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Is Bigger Really Better?

by James G. McCarthy

Can a local church become too big to be truly effective? Consider your car engine. It can efficiently produce great power, but only over the range of operation for which it was designed. It is called the power band. Keep the r.p.m.'s (revolutions per minute) within this range and it performs beautifully. Operate it outside that band, and efficiency and power rapidly diminish. I believe God's principles for the church were also designed to work under specific conditions. One of these is size. Consider three areas essential for church vitality which decrease in effectiveness as the size of the church increases.

Shepherding of the Flock

A shepherd has his limits. He can care for only so many sheep. Exceed that threshold and the flock suffers. To provide adequate care, the shepherd must first know his sheep, not as a flock, but as individuals. He must know their needs and pray for them regularly. He must be ready to lay down his life for the sheep under his care. Shepherds must lead by example (1 Pet. 5:3). This requires them to be with the sheep and available for genuine friendships. Sheep need to know the shepherd. "The sheep follow him for they know his voice" (John 10:4).

The anonymous lives we live in our neighborhoods are fast becoming a reality in many of our overgrown churches. Counsel lacks the needed perspective of a personal relationship and history. Sheep stray, and the only one who notices is the wolf. Church discipline is rendered obsolete because it would affect too many people and nobody can keep track of who is coming anyway.

In an attempt to meet these problems and keep growing, more men are added as elders. But once again there is a practical upper limit. The larger the group of elders, the more difficult it is to be of the same mind (1 Cor. 1:10). Where three elders worked together in concert, nine men are in danger of becoming a cacophony. Even with more overseers, no elder can keep up with all the needs. File systems are devised, but burdens on paper can never replace burdens on hearts.

The next step is often to subdivide the flock and assign each part to one elder. Although well intentioned, the dynamics of a plural eldership are destroyed in the process. Sheep lose the spiritual oversight of several pastors. In effect, they find themselves under one man. Often the different ministries of the church are also divided. One elder takes responsibility for evangelism, another for singles, etc. Soon the elders lose the big picture. They can even become territorial as they compete for resources. Specialized ministries tend to multiply, and elders soon find themselves administering programs rather than shepherding people. These taxing responsibilities put an effective barrier between the shepherds and the

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Ralph Shallis
from "From Now On"

sheep. One day, the Lord will ask elders, “Whatever happened to Bill Brown?” (Heb. 13:17). Woe to the shepherd who must answer, “Bill who?”

The Exercise of Spiritual Gift

The expertise required for ministry in a large church limits the use of spiritual gifts. Consider once again the eldership. As the church grows, the demands on the eldership increase exponentially. A working man who would have made a fine elder in a small church finds it impossible to keep up with a large church. The church becomes increasingly dependent on full-time staff. Slowly we creep toward professionalism as specially trained men are hired.

The same trend can be seen in the public ministry of the Word. Something is wrong when the pulpit is reserved for those of conference level ability or celebrity status. Even the dynamics of an open meeting such as the Breaking of Bread are adversely affected by big numbers. First, few men are willing to address a large crowd. Second, even of those willing to speak up, only a small percentage will have the opportunity. Most resign themselves to being dumb priests. Finally, because a truly open meeting in the large church would have unpredictable results, the leadership finds it necessary to restrict and orchestrate the meeting.

It can be argued that in the large church there is more opportunity, not less. There is some truth in that statement. But the ability of the oversight to effectively direct large numbers of people in ministry must also be considered. My experience has been that in the smaller churches men and women grow more quickly in the exercise of their gifts. In the larger church there tends to be what one successful church planter described as “too many folded arms.”

Corporate Identity

One of the greatest strengths of the smaller assembly is that it is conducive to a sense of belonging—a family atmosphere. In the large church the members, out of practical necessity, soon resign themselves to nothing more than a superficial relationship with the majority. The result is a marked decrease in corporate loyalty, commitment, and vision. The blessings of God which encourage and inspire the church are often lost. I was in one church where four adults professed faith in Christ in one week. Yet most of the members had never prayed for any of them or even knew that it had happened. Contrast that with the small assembly where even the visit of a neighbor can create corporate excitement.

Sorrows are also lost in the crowd. 1 Corinthians 12:26 could often be revised, “If one member suffers, most of the members don’t even know.” Aware of these problems, the large flock is yet again subdivided into cell groups in an attempt to have the best of both worlds. But treating the larger flock in smaller units is only an admission of an inherent strength of the small church.

Have we lost our way? Why do we want to be so big anyway? Is it because Christians have certain expectations which only a big church can deliver? Special ministries for every member of the family are becoming standard. Popular speakers, expensive facilities, and large numbers are often equated with success and blessing.

We may envy the assets of a large church, but do we applaud the results in people’s lives Personally, I am not impressed. In fact, I can’t recall anyone championing maturity as one of the benefits of being large. The Scriptures tell us that real spiritual maturity comes as the church grows “up into Him who is the Head, that is Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work”(Eph. 4:15-16 NIV). Here is where the large church fails to deliver what the

“Our churches should be growing. There is nothing spiritual about being small...Expansion during the first century was through the planting of new churches. To relieve overcrowding, experienced men should lead a portion of the flock out to establish a new assembly.”

Jim McCarthy

saints need most. Ralph Shallis, in his book to new believers, writes,

In a small church, you will find a purpose in being alive; you will be a valuable and important member of the family; you will have a real contribution to make. If, on the other hand, you are in a very large church, you will probably be submerged in an anonymous mass—which is very bad for your spiritual health. You become lazy and useless, or just frustrated. 1

We need to stop competing with the big church down the road. Certainly they have their strengths, but let's not sacrifice ours while attempting to mimic them. Teach the saints the strengths of the small church, and teach them what is of real value. Never compromise principles for parishioners. Remember that numbers are a poor index of success. Vance Havner writes of an approach to real growth all but forgotten today:

Actually, we need a thinning instead of a thickening. I learned long ago that growing corn and cotton must be thinned. We reduce the quantity to improve the quality. Gideon had to thin his troops, and a similar procedure might help God's army today. Jesus thinned His crowd. 2

How big is too big? There is not one answer to this question. Factors which affect the number include the ability of the elders and the culture in which the church resides. Certainly the church is too big when the elders find the flock more than they can handle, the gifts of many of the saints lie dormant, and the saints think of the church as something they go to.

What is the alternative? The answer is not to de-emphasize evangelism. We have been commanded to make disciples of all nations. Our churches should be growing. There is nothing spiritual about being small and stagnant like a puddle evaporating in the sun. Expansion during the first century was through the planting of new churches. To relieve overcrowding, experienced men should lead a portion of the flock out to establish a new assembly. This is usually referred to as a hive-off. In late spring, the crowding of the hive stimulates their swarming instinct. The queen bee and a portion of the bees migrate to a new location and establish a second colony. Soon both hives are back to full capacity, and the process repeats itself. Size is only one parameter of church vitality, but if your work has become ineffective, maybe you are too big.

Endnotes

1. Ralph Shallis, *From Now On*, (Bromley, England, 1973), p.143.
2. Vance Havner, *Hearts Aflame*, (Westwood, N. J., 1952), p.114.

Measuring the Church

by James Cymbala

Have you noticed that whenever you ask a fellow Christian these days about his or her church, the subject invariably goes to attendance. Question: "Tell me about your church. How is the Lord's work coming along there?" Answer: "Well be had three hundred on Sunday, I'd say."

When I ask pastors the same question, I get the same answer—plus two others: "Membership is at five-fifty, we have just finished a new education wing, and our gross income this year will top out at about four hundred thousand." Attendance, buildings, and cash. A-B-C: The new holy trinity.

Such a thing would never have happened in Peter and Paul's day. For one thing, they had no buildings to call their own. They met in people's homes,

**"...No
church, even
this one,
should be
measured by
its
attendance."**

James Cymbala,
from *Fresh Wind,*
Fresh Fire

FORWARDING SERVICE REQUESTED

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• INFORMATION •

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in public courtyards, sometimes even in caves. As for a budget, they seemed to have dispensed most of their funds in helping the poor.

How large was the attendance in the Antioch church? Berea? Phillipi? Rome? We have no idea. How large was the congregation at Philadelphia, one of the seven churches addressed in the book of Revelation? Apparently not very big. The Lord says, "I know that you have little strength." Yet He proceeds to give them a glowing review (Rev. 3:7-13). By contrast, how large was the congregation at Laodicea? One can get a hint from the fact that the church was "rich and in need of nothing." For all we know, it may have drawn 7,000 on a Sunday. Their bills were certainly paid—yet they received a scathing spiritual rebuke.

This leads me to say that no church should be measured by its attendance. Then what kind of spiritual things do matter a book-of-Acts church? The apostles prayer in Acts 4 provides a benchmark: "Enable your servants to speak your word *with great boldness*" (v. 29). Listen to Peter on the day of Pentecost: "You, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross (Acts 2:23). This is the last thing the crowd wanted to hear. But Peter's preaching did not drive the people away. Instead it stabbed their consciences. At the end of the day a huge group had repented of their sin and been converted.

New Testament preachers were boldly confrontational, trusting that the Holy Spirit would produce the conviction necessary for conversion. They were not afraid. The apostles weren't trying to finesse people. Their communication was not supposed to be "cool" or soothing. They aimed for a piercing of the heart, for conviction of sin. They had not the faintest idea of asking, "what do people want to hear? How can we draw more people to church on Sunday?" That was the last in their minds. Such an approach would have been foreign to the whole New Testament.

Instead of trying to bring men and women to Christ in the biblical way, we are consumed with the unbiblical concept of "church growth." The Bible does not say we should aim at numbers but rather urges us to faithfully proclaim God's message in the boldness of the Holy Spirit. This will build God's church God's way.

—Taken from *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, ch. 8 The Lure of Marketing, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), pp. 121-124

