

## Church Size: A Three-Part Series

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### Part II

#### Large Church, Small Identity

Some large congregations appear deceptively small. The size of the physical plant does not indicate anything other than a mid-sized congregation (150-200 active participants.) However, three to four different worshipping communities gather in the building over the course of a weekend. The number of people in the building never exceeds two hundred people, yet the building is host to over six hundred different people, each and every weekend.

The tricky thing about being a large church with a small church identity is that so few people really understand the size and complexity of the larger whole. The staff team knows, because they minister on a daily basis to the full complexity of the larger church family. But few others really get it.

The lay leadership body intellectually understands that they belong to a large church, but at a heart and soul level they relate to the smaller worshipping community they engage on Sunday morning. These are my people. This close community is my church home. It feels small and intimate. Except, of course, that I don't know anything about the community that gathers in this space an hour after I leave the building.

What are the challenges of being a large church that carries a small church identity? A large church operates with fundamentally different ways of caring for members and getting things done. When a church doesn't realize how large it is, the membership body places inappropriate expectations on leadership.

Here are some of the fundamental problems that are likely to arise in a large church that thinks of itself as a small congregation:

- **Misplaced expectations placed on the senior clergy leader.** In the small to mid-sized congregation, if you or your family is in crisis you can expect a visit from the clergy leader. In the large church, that same level of care is provided, but it is typically provided by someone other than the pastoral leader who fills the pulpit. When congregants don't understand how large their church is, they place unrealistic pastoral care demands on the role of the senior clergy leader.
- **Misunderstandings about the role of the staff team.** In the small to mid-sized congregation, the governing board and staff team work side by side to manage the life of the congregation. Laity and staff pass daily decision making back and forth to one another. Once a congregation passes the four hundred mark in active worship attendance, the staff team evolves into a team

of specialists who manage the day to day operations of the congregation. The board learns to do a different type of oversight work. Board members delegate the daily operation of the church to the staff team. Lay leadership voices participate differently in the life of the congregation after this size transition.

If congregants do not understand that they are members of a large church, they get over-involved in the daily management of the church. The staff team feels like they are being micro-managed.

- **Failure to connect to people and ideas.** In the small to mid-sized congregation, an attendee who is interested in a particular aspect of congregational life can simply register their interest with a clergy leader, and connections happen. If they have an opinion to share, they simply show up in any variety of settings to register their opinion. In the simple organizational structure of a small congregation, a new idea or person can be inserted at almost any point in the system and the full system can engage that person and their ideas.

In a large church, a participant has to become savvier about how to connect to the system. Ideas and people get lost more easily. A good idea registered in the wrong place or at the wrong time may be forgotten, or it may be experienced as unwelcome information. It is not enough to simply connect through a clergy leader. This is likely to result in missed opportunities, hurt feelings, and disconnected people, unless congregants understand how connection works in a larger church setting.

Different sized congregations operate with different sized leadership systems. Leadership performance problems are likely when a congregation isn't clear about size.