

# LEADERSHIP AND CHURCH SIZE DYNAMICS

PART I: GENERAL PRINCIPLES *By Timothy Keller*

---

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CONCEPT

One of the most common reasons for pastoral leadership mistakes and missteps is a blindness to the significance of church size. Size has an enormous impact on how a church functions. The *size culture* profoundly affects how decisions are made, how relationships flow, how effectiveness is evaluated, and how the church's staff operates.

We tend to think of the primary differences between churches in strictly denominational or theological terms, but this underestimates the impact of size. The staff person who goes from a church of 400 to a church of 2,000 is sometimes making a far greater change than if he or she moved from one denomination to another.

When Lyle Schaller gives names to church size categories, he deliberately chooses completely different "orders of being." He calls a church of fewer than thirty-five members a "cat," a church of 100–175 a "garden," and a church of 225–450 a "mansion."<sup>1</sup> Why? Because a larger church is not simply a larger version of a smaller church. The differences in communication, community formation, and decision-making processes are so great that the leadership skills required in each are almost of completely different orders.

---

## A BALANCED VIEW OF A CHURCH'S SIZE

Every church size presents the pastor with particular obstacles and opportunities for biblical functioning peculiar to its category. For example, discipline and accountability are far easier in smaller churches than in larger churches. On the other hand, lay ministry and the priesthood of all believers are easier to practice in larger churches, where pastoral care must be conducted on a large scale by lay leaders, than in smaller churches, which tend to acquiesce to clericalism. To use another example, larger churches generally have something of an advantage in evangelism; they can provide more doors into the church through their numerous programs, while in visiting smaller churches many (not all!) non-Christians feel too visible and their attendance too obvious.

**Every church has a size culture that must be accepted.** Although most people probably have a size culture they prefer, many "moralize" their favorite size culture as the *right* size, and they treat other size categories as spiritually or morally inferior. They may insist that the only biblical way to do church is according to a specific size culture, even though the church itself may be much bigger or smaller than their ideal.

For example, if members of a church of 800 feel they should be able to reach the senior pastor personally on the phone without much difficulty, they are insisting on receiving the kind of pastoral care that an under-200 size culture provides. Of course, the pastor will soon be overwhelmed. The members may insist that if he can't be reached he is failing in his biblical duty to be their shepherd, although such a claim has no biblical warrant.

Another example: A new senior pastor of a 1,000-member church insists that virtually all decisions be made by consensus of the entire session and staff. Soon the elders are meeting every week for six hours each time! The pastor may contend that if staff members make their own decisions they are acting without accountability, or that the staff lacks community. But to impose a size-culture practice on a church not having that size will wreak havoc on it, eventually forcing the church back into the size with which such practices are compatible.

Another example: New members who have just joined a smaller church after years of attending a much larger church may begin complaining about the lack of professional quality in the church ministries and insisting that this shows a lack of spiritual excellence. The real problem, however, is that in the smaller church, volunteers do things that in the larger church are done by full-time staff. New members of a

---

<sup>1</sup> Lyle Schaller, *Looking in the Mirror* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984).

smaller church might complain that the pastor's sermons are not as polished and well researched as they had come to expect in the larger church. While a large-church pastor with multiple staff can afford to put twenty hours a week into sermon preparation, however, the solo pastor of a smaller church can devote less than half of that time each week.

This means that a wise pastor may have to sympathetically confront people who are simply not able to cope with the church's size culture (just as many people cannot adapt to life within a different geographic culture). Some people are organizationally suspicious, often for valid reasons; others become distressed when the preacher is not available to meet their personal pastoral needs. We must suggest to them they are asking for the impossible in a church that size, without either encouraging them to leave or implying that to seek a different church would be a mark of immaturity.

**Every church has aspects of its natural size culture that must be resisted.**

A few brief examples follow.

Larger churches have a great deal of difficulty keeping track of members who begin to drop out or fall away from the faith. This should never be accepted as inevitable. Rather, the large church must continually struggle to improve pastoral care and discipleship.

Out of necessity, the large church must use organizational techniques from the business world, but the danger is that ministry may become too results-oriented and focused on quantifiable outcomes (attendance, membership, giving) because of the natural tendencies of management-by-objective. The goals of holiness and character growth can thus be overlooked. Again, this tendency should not be accepted as inevitable; rather, new strategies for focusing on love and virtue must always be generated.

The smaller church by its nature gives immature, outspoken, opinionated, and broken members far more power over the whole body. Since everyone knows everyone else, when a family or small group of members express strong opposition to the direction set by the pastor and leaders, that small group's misery can hold the whole congregation hostage. If they threaten to leave, the majority of people will urge the leaders to desist in their project. It is extremely difficult to get complete consensus in a group of 50–150 people about programs and direction, especially in today's diverse, fragmented society, and yet smaller churches have an unwritten rule that for any new initiative to be implemented nearly everyone must be happy with it. Leaders of small churches must be brave enough to lead and to confront immature members, in spite of the unpleasantness involved.

**There is no "best size" for a church.** Each size presents great difficulties and also many opportunities for ministry, which churches of other sizes cannot realize (or, at least, not as well). If you truly think there is an ideal size, it is most likely because you tend to emotionally value some biblical aspects of the church more than others, or because you are unbalanced in your own concept of what Christ desires from the church. Only together can churches of all sizes be all that Christ wants the church to be.

---

**CHURCH  
SIZES:  
GENERAL  
PRINCIPLES**

Reading books on church sizes can be confusing, as everyone breaks down the size categories somewhat differently. This occurs because many variables in a church's culture and history will determine exactly when a congregation reaches a new size barrier.

For example, it's easy to recognize that at some point a church becomes too large for one pastor to handle. People begin to complain that they are not receiving adequate pastoral care, and the time has come to add staff. In some communities this occurs when attendance rises to 120, while in others it does not happen until the church has nearly 300 regular attendees. It depends a great deal on expectations, the city's mobility, how fast the church has grown, and various other factors.

Despite the variables, the point at which a new pastoral staff member must be added is usually called "the 200 barrier." While this represents a good average figure, keep in mind that your own church might reach that threshold at a different attendance figure.

The following are general trends that occur as a church grows in size.

### **1. Increasing Complexity.**

The larger the church, the less its members have in common. The congregation exhibits greater diversity in age, family status, ethnicity, and so on, and thus a church of 400 needs four to five times more programs than a church of 200—not two times more, as one would naturally project.

Overall, larger churches are disproportionately more complex than their smaller counterparts. They have multiple services, multiple classes, multiple groups, and multiple tracks, and eventually they really are multiple congregations.

In addition, larger churches require more staff per capita. Often the first ministry staff persons are added for every increase of 150 to 200 in attendance. For example, a church of 500 may have two to three full-time ministry staff, but eventually ministry staff could be justified (even if you don't have the money for it!) for every 75–100 new persons. Thus, a church of 2,000 may have twenty-five staff. This creates a great burden on large churches, because unless you have a wealthy congregation, you can't add staff as quickly as you need to. A very competent volunteer recruitment, support, and deployment program therefore becomes critical.

### **2. Shifting Lay-Staff Responsibilities.**

On the one hand, the larger the church, the more decision-making falls to the *staff* rather than the membership or even the lay leaders. The bigger the church, the more issues and tasks have to be given to the staff to determine or execute on their own. The elders or board must increasingly deal with only top-level, big-picture issues. This means the larger the church, the more decision-making is *pushed up* toward the staff and away from the congregation and lay leaders. Needless to say, many laypeople feel extremely uncomfortable with this.

On the other hand, the larger the church, the more the basic pastoral ministry (hospital visits, discipleship, oversight of Christian growth, counseling) is done by *lay leaders* rather than by professional ministers. This means the larger the church, the more shepherding, teaching, and discipling are *pushed down* toward the lay leaders and people and away from the staff. Pastors must teach lay shepherds and teachers how to fulfill these roles.

In summary, in small churches policy is decided by many, and ministry is done by a few; in large churches ministry is done by many, and policy is decided by a few.

### **3. Increasing Intentionality**

The larger the church, the more it requires systematic and deliberate assimilation of *newcomers*. Newcomers are less visible in larger churches, and new people are not spontaneously welcomed or invited in. Assimilation must become systemic, and pathways must be identified by asking, "How will newcomers get here?" "How will they be identified by the church?" and "Where will unbelievers learn the Christian faith's relevance, content, and credibility?"

Also, the larger the church, the more it needs well-organized *volunteer recruitment*. Generally, the larger the church, the harder it is to recruit volunteers. It is much easier to say no to someone you don't know than to someone you know well, and the likelihood of an unknown person's approaching you to volunteer is much more likely in the big-church setting. Second, it is easier to feel less personally responsible for the ministries of a larger church and to think that because the church has many people "they don't need me." The larger the church, therefore, the more well-organized and formal the recruitment of volunteers must be.

### **4. Increasing Quality of Production**

The larger the church, the more it requires formal and thorough *communication*. You know when you've crossed into a higher size category when you receive constant complaints that people feel left out and uninformed. Informal communication networks (pulpit announcements, newsletter notices, and word of mouth) are insufficient to reach everyone. This also means that decisions have to be made in a more deliberate and formal way to ensure that timely and important information is reaching its proper recipients.

Second, the larger the church, the more planning and organization go into its *events*. In general, a higher quality of production is expected in a larger church, and therefore events cannot be thrown together willy-nilly.

Third, the larger the church, the more it requires high-quality *aesthetics*. In smaller churches, worship is based mainly on horizontal relationships with the other people present. For example, musical offerings of singers who are novices are appreciated because “we all know them, and they are members of our fellowship.” Being in relationships with them offsets their lack of giftedness or polish. In the larger church context, worship is based on the vertical relationship, on a sense of transcendence. If outsiders who do not know the musicians come in, a mediocre quality of production will distract from their worship. This means the larger the church, the more the music becomes an attractor and an assimilation measure on its own.

### **5. Increasing Openness to Change.**

The larger the church, the more it is subject to constant and sudden change. There are a couple of reasons for this.

First, smaller churches experience less turnover. Unlike larger churches, these churches do not change rapidly, and they face less turnover because individual members feel powerful and necessary.

Second, decision-making has moved from the congregation to the staff. Because too much is going on in large churches for laypeople to stay on top of, only the full-time staff members are well enough informed about many issues to make good decisions. When decision-making power moves toward staff members and away from individual members, change happens more quickly.

### **6. Losing Members Because of Changes.**

Smaller churches seek to avoid losing members at all costs. This emphasis allows individuals and small groups to exercise disproportionate power. There are always those who experience change as loss, and since the smaller church has a great fear of conflict, it usually will not institute a change that might result in a loss of members. Thus smaller churches do not lose members very often.

In larger churches, individual members or smaller groups have far less ability to exert power or resist changes they dislike. As noted above, since larger churches undergo constant change, they regularly lose members who feel overcome by church growth or upset with the changes. Leaders of churches that grow large are more willing to lose members who disagree with procedures or the philosophy of ministry.

### **7. Shifting Role of Pastors**

The larger the church, the less available the main preacher is to do pastoral work. In smaller churches, the pastor is available at all times for almost all occasions and for the needs of any member or unchurched person. In the large church, there are sometimes more lay ministers, staff, and leaders than the small church has members! The large church’s pastors must recognize their limits, set aside time for prayer and being with God, and focus the rest of their time on their staff and lay shepherds.

On the other hand, as the church grows, the minister’s leadership abilities become more important. Preaching and pastoring are sufficient skills for pastors in smaller churches, but as a church grows, the senior pastor must specialize in skills such as vision casting, strategic planning, and identifying problems ahead of time, before they become disasters.

Overall, more members of the ministry staff move from being generalists to being specialists. Everyone from the senior pastor on down must focus on certain ministry areas and concentrate on two or three main tasks.

And finally, the larger the church, the more important it is for ministers, especially the senior pastor, to stay put for a long time. As noted above, smaller churches do not change rapidly, and they experience less turnover. The innate stability of smaller churches can thus absorb a change in ministers every few years, if necessary. In the large church context, however, the staff in general and the senior pastor in particular are the main sources of continuity and stability. Rapid turnover of staff is therefore much more detrimental to a large church.

## **8. Structuring Smaller.**

In smaller churches, the classes and groups can be larger, because virtually everyone in the small church is cared for directly by full-time trained ministry staff, each of whom can care for 50–200 people.

In larger churches, however, people have much less access to direct pastoral care, so the internal groupings need to be smaller. People are cared for by lay shepherds, each of whom, even when given proper supervision and support, can care for only 10–20 people. Thus in a larger church, the more small groups per 100 people in attendance, the better cared for people are, and the faster the church grows.

## **9. Emphasis on Vision and Strengths**

The larger the church, the more it tends to concentrate on doing a few things well. Smaller churches are generalists and feel the need to do everything—a result of the power of the individual in a small church. If any member wants the church to address some issue, then the church makes an effort to please them. The larger church, however, the leadership identifies and concentrates on approximately three to four major emphases and works to do them extremely well, despite calls for new emphases.

Consequently, in a larger church, the vision becomes increasingly important. A key reason for being in a smaller church is relationships. A key reason for putting up with all the changes and difficulties of a larger church is to get mission done. People join the larger church because of the vision, so the particular mission needs to be clear.

Also, the larger the church, the more it develops its own mission outreach rather than supporting existing programs. Smaller churches tend to support denominational mission causes or contribute to parachurch ministries. Larger churches feel more personally accountable to God for the kingdom mandate and seek to start their own mission ministries or form partnerships with more direct accountability and responsibility.

And finally, the larger the church, the more its lay leaders need to be screened for agreement on philosophy of ministry, not simply for doctrinal and moral standards. In smaller churches, people are eligible for leadership on the basis of membership, tenure, and faithfulness. In larger churches, as noted, the distinctive mission and vision of the church become increasingly important. It is therefore essential to enlist (without apology) leaders who share the same philosophy of ministry as the staff and other leaders.

# LEADERSHIP AND CHURCH SIZE DYNAMICS

PART II: CHURCH SIZES: SPECIFIC CATEGORIES *By Timothy Keller*

---

## HOUSE CHURCH, 0-40 ATTENDANCE

**Character.** The house church is often called a “storefront church” (in urban areas) or a “country church” (in rural areas).

- It operates essentially as an extended small group. It is a highly relational church in which everyone knows everyone else intimately.
- Lay leaders are extremely powerful, and they emerge relationally—they are not appointed or elected. They are usually the people who have been in the church the longest and have devoted the most time and money to the work.
- Decision making is democratic and informal and requires complete consensus. Decisions are made by informal relational process. If any member is unhappy with a course of action, it is not taken by the church.
- Communication is by word of mouth and information moves very swiftly through the whole membership.
- The pastor is often a “tent-maker” and works on ministry matters part time, though once a church has at least ten families who tithe, it can support a full-time minister. The minister’s main job is shepherding, not leading or preaching.

**How it grows.** House churches grow in the most organic possible way—through attraction to their warmth, relationships, and people. New people are simply invited and continue to come because they are befriended. There is no “program” of outreach.

**Crossing the threshold to the next size category.** The house-church, like any small group, gets to saturation rather quickly. Once it gets to 40+ people, the intense face-to-face relationships become impossible to maintain. It then faces a choice: either (a) multiplying off another house church or (b) growing out of the house-church dynamics into the next size category, a small church.

If it does not do either, evangelism becomes essentially impossible. The fellowship itself then can easily become ingrown and stagnant—somewhat stifling, sometimes legalistic. An ongoing problem for the stand-alone church of this size is the low quality of ministry to specific groups like children, youth, and singles.

If it opts to multiply off into another house church, the two (and eventually several) house churches can form an association that does things like youth ministry together. They may also meet for joint worship services periodically.

If it opts to grow out of the house-church size and into a small church, it needs to prepare its people to do this by acknowledging the losses (of intimacy, spontaneity, informality) and agreeing to bear these as a cost of mission, of opening their ranks to new people. This has to be a consensus group decision, to honor the dynamics of the house church even as it opts to change those dynamics.

---

## SMALL CHURCH, 40-200 ATTENDANCE

**Character.** This category includes a range of churches, from those that are just barely out of the house-church stage up to churches that are ready for multiple staff. But they all share the same basic characteristics.

- While the relational dynamics are now less intense, there is still a strong expectation that every member must have a face-to-face relationship with every other member.
- While there are now appointed and elected leaders, the informal leadership system remains extremely strong. There are several laypersons—regardless of their official status—who are “opinion leaders.” If they don’t approve of new measures, the rest of the members will not support them.

- Communication is still informal, mostly word of mouth, and relatively swift.
- The pastor is still primarily a shepherd. While in a larger church the people will let you pastor them if you are a good preacher, in a smaller church the reverse is true: people will listen to your sermons if you are a good pastor. Effective, loving shepherding of every member is the driving force of ministry—not leadership or even speaking ability. (A pastor who says, “I shouldn’t have to shepherd every member—I’ve delegated that to my elders,” is trying to practice large-church dynamics in a small-church environment.) However, the pastor of a small church will (as the church grows) feel more and more need for administrative leadership skills. Small churches do not require much in the way of vision casting or strategizing, but they do eventually present a need for program planning, mobilization of volunteers, and other administrative skills.
- Changes are still processed relationally and informally by the whole congregation, not just the leaders. But since the congregation is larger, decisions take a longer time than in either the house-church or the medium-size church. Ultimately, however, change in a small church happens from the bottom up through key laypeople who are central to the informal leadership system. No major changes can be made unless you get at least one of these people to be an ally and an advocate for the change.

**How it grows.** Small churches also grow through attraction of newcomers to the relationships of the congregation. However, in the small church it is the personal *relationship to the pastor* that is often the primary attraction for a new person. The pastor is therefore key to beginning two or three new ministries, classes, or groups that bring in new people. He can do this by securing the backing or participation of one key informal leader. Together they can begin a new activity that may bring in many new people who were not previously attending the church.

---

**BREAKING  
THE 200  
BARRIER**

**Crossing the threshold to the next size-category.** This church may eventually face the famous “200 barrier.” To make room for more than 200 people in a church takes a significant commitment to some or all of the following changes.

**Multiplying options.** When a church gets to the place where the older members begin to realize there are members whom they barely know or don’t know at all, the complaint may come with a tone of moral authority: “This church is getting too big.” (Another form of this complaint is that the church is getting “impersonal.”) Essentially, this attitude must change if newcomers are to be accommodated. There must be a willingness to question the unwritten policy that every voting member should have a face-to-face relationship with every other member.

Often the key change that a congregation must allow is the move to “multiplying options,” such as starting a second service, putting more emphasis on small group ministry than on having one unified corporate prayer meeting, and so on.

As a general rule, adopting multiplying options creates a growth spurt. The single best way to increase attendance is to multiply Sunday services. Two services will immediately draw more people than the one service did. Four Sunday school electives will generally draw more people than two Sunday school electives. Why? Because when you give people more options, more people opt!

**Taking on an additional primary ministry staff person.** It is a sociological fact that a full-time minister cannot personally shepherd more than about 150–200 people. At some point any human being loses the ability to personally visit, stay in touch, and be reasonably available to all the people.

The minister’s span of pastoral care can be stretched with part-time or full-time specialty or administrative staff, such as children’s workers, secretaries, administrators, and musicians. There are variations to this figure depending on (a) the minister’s personality and energy level and (b) the local culture.

But at some point, a second ministry staff worker must be hired. This is commonly another ordained pastor, but it could be a layperson who is a counselor, overseer of small groups, or supervisor of programs who can share in the work of shepherding and teaching. It is important to be sure that this second staff worker really can grow the church—and, practically speaking, grow the giving that will pay their salary. So, for example, it may not be best to hire a youth pastor as the second person on staff. It would be better to

hire a small group minister or a minister of evangelism and outreach. Or, if the senior minister is excellent at outreach, the second staff worker could be a pastor/counselor who works more on internal growth and complements the gifts of the first minister. Initial staffing must be for growth.

The tension that often occurs in a church this size is that the church is big enough that the pastor begins to feel burned out but is not big enough to financially support a second minister.

**Letting power shift away from the laity, or even the lay leaders, to the staff.** As you start to approach this size barrier, the old approach to decision making, which required everyone to come to a consensus, becomes far too slow and unwieldy. Why? In the consensus approach to decision making, it is considered impossible to proceed with a change if any member is strongly opposed, especially if it appears that a change would actually result in some people's departure from the church. As a church nears the 200 barrier, there is almost always someone who experiences such a change as a loss, making it more likely that they will oppose it. Therefore no changes will ever occur unless many of the decisions that used to involve the whole membership now shift to the leaders and staff.

But it is not just that the laity must cede power to the leaders. The lay leaders must also cede power to the staff and volunteer leaders. In a smaller church the lay leaders generally know more about the members than the pastor does. The lay leaders have been there longer and thus have more knowledge of the past, more trust from the members, and more knowledge of the congregation's abilities, capacities, interests, and opinions. But once a church grows beyond the 200 barrier, staff members generally know more about the church members than the lay leaders do, and the new members in particular take their cues from the pastor(s) rather than from the lay leaders. Increasingly, the lay officer board (session, elders, or vestry) will not be able to sign off on everything and will have to let the staff and individual volunteer leaders make decisions on their own.

**A more formal and deliberate approach to assimilation and communication.** For a church to move beyond this barrier, it can no longer assume that communication and the assimilation of newcomers will happen "naturally," without any planning. Communication will have to become more deliberate instead of by word of mouth alone. Newcomers will have to be folded in more intentionally. For example, a new family could be assigned a "sponsor"—a member family that invites the new family over to their home, brings them to a new members' class, and so on—for six months.

**A shift in the role of the pastor: less shepherding and more leading.** A bigger church requires a bit more vision casting and strategizing and a *lot* more administrative know-how. The pastor of the medium-sized church will have to spend much more time recruiting and supervising volunteers and programs to do ministry work that in the smaller church he would have done himself. This takes administrative skills like planning, delegating, supervising, and organizing.

In the medium-sized church, the pastor is simply less available and accessible to every member. Even with the hiring of additional ministry staff, members will not have the same access to the senior pastor as they did before. Both the people and the senior minister need to acknowledge and accept this cost.

**Possibly moving to a new space and/or facilities.** A move can sometimes, but not usually, be crucial to breaking this growth barrier. Usually the key is initiating multiple services, staffing for growth, and making the other attitudinal changes mentioned above.

---

**MEDIUM  
CHURCH,  
200-450  
ATTENDANCE**

**Character.** In smaller churches, each member is acquainted with the entire membership of the church. The primary circle of belonging is the church as a whole. But in the medium-sized church, the primary circle of belonging is usually a specific affinity class or program. Men's and women's ministries, the choir, the couples' class, the evening worship team, the local prison ministry, the meals-on-wheels ministry—all of these are possible circles of belonging that make the church fly. Each of these subgroups is approximately the size of the house church, 10–40 people.

Leadership functions differently in the medium-sized church.

- First, since the medium-sized church has far more complexity, the leaders must represent the various constituencies in the church (e.g., the older people, the young families).

- Second, there is too much work to be handled by a small board. There are now influential leadership teams or committees, such as the missions committee or the music/worship committee, that have significant power.
- Third, because of the two factors above, leaders begin to be chosen less on the basis of length of tenure and strength of personality and more on the basis of skills and giftedness.
- Fourth, the role of the lay officers or board begins to change. In the smaller church, the officers basically oversee the pastor and staff, giving or withholding permission for various proposals. The pastor and staff then do the ministry. In the medium-sized church, the officers begin to do more of the ministry themselves, in partnership with the staff. Volunteer ministry leaders often rise up and become the decision-making leaders. Chairs of influential committees sit on the official board.
- As noted above, the senior minister shifts somewhat from being a shepherd toward becoming a “rancher.” Rather than doing all of the ministry himself, he becomes a trainer and organizer of laypeople doing ministry. He also must be adept at training, supporting, and supervising ministry and administrative staff. At the medium-sized church level, this requires significant administrative skills.
- While in the smaller church change and decisions happen from the bottom up through key laypeople, in the medium-sized church change happens through key committees and teams. Ordinarily the official board or session in the medium-sized church is inherently conservative. They feel very responsible and do not want to offend any constituents they believe they represent. Therefore change is usually driven by forward-thinking committees such as the missions committee or the evangelism committee. These can be very effective in persuading the congregation to try new things.

**How it grows.** As noted earlier, smaller churches grow mainly through pastor-initiated groups, classes, and ministries. The medium-sized church will also grow as it multiplies classes, groups, services, and ministries, but the key to medium-sized growth is improving the quality of the ministries and their effectiveness to meet real needs. The small church can accommodate amateurish quality because the key attraction is its intimacy and family-like warmth. But the medium-sized church’s ministries must be different. Classes really must be great learning experiences. Music must meet aesthetic needs. Preaching must inform and inspire.

**Crossing the threshold to the next size category.** I have said that the small church crosses the 200 barrier through (1) multiplying options, (2) going to multiple staff, (3) shifting decision-making power away from the whole membership, (4) becoming more formal and deliberate in assimilation, and (5) moving the pastor away from shepherding everyone to being more of an organizer/administrator. You can grow beyond 200 without making all of these five changes; in fact, most churches do. Often churches grow past 200 while holding on to one or more of the smaller-church attitudes. For example, if the minister is multi-gifted and energetic, he can take care of the organizational/administrative work and still have time to visit every member of his church. Or perhaps new staff persons are added but the decision making is still done on a whole-congregation consensus model. But to break 400, you must firmly break the old habits in all five areas. As for the sixth change—moving to new space and facilities—this is *usually* needed for a medium-sized church to break the growth barrier, but not always.

---

**LARGE  
CHURCH,  
400-800  
ATTENDANCE**

**Character.** We have seen that in the small church, the primary circle of belonging is the entire church body. In the medium-sized church, the primary circle is the affinity class or ministry group, which is usually 10–40 in size. However, in the large church the primary circle of belonging becomes the small group fellowship. This is different from the affinity class or ministry in the following ways:

- It is usually smaller—as small as 4 and no bigger than 15.
- It is more of a “miniature church” than is the affinity class or ministry. Affinity classes or ministries are specialty programs, focusing only on learning or worship music or ministry to the poor and so on. The small group fellowship does Bible study, fellowship, worship, *and* ministry.

Leadership also functions differently in the large church.

- In the small church, leaders were selected for their tenure; in the medium-sized church, for their skills and maturity. Both of these are still very desirable! But in the large church, these qualities must be

combined with a commitment to the church's distinct vision and mission. The larger the church becomes, the more it develops certain key ministries and strengths that it emphasizes, and the common vision is an important reason that members join. So leaders need to be screened for vision as well as other qualifications.

- In the small church, the board gave or withheld permission to the pastor(s), who did the ministry. In the medium-sized church, the board is made up of lay leaders and committee chairs who share the ministry work with the pastors and staff. But in the large church, the board must work with the senior minister to set overall vision and goals and then to evaluate the overall ministry. Unlike the small church board, they don't oversee all the staff—they let the senior minister do that. Unlike the medium church board, they may not necessarily be the lay leaders of ministry. Instead they oversee how the church and ministries are doing as a whole.
- In the large church, the roles of individual staff members become increasingly specialized, and that also goes for the role of the senior minister. He must concentrate more and more on (a) preaching and (b) vision casting and strategizing. He must let go of many or most administrative tasks; otherwise he becomes a bottleneck.
- While in the small church change and decisions happen from the bottom up through powerful lay individuals, and in the medium-sized church they come from the boards and committees, in the large church they happen "top down" from staff and key lay leaders.

**How it grows.** The small church grows mainly through new groups, classes, and ministries initiated by the pastor, sometimes with the help of an ally. I call this the "backyard approach," since it grows from informal new fellowship circles. The medium-sized church grows mainly through ministries that effectively target "felt needs" of various groups such as youth, seniors, young married couples, and "seekers." I call this the "side-door approach," since it brings in various people groups from your city or neighborhood by addressing their felt needs. The large church, however, grows through a "front-door" approach. The key to its growth is what happens in the worship services—the quality of the preaching, the transcendence of the worship experience, and so on.

**Crossing the threshold to the next size category.** The same five changes mentioned before need to be taken to the next level.

*Multiplying options:* Up to the "800 barrier," churches can still get away with having a mediocre or poor small-group system. The people may still be getting shepherded mainly through larger programs, affinity classes, and groups that are run by staff people directly. But to break the 800 barrier, you must have the majority of your members and adherents in small groups that are very well run and that do pastoral care, not just Bible study. Multiple services were more important in breaking the 200 or 400 barrier, but small group life is the key to breaking this barrier.

*Multiplying staff:* Up to the "800 barrier" churches can still get away with a small staff of generalists, but after the 800 barrier there must be much more specialization. Staff members must be increasingly gifted, and not simply workers, nor even leaders of workers, but *leaders of leaders*. They must be fairly mature, independent, and able to attract and supervise others.

*Shifting decision-making power:* Up to the "800 barrier," decision-making power was becoming more centralized—migrating from the periphery (the whole membership or the whole lay board) to the center (the staff and eventually the senior staff). Now the decision-making power must become more decentralized—migrating out away from the senior staff and pastor to the individual staff and their leadership teams. As noted above, the staff must become increasingly competent and must be given more authority to make decisions in their area without having to run everything through the senior staff or lay board.

*More formal and deliberate in assimilation:* Assimilation, discipline, and incorporation of newcomers must become even more well organized, highly detailed, and supervised.

*Changing the senior pastor's role.* The pastor becomes even less accessible to do individual shepherding and concentrates even more on preaching, large group teaching, vision casting, and strategizing.

---

## THE VERY LARGE CHURCH

**Character.** Churches in these categories have several advantages.

The very large church has a missional focus. In general, smaller churches give members a greater voice (see below), and thus the concerns and interests of members and insiders tend to trump those of outsiders. On the other hand, the larger church gives the staff and executive leaders a greater voice. The more staff-driven a church is, the more likely it is to concentrate on ministries that will reach nonmembers and that don't directly benefit its own constituents—that is, church planting, mercy and justice ministries, and other new services and programs.

The very large church has several traits that attract seekers and young adults in particular:

- *Excellence.* Those with no obligation to go to church based on kinship, tradition, ethnicity, or local history are more likely to attend where the quality of arts, teaching, children's programs, and so on is very high.
- *Choices.* Contemporary people are used to having options when it comes to the schedule or type of worship, learning, support services, and the like.
- *Openness to change.* Generally, newcomers and younger people have a much greater tolerance for the constant changes and fluidity of a large church, while older people, long-term members, and families are more desirous of stability.
- *Low pressure.* Seekers are glad to come into a church and not have their presence noticed immediately. The great majority of inquirers and seekers are grateful for the ease with which they can visit a large church without feeling "pressured" to make a decision or join a group.

The very large church also has greater potential for developing certain qualities and ministries:

- *Being multicultural.* A larger staff can be multiethnic (while a single staff/pastor usually cannot). A larger church with multiple services, classes, or even "congregations" can encompass a greater variety of interests and sensibilities.
- *Creating a full-service family support system.* Families often need a variety of classes or groups for children in different age groups as well as counseling services, recreational opportunities, and so on. Larger churches often attract families for that reason.
- *Doing church planting.* Larger churches, in general, are better at church planting than are either (1) denominational agencies or (2) smaller churches.
- *Carrying out faith-based holistic ministries.* Larger churches have a bigger pool of volunteers, finances, and expertise for carrying these out.
- *"Research and development" for the broader church.* Again, the larger church is usually a good place for new curriculum, ministry structures, and the like to be formulated and tested. These can all be done more effectively by a large church than by denominations, smaller churches, or parachurch ministries.<sup>2</sup>

Of course the very large church has disadvantages as well:

- *Commuting longer distances can undermine mission.* Very large churches can become famous and attract Christians from longer and longer distances, who cannot bring non-Christians from their neighborhoods. Soon the congregation doesn't look like the neighborhood and can't reach its own geographic community. Megachurches can increasingly become part of an evangelical subculture. However, this is somewhat offset by the mission advantages and can be further offset by (a) church planting and (b) staying relentlessly oriented toward evangelism and outreach.
- *Commuting longer distances undermines community/fellowship and discipleship.* Christians coming from longer distances are less likely to be discipled and plugged in to real Christian community. The person you meet in a Sunday service is less and less likely to be someone who lives near you, so natural connections and friendships do not develop. This can be somewhat offset by a great small-group system that unites people by interest or region.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Timothy Keller, "Why Plant Churches?" (Redeemer Church Planting Center, 2002) for a more in-depth discussion of church planting.

- *Diminished communication and involvement.* “A common pattern is for a large church to outgrow its internal communication system and plateau . . . as many people feel a loss of the sense of belonging, and eventually decline numerically.”<sup>3</sup> People are no longer sure whom to talk to about things: in a smaller church, the staff and elders know everything, but in a very large church, a given staff member may know nothing at all about what is going on outside their ministry. The long list of staff and ministries is overwhelming. No one feels they can get information quickly; no one feels they know how to begin to get involved. This can be offset by continually upgrading your internal communication system. This becomes extraordinarily important in a very large congregation.
- *Displacement.* People who joined when the church was smaller may feel a great sense of loss and may have trouble adjusting to the new “size culture.” Many of them will mourn the loss of feeling personally connected to events, decision making, and the head pastor. Some of these “old-timers” will sadly leave, and their leaving will sadden those who remain in the church. This can be offset by giving old-timers extra deference and consideration, understanding the changes they’ve been through, and not making them feel guilty for wanting a different or smaller church. Fortunately, this problem eventually lessens! People who joined a church when it had 1,500 members will find that not much has changed when it reaches 4,000.
- *Complexity, change, and formality.* Largeness brings (a) complexity instead of simplicity, (b) change instead of predictability, and (c) the need for formal rather than informal communication and decision making. However, many long-time Christians and families value simplicity, predictability, and informality, and even see them as more valuable from a spiritual standpoint. The larger the church, the more the former three factors grow, and many people simply won’t stand for them.
- *Succession.* The bigger a church, the more the church is identified with the senior pastor. Why? (a) He becomes the only identifiable leader among a large number of staff and leaders that the average person cannot keep track of. (b) Churches don’t get large without a leader who is unusually good in articulating vision. This articulation then becomes the key to the whole church. That kind of giftedness is distinctive and is much less replaceable than even good preaching. This leads to the Achilles’ heel of the church—continuity and succession. How does the pastor retire without people feeling the church has died? One plan is to divide the church with each new site having its own Senior Pastor. Schaller believes, however, that the successors need to be people who have been on staff for a good while, not outsiders.

**How it grows.** Basically, a very large church continues to grow only if the advantages described are exploited while the disadvantages described are resisted and minimized.

#### **A few more suggestions regarding very large churches**

*Be nonjudgmental.* A common problem in churches is that people attach a moral significance to their ideal size culture. They don’t see a large church size culture as “different” but as “bad.” For example, some members may feel that a very large church is an “unfriendly” or “uncaring” church because they can’t get the senior pastor on the phone personally. However, if everyone in a church of 3,000 *could* get the pastor on the phone anytime they wanted, it would not lead to a more caring church at all. He could not possibly respond to all their needs. (On the other hand, if a pastor in a church of 150 can never be gotten on the phone, he *is* imposing a larger size culture in a smaller church, and that will lead to disaster.)

Because a very large church is marked by *change*, the overall vision may stay the same, but few or no programs or practices are sacrosanct. Because it is *complex*, it is not immediately obvious whom to talk to or who needs to be in on a given decision; many new events may have unforeseen consequences for other programs. Because there is a need for greater *formality*, plans have to be written down, and carefully executed, rather than worked out face to face and relationally. In a very large church, all of these traits must be considered the inevitable cost of ministry. There should be little hand-wringing and no moral significance attached to these traits (calling change “instability,” formality “being impersonal,” etc.). Different cultures are just that—different, not inferior.

*Form smaller decision-making bodies.* In general, the larger the church, the fewer people should be in on each decision. Why? The larger the church, the more diversity of views. If the older processes are followed, decisions take longer and longer to be made, and they result in watered-down compromises. As

---

3 Lyle Schaller, *The Very Large Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 174.

a church gets larger it *must* entrust decision making to fewer and fewer people just to maintain the same level of progress, decisiveness, and intentionality it had when it was smaller. Many Christians consider the size culture of a very large church to be by definition undemocratic or unaccountable. This is one reason that many churches never get very large, or shrink again once they do.

*Allow the decentralization of power.* Another mark of a very large church, especially once it surpasses about 1,800 members, is that the “hub and spokes” structure, in which the senior pastor serves as the captain or “hub” and his staff are the “spokes,” becomes obsolete. Instead of being a team under the senior pastor, the staff becomes a team of teams. The power of directors and clusters of directors grows greatly. The church has become too complex for the senior pastor to supervise directors closely, and power is shifted to specific departments. This cuts two ways. (a) On the one hand, it means that staff leaders have more decision-making power for their own area. Other staff directors and even the senior pastor have less information and ability to second-guess them or interfere. This happens increasingly as a church gets larger. (b) On the other hand, it means staff cannot expect to receive as much mentoring, instruction, and rescuing from the executive staff as they used to.

*Bring on more specialized, competent staff workers who understand the vision.* Studies show that churches of fewer than 800 members are staffed primarily with seminary-trained ministers, but the larger a church gets, the fewer trained ministers are on staff. Why is this?

First, the larger church needs specialists in counseling, music, finance, social work, and childhood development—whereas seminaries train generalists. Very large churches do not need theologically trained people to learn a specialty so much as they need specialists who can be theologically trained.

Second, the very large church cannot afford to bring on a newcomer with a steep learning curve as director of a large ministry. In a church of 500, you may have a youth ministry of 30 kids, so you can hire a young person out of seminary to be the youth pastor. But in a very large church there may be 300 youth—so the staff director has to be very competent from the start. The larger a church gets, the more competent the staff needs to be. The call to the staff changes from “Do what I tell you” to “Go out and make things happen.” Resourcefulness and creativity become more and more important. The staff often need to be able to inspire followers and to find creative ways to bring something out of nothing. They must move from being leaders to being leaders of leaders.

Third, the larger the church gets, the more unique its vision is. It has a highly honed and carefully balanced set of emphases and styles—its own “voice.” People who are trained theologically before coming to staff inevitably come in with attitudes and assumptions that are at variance with the church’s vision. They may also feel superior to other staff people who are not theologically trained or may underestimate their own ignorance of the church’s specific context. The larger the church, then, the more important it is to raise and train leaders from within. This means that staff coming from outside need thorough training in the very large church’s history, values, and so on, and staff coming from within should be supported heavily for continued theological education.

*Change the senior pastor’s role.* A very key and very visible part of the large size culture is the changed role of the senior pastor. As stated earlier, in a very large church the preacher cannot be the people’s pastor. The senior pastor must move from an emphasis on doing the work of ministry (teaching, pastoring, administering) to delegating this work so that he can concentrate on vision casting and general preaching. Many churches and/or ministers never allow this to happen; indeed they believe it is wrong to make such a shift. While the senior pastor must not become a CEO and stop doing traditional ministry altogether, he must not try to do pastoral care or provide oversight for the church at large either. That responsibility must go to others. This is undoubtedly difficult; the senior pastor will have to live with this guilt all the time. It’s a burden he must be willing to bear, with the help of the gospel. Otherwise the pressures of trying to do it all will lead to burnout. The senior pastor, the staff and ministry leaders, and the congregation must allow this transition to happen.

*Build trust.* Schaller shows that the very large church is more accessible and capable of reaching young people, single people, the unchurched, and seekers than smaller churches are. He then poses a question: If the need for very large churches is so great, why are there so few? Why don’t more churches (a) allow the senior pastor to become less accessible, (b) allow the staff to have more power than the board,

(c) allow a small body of executive staff to have more decision-making power than the larger staff or congregation, or (d) allow directors more power to hire competent workers and release generalists? His main answer is that the key to the very large church culture is *trust*. In smaller churches, suspicious people are much happier. Every decision goes through a process of consensus that is accessible to any member. Any minority that is unhappy with something can block it. The larger the church gets, however, the more and more the congregation has to trust the staff, and especially the senior pastor. Though the staff (and the senior pastor) must do everything they can to be open to criticism, to be relationally available, and to communicate with people in a way that makes them feel included and informed, ultimately a very large church runs on trust.

Copyright © 2006 by Timothy Keller, © 2009 by Redeemer City to City. This article first appeared in The Movement Newsletter, Fall 2006. We encourage you to use and share this material freely—but please don't charge money for it, change the wording, or remove the copyright information.