

Small Churches Still Dominate in the Megachurch Age

Though much of the ink has lauded large and influential megachurches, a new survey confirms almost three quarters of churches are small congregations.

The National Congregations Study (NCS) was undertaken as a part of the 1998 General Social Survey of Americans. As such, it was administered by scholastic researchers with a high degree of empirical constraints to limit any skewing of the data.

Probably the most unexpected result from the NCS was the sizable number of congregations that “have fewer than 100 participating adults in the religious life of the congregation”(Chaves, Konieczny et al. 1999). An earlier survey, the Independent Sector questionnaire (IC), had suggested that only 20% of U.S. congregations have fewer than 100 participants (Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1992). As such, this earlier survey seemed to herald the end of the small local church and the arrival of the region-wide large congregation.

However, work by non-profit researcher David Horton Smith uncovered that most research samples of churches result in skewed data because their sampling methods over-represent older, more established and larger organizations (Smith 1977). Smith praised the National Congregations Study for its rigorous sampling criteria, which reveals what Smith labels “the dark matter” in the organizational universe, i.e. organizations not visible through the lenses of traditional analysis.

Using the more precise sampling technique, the NCS discovered that a significant 71% of the churches in America, almost three-quarters, have fewer than 100 regularly participating adults. The NCS had revealed through their lenses a new ecclesiastical universe, where the often overlooked realm of the small church actually dominates.

REALITY IN ACTION POINT 1: Much of the leadership literature penned today seems to be directed at developing leaders for the mid-sized to large church. However, empirical evidence suggests that it is the small church that populates our universe. As a result, much of our leadership training material may be preparing church leaders to manage a larger organization than they at present face. Authors such as Jenson and Stevens have demonstrated that managerial skills change dramatically as the church crosses different size thresholds (Jenson and Stevens 1981). And the authors point out that if managerial skills do not concurrently evolve, a growth plateau will result.

Consequently, church leaders must seek out books that are specifically written for the size of congregation they are currently managing. Such books as Gary McIntosh’s “One Size Doesn’t Fit All: Bringing Out the Best in Any Size Church,” Lyle E. Schaller’s “The Small Membership Church: Scenarios for Tomorrow (Ministry for the Third Millennium),” Kent R. Hunter’s “The Lord's Harvest and the Rural Church: A New Look at Ministry in the Agri-Culture,” and the author and Kent R. Hunter’s book “A House Divided: Bridging the Generation Gaps in Your Church” all offer strategies developed within and specifically for the small congregation.

REALITY IN ACTION POINT 2: In today’s affluent and laissez-faire culture, the church with fewer than 100 regularly participating adults will probably not be able to offer the level of service that potential attendees have come to expect. As a result, those seeking a church home are likely to go elsewhere. The end result can be the death of a long-lived congregation with an illustrious history.

Rather than see these grand dames of the ecclesiastical world die slowly (and painfully), church leaders must immerse themselves in the literature of the effective management and growth of ecclesiastical organizations. Church growth is not only necessary to fulfill our Great Responsibility (Matthew 28:18-20), but also for many churches' survival.

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