

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Size As A Factor in Church Growth: Part Two

During the 1990s church consultant, Carl George, wrote two books based on the hypothesis that as churches grow they must change their organizational structure. In *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (1991) George shares, "Almost every growing church I've encountered faces insurmountable limits on its ability to expand its structure without serious disruption in quality" (1991:43). He further attests, "Churches find that each

time they grow a little, their quality lessens, so they must scramble to implement a new organizational system geared to their current size" (1991:42).

In a follow-up book, *How to Break Growth Barriers* (1993), Carl George specifically deals with the 200, 400, and 800 size barriers. He declares that, "Churches have more in common by their size than by their denomination, tradition, location, age, or any other single, isolatable factor (1993:129). After demonstrating the predictable barriers, or sizes, around which churches cluster, he addresses several issues of organizational capacity necessary to break the 200 barrier: parking availability, space for classes and seating, and expansion/relocation. To pass the 400 barrier, George recommends changes in the roles of the board and staff. Essentially, operational functions must begin to be shifted to the staff, while policy-setting functions remain with the board. Growing beyond 800 requires changes in marketing,

facilities usage, and organizational design. In part leaders must establish reasonable spans of care, use niche marketing to reach new people, focus on life-stage ministry, and offer multiple worship services (1993:129-164).

While not strictly a study on church sizes, *Confession of a Reformation Rev.* (2006) by Mark Driscoll is a testimony of how God worked in the ministry of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington. Driscoll writes, "Churches, like children, have a shoe size that they will grow into. As a church grows, it must accept its size" (2006:28).

The size of a church creates different challenges for ministry and leadership.

"There is a tendency to think of growth (and the decline) of a congregation as resembling a smooth curve. Another way to look at it is to see the growth, or the decline, of a church as resembling a series of stairsteps, with each step as a plateau."

—Lyle Schaller

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As churches grow, they must innovate.

To get larger a church must get smaller.

Given the numerous studies on the impact of increased size on various organizations, what have we learned? The following is a dozen essential ideas gathered from the fields of research summarized above.

1. The larger a church becomes the more numerous and complex the relationships and organizational structure.
2. The larger a church becomes the more it must break down into midsized and smaller units to maintain care and communication.
3. The larger a church becomes the more it must develop specialized roles and functions, as well as increasing the total number of roles.
4. The larger a church becomes the more specialized and diverse its subgroups must become.
5. The larger a church becomes the more its roles are formalized, and the number of levels of lay and staff roles increase.
6. The larger a church becomes the more important regular communication of its vision, values, mission, and philosophy of ministry is in order to maintain common norms. Redundant systems must be put into place to insure permeation throughout the entire church.
7. The larger a church becomes the more authority key influencers gain.
8. The larger a church becomes the more potential exists for conflict among various parts of the organizational system. Therefore it must focus

on assisting subunits to co-relate, and function with harmony and less friction.

9. The larger a church becomes, the more decentralized the ministry.
10. The larger a church becomes the more necessary it is that it learn from other churches of equal or larger size, even from churches of different theology, polity, or any number of identifiable aspects. Its size is its primary definitive characteristic.
11. The larger a church becomes the more it must focus on issues and needs further removed in time and space.
12. The larger a church becomes the more important it is that it continue to innovate.

What insights regarding your church have you discovered from this article? What ideas must you begin to consider as you lead your church?

As you continue to grapple with the challenges of understanding and applying church size strategies to impact your church, it will have far reaching effects.



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