

LEADERSHIP AND CHURCH SIZE DYNAMICS HOW STRATEGY CHANGES WITH GROWTH [DR. TIMOTHY KELLER]

A church's functional style, its strengths and weaknesses, and the roles of its lay and staff leaders will change dramatically as its size changes. Size has an enormous impact on how a church functions. There is a "size culture" that profoundly affects how decisions are made, how relationships flow, how effectiveness is evaluated, and what ministers, staff, and lay leaders do.

SIZE CULTURES

Every church has a culture that goes with its size and which must be accepted. **Most people tend to prefer a certain size culture, and unfortunately, many give their favorite size culture a moral status and treat other size categories as spiritually and morally inferior. They may insist that the only biblical way to do church is to practice a certain size culture despite the fact that the congregation they attend is much too big or too small to fit that culture.**

For example, if some members of a church of 2,000 feel they should be able to get the senior pastor personally on the phone without much difficulty, they are insisting on getting a kind of pastoral care that a church of under 200 provides. Of course the pastor would soon be overwhelmed. Yet the members may insist that if he can't be reached he is failing his biblical duty to be their shepherd.

This means a wise pastor may have to sympathetically confront people who are just not able to handle the church's size culture—just like many people cannot adapt to life in geographic cultures different from the one they were used to. Some people are organizationally suspicious, often for valid reasons from their experience. Others can't handle not having the preacher as their pastor. We must suggest to them they are asking for the impossible in a church that size. We must not imply that it would be immaturity on their part to seek a different church, though we should not actively encourage anyone to leave, either.

HEALTHY RESISTANCE

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

The smaller church by its nature gives immature, outspoken, opinionated, and broken members a significant degree of power over the whole body. Since everyone knows everyone else, when members of a family or small group express strong opposition to the direction set by the pastor and leaders, their 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 about programs and direction in a group of 50–150 people, 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 that churches of other sizes cannot undertake (at least not as well). Only together can churches of all sizes be all that Christ wants the church to be.

SPECIFIC SIZE CATEGORIES

What kind of church do you like???

1. HOUSE CHURCH: UP TO 40 ATTENDANCE

Character

- + The house church is often called a “storefront church” in urban areas and 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 at 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 “tentmaker” and does church ministry 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 multiplying off another house-church or growing out of the “house-church dynamics” into the next size category, the 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 into another house church, the two (and eventually several) house churches can form an association and do things like youth ministry together. They can also meet for joint worship services periodically.

If it opts to grow out of the house-church size into a small church, it needs to prepare its people to do this by acknowledging the losses of intimacy, spontaneity, and informality and agreeing to bear these as a cost of mission, of opening its 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.

2. SMALL CHURCH: 40–200 ATTENDANCE

Character

- + The range of this category goes from churches that are 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.
- + And while there are now appointed and elected leaders, the informal leadership system remains extremely strong. There are several laypeople—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 the changes.
- + Communication is still informal, mostly word of mouth, and relatively swift.
- + The pastor is still primarily a shepherd. While in a larger church 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 or small group leaders,” is trying to practice large-church dynamics in a small-church environment.
- + However, as the congregation grows the pastor of a small church will 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 tasks.
- + 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-sized church. Ultimately, however, change in a small church happens from the bottom up through key lay leaders. No major changes can be made unless you get at least one of these people to be an ally and an advocate for them.

How it grows

Like house churches, small churches grow through newcomers’ attraction to the relationships in the congregation. However, in the small church it can also be a personal relationship to the pastor that is the primary attraction for a new person. The pastor can begin two or three new ministries, classes, or groups, as long as he has secured the backing or participation of one key informal leader. Together they can begin a new activity that will bring many new people into the church.

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. Are YOU committed to these changes???

+ First change—multiplication options.

- 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.
- When a church gets to the place where the older members begin to realize that there are members whom they barely know or don't know at all, the complaint may be voiced in 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 welcomed.
- Often the key change that a congregation must allow is a move to multiplying options such as more than one Sunday service, or putting more emphasis on small group ministry than on having one unified corporate prayer meeting.
- As a general rule, multiplying options generate a growth spurt. The single best way to increase attendance is to multiply Sunday services. Two services will immediately draw more people than 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!

+ Second change—a willingness to pay the cost of 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 pastor will lose the ability to personally visit, stay in touch, and be reasonably available to all the people of a growing congregation.
- 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 the minister's personality and energy level and the local culture. For example, a more white-collar community tends to demand far more specialized programs than does a working-class community, and therefore you may find in such a place that you need a full-time ministry staff person for every 100–150 in attendance.
- Eventually that second ministry staff person 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 does a lot of shepherding work and teaching. It is important to be sure that this second person really can grow the church and, practically speaking, grow the giving that will pay his or her salary. So, for example, it may not be best to have the second ministry staff person be a youth minister; 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 complements the gifts of the first minister and works on the church's internal growth. Initial staffing must be for growth.
- The tension that often arises in a church this size is that the church is big enough that the pastor begins to feel burned out but is not yet big enough to financially support a second minister.

+ Third change—a willingness to let power shift away from the laity and even lay leaders to the staff.

- As you get to this size barrier, the old approach to decision making, which required that everyone to come to a consensus, becomes far too slow and unwieldy. In the consensus model of decision making, it is considered impossible to proceed with a change if any member is strongly opposed, especially if it appears that the change would actually result in some people's leaving the church.

- As a church nears the 200 barrier, there is almost always someone who experiences the concomitant changes as a loss. 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. Long-time lay leaders must also cede power to the staff and volunteer leaders.

- In a smaller church the lay leaders often 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 members' abilities, capacities, interests, and opinions.

- Once a church gets beyond 200, however, the staff tends to know more about the church members than the lay leaders do, and increasingly the new members in particular take their cues from the pastor(s) rather than from the lay leaders.

- The lay officers' board or elders will no longer be able to sign off on absolutely everything and will have to let the staff and individual volunteer leaders make many decisions on their own.

+ Fourth change—a willingness to become more formal and deliberate in 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, every new family could be assigned a "sponsor" for six months—a member family who invites the new family over to their home, brings them to a new members' class, and so on.

+ Fifth change—the ability and willingness of both the pastor and the people for the pastor to do shepherding a bit less and leading a bit more.

- The next-size 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 that in the smaller church he would have done himself. This takes administrative skills of planning, delegating, supervising, and organizing.

- In this next-size church the pastor is simply less available and accessible to every member. Even with the hiring of additional ministry staff, every member will not be able to have the same access to the senior pastor as he or she did before. Both the people and the senior minister need to acknowledge and accept this cost.

+ Sixth change—considering the option of moving to a new space and facilities.

- Will such a move be crucial to breaking the next growth barrier? Sometimes, but not usually. Usually what is needed is planning multiple worship services, staffing for growth, and adjusting attitudes and expectations in preparation for a new size culture.

PRINCIPLES OF SIZE DYNAMICS

Here are the general trends or changes that come as a church grows larger.

1. INCREASING COMPLEXITY

The larger the church, the less its members have in common. There is more diversity in factors such as 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. Larger churches are much more complex than their smaller counterparts. They have multiple services, multiple groups, and multiple tracks, and eventually they really are multiple congregations.

2. SHIFTING LAY-STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES

On the one hand, the larger the church the more decision making falls to the staff rather than to the whole membership or even the lay leaders. 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.

Generally, in small churches policy is decided by many and ministry is done by a few, while in the large church ministry is done by many and policy is decided by a few.

3. INCREASING INTENTIONALITY

The larger the church, the more systematic and deliberate the assimilation of newcomers needs to be. As a church grows, newcomers are not visible to the congregation's members. Thus new people are not spontaneously and informally welcomed and invited in. Pathways for assimilation must be identified or established by asking questions such as these:

- + How will newcomers get here?
- + How will they be identified by the church?
- + Where will unbelievers learn Christianity's relevance, content, and credibility?
- + Who will move them along the path?
- + Where will believers get plugged in?
- + Who will help them?

The larger the church, the harder it is to recruit volunteers and thus a more well-organized volunteer recruitment process is required. Why is this so? First, the larger the church, the more likely it is that someone you don't know well will try to recruit you. It is much easier to say no to someone you do not know than to someone you know well. Second, it is easier to feel less personally responsible for the ministries of a large church: "They have lots of people here—they don't need me." Therefore, the larger the church, the more well-organized and formal the recruitment of volunteers must be. redeemercitycity.com | 4

4. INCREASING REDUNDANCY OF COMMUNICATION

The larger the church, the better communication has to be. Without multiple forms and repeated messages, people will feel left out and complain, “I wasn’t told about it.” You know you’ve crossed into a higher size category when such complaints become constant. Informal communication networks (pulpit announcements, newsletter notices, and word of mouth) are insufficient to reach everyone. More lead time is necessary to communicate well.

5. INCREASING QUALITY OF PRODUCTION

The larger the church, the more planning and organization must go into events. A higher quality of production in general is expected in a larger church and events cannot simply be thrown together. Spontaneous, last-minute events do not work.

The larger the church, the higher its aesthetic bar must be. In smaller churches the worship experience is rooted mainly in horizontal relationships among those who attend. Musical offerings from singers who are untrained and not especially talented are nonetheless appreciated because “we all know them” and they are members of the fellowship. But the larger the church, the more worship is based on the vertical relationship— on a sense of transcendence. If an outsider comes in who doesn’t know the musicians, then a mediocre quality of production will distract them from worship. They don’t have a relationship with the musicians to offset the lack of giftedness. So the larger the church, the more the music becomes an inclusion factor.

6. INCREASING OPENNESS TO CHANGE

The larger the church, the more it is subject to frequent and sudden change. Why?

First, smaller churches tend to have little turnover: individual members feel powerful and necessary and so they stay put.

Second, the larger the church, the more power for decision making moves away from the whole congregation to the leaders and staff. Too much is going on for the congregation or the board or eventually even the staff to make all the decisions as a group. As decision-making power comes into the hands of individual staff or volunteer leaders, change happens more quickly. Decisions can be made expeditiously without everyone signing on.

Further, as we saw above, the larger the church, the more complex it is and therefore the more schedules, events, and programs there are to change.

7. LOSING MEMBERS BECAUSE OF CHANGES

The larger the church, the more it loses members because of changes. Why? Smaller churches seek at all costs to avoid losing members. As a result, certain individuals and small groups often come to exercise power disproportionate to their numbers. If a change were made, someone invariably would experience it as a loss, and since the smaller church has a great fear of conflict, it usually will not institute a change that might result in lost members. Thus smaller churches tend to have a more stable membership than large churches do.

In larger churches small groups and individual members have far less ability to exert power or resist changes they dislike. And (as noted previously) since larger churches undergo constant change, they regularly lose members because “It’s too big now” or “I can’t see the pastor anymore” or “We don’t

pray spontaneously anymore in church.” Leaders of churches that grow large are more willing to lose members who disagree with procedures or the philosophy of ministry.

8. SHIFTING ROLE OF THE MINISTERS

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 most occasions and needs, to any member or unchurched person.

GENERALLY, IN SMALL CHURCHES POLICY IS DECIDED BY MANY AND MINISTRY IS DONE BY A FEW, WHILE IN THE LARGE CHURCH MINISTRY IS DONE BY MANY, AND POLICY IS DECIDED BY A FEW.