
Engaging in God's Work:

Ruling Elders in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Part 3: How congregational size effects leadership

A quick glance at chapter 3 of the Book of Forms is enough to remind elders that The Presbyterian Church in Canada sets a high standard for the work of sessions. Consider the following statements taken from the Book of Forms.

- Section 109:1** "The session is responsible for the supervision and oversight of all associations of members and adherents connected with the congregation. No such association may be established without first receiving the approval of the session."
- Section 109:2** "The session is responsible for all policy and procedures with respect to the use of the church buildings and property...."
- Section 110** "The session is responsible for...the pastoral care of all persons within the fellowship of the congregation."
- Section 112** "The session is responsible for providing for the program of Christian education for persons of all ages in order that they may be confronted by the gospel, may grow in faith, participate in the life of the Christian community, and be active witnesses to Christ in the world."
- Section 113** "The session is responsible for all aspects of stewardship and mission, both spiritual and material, within the congregation."

How does the session provide such service? The answer differs according to the size of the congregation.

Congregations by size

In 1983, Arlin J. Rothauge wrote a booklet entitled *Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry*. Originally he set out to explore why programs designed to attract and keep new members worked in some congregations but not in others. He discovered the size of the congregation determined the effectiveness of various strategies. He then outlined the concept of four types of churches which differ in size, in the way leadership is exercised and relationships are developed. That concept has blossomed far beyond his original purpose. Students of church life have found it an effective tool for understanding how the size of a congregation impacts many aspects of the life of the congregation. **It is important to note that all four sizes can have effective ministries. They can all, regardless of size, be wonderful, healthy congregations.**

Let's consider the four types of churches.

The Family Church

The Family Church has less than 50 people in attendance at Sunday worship. It is a small, tightly knit group. As in regular families, new people are added by birth or by adoption. The family church is led by a few strong members of the group (male or female)¹. In a Presbyterian church, these leaders are usually elders. The role of the clergy is clearly defined within the family church. His/her assigned tasks are typically to preach, lead worship and Bible studies, and provide pastoral care². The clergy is not expected to initiate much programming. It may take years of trust-building before the clergy's new ideas are welcomed and integrated into the life of the congregation through the strong leader(s).

¹The literature on congregational size tends to use the terms "matriarch" and "patriarch." We have chosen not to use these terms as they have somewhat of a pejorative flavour. The strong leaders—whether male or female—keep the church together and functioning.

²The literature often refers to this role as "chaplain."

The Pastoral Church

The pastoral church has from 50 to 150 in attendance at Sunday worship. It is too large to be a family group but may be called a fellowship group since its top limit is the largest number of people with which humans can comfortably have fellowship. There are some small functional groups (choir, Sunday school teachers, Bible study) or friendship groups, and the congregation is still small enough that everyone can know everyone else. The minister is the centre of the pastoral church. The members of the congregation see the minister as their leader. The minister has a pastoral relationship with the entire membership; an emergency brings a visit or a call from the minister.

The Program Church

The Program Church has from 150 to 350 worshippers on Sunday. Frequently, two worship services are held each Sunday. It is no longer possible to know everyone in the church. There are a number of groups within the congregation that provide fellowship opportunities. Often, they are led by skilled and empowered lay leaders. This size church has ability to provide a wide spectrum of programs which meet many different needs. The minister becomes more of an executive. S/he is still the focal point of worship leadership, although it may be shared with other staff members and lay people. Apart from worship preparation, a large part of the minister's time is spent in recruiting, training and encouraging leaders for the various groups in the church. Pastoral care will be provided mainly through other staff members, paid or volunteer.

The Corporate Church

The Corporate Church has more than 350 worshippers on Sunday, spread over more than two services. The senior minister has a clearly defined role—usually preaching and administration. S/he oversees the work of staff (at least some of whom are ordained) who serve as executives for the various programs. The corporate sized church can provide even more programs than smaller sized churches for those seeking fellowship and service opportunities. For those who wish limited involvement in the congregation, it is easy to remain relatively anonymous in the large worship services. The minister has limited connection to the pastoral care of the congregation because it is delegated to other staff. Her/his time is spent largely with the staff, coordinating and directing their activities.

Note: Within a Canadian Presbyterian context, some of the above defining numbers may vary. For example, congregations attracting approximately 120 - 150 worshippers per Sunday may function as Program Churches, while our Corporate Churches may see about 300+ worshippers on an average Sunday.

The In-between stages

Alice Mann says that the times when a congregation is between one size and another is a place of great anxiety. The congregation must decide what must be done to make a transition to another size or, in some cases, the people must decide if they would like to start another congregation in another part of town in order to remain as their ideal size.

For more information about moving from one type of congregation to another, read *The In-Between Church: Navigating Size Transformations in Congregations* Alice Mann, Alban Institute, 1998.
(Available from the Book Room, 800-619-7301, bookroom@presbyterian.ca)

How sessions function in various sized congregations

Sessions function in different ways according to the size of the church in which they are found.

In Family Churches . . .

In family churches the session is able to give direct attention to congregational details, sometimes called micromanaging. In a Presbyterian church, a few strong leaders are usually members of the session. In fact, they may constitute the entire session. It is not uncommon to have a large overlap between the session and the board of managers or finance committee. Consequently, the session meetings deal not just with policy and pastoral care, but every aspect of the life of the congregation. Very little is delegated to others, even to the minister. If the minister does not understand the dynamic role held by the few strong leaders, serious conflict could arise.

In Pastoral Churches . . .

In pastoral churches there is still a fair amount of micromanagement—attention to congregational detail. However, the fact that the minister is seen to be the leader of the congregation means that s/he is also seen as a leader, perhaps *the* leader, in the session. Many decisions, therefore, about the carrying out of policies are left to the minister's discretion. The pastoral church usually has a number of committees that report to session. In their respective areas, these committees also carry out session policies, and the session gives them authority to make decisions within the parameters that have been determined by the session. Consequently the sessions receive reports of decisions already taken, rather than deliberating about those decisions.

In Program Churches . . .

The amount of delegation increases sharply in program churches. The congregation now includes a number of groups whose leaders exercise a fair degree of autonomy. They are still under the authority of the session and report to the session. The session, however, now has greater responsibility to express clearly the policies which are to be followed so that these leaders know how to direct the activities of their groups in accordance with the overall direction of the congregation. Session members may serve as representatives on those groups so the session has direct information about the ongoing work. If the session of a family church might be compared to a horse pulling the congregational cart, the session of a program church is the driver of a team of horses pulling the congregational wagon.

In Corporate Churches . . .

The corporate church is like the program church on a larger scale. The corporate church has a staff of ordained ministers and trained lay people led by the senior minister. These staff members have responsibility for the supervision of the many lay leaders who direct the activities of the groups that make up the congregation. The session is now like the board of a corporation which has no micro-management functions. Since the session is still responsible for the supervision and oversight of the congregation, it must be sure all the groups are reporting to the session, directly or indirectly, and that the policies it has established are being followed. The session should periodically review those policies to be sure they still reflect the current needs of the congregation and the direction in which the congregation should be moving.

It is obvious that differences in size denote a change in the way a session operates. The family church is almost totally a "hands-on" operation. The corporate church session operates almost entirely by delegation. The session in the family church has hands-on involvement in the work of the congregation. The session in a corporate church has to make sure the work is being done properly. The purpose of the session's work remains the same; the way in which it is carried out changes greatly.

Regardless of size, it is important to stress, again, that all sizes of congregations can have effective ministries and fulfill their gospel call to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others.

Suggestions for using this material

- Copy this material and distribute it to all the elders.
- At a session meeting or retreat time, talk about this things:
 - Looking at the descriptions of the four sizes of congregations, which size are we?
 - Are we in a time of transition between differing sizes? If so, what issues should we be paying attention to? If not, make a list of the characteristics of our size of congregation.
 - What are the advantages and challenges of our particular size of church?
 - How are new members added to each size of congregation? How are they assimilated and welcomed? What does this mean for our congregation?
 - Looking at the section on "How sessions function," what comparisons can we make as to how our session works? Are there things we need to change because it does not fit with our size of congregation?
 - Looking at our congregation, what size of church do we anticipate it will be in five years? What are the implications of this?

More creative suggestions

If you wish to engage people in addition to discussion, try some of these suggestions:

- For each church size, write three characteristics on separate sheets of paper and post all the characteristics around the room. Briefly describe the four main sizes of church. Ask people to mill around the room, looking at the descriptions. Invite them to gather together three characteristics that seem to belong to each of the four sizes of churches.
- Create, on large sheets of chart paper, a drawing of a church for each size of church. List some characteristics of each church and session inside each church drawing. Invite people to stand beside the church that best describes your congregation. You may also invite people to move to another size of church of a previous congregation where they used to attend. Ask them to share with others their experience of what it was like to be on session and/or worship in that congregation.
- After deciding which size of congregation you are, post a piece of chart paper, divided down the centre. On the left side, jot down roles of the minister in that size of church. On the other side, jot down roles of the session. Are there surprises?

People Resources

If you wish to explore these issues further, look for people resources at various church levels:

Presbytery: Ask at a presbytery meeting if another colleague (clergy or lay) has made a study of church sizes and functioning and can provide your congregation with additional help.

Synod: Your regional synod staff may be gifted to help you in this area.

National: Several staff people such as Don Muir (Deputy Clerk) and the Education for Discipleship team, Jim Czegledi, Dorothy Henderson and Annmarie Klassen are available for phone consultation. 800-619-7301