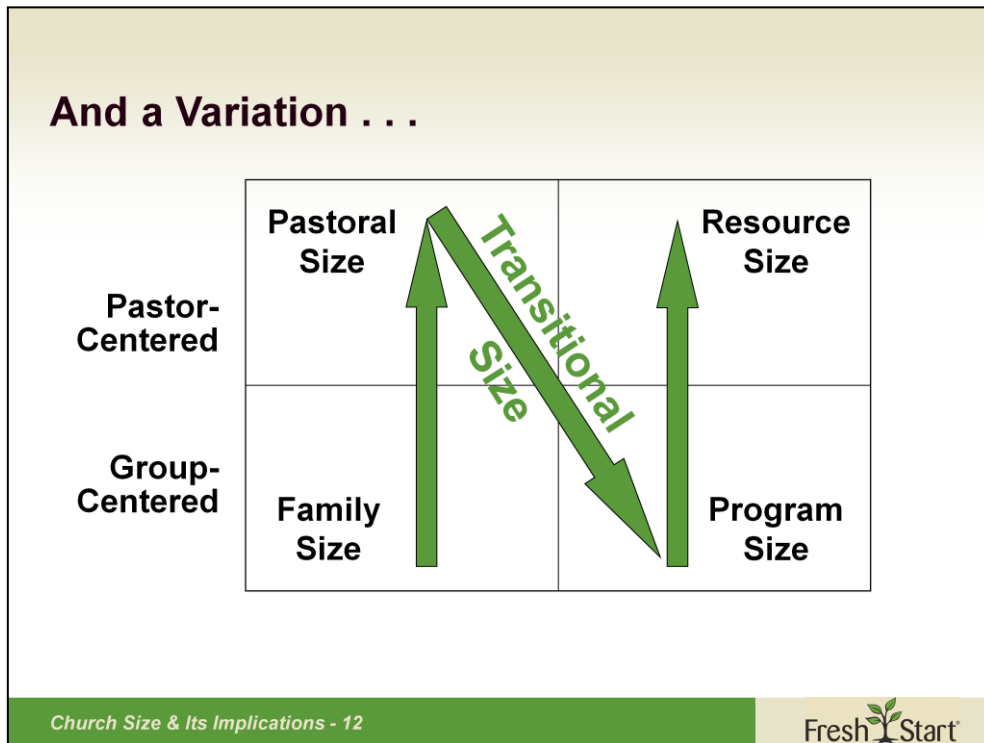
Research on congregations of more than 400 and less than 1200 ASA is new and fairly limited – but do Beaumont’s observations correlate with your own experience? How and how not?



### Talking Points

Here is one way to summarize the impact of size transitions on parish organization. Alice Mann of the Alban Institute illustrates the difficulty of moving from a Pastoral to Program size using what she calls the "N Curve." When going from Family to Pastoral size there is not only a change in the number of members, but a change from being "group-centered" to being "pastor-centered." A similar situation occurs in the multi-cell size shift from Program to Resource size. However, moving from Pastoral to Program means not only a shift from being "pastor-centered" to "group-centered" but from what is essentially a single cell organizational structure to a multiple cell one – a change in the type of organism AND the style of organization at the same time.

***The original appears on page 12 of Raising the Roof.***



### Talking Points

Alice Mann's theory assumes that transitional size parishes are simply moving from Pastoral to Program size. However, given that many congregation are stable in this size range, Mann's N-Curve might be up-dated to look like this. The Transitional size congregations fit along the diagonal arrow illustrating the "stretched" nature of their cell and their organization.

## Some Further Caveats . . .

- Research based on white, suburban congregations
- Impact of culture
- Size and behavior may differ
- Influence of life cycle

### Talking Points

Remember that size theories have largely been developed based on research done in suburban white congregations (though Beaumont's experience includes urban ones as well). Some ethnic congregations have significant numbers of people worshipping on a Sunday, but the culture and tradition of the population demands that the church function more like a family or pastoral size congregation. And congregations of any size may act more like congregations of another size.

Another factor is where the congregation is in its life cycle. Is it stable at its current size? Is it declining in membership? Or growing? Such changes can often explain why the congregation presents itself as one size, but behaves differently.

What has been your experience with different size congregations? Do the descriptions of the various sizes ring "true"? Why or why not? What about the impact of ethnic or cultural differences within congregations? What have you experienced?

***Distribute Handout 1 as a summary of church size theory.***

## Impact of Size

Family  Resource

- **Focus:** Relationships – Programs – Organization
- **Role of Rector:** Chaplain – Administrator – Leader
- **Role of Vestry:** Doing – Leading – Visioning
- **Decision Making:** Informal – Formal
- **Change:** Bottom-up – Middle – Top-down
- **Tone of Conflict:** Emotional – Subjective

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Fresh Start

### Talking Points

Size also impacts governance and roles.

In smaller congregations relationships are the focus, as congregational size increases the focus shifts to programs with people increasingly knowing only those who are involved in the same subgroups or activities. In the very largest congregations organization becomes the focus of energies – it takes a lot of management skill to keep a complex, busy congregation functioning.

Not surprisingly the role of the rector shifts as well from being almost a family chaplain in the smallest size congregations to serving as a mid-level manager overseeing increased program activity and staff to, in Resource Size congregations, being a leader or visionary. The Vestry's role also changes from one in which they typically run the few programs or activities of a small congregation to serving as liaisons or perhaps committee chairs in medium-size churches to setting general direction and providing oversight over the significant resources of the largest congregations. Beaumont notes that as church size increases, the size of the Vestry should DECREASE as too large an oversight body hampers the kind of decision-making needed to provide strategic direction and respond to changing circumstances. As congregations increase in size, decision making becomes increasingly formal. Decisions and change increasingly come from committees as the size increases, and there is an eventual shift from a more top-down model as the interests of individual members and subgroups become more diverse. A very large congregation can hold diverse interests within its borders, able to provide "something for everyone" – small and medium congregations find that difficult to do.

***Distribute Handout 2 and give participants a few minutes to jot down their responses, then have them discuss with a small group what they have observed or draw the lines on a flip chart and facilitate a general discussion. Probe for indicators that support where they place their congregations on each of the scales.***

## True to Type?

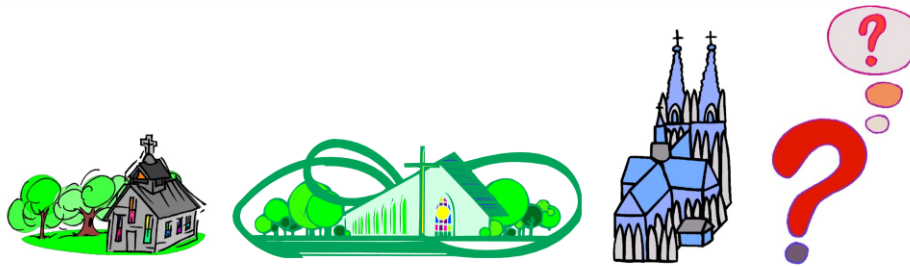
- Where does your congregation seem true to its size type?
- Where is it different?
- What signs do you see that support your views?
- From where do these differences arise?

### Talking Points

Looking at the various continuums on the handout, how does your congregation measure up? Is it of one size – and behaving like it is something different? What is the origin of that out-of-type behavior?

***Note: history, change in church size, ethnic or cultural make-up of the congregation, generational differences of members – all can be reasons for size/type anomalies.***

## What Does This Mean for Us?



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Fresh Start

### Talking Points

***Distribute Handout 3 and give participants a few minutes to jot down their answers, then have them share their thoughts with a small group or facilitate a whole group discussion. If the discussion occurs in small groups, debrief in the larger group.***

What are the implications of your analysis of size type for your ministry? What strengths are found in your size congregation? What challenges? What do you want to do as a result?