

Church Size

Size matters...

In considering the issue of church size there is one person whose work I would turn to every time. Dr Timothy Keller, the founder and pastor of New York's Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan has written very helpfully on this topic and I make no apology for being heavily dependent on his work for what follows. You can find his complete article '*Leadership and Church Size Dynamics – How strategy changes with growth*' on the Redeemer website:

http://redeemercitytocity.com/resources/library.jsp?Library_item_param=477

What follows are highlights from the article with my own personal slant on some of the points.

Keller stresses that how a church operates and functions will be heavily impacted by its size and that failure to realise the significance of church size provides the common reasons for mistakes by pastors and leaders in managing their church. He talks of a 'size culture' which will majorly influence the areas of decision-making, the flow of relationships, how effectiveness is evaluated and even what ministers, staff team and volunteer leaders actually do.

Major differences between churches are often seen in denominational or theological terms - so we can underestimate how size impacts the way an individual church operates. In Keller's view, a staff team member who moves from a church of 400 to one of 2000 is making a massive change and one greater than a move between denominations. He tells us that it is not just a matter of a large church being a bigger version of a small church but it has a massive impact on the scale and scope of leadership skills required to cover the difference in the means and style of communication, ways of forming community and the decision-making processes.

Starting small

Keller examines churches of different sizes and from his research gives the following observations. He talks of 'house churches' with up to 40 attenders growing in an organic way attracting new people by their warmth, relationships and people. They have no recognised programme of outreach and find that newcomers, once they have been invited and have come along, tend to continue to attend because they are befriended.

The *small church*, which has between 40 and 200 members, continues to build on the importance of relationships between the members of the congregation but the relationship with the pastor tends to be the primary attraction for new people. With the backing of one key informal leader Keller maintains that the pastor can start and run two or three ministries, groups or activities which will in all likelihood bring lots of new people into the church

At this point, moving through the so-called '200 barrier' becomes the issue. Keller actually talks about 'making room' for more than 200 people and I am sure he is not just talking about having the space - or enough chairs. A significant change in thinking and a commitment to many of the following changes is required.

Moving through the 200 barrier

Approaching the 200 barrier, a church that truly wants to make room for more people is likely to have to engage seriously with the following:

- *Multiplication options.* There has to be a willingness to accept that it is no longer possible for everyone to have a face-to-face relationship with everyone else. This requires a major change in attitude within the church or newcomers will pick up that established members feel that the church is becoming too big and impersonal. Often the way to deal with this is to provide multiplication options such as an additional Sunday meeting and/or an active small group ministry. Experience generally shows that such moves provide a growth spurt – ‘when you give more options, people opt!’
- *A willingness to meet the cost of an additional primary ministry staffer.* It should be a given that one full-time minister cannot personally shepherd more than 150-200 people. Specialists, such as youth workers, administrators and musicians can help with the span of pastoral care – the actual profile of this will vary with the local culture. Often a middle class environment will require such specialists earlier on in the process. The time will come when it will be necessary to employ a second full-time staff worker – *such an appointment should be made for growth* – and in essence that person must be able to aid growth and generate the giving to cover his/her salary. For this reason the second staffer is often an evangelist, unless one of the primary gifts of the senior leader is evangelism, in which case a pastoral gift would complement the situation and work on internal growth. At this stage the church can be big enough to give the senior leader a feeling of increasing burn-out but has not yet got to the point where it can/will pay for that second worker.

Tim Keller identifies further issues for a church moving through the 200 barrier:

- *A willingness to let power shift away from lay leaders to staffers.* The old approach to decision-making requiring total consensus from everyone is now too unwieldy and up to this point any change that brings strong opposition and the possibility of anyone leaving the church is avoided. Growth toward the 200 barrier brings the point where *someone* is going to experience discomfort at any change and in order to facilitate necessary changes (necessary for growth!) much decision-making has to move to leaders and staff. Increasingly staff will know more about the members than lay leaders and newcomers will take their cues from the pastor and the staff. Decisions will need to be made by those individuals on the ground rather than the traditional committee.
- *A willingness to be more formal and deliberate in assimilation and communication.* Where previously this has taken place ‘naturally’, without planning, it now has to become more deliberate and thought out – word of mouth is no longer sufficient. If newcomers are to find their place in the church a more intentional and organised approach is required from the church.
- *An ability and willingness of both pastor and people to allow the pastor to do less pastoring and more leading.* More vision-casting, strategising and administrative ability is required at this level. Recruiting and supervising volunteers and programmes become more time-consuming while planning, delegating, supervising and organising become more important. At the same time the pastor becomes increasingly less available to the membership - this development needs to be recognised and accepted by both pastor and people.

The medium-sized church: 200-450 attenders

At this point of growth Keller states that the interplay between three vital parameters of church life comes into focus more clearly. The three are *team*, *facilities* and *finance* – place them as the three sides of a triangle to see how they affect the stability of the church; if one of them is weak it will affect the life and growth of the church. So much so that if a church has stopped growing it is usually one of these areas – or a combination of them – that needs to be looked at carefully.

In a church at this stage of growth, the primary circle of belonging for the individual ceases to be the entire membership of the church and becomes a specific ministry group within it. Men's and women's ministries, a worship group, an outreach team, the social action group, youth work, children's ministry – all these are possible circles of belonging that make church life 'living'. Each of these groups is likely to be the size of a house church, namely 10 to 40 people.

In the medium-sized church, leadership functions differently – the structure becomes increasingly complex and the leaders must represent the different areas of church life such as young families, older people etc. There is now too much work to be handled by one committee or board and work is devolved to influential leadership teams that have the power to make important decisions. Leaders are now chosen not for their length of service and strength of personality but for their skills and gifts in specialised tasks and roles. Lay leaders cease to have the power to merely rubber stamp proposals or withhold permission and are required to be active in ministry or lose their role.

The senior leader now becomes less of a practitioner and becomes a trainer and organiser of others. He must be able to train, support, supervise and organise - this requires significant administrative skills. Change is generally driven by forward looking groups – often the mission, ministry or evangelism team.

Moving through the 400 barrier:

While the smaller church grows through pastor-initiated groups and ministries, Keller states that the medium-sized church grows through multiplying these groups and by improving their quality and effectiveness. There is no room for the 'amateurish' approach of the small church – classes must provide a great learning experience, music must be at a certain quality, preaching must be informative and inspirational.

Once the 400 mark is reached, such a church will grow only if the habits of the 200-sized church are broken and discarded. Often it will also require that a church moves to new space and facilities.

Large church – 400-800 attenders:

With this size of church the primary circle of belonging becomes the small fellowship group – usually between 4 and 15 people in size and more of a miniature church, not focused on a particular task within church life but existing for Bible study, worship, fellowship and ministry.

In a large church the leadership qualities of tenure, skill and maturity that served smaller churches are also desirable but must be combined with commitment to the

church's distinct vision and mission. Key ministries will grow, both in size and importance, and will become an important reason visitors decide to join that church.

Staff members in a large church, including the senior leader, will find themselves in an increasingly specialised role. Preaching, vision-casting and strategising will be the senior leader's major tasks and he must relinquish many/most of his administrative tasks or find that he has become a bottle-neck to further progress. Change and decisions now come from 'top down' - from staff and key lay leaders.

The means by which a large church grows differs from small and medium sized churches in that the key to its growth is what happens in the worship services – the quality and style of worship and preaching are paramount here, giving a means of growth by a front door approach. This is unlike the small church's groups and ministries (backdoor approach) and the medium-sized church's targeting of felt needs of constituent groups such as young families, youth, seniors, seekers - providing specifically designed ministries for them (side-door approach). For the large church the Sunday meetings provide the front door through which new people will come.

Breaking through the 800 barrier:

The same five changes mentioned previously in the context of transitioning through the 200 barrier need to be taken to the next level:

- *Multiplication options.* A mediocre or poor small group system may have sufficed previously as people receive shepherding via programmes, classes and groups run by staffers. At this point the small group system needs to be well run and cover pastoral care as well as the Bible study for which it is generally valued. Small group life is the key to successful navigation of this barrier.
- *Multiplying staff.* Up to this point a small staff of generalists may have been sufficient but now staff members must be gifted in particular specialisms – not just workers or even able to lead workers but able to lead leaders. Qualities of maturity, independence and the ability to attract and supervise others are of increasing importance.
- *Shifting decision-making power.* After a stage where decision-making power was increasingly centralised - from the whole church through the lay leaders, to the staff and then to the senior staff – it now becomes increasingly decentralised again to individual staff and their leadership teams. As well as an increase in competency they must have an increasing authority to make certain executive decisions.
- *Increasing formality and deliberateness in assimilation.* Well organised, highly detailed and supervised incorporation of newcomers becomes essential.
- *Adapting the role of the senior pastor.* The pastor must concentrate on preaching, large group teaching, vision casting and strategising and is less accessible for individual shepherding.

The very large church – 800 plus:

Keller describes the character of such a church:

- *Missional focus* – now the needs and interests of outsiders are prioritised above those of the members/insiders. Staff and executive leaders gain a louder voice. The more staff-driven a church is, the more likely it will concentrate on ministries

that reach non-members – these will not directly benefit its own constituents, e.g. – church planting, mercy and justice ministries.

- Things that attract seekers and particularly young adults:
 - *Excellence* – quality of arts, teaching, children’s work are important to those who have no obligation to go to church because of kinship, tradition, ethnicity etc.
 - *Choices* – people are now used to having choices as to time of services, type of worship, ways of learning, support services etc.
 - *Openness to change* – newcomers and young people are generally more tolerant to constant change and the fluidity found in a large church. Older people and long-term members and families often place a high value on stability.
 - *Low pressure* – seekers often appreciate being able to come into a large gathering where they can initially remain anonymous and no pressure is placed on them to join anything!

The very large church has the potential to develop certain qualities and ministries:

- *Being multicultural.* A larger staff can more easily be multi-ethnic; a larger church with multiple services/congregations can embrace a greater range of approaches.
- *Creating a full family support system.* Families will be attracted by a full range of groups for children of differing ages, recreational opportunities, etc.
- *Church planting.* Large churches are generally better at this than denominational agencies and smaller churches.
- *Faith-based whole-person ministries.* Because of their larger pool of volunteers, finances and expertise it is easier for the very large church to provide these.
- *'R&D' for the broader church.* New curriculum and ministry structures are often formulated and tested in such churches rather than in denominations, smaller churches and parachurch organisations.

Disadvantages of the very large church:

- *Commuting longer distances can undermine mission.* Very large churches can become famous, attracting Christians from further afield. These cannot easily encourage non-Christian friends and neighbours to come along and the result is that the congregation ceases to be representative of the immediate neighbourhood. This can be offset by church planting and being relentless in a mission orientation.
- *Commuting longer distances undermines community/fellowship and discipleship.* Those who travel longer distances are not likely to plug into real Christian community and receive discipleship benefits. The person you meet on a Sunday is unlikely to live near you, inhibiting natural friendships and connection. This can be offset by an effective small group system.
- *Diminished communication and involvement.* A very large church can outgrow its internal communication system and so plateau. People begin to feel the loss of a sense of belonging and numerical decline can set in. In such a church people become unsure who to talk to about an issue – staff members may not know about systems outside their own ministry and the long list of staff and ministries is overwhelming. No-one feels they can get info quickly; no-one feels they know how to get involved. This can be offset by upgrading the communication system – extraordinarily important in a very large congregation.

- *Displacement.* Those who joined when the church was smaller feel a sense of loss and may have difficulty with the new size culture. They may no longer be connected to events, decision-making and the senior leader. 'Old-timers' who leave will be sad - and so will those long-term members who remain. This can be offset by giving them recognition for the changes they have made over the years and not making them feel guilty for missing the old ways and the smaller church! Eventually this issue lessens - those who join a church of 1500 will not notice much of a difference when that church reaches 4000.
- *Complexity, change and formality.* Largeness brings:
 - Complexity in place of simplicity
 - Change in place of predictability
 - Need for formal rather than informal communication and decision-making
 Where simplicity, predictability and informality are valued more highly than the benefits of growth, people will leave.
- *Succession.* The bigger the church, the more the church is identified with the senior pastor because
 - a) he is identifiable among a large team of staff/leader
 - b) churches don't grow without a visionary leader - and one who can articulate that vision. This is the key to the whole church. Such a gift is distinctive and is irreplaceable - even more than good preaching.

So how does such a leader retire without people feeling the church has died? One plan is to divide the church and give each new site its own senior pastor. Lyle Schaller believes that such successors need to be people who have been on staff for a good while - not outsiders.

A very large church continues to grow only if the advantages given are exploited and the disadvantages above are resisted and minimised.

Suggestions for very large churches:

Be non-judgmental

Keller states that attaching moral significance to a particular church size can be an issue here. People view their preferred church size (often the smaller size, as that is likely to be all they may have known to that point) as the ideal and see the very large church not as 'different' but as 'bad'. If your definition of a an uncaring or unfriendly church is one where you can't get the senior pastor on the phone as a matter of course, then you will not have a positive view of a very large church. For a church of 3000 it would be a disaster for the senior pastor to be available to everyone in this way - and at the same time if the pastor of a church of 150 tries to impose a larger church culture then that will also end in disaster.

A very large church is marked by:

- change - the overall vision may stay the same but few of the programmes and practices are sacrosanct.
- complexity - it is not immediately obvious who to talk to or involve in any given issue or decision and new events may have unforeseen consequences for other ministries.

- formality – this is needed in greater measure, so plans have to be written and carefully executed rather than face-to-face and 'on the hoof'.

These elements are the inevitable cost of ministry and should bring no moral aspersions with them.

Form smaller decision-making bodies

In general the larger the church, the fewer people should be involved in decision-making, because of the diversity of views likely to be present and the inevitability of a lengthening decision-making process with watered-down outcomes and compromises as a result. To maintain the same level of progress, decisiveness and intentionality from previous days the decision-making must be entrusted to fewer and fewer people. A very large church can be seen by some as undemocratic or unaccountable – a prime reason why many churches never grow to this size, or shrink again when they do.

Allow the decentralisation of power

A church that has grown to 1800 members will see the 'hub and spokes' structure, with the senior pastor as the hub and the staff as the spokes, become obsolete. No longer one team under the senior pastor, the staff become a team of teams. Power is shifted to specific departments, each under a director and the senior pastor can no longer supervise those directors closely. Two major consequences come from this – staff leaders have more responsibility for their own area since others in the team have insufficient information and ability to question decisions. Secondly staff cannot expect the same level of mentoring, instruction and supervision - or rescuing - from the executive staff as they previously received.

Bring on more specialised, competent staff workers who understand the vision

Fact: churches of less than 800 members are staffed primarily with theological college trained ministers but the larger the church becomes, the less of these there are on staff. Why?

- The very large church needs specialists in counselling, music, finance, social work, children's development, while theological colleges produce generalists. The need is for specialists who can be theologically trained - not vice versa.
- The very large church can't afford to hire people who aren't already experienced and competent in a particular ministry – a young person straight from seminary may be able to run a youth work of 30 but won't be able to deal with a group of 300. For all staff, the larger a church becomes the greater the competence required and the requirement that they 'make things happen' is a large one. Resourcefulness and creativity are of prime importance at this stage, with staff needing to be able to inspire followers and to move to be leaders of leaders
- The very large church will have a distinctive vision – with a highly defined and carefully balanced set of emphases and styles (its 'voice'). Those trained in seminaries prior to coming on staff invariably bring a set of attitudes and assumptions to the task, perhaps even a superior attitude and an underestimation/ignorance of that church's specific context, so it becomes more important for a large church to train and recruit leaders from within. The result of this is that those from within require heavy support for continued theological

education and those recruited from outside the church need thorough training in the church's history, values and culture.

Change the senior pastor's role

This is a key and highly visible part of the church's large-size culture. The 'normal' functions of the pastor must be delegated to others so that the senior pastor can concentrate on the tasks of vision-casting and preaching. This is a difficult transition for many to navigate – both senior pastor and church can see this as an error in redirection but the reality is that the senior pastor must overcome any guilt feelings over this issue and relinquish teaching, pastoral care and administration to others with the time and energy for it (and greater experience and qualification?) or the result will be personal burnout. Senior pastor, ministry leaders and wider church must accept this change is inevitable and allow it to take place.

Build trust

The very large church is more accessible and capable of reaching young people, singles, the unchurched and seekers (Schaller). This being the case – why are there so few? It requires:

- Allowing the senior pastor to be less accessible
- Allowing the staff to have more power than the board
- Allowing a small group of executive staff to have more decision-making power than the wider staff or congregation
- Allowing directors more power to hire competent specialists and release generalists

The key is *trust*. In smaller churches, people with a tendency to be suspicious feel happier, consensus is required for decisions and any minority that is unhappy can block a decision. The larger the church, the more trust is required from the congregation in the staff - and especially in the senior pastor. Though the staff and senior pastor must be open to criticism and be relationally available, communicating in a way that helps people to feel included and informed, ultimately a very large church runs on trust.

Wherever our church appears on the size range, as leaders we need to take time to consider these insights from Dr Keller. If we are to see a greater number of larger churches in the UK I believe that grappling with the issues that he so clearly puts before us will be essential. Leaders and their teams need to come together in honest appraisal of their situation and be prepared to make what are sometimes hard decisions – and then see them through. And it goes without saying that those same leaders and teams need to be together in prayer to the Lord God who gives the growth that they earnestly seek. Meanwhile, as Bill Hybels puts it so well, 'the Kingdom of God advances - one life at a time'.

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July 2012

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