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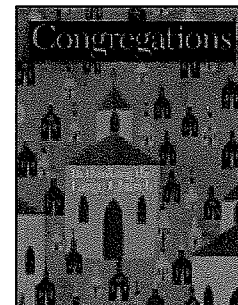
CONGREGATIONS

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Congregation Size: What the Research Tell Us

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While considerable attention has been paid in recent years to small churches and megachurches, far less has been given to large churches—those with a minimum average attendance of 350 but not reaching the 2,000 mark often used as the cut-off point for defining a megachurch. However, studies and other research efforts have revealed some interesting and little-known findings about these churches—and church size in general.



"By any measure, most congregations are small" (p. 17), writes Mark Chaves in *Congregations in America*, in which he describes the findings of the 1998 National Congregations Study, a survey of 1,236 U.S. churches, the majority of them Christian and Jewish. "Fifty-nine percent of U.S. congregations have fewer than one hundred regular participants, counting both adults and children; 71 percent have fewer than one hundred regularly participating adults" (p. 17–18). These are stunning figures, but perhaps even more startling is another statistic Chaves cites: that 10 percent of U.S. congregations—the largest ones—contain half of the nation's churchgoers¹. "Even though there are relatively few large congregations with many members, sizable budgets, and numerous staff, these large congregations contain most of the people involved in organized religion in the United States" (p. 18).

Similar results were obtained by later surveys. "Most congregations are small. But most worshipers are in large congregations" (p. 21), write Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce in *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations*, based on the U.S. Congregational Life Survey of more than 300,000 churchgoers from 434 congregations, conducted in 2001.² "Ten percent of U.S. congregations [the largest ones] draw 50 percent of all worshipers each week. Another 40 percent of congregations have 39 percent of worshipers attending services that week. The remaining 50 percent of all congregations [the smallest ones] have only 11 percent of the total number of worshipers in a given week" (p. 22).

Similarly, the Faith Communities Today (FACT) study, undertaken in 2000 by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford Seminary, found that only 10 percent of U.S. churches have more than 1,000 regularly participating adult members. Half have fewer than 100 participants, and one-fourth have fewer than 50³.

Church Growth: The Where and Why

Fifty-one percent of the congregations in the FACT study reported that they had grown in the previous five years, with 34 percent reporting a membership increase of 10 percent or more. Factors contributing to the greatest growth, the Hartford researchers found, included being located in the suburbs (particularly newer ones), offering a variety of social ministries, attention to social justice issues, denominational loyalty, a clear sense of mission, well-organized programs, uplifting worship, spiritual nurture, and inclusion of contemporary worship styles and music—characteristics that describe many large churches.

New suburban communities, Hartford researchers Carl Dudley and David Roozen found, are particularly favorable to the growth of faith communities because they offer the family composition, higher educational and income levels, and the available teenage, male, and young adult populations that are conducive to such growth. According to these

researchers, the larger the congregation, the more male participants it has⁴. In addition, "Newer and larger congregations in growing suburban communities report a higher percentage of active high school youth. The ability to attract teenagers and youth also contributes to membership growth," they write (p. 21).

Additionally, many large churches tend to very socially conscious, develop strong ministries, are often located on arterial highways or other convenient access routes, offer plenty of parking, and are frequently highly denominational, the researchers found. "They do the tradition and they do it really well. They are not required to be so much innovative as excellent," says Dudley, faculty emeritus for the Hartford Seminary and the Hartford Institute of Religion Research.

However, Dudley says, "Large churches do not necessarily grow at all. The growth of a large church is typically based on how good a job it has done at providing family-based programming." Many growing large churches, he says, are located in "feeder suburbs"—suburban areas where there is a match between a church's ministry and the surrounding population's needs and desires, causing the community to "feed" members into the church. This heavy reliance on local support sets the large church apart from the megachurch. As Dudley points out, megachurches are often regional institutions, drawing their members from a wide geographical area. Consequently, their growth potential tends to be more independent of the reaction of the people living in the immediate area.

The Perception of Vitality

Dudley and Roozen also found that larger, newer, and growing congregations are more often described by their members as vital and healthy than are other congregations, and that the perception of vitality contributes to continued growth. Older, larger congregations—especially those in the suburbs—report better financial health than other congregations, as well. Directly related to a church's growth and financial well-being, the FACT study suggests, are clarity of mission and purpose and the strictness of the church's expectations of its members. Larger congregations, the researchers say, are more likely to be clear about their mission and purpose, and more likely to emphasize personal morality.

Larger congregations are also more likely than others to welcome change, the FACT study indicates, especially if they are Evangelical and located in growing suburban areas or Western states. More recently organized congregations appear to be more willing to change than older congregations, which tend to have more established patterns that appear to make them less able—or more resistant—to making changes.

When it comes to the breadth of program offerings, size makes the most significant difference, the Harvard researchers contend. "While Sunday school, Scripture study, and prayer groups are the most universal programs, other programs for spiritual development seem to require a minimum critical mass of participants, funding, and building space to sustain the activity. Larger congregations, therefore, have the option of developing a much broader range of programs" (p. 44).

The ability to offer a wide array of programs, in turn, affects reports of the church's vitality. "Congregations with the broadest offerings of programs report greater vitality among their members. For many participants, community outreach is as much an expression of faith as participation in prayer groups, liturgical practice, or doctrinal study. Congregations working for social justice and with a broad array of outreach ministries are more likely to express vitality. Congregational size has the predictable effect on social ministries, with larger congregations generating more programs and speaking to more issues" (p. 47).

Scores on Spiritual Growth and Nurturance

Size alone, however, should not be viewed as a reliable predictor of growth, cautions Deborah Bruce, associate research manager of the Research Services Office of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Like the FACT study, her research with Cynthia Woolever revealed that a church's commitment to caring for its children and young people through adequate programming is a significant predictor of church growth. So is level of participation. In other words, says Bruce, "the degree to which people are involved in more than just worship"—whether that takes the form of

singing in the choir, teaching a Sunday school class, participating in a small group, serving on a committee, or getting involved in the church's outreach programs—is a strong indicator of how likely the church is to grow.

Size may actually be a drawback in some ways. As Woolever and Bruce note in *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregation*, although worshipers in mid-size and large congregations report being "more satisfied with the spiritual nurture they receive from their congregation" (p. 20) than those attending small congregations (those with average attendance under 100), small church members gave much higher ratings on factors relating to "growing spiritually" than did those attending larger churches.

Perhaps most significantly, small churches received the highest average scores from their members on the following six out of the ten strengths Woolever and Bruce believe are tied to church growth:⁵

- growing spiritually
- meaningful worship
- participating in the congregation
- having a sense of belonging
- sharing faith
- empowering leadership

Mid-size congregations had the highest average scores on the following three strengths:

- caring for children and youth
- focusing on the community
- looking to the future

Large congregations received the highest average score on only one strength: welcoming new people. Contrary to what they expected, the authors say their research indicates that congregations with high scores on their Growing Spiritually Index are less likely to be growing numerically. "Unfortunately, congregations that are strong in the area of spiritual growth are rarely strong in welcoming new people, a congregational strength that powerfully predicts growing in numbers" (p. 23). Nevertheless, they caution against viewing growth as the key to determining a congregation's health and vitality, and warn that "congregations whose members fail to spiritually change and grow" are likely to ultimately see membership declines—and possibly even their own demise.⁶

Large Churches Account for More than Half of All U.S. Churchgoers

As Mark Chaves notes in *Congregations in America*, in which he analyses the data from 1998 National Congregational Study, that showed that 53 percent of the people who attend church in the U.S. attend 10 percent of the nation's churches, those with average attendance of more than 350. Sixteen percent attend churches with an average attendance exceeding 2,000, or a megachurch. Even when Catholic churches, which tend to be large, are excluded from these calculations, 39 percent of American churchgoers are still in 8 percent of the churches—the largest ones.

Congregation Size (based on average attendance)*	People Attending Churches of This Size*	Congregations of This Size*
Under 50	7%	40%
51-100	11%	24%
101-350	29%	26%
351-2000	37%	9%
Over 2000	16%	1%

*These figures are based on the number of regularly participating individuals, including both adults and children.
Source: 1998 National Congregations Study

Participation in Small, Mid-Size, and Large Congregations

According to the Faith Communities Today study of 14,000 congregations from 41 denominations and faith groups, conducted in the summer of 2000, adult participation in congregations of various sizes was distributed as follows:

Size in Regularly Participating Adults (RPAs)	Percentage
1,000 or more	6%
350-999	11%
100-349	33%
Under 100	37%

Source: Carl S. Dudley and David A. Boozen, "Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today," Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, March 2001, page 8.

Contrast of Characteristics

Pastor-Centered Churches versus Large Congregations

Large congregations are vastly different from smaller congregations in a number of ways, as are the roles of their pastors. Alban Institute senior consultant Gil Rendle has drawn the following conclusions about these churches from his work with congregations of various sizes.

Pastor-Centered Churches (average attendance: 75-200)	Large Churches (average attendance: 350-2,000)
<i>Pastor-driven.</i> The pastor is often the primary or only provider of focus, program oversight, pastoral care, and leadership energy.	<i>Staff-driven.</i> Aspects of ministry typically handled by the pastor in smaller churches—such as pastoral care and program oversight—in the large church are typically handled by other staff members.
<i>Pastor-dependent.</i> The pastor's personality and effectiveness are the primary determinants of the congregation's growth and success.	<i>Staff-dependent.</i> The staff's effectiveness and ability to work in harmony with each other and with lay leaders determine the success and growth of the congregation. Healthy communication and effective accountability systems are therefore a must.
<i>More relational than organizational.</i> The currency of leadership is in the forming, managing, and shaping of relationships.	<i>More organizational than relational.</i> The currency of leadership is organizational, through attention to vision, goals, staff supervision, and outcomes.
<i>Communal and relational advantages.</i> The size of the congregation supports a sense of community and creates a familial environment, in which members typically know and care about each other.	<i>Mission advantages.</i> Financial and human resources enable large churches to develop and sustain numerous and varied programs.
<i>Characterized by homogeneity and simplicity.</i> These churches tend to have homogeneous memberships and	<i>Characterized by complexity and diversity.</i> Large churches tend to offer a variety of worship styles, music, and

limited options in regard to worship styles, music, and programs.	program offerings, thus attracting people of diverse backgrounds, ages, and interests.
<i>Expect conformity.</i> Individuals tend to be expected to conform to the style and level of participation of other members. A willingness to work closely with others and establish close relationships with them is often expected.	<i>Expect individuality.</i> Individuals control their level of participation and commitment. Because of the variety of offerings available in large churches, individuals may choose to opt for small-group intimacy or full-group anonymity.
<i>Private communities.</i> Often have a singular purpose and tend to be self-contained communities.	<i>Public presence.</i> Large churches have a significant institutional presence in the community, and their leaders are able to speak to multiple issues and audiences in the community.
<i>Denominationally supported.</i> Pastor-centered churches tend to rely on denominational support for resources and training.	<i>Less denominationally supported.</i> Large churches tend to look outside their denominations for resources and training.
<i>Broad leadership role.</i> The pastor's role and responsibilities tend to be broad and encompassing, requiring a generalist approach.	<i>Narrow leadership role.</i> The senior pastor's role and responsibilities tend to be focused on preaching, visioning, staffing issues, development, and working with the governing board.
<i>Heavy reliance on volunteers.</i> The pastor is often the only paid staff member. In many other small churches, the pastor and one other person constitute the paid staff.	<i>Heavy reliance on staff.</i> Programs are of such a magnitude and complexity that trained staff are needed to fulfill the roles that volunteers are able to fill in smaller churches.
<i>Governing board meetings are brainstorming and decision-making sessions.</i>	<i>Governing board meetings are moments of discernment and visioning and—at best—events where direction and policy are set.</i>
<i>Vision alignment takes place within the governing board and in the work and focus of the pastor.</i>	<i>Vision alignment and organizational strategy take place in staff meetings.</i>
<i>Personalized expectations.</i> Members are often willing to accept whatever leaders and members offer—of whatever quality.	<i>High expectations.</i> Expectations of quality are high, so greater attention is given to detail and quality in the large church.
<i>Personalized discontent.</i> Discontent often has a very personal orientation around the practices or personality of the pastor.	<i>Organized discontent.</i> Large churches are more vulnerable to organized discontent because leaders are not as involved with members, and dissatisfaction can therefore go undetected for an extended period of time, leading to people to organize around their dissatisfaction.
<i>Multiple networking opportunities.</i> Pastors of smaller churches have many opportunities to network and form friendships with pastors of similar churches.	<i>Limited networking opportunities.</i> Pastors of large churches have few opportunities to network with pastors of similar churches.

NOTES

1. Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 18.
2. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).
3. Carl S. Dudley and David A. Roozen, "Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today" (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, March 2001).
4. Dudley and Roozen, "Faith Communities Today," 13.
5. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 24.
6. Woolever and Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary*, 136.

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[Back to Top](#)

[Back to Table of Contents](#)