

The Church Size Matrix

By Kent E. Fillinger

Less than 20 years ago, a megachurch was an anomaly. Today there are roughly 1,500 Protestant megachurches—56 from among the Christian churches and churches of Christ, representing a 250 percent increase from the 16 megachurches recorded in 1997, the first year Christian Standard reported megachurch attendances.

But while the number of megachurches has dramatically increased during the past decade, the size of the average church has not changed since 1998.

The median conservative Protestant church in the United States has 117 regular participants in worship on Sunday mornings. The median refers to the point at which half the churches are smaller and half the churches are larger.

The National Congregations Study estimated that smaller churches draw only 11 percent of those who attend worship. Meanwhile, half of all churchgoers attend the largest 10 percent of congregations, which includes churches with 350 or more regular participants. Therefore, 90 percent of churches have fewer than 350 attendees.

The good news is God uses churches of all sizes to achieve his purposes. In this and the next two issues (April 24 and May 1), Christian Standard will spotlight four categories of churches, ranging in size from 250 to almost 20,000. Timothy Keller wrote, “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” (“Leadership and Church Size Dynamics: How Strategy Changes with Growth,” Redeemer City to City, 2010).

The hope is the stories and statistics of these churches, combined with relevant trends and important findings, will spark significant conversations among your church leaders, generate deeper-level analysis of your church, and motivate the leaders to dream together of future possibilities for greater kingdom impact.

A dozen years ago, Gary McIntosh’s book *One Size Doesn’t Fit All* assisted me in navigating the leadership and organizational transitions of a growing church. McIntosh wrote, “The most useful system is to group churches by size. Comparing churches by size reveals more helpful information for faithful ministry than looking at their denomination, location, or any of the other numerous methods of comparison.”

McIntosh developed a “typology of church sizes” that he explored and explained throughout his book. The book still has value for small- and medium-size church leaders attempting to gain a better understanding of the leadership and organizational shifts necessary to grow past certain size barriers.

But McIntosh’s work included only small, medium, and large churches, with the final category including any church that averaged more than 400. Given the subsequent explosion of churches with more than 1,000 in attendance, McIntosh’s typology is outdated.

Using McIntosh’s model as a springboard, I developed the “Church Size Matrix” (see chart, below) to highlight the transitions that take place as a church continues to grow past specific size points. While McIntosh devoted an entire book to this topic, I provide a snapshot in this two-part article.

The Church Size Matrix explores six types of organizational change that take place as a church grows, including: orientation, structure, the senior minister’s role, leadership and decision making, staffing, and culture. The Church Size Matrix identifies six size categories of churches, four of which are profiled in this and the following two issues.

Keller wrote, “One of the most common reasons for pastoral leadership mistakes is blindness to the significance of church size. 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. . . . A large church is not simply a bigger version of a small church.”

Church Size Matrix							
TYPE OF CHURCH	SIZE	ORIENTATION	STRUCTURE	MINISTER'S ROLE	LEADERSHIP/ DECISIONS	STAFF	CULTURE
Small Church	35-249	Family/relational	Single cell	Pastor/shepherd	Key families/church	Solo minister (generalist)	Traditional/static
Medium Church	250-499	Programmatical	Stretched cell	Administrator	Committees	Several specialists	Turnaround
Large Church	500-999	Organizational	Multiple cells	Leader	Elders/staff	Multiple specialists	Transitional
Emerging Megachurch	1,000-1,999	Hybrid	Multiplying cells	Teacher	Staff/elders	Specialists + generalists	Transforming
Megachurch	2,000-9,999	Corporation	Simplified cells	CEO	Senior level staff	Teams of specialists	Creative imitators
Gigachurch	10,000-plus	Minidenomination	Multiple locations	Celebrity/icon	Executive core	Division leaders/many layers	Innovative

Developed by Kent E. Fillingim (September 2010)

1. Orientation

Every church has a central organizing principle or orientation. The small church is driven by a family or relational orientation, with high value placed on everyone knowing one another. Often these churches are comprised of one or two extended families that play a key organizing role for the church.

As a church grows and the possibility of knowing everyone decreases, a medium-sized church begins to function as a collection of family groups with several ministry groups or teams. Programs begin to take precedence over what is acceptable to the key families, and the collection of groups and the programmatic focus create an environment for growth.

As a church reaches the large-sized phase, it is critical that another shift be made to an organizational orientation where there are additional structures and more organized group life.

The emerging megachurch can function like an oversized large church or begin to function in such a way as to truly become an emerging megachurch; this grouping of churches, therefore, receives the classification of having a hybrid orientation. Depending on the philosophy of the leadership, the emerging megachurch can either maintain the same menu of groups and ministries, or it can once again explore new structures to spur continued growth.

Upon reaching the megachurch level, a church's orientation resembles a corporation where the bottom line drives more decisions and the number of relational entry points is simplified and clearly defined, and people are guided into specific environments.

If a church reaches the gigachurch level (10,000 or more in weekly attendance), then based on sheer size, its orientation assumes that of a minidenomination, and often the by-products include specialized church conferences, self-published curriculum and books, and other resources that support and reinforce the brand or flavor of that particular church.

McIntosh notes that if a church does not make the appropriate and required adjustments, then it will either plateau for a time, or decline back to the previous smaller-size category. The pull downward, he adds, is stronger than the pull upward.

2. Structure

The small church is best characterized as a single cell. Most times, the single cell small church is internally focused on meeting the needs and concerns of those who are already in the circle. McIntosh says it is difficult for someone new to be accepted in a small church unless he or she meets one of the following criteria: he or she is born into one of the key families, marries someone from one of the key families, has an outgoing personality, has something of value to offer that the church needs (e.g., spiritual gifts, money, prestige), or has experienced a crisis along with the key families.

When a small church experiences growth, the single cell is stretched as it becomes a medium-sized church. The medium church is comparable to an awkward teenager experiencing the growing pains of adolescence. McIntosh defines a stretched cell as one that "has grown numerically large enough to be considered a medium church but has not added new leadership to its governing board." The church leaders are still solely comprised of the original single cell or members of the key families.

The multiple cells of a large church set it apart from a medium church. In a large church, most attendees are involved in a mix of small and large groups, with most having little or no contact with one another. The focus often includes a balance between the external and internal, and new people find quicker, easier entry points into community. Also, the leadership is representative of multiple groups within the church.

The emerging megachurch continues to expand as it focuses on multiplying cells or the number of new groups and ministry options available in an effort to meet everyone's needs. Oftentimes, the strategy of emerging megachurches becomes somewhat fragmented or diffused as it tries to mirror the megachurch rather than creating the new functional structures that best fit its inherent strengths.

The book *Simple Church* has been used by churches of all sizes, but recently the book's concepts have permeated many megachurches, which have called a time-out to address the scope creep they have experienced as the number of attendees, groups, and ministries has reached unmanageable proportions. Megachurches best achieve a structure of simplified cells as they work to redefine their ministry strategy and hone in on a few intentional pathways for future growth.

Finally, the structure of the gigachurch is often best reflected by multiple locations. Gigachurches are still the primary drivers behind the multisite movement, and now online worship venues have opened a

new stream that can include defined virtual and physical groups meeting in several states or even countries around the world that identify with a particular gigachurch.

The reality is the more groups your church has per 100 in attendance, the better cared for people are, and the faster your church will grow.

3. The Minister's Role

In his book *One Size Doesn't Fit All*, Gary McIntosh wrote, "As the size of a church increases, the perception of a pastor changes from an emphasis on relational skills, to functional skills, to leadership skills."

It is essential, therefore, to understand the progression of roles required by the senior minister to avoid bottlenecking the church's growth potential and to successfully transition the church to the next size category. Many times the elders or church board, because of preconceived notions or expectations of a senior minister, can hinder the church's potential by imperceptibly restricting a senior minister's opportunity to transition to the next required role.

The small church minister functions as a pastor or shepherd who is expected to know and love his flock. The medium church minister must transition some into the role of an administrator who can manage more ministries and staff. As the church evolves into a large church, the minister must become a leader who can envision and implement a ministry growing ever more complex. In the emerging megachurch, the senior minister's role shifts to that of being a better teacher, and his communication gifts continue playing a more vital role. The increasing size of the church and staff combined with a growing level of organizational complexity demands that the megachurch minister function more like the CEO of a successful, growing corporation. The gigachurch (attendance 10,000 or more) senior minister takes on a larger-than-life persona and receives celebrity or icon status in spite of his best efforts and intentions to spurn such associations.

4. Leadership and Decision Making

Who sets the direction in the church? In the small church, leadership and decision making normally is driven by a few key families, a couple of strong personalities, or a congregational vote of the entire church. In a medium church, the direction of the church falls to several major committees.

As new leaders are assimilated into the large church, the source of power resides with the elders and staff, with the elders typically taking a stronger leadership role in decision making. This scenario flip-flops in the emerging megachurch, as the church transitions to a more staff-led, elder-protected leadership structure. This adjustment frees the staff to make decisions within defined boundaries, allowing them to be more nimble and responsive to trends when making needed changes.

In the megachurch, the decision-making circle shrinks to the senior-level staff, which is managing various staff teams; elders offer input and feedback only in major policy or organizational change situations. The gigachurch relies on an executive core of staff to set the direction of the church, and the role of the elders or church board varies according to the agenda item and the professional expertise of the eldership or board.

5. Staff

Gigachurches use a smaller percentage of paid staff, as the staff-to-attendee ratio changes with increased size. The average emerging megachurch and megachurch has 1 staff member per 80 attendees, compared with 1 staff member per 131 attendees at a gigachurch, according to Leadership Network's 2010 Large Church Finances and Staffing Report.

In the small church, the senior minister is often the only person on staff and must function as a generalist by wearing many hats. Multiple paid staff members are increasingly common, though, for churches with fewer than 250 in attendance, with staff typically hired to serve a particular generation within the church. This can sometimes result in additional growth that moves the small church into the medium-sized category.

The medium church often employs several specialists to lead certain high-priority ministries within the church, and the senior minister moves from being a shepherd to being a rancher. A large church continues to add more specialists, as more groups in the church feel a need for professional staff attention.

The emerging megachurch sometimes moves toward hiring a few ministry generalists to integrate with the specialists on staff, based on the priorities and passions of the church and its leadership. In the megachurch setting, staff members are grouped into teams of specialists, with multiple people focused specifically on certain ministries within the church. And in the gigachurch, given the scope of the ministries, there are multiple layers of staff with highly skilled division leaders providing oversight for specialized areas of ministry.

6. Culture

In *Cracking Your Church's Culture Code*, Samuel Chand writes, "Organizational culture is like the air; it's all around us, shaping every moment of every day, but we seldom notice it at all." And Keller noted, "Every church has a culture that goes with its size and which must be accepted. Most people tend to prefer a certain size culture." Knowing that people tend to have a "size preference" helps explain why sometimes a positive, key leader at one stage in the life of the church chooses not to continue on as the church grows to the next size category.

The small church is marked by a traditional, or static, culture where change is often avoided out of fear of disrupting the relational life within the church or the fear of losing members.

As a church grows, it is subject to more frequent and sudden change. As a result of these changes; growing churches tend to lose more members. But usually leaders of growing churches are more willing to lose members who disagree with the direction and decisions of the church.

The medium church is in the midst of a turnaround culture as it tries to grow beyond the single-cell structure and stretch the church toward continued growth. Inherent with the turnaround culture are significant structural and stylistic changes that often result in conflict, as the once influential core begins to realize its power is diminishing and attempts to push back to maintain control. A church's elders and staff must be united in their ownership and support of the church's vision and direction to effectively navigate this change cycle, while also being willing to give up some people to continue on the journey.

The large church is transitional in nature as it strives to continue to grow and evolve. This is the stage where many churches plateau because they develop a level of comfort—the churches have added a team of ministry specialists to serve their various groups, and the churches feel large enough to be exciting without being so large they are overwhelming or unfamiliar to longtime members.

The emerging megachurch is best defined as a transforming culture. Such churches wrestle with feeling like an oversized large church that has attracted a diverse group of members. The compounding impact of changed lives and an increasing diversity of personal needs are more evident in such churches, as the leadership finds its footing in this new culture while it attempts to continue to grow.

With a cadre of specialists on staff and an awareness of, or connections with, other like-minded churches, megachurches excel at creative imitation; they adopt and adapt ideas that have worked in other megachurches while adding a personal signature that makes the idea feel homegrown.

A culture of innovation marks the gigachurch, as the wealth of staff time and resources enable them to explore new realms of ministry creativity while carving a path for other churches to follow. The innovative ideas employed by gigachurches often are sold in prepackaged resources to much smaller churches that hope to realize similar results.

Closing Thoughts

Lyle Schaller said in *44 Questions for Congregational Self-Appraisal*, “The majority of North American Protestant congregations founded before 1970 are in a state of denial.” Too many churches and church leaders have resigned themselves to “do church” rather than striving to “be the church.” This has resulted in the American church’s declining social role and influence, and has left the church grasping to maintain a presence in people’s lives and the cultural landscape.

Organizational arrogance among church leaders is often connected with this denial. In *Equipped for Adventure*, Scott Kirby says, “Arrogance means that we think that we know all the answers and understand all of our problems and their solutions. It means we don’t need advice or input because we already have it all figured out. . . . The longer people are in a position of leadership, the more susceptible they are to this.” In *Change Is Like a Slinky*, Hans Finzel puts it this way: “We naturally think we become experts by virtue of longevity. Yet a common effect of all those years of practice is an isolation and conformity to traditions.”

Henri Matisse said, “To look at something as though we had never seen it before requires great courage.” In other words, as the saying goes, “You can’t read the label from inside the bottle.” So while we often talk of “insight,” a better goal might be “outsight,” that is, perspective from those outside your church or decision-making team to help you accurately gauge your church’s status.