

Truths Of Certain Size Churches With Insights On How We Change

In our recent meeting with Dr. Alan Rice, he made mention of our need to move through being a Program Church to a Corporate Church. This terminology scared some folks, and I wanted to share a bit with this and encourage your feedback. I am using information from the “Alban Institute” as written by Roy Oswald as the foundation for this. I will seek to explain the different styles of church in this and then offer my thoughts at the end. Remember, terms are just terms... these different areas of growth are important to keep in mind as we move - IF we decide we want to move and grow larger.

The challenge as pastors and congregations move through these styles of ministry is to acknowledge and to be ready to make the changes. As a person who has served in each “segment” of church (I served churches that ranged in average attendance from 15 to 396) I can tell you that whether we like it or not, these areas are true in broad strokes. So, without further adieu, here goes:

The Family Church (Fewer Than 50 Active Members)

This church functions like a “family” with appropriate parental figures. The matriarchs and patriarchs control the church’s leadership needs. What Family Churches want from clergy is pastoral care, period. If clergy assume they are CEO, they make a serious mistake.

The key role of the patriarch or matriarch is to see to it that the clergy do not take the congregation off on a new direction of ministry. Clergy are to serve as the chaplain of this small family. Clergy must understand this and not get into a direct confrontation with the parental figure - it’s suicide. Clergy can play an important role in consulting with the patriarchs or matriarchs.

Because these congregations usually don’t pay an acceptable salary, many clergy see them as stepping stones to more rewarding opportunities. It is not unusual for a congregation of this size to list five successive clergy for every ten years of congregational life. The Family Churches, then, develop very strong laity who often keep the church going. The Family Church has learned to survive with its own internal leadership. Very often this is the kind of appointment where a brand new clergy is appointed.

The Pastoral Church (50 to 150 Active Members)

Clergy are usually at the center of the Pastoral Church. There are so many parental figures that someone needs to manage them. A leadership circle usually replaces the patriarchs and matriarchs. The pastor has to clearly communicate and delegate authority. If not, the clergy person becomes overworked, isolated, and exhausted and may be attacked by other leaders and the fellowship of the leadership circle degenerates.

A key feature of a Pastoral Church is that lay persons experience having their spiritual needs met through their personal relationship with a seminary trained person. In a Pastoral Church, it would be rare for a Bible Study or prayer meeting to take place without the pastor. The pastor is readily available. The time demands upon the pastor of

the Pastoral Church can be oppressive. However, most members will respond with loyalty to a reasonable level of attention and guidance from this central figure.

In the Pastoral Church, it is generally assumed that everyone knows everyone. This, of course, is never true, but the thought persists. Clergy begin to feel stressed when they have more than 150 active members whom they try to know in depth. In fact, this is one of the reasons why clergy may keep the Pastoral Church from growing to the next larger size congregation - the Program Church.

Two-thirds of mainline Protestant congregations are either Family- or Pastoral-sized churches. Out-going, expressive persons seem to be the best match for the style of ministry in the Pastoral Church. Growth in the Pastoral Church will depend mainly upon the popularity and effectiveness of the pastor.

When some congregations grow to the point where their pastor's time and energy is drawn off into many other activities and the one-on-one pastoral relationship begins to suffer, they may hire additional staff to handle these new functions so their pastor can once again have plenty of time for interpersonal caring. Unfortunately, this strategy will have limited success. Hiring additional staff means staff meetings, supervision, delegation, evaluation, and planning. These activities draw the pastor deeper into administration.

As we move to the next size congregation, notice the change in the diagram of the church's structure. Clergy consider a congregation's transition from Pastoral to Program size the most difficult. One can expect enormous resistance on the part of the Pastoral Church as it flirts with becoming a Program Church. The two treasured features of a Pastoral Church that will be lost if it becomes a Program Church are ready access to their religious leader and the feeling of oneness as a church family.

Two things prevent this transition: (1) Clergy who hold onto a need to be connected in depth to all active members, and (2) Lay members who are unwilling to have many of their spiritual needs met by anyone other than their ordained leader. If church leaders have been saying "yes, yes" to church growth with their lips, but "no, no" with their behavior, this theory can bring their resistance to the conscious level by pointing out the real costs they will face in growing. Church tend to grow when parish leaders, fully aware of the cost of growth, make a conscious decision to proceed.

Without the backing of key lay leaders, the cost of moving from a Pastoral to a Program Church usually comes out of the pastor's hide. Burnout and/or forced pastoral termination can often result.

The Program Church (150 to 350 Active Members)

The Program Church grows out of the necessity for a high-quality personal relationship with the pastor to be supplemented by over avenues of spiritual feeding. Programs now begin to fulfill that role.

The well-functioning Program Church has many cells of activity, which are headed up by lay leaders. They also take on help provide some pastoral functions. Clergy are still at the center, but their role has shifted. Most of their time is spent in planning with lay leaders to provide quality programs. The pastor must spend a lot of time recruiting people to lead these smaller ministries, and making sure that morale stays high.

When clergy move from a Pastoral Church to a Program Church, unless they are

able to shift from a primarily interpersonal mode to a program planning and development mode, they will experience tension and difficulty. Clergy must be able to help a parish develop a common sense of mission and lead the church in matters arising out of their consensus. To wilt in the face of opposition to this consensus will be seen as a lack of leadership ability. The Program Church pastor will need to be able to motivate the most capable lay leaders in the parish to take key components of the vision and help make it become a reality.

The Corporate Church (350 or More Active Members)

The quality of Sunday morning worship is the first thing you usually notice in a Corporate Church. They will usually have the finest of musical offerings in town. A lot of work goes in to Sunday morning. The head of staff usually spends more time than other clergy in preparing for preaching and worship leadership.

In very large Corporate Churches, the head of staff may not even remember the names of many parishioners. Those who value highly the Corporate Church experience are willing to sacrifice a personal connection with the senior pastor in favor of the Corporate Church's variety and quality of program offerings.

The Corporate Church is distinguished from the Program Church by its complexity and diversity. Laity lead on many levels, and the Corporate Church provides opportunity to move up the ladder of influence. Keys to success are the multiple staff members being able to manage the diversity of its ministries in a collegial manner. Maintaining energy and momentum in a Corporate Church is very difficult when there is a division in parish staff. This leads to many of the downfalls of pastors in Corporate Churches... learning to work with multiple staff members.

Clergy usually called as head staff of Corporate Church are usually multi-skilled persons who have proven their skill in a great variety of pastoral settings. Learning how to allow other staff to fulfill functions of ministry is a major new demand. Lay leaders are usually baffled by the inability of ordained people to work collegially.

Uncle Dave's Two Cents' Worth

I really hate "labels". I think it is awfully hard to paint with a broad stroke. However, I must say that the longer I am in ministry, the more I realize that no matter what we call them, the culture clashes happen at the stages listed by Oswald listed above. There really is something to them. As a person who has served in all sizes of church, I can generally agree with what he listed there.

That's why I think we need to consider very seriously whether or not we want to grow. I do not think that we grow just for the sake of growth. I believe we HAVE to grow because we need to tell people about the saving grace of Jesus Christ and disciple them in daily living. For me, there is no - as in ZERO - choice. The easiest thing to do is to stay the same. But, just as what happens in our physical bodies when we stay the same, the Body of Christ begins to atrophy and waste away to nothing.

It truly is hard to make the "next step" at the parts where Oswald lists: Family, Pastoral, Program, and Corporate (or whatever one calls them). I can also say that in my experience with one church that went from Pastoral to Program to Corporate - it really is hard for clergy and laity to get their minds around it. Expectations necessarily have to change.

The bottom line is that this is a chance for us to discuss this. We have to figure out what are our sacred cows and whether or not we are willing to make gourmet burgers out of them! We truly have to decide whether or not we want to win the world for Jesus Christ or be a chapel for ourselves.

There are no right or wrong answers... it is just what we decide. I want to be very clear. No one HAS to attend these meetings. No one HAS to be a part of this. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you want to have a hand in leading our church to the next step. Please join me in praying through this. Ralph and I will be in contact with you about our next meeting and deciding on some benchmarks for us.

Thank you for your commitment to Christ!