

# Parish Size: Categories, Dynamics, and Issues

## Common Dynamics Related to Organizational Size

Those who research organizational behavior have known for years that there are certain common dynamics related to organizational size.

In general when you increase size there is:

- More need for coordination
- More need for routines and procedures
- More potential for tension and conflict
- More need for formal planning
- More need for formal means of communication

## Basic Organizational Tasks & Size

We also know that all organizations need ways to accomplish certain basic tasks. They all need to have ways to:

- Include people -- Both in the sense of relationship inclusion, but also in terms of the organizational culture. The need is for a process that moves in both directions. The new person in an organization needs to accept the existing culture and people, just as the current group needs to make space for the new person.
- Communicate -- To receive and share information (i.e., feelings and thoughts)
- Set Direction -- To establish what we will do together and how we will do it.
- Be Productive -- To accomplish what we exist to accomplish. To move in the direction we have established for ourselves.

The size of an organization will impact how these basic tasks are addressed. For example: Very small parishes are more likely to have informal ways of including new people. The greetings are more likely to be one-on-one; the information on culture communicated more by stories and over time; and so on. If it is an Episcopal parish the greeting process is unlikely to be within the Sunday Eucharist. Leaders are wise to just allow this organic process to just happen. I remember being the young, new vicar in a tiny urban parish and deciding that I would use a series of small group gatherings to get to know people. I had heard how well it worked in other places. The new priest becomes more familiar with more people more quickly. It also may help build new relationships among the members. One Sunday I began to test out the idea with people at coffee hour. Toward the end of coffee hour Rose came up to me (she was 80 years old, very short, had worn black since her husband died many years before, and was loved and trusted in the parish) -- Rose said "About these groups. [pause] Don't worry, Father, we'll get to know you." So, no groups! It was a good idea that fit another size parish and another culture. Rose acknowledged my need, but was signaling to me how it would be addressed in this parish.

Of course, part of the job of leaders is to be concerned with the health and productivity of the organization. A small parish's incorporation process may make it difficult for potential members to connect. Leaders need to see as the legitimate claim of both the parish's existing norms about incorporation and also the potential member's desire to connect more quickly. In one case a priest asked a young woman in the parish to be the parish's greeter. While everyone knew she was doing it, there was no need to give her a title or to insist that anyone else share the responsibility with her. She might sit with visitors during the Eucharist, she would go up to them and introduce herself during coffee hour, and she would introduce the visitor to at least two other people. If the visitor was abandoned by others, she would return to them. It was an approach that allowed most members to focus their attention on the joy of being in this Eucharistic community with people they had known for years. They had the time to hear from one another about the weeks' joys and disappointments. At the same time this introverted woman was engaged with just the one or two visitors; playing a useful role that she was especially good at. Doing it on behalf of us all.

But size isn't the only issue and frequently may not be the most significant issue. Sometimes there are other factors to consider. For example, many parishes along the coast of Maine are used to having members who spend half the year in Maine and half the year someplace else. They also may have a number of people who "summer" in Maine for a month or two every year. The community changes and is reestablished each year. It may move from being a very small parish to being a middle-sized parish within a matter of weeks. The return of old friends has led to a greeting "ceremony" that is public. The need is so strong and the tradition so engrained that it can override other legitimate concerns. So, the usual flow of liturgical worship can be interfered with and the norm, common in most Episcopal churches that you don't put people on the spot in a way that may embarrass them, is set aside. Some clergy "from away" may try to stop the practice (they usually lose); other may convince themselves that they just need to accept it as it has been done. Others work at taking all aspects of the situation into account and come up with more integrated practices that respect the various aspects of what is happening (e.g., the need to publicly greet and acknowledge, a hospitality that doesn't trap visitors in a practice they may find awkward; and the need for flow and grace in liturgy. So, the public greeting process is moved to the front of coffee hour or is part of the gathering process before the Eucharist begins.

## Size Categories

In looking at the various ways to categorize churches based on size it's important to remember the basic organizational behavior understandings about size, e.g., as you get larger you need more coordination, routines, etc. The basics hold true for all ways of categorizing.

For Episcopalians the most familiar method is Arlin Rothauge's (i.e., average attendance 0 - 50 adults is a "Family Church"; 51 - 150 is "Pastoral"; 150 - 350 is "Program"; and 359 and up is "Corporate". That was later modified in the Diocese of Texas to "Family" 6 - 75; "Pastoral" 76 - 140; "Transitional" 141 - 225; "Program" 226 - 400; and "Resource" 401 and up. Lyle Schaller has a model that is "Fellowship" 35 - 40; "Small: 35 - 100; "Middle" 100 - 175; "Awkward" 175 - 225; Large 225 - 450; "Hugh" 450 - 700; and "Mini Denomination" 700 and up.

I'm going to make use of a fourth approach. I have found Doug Walrath's version of size categorizing as the most useful system. Below is a sample of his approach.

	Very Small	Small	Middle-Sized	Moderately Large	Very Large
<b>Average Sunday Adult Attendance</b>	Under 50	40 - 100	75 - 200	150 - 400	Over 350
<b>Key Characteristics</b>	Tight-knit group; regular interaction	Familiar faces; Dominant core group	Full time priest; "full program"	Diverse community & program	Comprehensive program; specialized staff
<b>Typical Interaction Pattern</b>	Know one another & regular interaction	Majority have regular interaction	Clergy & some lay have current information on members; most interact regularly, some only within sub-groups	Same as for middle size. But only a core interact regularly; majority interact in sub-groups	No one has current information about all members. Regular interaction is all in sub-groups
<b>Typical Planning Pattern</b>	Spontaneous, informal. Based on member experience	Usually spontaneous, informal. . Based on member experience	Usually formal; by vestry & rector. Based on group data and at times research	Formal. By vestry, rector & sub-groups. Often a lot of research	Formal. Vestry or planning group coordinates sub-groups. Usually uses a consultant. Formal research.

Based on work of Doug Walrath, "Sizing up a Congregation"; Alban Institute, 1985 Used in CDI by permission.

I like Walrath's approach for several reasons.

1. He focuses on characteristics and dynamics rather than numbers. That the numbers for different sizes overlap is useful in drawing our attention toward the dynamics. That may help in avoiding the tendency to use size models in a prescriptive manner. All size tells us is about certain tendencies. It

may all be changed depending on parish culture, training members in competencies that allow an expanded behavior range, or the strategic direction the parish has decide to move in.

2. He doesn't bias the discussion with a view that some size is better than another.
3. He uses names for the sizes that are straightforward and clear. They are less likely than other models to imply that there is some "should" attached to your size (e.g., "Resource Church") or that use images that may suggest things that the model isn't really trying to suggest (e.g., "pastoral" or "corporate").

## Episcopal Parishes

This is a very rough breakdown on applying Walrath's categories to the Episcopal Church. From the material I've seen parishes

Very Small	30% +/- of parishes
Small	25% +/-
Middle-Sized	30% +
Large - Very Large	15% +/-

Note: I use the term "parishes" in the more common use than in a canon law manner. Congregation is a confusing term as a parish often has at least two congregations.

Most Episcopalians are members of the two larger sized parishes.

Here are the related numbers from a report on from *Congregation Size and Church Growth in the Episcopal Church* by C. Kirk Hadaway; Director of Research; The Episcopal Church Center

The following percentages show the distribution of Episcopal churches across size categories **in 2001**:

1-50 ASA 33.4%  
 51-100 25.5%  
 101-150 16.1%  
 151-225 12.9%  
 226-325 6.6%  
 326-450 3.0%  
 451-800 2.1%  
 801+ 0.5%

Obviously, smaller churches have smaller numbers of people in their worship services, so the following percentages show the distribution of worshippers on an average Sunday:

1-50 ASA 7.9%  
 51-100 15.8%  
 101-150 16.8%  
 151-225 20.0%  
 226-325 15.1%  
 326-450 9.6%  
 451-800 10.2%  
 801+ 4.5%

## Size and Dynamics

As mentioned before, as the parish grows there will be a tendency to increase coordination, routines and standard practices, formal communication and decision-making processes. For example:

### **TRUST DEVELOPMENT**

Smaller sized parishes tend to rely more on interpersonal relations. Larger parishes more on the system's processes and structures. Trust involves the experience of behavior that shows reliability, responsiveness and congruence. In smaller parishes it is more in the relationships among people, and between leaders and the group. It is very "personal", i.e., "I trust Mary". In larger parishes the reliability needs to be seen in the decision-making processes; the congruence in the alignment between stated core values and organizational practices.

### **COMMUNICATION**

In smaller parishes communication is more word of mouth. Word of mouth continues to be a factor in all size parishes. It's one that larger parishes sometimes overlook or attempt to shut down. As size increases additional methods are used. Communication "out" by a quarterly newsletter; announcements in the Sunday bulletin; an e-mail announcement system. As size increases the reliance on a web site or

printed materials usually increases. It's simply no longer possible for most people in the system to get accurate information by a "word of mouth" system. There is more bringing information "in" from the members by survey and testing processes or group discussions. Large parishes may make special efforts at getting all leaders "on the same page". Even offering "talking points" about how to explain some issue the parish faces.

## **LEADERSHIP SKILLS**

In a smaller parishes the effectiveness of communication (in all directions) and the level of trust can be increased by having leaders with competencies in interpersonal communications, human interaction and group dynamics. In a larger parish those skills are still important but need to be added onto with skills in large group gatherings, design skills, organizational dynamics, etc.

## **Size and the Parish's Primary Task**

My assumption is that most Episcopal churches see the primary task of the parish to be the formation of members - growth into the maturity of Christ. As a denomination it is one of our strengths. We know something about spiritual life and development. In another place I use a model to diagram the way in which the primary task is engaged. In the *Renewal-Apostolate Cycle* the task is pictured as a movement between those things that *renew* a person in baptismal identity and purpose and an *apostolate* in their daily life. In *renewal* we are made "light"; in *apostolate* the light shines in our families, workplaces and civic involvement. To use Evelyn Underhill's images, in *renewal* we are "given...to God, laid on His altar as a sacrifice of love, and consecrated, transformed by His inpouring life" and in *apostolate* we are "to be used to give life and food to other souls".

There are three assumptions I make between the ministry of formation and parish size:

1. People can grow in Christ in any size parish. That's based on the assumption that any size parish can live a complete Christian life. All parishes are engaged in "restoring people to unity with God and each other in Christ." All parishes are places of worship-doctrine-action.
2. Some sized parishes may serve some people better than others. Some will grow best in a small parish, others in a larger parish. Some people work out their baptismal life best in a small community in which they know and are known. Others find more formal educational and training programs useful.
3. It may be that the Episcopal Church's culture and approach to spiritual formation is more effective in some sizes than in others. The images many Episcopalians carry of the parish church is of a parish in which you know, and are known, by many other people, including the priest. Formation is largely by participation in the Sunday Eucharist and in the exchanges of the community that gathers for that Eucharist.

In general, you interfere with effective attention to the primary task when you live out-of-alignment. Insisting on a series of standing committees and programs in a small parish is a way of draining energy into administration. Managing that structure, and coping with the resistance that is likely to emerge, is where the energy goes. The need remains to work at the primary task in a manner that fits a small church. The same problem occurs in a large parish when the rector spends a lot of time visiting people or the vestry insists that it must be involved in everything. It focuses the leadership's attention on making something work that is out-of-alignment. It creates unproductive stress in parish life. More importantly it establishes a "demand system" that draws the attention of leaders away from the primary task.

I see three possible exceptions to the caution. One is that a parish may so value a certain way of approaching church life that it is willing to struggle with some adaptation. For example, in a very small parish with a Sunday only priest, it might be common for leadership to revolve around a couple of key lay leaders and a norm that everyone was involved in making all the decisions. I was vicar in a very small

parish where there were strong values about trust and empowerment. So, small teams, responsible for the various aspects of life such as property or hospitality, were given the authority and responsibility to move things along without coming back to the whole group. It worked because most people valued it and several members had experience with self-managing teams at work. A second exception might be when the parish's culture is strongly influenced by some factor(s) other than size. At Trinity Church, Castine, the members come from a high achievement culture. They are good at making things happen. So, the parish tends to be doing more than might be anticipated based on size. A third possibility is when you are trying to make a transition up in size. The parish needs to over-function for a time if it is to make the transition. In the first two cases the primary task is probably addressed in a satisfactory manner. The combination of the member's competencies and values provided a degree of efficiency. In the third case, the primary task is likely to be interfered with. But it is being interfered with in any case because things are out of alignment. So, for a period of time energy goes into making the transition so alignment can be restored and the primary task engaged efficiently and effectively.

## Size and Membership Growth

### **Growth Methods and Size**

In 1977 Carl Dudley wrote what remains true in 2002, that small churches are often torn between the way of life that has worked best for them (i.e., a single cell in which "being together" is at the center of what offers meaning and joy) and a series of "shoulds" and "threats" carried by denominational authorities and clergy (e.g., you "should" grow, you "should" be more "mission driven", you "should" offer more programs for your members; you will die if you don't grow, etc.). The implications of Dudley's work are that this type of congregation is a mission driven resource for a significant number of people; that what happens in such small parishes is how some people best grow in Christ. Dudley suggests that small parishes do have growth methods appropriate to the parish culture. "One growth pattern is "adoption", a process by which the new member "joins the past" in order to share the present. Another pattern is the assimilation of whole families together, not separate individuals. A third approach is the recovery of Calvin's wholistic use of stewardship: i.e. God's care for the whole community through the church as His steward." The last approach is much the same as the Episcopal tradition of parish churches that at one time may actually have had geographical boundaries and now can see the scope of its mission as including some specific community (which may be a neighborhood or town, an ethnic group, the performing arts community, etc.)

The bias in the larger church system can be oppressive for small churches. Mission gets defined in terms of membership growth and justified by a marketing device, i.e., "the great commission" (an act of branding that uses of a passage in Scripture, declares the passage "The Great ..."; and may be more rooted in an American preoccupation with quantity than it is in the Gospel). Clergy frequently come with an assumption that there is something wrong with the small parish culture and proceed to offer programs and activities appropriate to larger systems.

It is "fair enough" for diocesan authorities to decide that they do not want to pay the bills of a small parish for decades or that the neighborhood of the church is experiencing a significant population increase and that they want to serve that new population. Diocesan officials and parish clergy (who are likely to be part-time or a cluster team) can make an assessment -- Is there a realistic chance of significant growth in this area? Do the demographics support that possibility? Is the existing building large enough that a number of additional members can be accommodated? Are we willing to invest the money and time to help growth take place? What are the options - growth from the base of the existing parish, a parallel congregation in the parish, starting a new large parish in the area, etc.? If significant membership growth is not likely, then the strategy that will make sense is to support the natural growth processes of a small parish culture -- adoption, etc.

In larger churches membership growth can be facilitated with strategies such as:

- Add staff -- in a small parish make the part-time vicar a full-time vicar
- Increase marketing -- spend time getting your approach right and communicate "out" more
- Arrange your greeting, orienting and incorporating processes to work for an increased flow of potential members
- Intentionally open up and explore issues of leadership, inclusion and participation styles, what will happen Sunday morning, how the building will be used, how the change will impact the way in which baptismal-renewal occurs in the parish, etc.
- Acknowledge grief and pain in the change process
- Be clear that you want to grow -- test this out openly with people from time to time. There needs to be a critical mass prepared to support and work for membership growth.

All of these strategies assume that the potential for growth exists.

### **Growth Plateaus and Leadership**

A plateau is when a parish seems stuck between sizes. It just can not make the move from "Small" to "Middle-Sized" and from "Middle-Sized" to "Moderately Large" and so on. Alice Mann writes of "plateau zones" in which attendance hits a place on one side or another of a size type and just hangs there. (*The In-Between Church*, Alban, 1998) The numbers and patterns of parish life just don't change enough to settle into a stable size.

A parish might hit a growth plateau for a number of reasons.

1. The church is just too small. New people visit. It feels crowded, people end up in the worst seats, it is hard to find a parking space; they don't come back or they drift away.
2. The community is largely "churched" Most people in the region have existing, well-established religious relationships.
3. The parish just likes being a certain size. This may be conscious or sub-conscious. Members like being in a small parish and they find ways to keep it small by not inviting new people and by not making space for those who just show up
4. The community has changed and the parish has not come to terms with the change. The change could be in race, class, generational, or values group. In any case the kind of people who had made up the parish no longer live in the community in large enough numbers to allow the parish to grow in the way it had grown in the past.
5. The parish has a troubled culture as an organization. Healthy people don't feel attracted to belong. Deal and Kennedy describe troubled organizational cultures as having certain characteristics: inward focused and not paying attention to contextual trends and forces; not attending to strategic issues; high levels of chronic dissatisfaction, victim mentality, etc.; a sense of fragmentation or inconsistency in which people can't figure out the norms and don't come together when common effort is needed; a lot of dramatic emotional outbursts or a pattern of crisis; and subculture issues in which there is not adequate contact across groups, or groups are in some form of struggle with each other, etc.
6. The parish doesn't have the leadership with the competence and/or commitment and/or emotional-spiritual maturity to navigate the changes needed to change sizes. New people come. The parish appears to be growing. After a few years it is back where it was.

A parish may have several of these "reasons" in play at the same time.

### **What to do about a plateau?**

If your primary issue is too little space -- make more space, expand the building, add parking spaces, add another celebration of the Eucharist. If the issue is that the community you are in is already "churched" - there may not be much you can or should do. Focus on being a healthy, faithful parish church and on making sure people know who you are. If it's that people just like the small church culture consider accepting that as the starting point, as strength to work with.

All the other causes of a plateau have more complex and costly solutions.

1. Pay attention to the parish culture. How does it approach membership growth? Change? Leadership? Etc. It badly oversimplifies the situation to act as though once you figure out what size the parish is; there are certain built-in strategies to pursue. Leaders need to know how to "read" the organizational culture, appreciate the "best" of that culture
2. Develop competence in the ministry of change and development.
3. Learn the standard strategies for size change and the related issues and dynamics. Below is a brief exploration.

Edward Koster explored the issue of plateauing in "Leader Relationships: A Key to Congregational Size" (July/August, 1987 *Action Information*, Alban Institute). He claimed that the plateaus come when the congregation reaches 100 and 200 average adult attendance. In Walrath's model that would be the transitions from "Small" to Middle-Sized" and from "Middle-Sized" to "Moderately Large". Koster sees these two transitions as especially difficult to make. He does tend to give excessive weight to size in determining the role of leaders to the neglect of polity, denominational and parish culture, the degree of clergy presence in a parish, etc. What he is onto, is that the way in which a parish organizes itself and fulfills leadership needs works best when it fits the parish's size. Therefore, what works well at one size is not only unlikely to fit the next size up (or down) but also isn't well suited to the transition process. That means that to move off a plateau will require leadership different from what has been the case in the parish.

Alice Mann's work in *The In-Between Church* uses Rothauge's size model in describing transitions, up and down. So she looks at the change up from "Pastoral" to "Program", as well as the transition down from "Program" to "Pastoral". It's a very useful model.

My assumption, from Koster and Mann's work, is that if the parish is to grow -- the parish needs to be able to process more information, make more complex decisions, and be generally more decisive. The processes for inclusion, information flow, setting direction, and collaborating will all need to change to fit the size you are moving toward. In a sense, you need to wear shoes that are too big so you can grow into them. For example, once a parish has made the transition from "Small" to Middle-Sized" the parish will have more people around, the number of people taking initiative and getting work done will have expanded, parish space use will increase with more activities, etc. That will organically bring a shift in the pattern of interaction -- people will no longer know everything that is going on and they will not know everyone in the parish or everyone playing leadership roles. That in turn will increase the level of tension in the parish.

While all this is going on there may also be a change in the clergy- lay authority relationship. It is somewhat like the change that takes place in non-profit organizations that have gotten by on limited staffing and volunteers and then hires a full time executive director. The ED has been hired to help the organization cope with the increasingly complex and demanding situation it faces. People outside the organization begin to contact the ED instead of the committee head. New members may develop a working relationship with the ED rather than the volunteer president. In the community the local newspaper makes contact with the new ED (because that's who is answering the calls coming into the office). The web of relationships is changing organically. And with the ED feeling responsible for dealing with the increased scope and complexity the organization faces (after all that's why she was hired) and with the ED in touch with more parts of the system than any other person, seeing more connections among the elements of the system, and beginning to see what might improve the ability of the organization to accomplish its work, with what use to be spread out among a number of people now taking place within one person -- power is shifting in the organization.

The amount of time the staff person is putting in is one factor in what emerges. But even if the organization already had a full-time staff person who had been managing things in a low-keyed administrative manner that fit the need at the time; now the context and the organization have changed.

The staff person will either change their approach to the work to fit the increased size and scope of the work or will become a source of the organization's inability to navigate the new situation. Then the organization either applies pressure or freezes into an approach to leadership that can't address what is before it.

Now let's go back to the tricky part -- wearing shoes too big for your existing size so you can grow into them (caution - it's just an image trying to get at one point, don't press it!). When a parish does this several things are true:

- it feels awkward and unfamiliar
- you are spending money and energy that serves your hoped for size and not your existing size
- that may feel stupid and bring resistance to the changes
- dynamics kick in that are like those experienced when the size has changed (e.g., because you there are more activities offered, even if they are not fully used, some people will begin to notice that they don't know everything that is going on in the way they use to; depending on who they are they will feel excited or anxious; that may cause resistance
- power will begin to change; and that may bring more resistance

For more on some of the books mentioned see:

Carl S. Dudley, *Unique Dynamics of the Small Church*, Alban, 1977. Later expanded and offered as *Making the Small Church Effective*, Abingdon

Loren Mead, *More Than Numbers: The Ways Churches Grow*, Alban, 1993

Alice Mann, *The In-Between Church*, Alban, 1998

Douglas Walrath, "Sizing Up the Congregation", in *Action Information*, Alban, 1985

Edward Koster, "Leader Relationships: A Key to Congregational Size", *Action Information*, July/August 1987

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