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—Ronald W. Richardson

### The **Hidden Lives** of Congregations

Faced with crisis, lack of direction, or just plain "stuckness," many congregations and their leaders are content to deal just with surface issues and symptoms—only to discover that the same problems keep recurring, often in more serious ways. Israel Galindo takes leaders below the surface of congregational life to provide a comprehensive, holistic look at the corporate nature of church relationships and the invisible dynamics at play. Informed by family systems theory and grounded in a wide-ranging ecclesiological understanding, Galindo unpacks clearly the factors of congregational lifespan, size, spirituality, and identity. He shows how these work together to form the congregation's "hidden life" and suggests how leaders can use that knowledge to help the congregation fulfill its vision.

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*Marty Canaday, Minister of Christian Formation, Derbyshire Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia*



**Israel Galindo** is professor at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Virginia. He also serves as faculty for Leadership in Ministry Workshops ([www.leadershipinministry.com](http://www.leadershipinministry.com)), a clergy leadership training program, and is executive director of Educational Consultants ([www.galindoconsultants.com](http://www.galindoconsultants.com)). He is the author of several books and is a frequent seminar and workshop leader.

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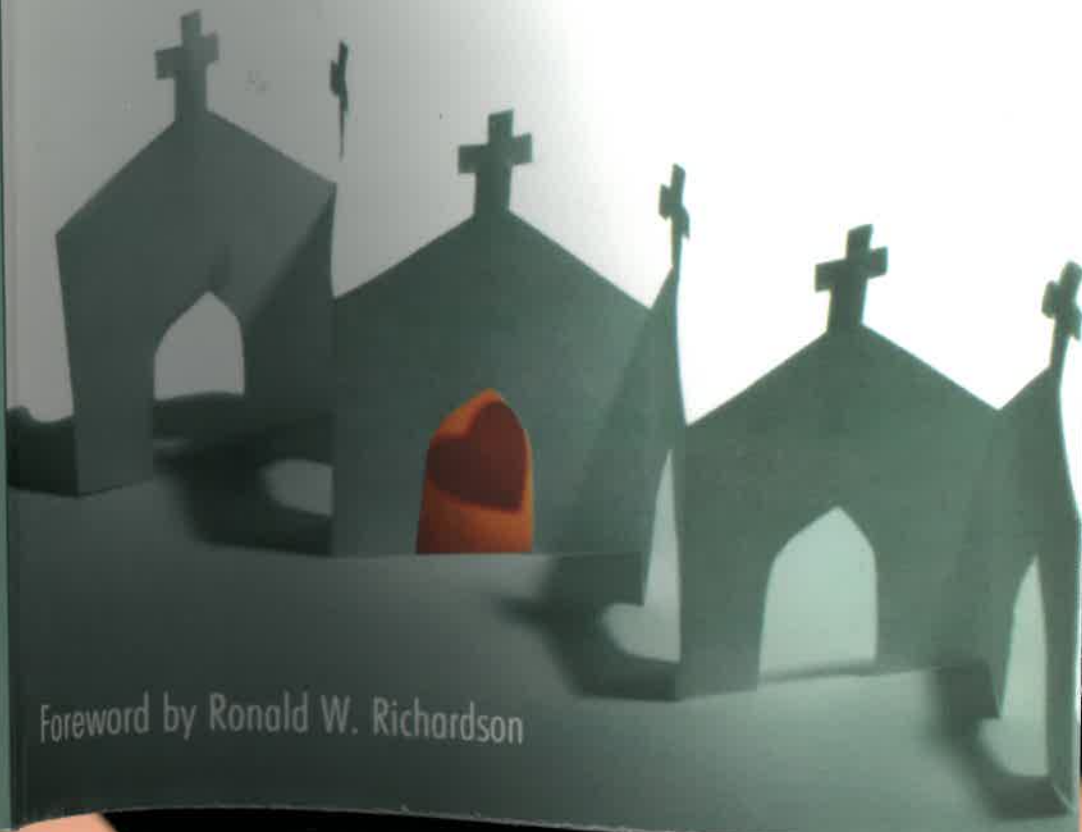
The **Hidden Lives** of Congregations

The Alban Institute

Israel Galindo

# The **Hidden Lives** of Congregations

DISCERNING CHURCH DYNAMICS



Foreword by Ronald W. Richardson

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will always experience cycles of renewal, will always vacillate between faithfulness to God and being a success in the world, and will always struggle with defining the nature of the roles of laity and clergy.

The remaining faithful members in the final stage of the lifespan have an enormous capacity to delay the corporate dissolution of their congregation—by engaging in institutional life support. But once a congregation reaches this stage, its end as a local expression of the Body of Christ is at hand. Nancy Ammerman's study found that, while commitment makes a positive impact during early stages in a congregation's lifespan, that characteristic becomes a liability in the later stages. She states that "In fact, their very commitment to each other and to the memories their congregation represents may be among the major obstacles preventing congregational adaptation to new circumstances."<sup>9</sup> Despair, loss of hope, and loss of identity will leave members with an incapacity to address even minimal issues of institutional survival. The buildings, property, and programs become mere cultural artifacts, a sad commentary on lost hopes and current failure. If the remaining members cannot extract themselves from the grips of denial they will be unable to choose responsibly and courageously from the few realistic options they have: leaving individually, turning over the remaining assets to a denominational body, allowing itself to be absorbed by another congregation, or closing shop and attempting to begin again elsewhere. If there is a pastor remaining, or if the church finds that rare pastor who is called and gifted in providing a pastoral-care ministry to a dying church, he or she can resource the church through the dissolution process. Ministry at this church is all about helping the congregation "die well."

### Conclusion

Congregations are living relational organisms. And, like any other living organism, they have a lifespan composed of stages and cycles of decline and renewal. They are planted or established, and then they go through a formation phase during which the personality, values, and homeostasis of the congregation is established. The subsequent lifespan stages are periods of growth, evolution, stability, then decline and, eventually, dissolution. The concept of the congregational life cycle has been ably treated and interpreted elsewhere. This chapter has focused on the importance of the leadership function during the life stages, and has attempted to identify how the educational enterprises can be a resource to the churches throughout their lifespan.

## Chapter 5

### The Hidden Life of How Size Shapes Congregational Relationships

ONE COMMON AND PRACTICAL SCHEMA USED TO UNDERSTAND congregations is the congregational-size approach to classifying churches. Looking at congregations through this lens is used not only by denominational strategists in assessing and planning, but also by sociologists who study the role and development of religion in society. In this chapter we will use the schema of congregation-by-numerical-size to understand how the size of a congregation influences certain dynamics in the hidden lives of congregations. My review of current material on congregational size, however, will not advocate a church-growth approach to understanding this material. That is, the purpose of this chapter is not to use the schema as a way to "grow a church" or to move a church beyond a "plateau." Rather, the concept will highlight how the size of a congregation affects corporate relationships, leadership functions, and congregational forces. What I want to do in this chapter is help you to understand the hidden life forces of numerical size in the lives of congregations.

One typical but misguided interpretation of this model is to emphasize church numerical growth with its accompanying necessity for a particular, and narrow, clergy leadership focus. A survey of current literature and training programs for clergy will reveal certain unfortunate assumptions about congregational size, including the one that seems to say that "bigger is better" and that numerical growth correlates to being a "successful" or an "authentic" church. Clergy and denominational leaders who rely too eagerly on popular business models of organizational leadership will readily assume that growth in such indicators as numbers—or in business-oriented indices like market impact, product, and facilities—signifies effective leadership. But the fact of the matter is that there is no *theological* reason for insisting that a congregation needs to grow in numerical size. If one were to ask the average pastor or congregational lay leader, "Why do you want your church to grow numerically?" the reason

given may have to do with marketing, strategy, organizational matters, or even ego, but it will not be theological.

Most presentations that focus on the congregation-by-size model seem to fail to understand three things: First, *the schema is descriptive, not prescriptive*. The fact of the matter is that bigger is *not* better, just different. And a small congregation is a *real* church, complete and fully Church, and is not inadequate to its nature because of its numerical size. Part of our obsession with size may be, as author and international church consultant James Desmond Anderson suggests, that American culture has created an ecclesiastical mentality with an entrepreneurial bias toward organizational efficiency and numerical growth.<sup>1</sup> Theological educator Janet Fishburn is correct in stating, "The point is that there is a difference between ministry that is a success measured in numbers and a ministry where spiritual formation and growth of all the people of God is the criterion for effective pastoral leadership."<sup>2</sup>

Second, *this model is only adequate in describing one model of Church*. At its worst, this size-related model fosters a congregation-in-a-kit type of church that is dependent on the pastor's personality and on a narrow perspective of the pastoral leadership function: Pastor as CEO and institutional developer. This tends to leave out many pastors whose pastoral strengths are more personal and relational rather than corporation building.

Third, *this model fails to appreciate that numbers are important less because of numerical size and more because size informs us about the nature of the congregation's systemic relationships*. This in turn helps us appreciate the formative processes and possibilities at work in the faith community. In other words, faith communities shape the faith of their members through the nature and dynamics of the relationships that exist in its context; rightly understanding those relationship dynamics created by numerical size informs us about what leadership functions a particular congregation requires.

I am indebted to the good studies of Arlin J. Rothauge, Alice Mann, Loren Mead, Gary L. McIntosh, Carl Dudley, and Beth Ann Gaede for their treatment of and continuing development of the concept of congregation size.<sup>3</sup> All of them are quite useful, especially in their treatment of the dynamics of transitioning from one size congregation to another. If you are familiar with their work, you'll recognize their influence in this chapter. I'll use a slightly different schematic organization in order to highlight the hidden life forces that are the focus here. I will divide congregations into three major categories: small congregations, large congregations, and size-independent congregations. There are two distinct types of congregations within each of the first two categories, which I will identify

in terms of their unique hidden life forces. In the third category, the size-independent congregations, I will highlight particular hidden life forces inherent in those congregational contexts.

### Small Congregations

Small congregations are churches with an average worship attendance of between 10 and 150 members. The term *members* in this schema does not refer exclusively to names on the official church register or roll. The hidden life dynamics of congregational size has also to do with how "belonging" is defined—that is, who "belongs" to a congregation and who does not. From an organizational reference point, membership may refer to the names on the roll (including even persons who are inactive, have left the area, have disappeared, or have died). But congregations are more than an organizational entity, and membership must therefore be understood in a way that provides more integrity about what it means to belong. Therefore, meaningful *participation* in congregational life may provide a better gauge for what it means to "belong" than a name on a membership roll. In most congregations, one does not need to be an official member to be able to participate significantly in the life of the congregation.

### The Family-Size Congregation

The smallest-size congregation, with its accompanying styles of practices, is the so-called *Family-Size congregation*. Relatively small in number—from 10 to 50 members—the "family" designation is apt. Some church size schemas use the numbers "0 to 50" or "3 to 50" for this category. But I don't believe a number under 10 actually constitutes what we mean when we use the term *congregation*. Certainly, three individuals meeting regularly for worship can be a genuine faith group—but it is not a "congregation" in the institutionalized sense of the word. The individuals that tend to make up these congregations are a family in a very real sense: They all tend to be related through familial bonds. The easiest way to become a bona fide member in this church is to "marry into it." With the presence of resident patriarchs and matriarchs in the congregation, it is not unusual to have two or three influential extended family systems setting the tone for how this church functions. That includes everything from how worship is done (or not done) to how the church makes decisions.

Two hidden life forces are important to appreciate for this size congregation. First, the inclusion dynamics of this congregation make it es-



essentially a "closed" system. This is a "members-only" congregation with a strong sense of who "we" are and who "they" are—or perhaps more precisely, who "is not one of us." Entry and participation in this system is difficult to achieve—unless you are literally "one of the family," in which case membership and participation is expected. This congregational system facilitates the "selective inclusion" hidden life force, as discussed in chapter 3, through the function of the congregational "gatekeeper." Often, that gatekeeper is the system's matriarch or patriarch, but sometimes that function is "assigned" to someone else. The resistance to include outsiders into this congregation makes it a tight-knit group providing a feeling of closeness, of being a part of a "real family."

The second significant hidden life force is the ascribed leadership function of the pastor. Even when this congregation can afford a full-time pastor, the system's required leadership pastoral functions are bounded. That is, this congregation has clear, if unspoken, expectations of the pastor regarding what it does and does not want the pastor to provide for them. Mostly, this congregation wants the pastor to function as a family chaplain who will provide basic pastoral care, officiate at nodal family events (weddings, funerals, births), and provide crisis counseling. As worship leader, a pastor in this church will do well to foster the family atmosphere and provide inspiring (but not challenging) sermons that affirm and reinforce the congregation's beliefs. This congregation may occasionally feel the pinch of a small congregation's limited resources and begin to talk about growing and reaching more people. The wise pastor, however, will understand that attempting to take the congregation at its word and moving to facilitate numerical growth will meet only with resistance. In fact, the string of short pastoral tenures typical of this congregation is evidence of its resistance to change and its adeptness at maintaining its homeostatic structure. What people in a Family-Size congregation want from their pastor is to be loved and cared for—in effect, to be shepherded.

The hidden truth about education in this context has less to do with *how* religious education is done, than *to what end*. Because of its size and limited resources, religious education programming tends to be basic, small-scaled, and run on a shoestring budget. Educational programming tends to be pastor-initiated and pastor-led. These tend to be family affairs (rarely do outsiders attend educational or training functions offered by this congregation) with basic content that is nontransformative. That is, the educational intent is not to challenge the faith of the members; rather, it is to reinforce and affirm the family corporate faith—the beliefs and values that bind the church. This is accomplished primarily through

the power of community narrative and storytelling. Additionally, this church will rarely partner with another small church in joint educational ventures. Despite the advantages to such a partnership, this church will resist interacting with other congregations because of the possibility that its own beliefs and values will be challenged.

The hidden life of the Family-Size congregation speaks to how this type of faith community "shapes" the faith of its members. Perhaps in no other model of congregation is the power of corporate spiritual formation more evident than in this intimate system. Faith is more about relationship than about content, such as doctrine, teachings, or theology. In other words, faith is more about *who* you know than about *what* you know. Therefore, ministry is more important than missions in this church—but ministry is defined by what the members do for each other and for the community because of their place in "the family." This translates directly to the single most important hidden life force in this relationship system: identity. If there is one thing that the Family-Size congregation does better than any other type, it is to provide its members with a strong corporate identity of "who we are," accompanied with the formation of a strong personal identity to its members about "who *you* are among us."

### The Shepherding-Size Congregation

The second type of congregation under the small-churches category is the *Shepherding-Size congregation*. This church has between approximately 50 to 150 active members. I refer to it as a "shepherding" church because it is highly dependent on its pastor for leadership (in contrast with the Family-Size congregation whose leadership functions center around patriarchal or matriarchal relationships and functions). Additionally, the primary leadership function of the pastor is akin to that of a shepherd caring for the flock. The members in such congregations get their spiritual needs met primarily through their personal relationships with the pastor. In fact, the majority of new members in this congregation will likely join the church as a direct result of the pastor's influence, either his or her ministry style or personality, or the pastor's direct efforts at reaching out to potential members. In this size congregation, it is likely that if the pastor is not reaching out to bring in new members, few in the congregation will do so.

One of the hidden life forces of this congregational type is just how dependent the church is on the pastor, not only for leadership functions but also for ministry tasks and missions activities—so much so that this can be called the "burn-out" church for clergy. Clergy in these congrega-

tions are overworked and overburdened. This congregation tends to attract overfunctioning pastors who mistake busyness with effectiveness. This congregation depends on the pastor not only to bring in new members, but also to grease the skids for their entry into a church that does not receive new members easily. This happens often more through the force of the pastor's personality than through any formal structures and processes. While membership in this congregation is more easily granted than in a Family-Size congregation, inclusion into the core life of the church is more difficult. This congregation can maintain a sense of "family." It is small enough to ensure that everyone knows everybody else, and it values the fact that the pastor knows everyone and can provide highly personal pastoral care. In fact, one of the chief obstacles to growth for this congregation is the unwillingness on the part of its members to receive pastoral care from anyone other than the "chief shepherd." Many a new pastoral associate in this size church learns this lesson when, at the conclusion of a hospital visit to a parishioner, he or she is asked, "And when is the pastor coming by?"

In the Shepherd-Size congregation, religious education enterprises also remain highly pastor-initiated and mainly pastor-led. As this congregation reaches the 150 mark in member participation, it may hire part-time, if not full-time, program staff for youth or children's ministry—or a combination configuration depending on perceived needs (youth and music, children and family, education and administration, and so forth). Even so, its educational offerings will likely be basic Bible studies and traditional church programs like Sunday school, Vacation Bible school, home Bible studies, and perhaps a support group or two. But this congregation will occasionally partner with other local churches to pool resources and make an attempt at organized outreach.

Most Shepherd-Size congregations will reach their ceiling at about 150 members and then stop growing numerically. At that point, they become one of the infamously labeled "plateau churches." The fact is that the majority of congregations in the United States have an average membership of less than 100.<sup>4</sup> But when a Shepherd-Size congregation nears the 150 membership point, it seems to become anxious about its inability to grow larger. Several reasons may contribute to this, including our culture's success-oriented mentality that assumes that "bigger is better" and that the goal of any organization is to grow as large as it can. The "celebrity status" given to the so-called megachurches certainly contributes to this, including the often-misguided attempt among denominational leaders to duplicate the megachurch model as the norm. Add to that the feelings of insecurity that clergy suffer when their efforts at "growing the church" continue to fail in spite of their best efforts at follow-

ing the recommended formulas for success—starting the right programs, adopting the right styles, and putting in place the correct strategies they are told will ensure success in numerical growth.

At 150 members, the Shepherd-Size congregation hits its first real plateau in terms of numerical growth. But I suspect that there is a hidden life force in the congregation that suggests that the reason for this has less to do with a lack of faithfulness on the part of the congregation, or a failure of leadership, or a lack of competence on the part of the pastor, or even the implementation of misguided strategies, and has more to do with the nature of the systemic relationships that are at play in the Shepherd-Size congregation.

Malcolm Gladwell, in *The Tipping Point*, presents the concept of "The Rule of 150" to explain the phenomenon of why groups have difficulty moving beyond the 150-member "tipping point."<sup>5</sup> The Rule of 150, says Gladwell, is the "tipping point" for any organization or group, because, when more than 150 persons are involved, structural matters impede a group's ability to agree on issues and to act with one voice. And if there is one value that churches with a sense of family desire, it's a sense of unity and oneness. Gladwell suggests that the dynamic behind the Rule of 150 is not merely organizational; 150 seems to represent the maximum number of individuals with whom we can biologically have a genuine social relationship, which goes with knowing who the people in our group are and how they relate to us. Gladwell cites the practice of the Hutterites, who, whenever their community reaches 150, split the community into two in order to maintain the intimate communal relationship dynamics.

Anyone who has had some experience in sales is likely to have endured any number of "pep talks" from sales managers and supervisors. One common pitch to starting salespersons is the message, "You can go out that door right now and sell 150 of these! How do I know? Because you know 150 people well enough to sell them this product." I worked my way through seminary as a manager in a funeral home. The home had two viewing parlors with a large sitting area in between. Each of those parlors would seat 300 people. Why 300 and not 150? I suspect because no one likes to go to a funeral by him or herself! The average size of the typical funeral is 300 people.

The hidden life force that drives this Rule of 150 phenomenon is what Gladwell refers to as the role of *transactive memory*. Transactive memory is a type of communal-corporate memory that involves the kind of information we store with other people in our group. This instinctual sharing of knowledge is a big part of what intimacy means: Knowing others well enough to know what they know and to trust them to know things for us. It's why, at any given moment in any number of places around the



globe, someone in a household is turning to another person and saying, "Honey, where do we keep the \_\_\_?"

My favorite personal example of this is the time I was in my study at home working on a class lecture. In the course of typing the lecture notes it occurred to me that showing a video clip from the movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* would provide an effective illustration of the point I wanted to make. Without even thinking or taking my eyes off the computer screen, I called out to my youngest son, "Thomas, would you go down and get me the *Ferris Bueller* videocassette?" My son went downstairs and in less than three minutes was in my study with the tape. The hidden dynamics in that little scenario did not occur to me until later. Like most families in suburbia, we have a cabinet crammed full of videos in no organized system, long having exceeded its maximum capacity. When I wanted the video of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, I instinctively knew that if I tried to go down to the den and look for that one videocassette, I'd spend a fruitless half hour trying to find it. And, just as instinctively, I knew who in our family would *know* where that one videocassette was in that chaotic mess: my youngest son. That is the power of transactive memory! Our family never called a family council when the kids were young, sitting around the kitchen table with a notepad, saying, "Now Mom, you're in charge of housewares and landscaping; Dad, you keep track of the tools and auto maintenance. Doug, you're the oldest, so you're in charge of the household pets, and Thomas, you're the video guy." Families and intimate communities don't work that way! Intimacy, and the role of transactive memory, means that while I don't know where certain things are in my home, I know who does, and I trust them to have that knowledge for me.

The hidden life dynamic of why congregations tend to plateau at 150 is that the nature of the systemic, communal relationship will change beyond the tipping point and thus alter emotional processes like transactive memory. Churches intuitively know this. Growing larger will mean risking the loss of the way they know each other and the way they are known. In an intimate small congregation, you don't need an organizational and administrative manual to find out certain things. All you have to do is ask the right person and you'll get the information you need—and the systemic nature of relationships ensures that you'll likely know who that right person is.

The systemic relational dynamics of intimacy and identity are part of the hidden life forces that explain why change in terms of numerical growth is resisted and is such a challenge for the Shepherding-Size congregation. Numerical growth will mean a loss of intimacy, and a loss of the feeling of "church" as people have come to experience it.

In terms of pastoral leadership, there are additional hidden life forces at play that provide reasons why so many churches plateau at around 150 members. First and foremost may be the sense of loss that the pastor feels about his or her ministry. As the congregation grows in numbers and the relationship dynamics get more complex, the pastoral leadership function shifts. The practices and habits of ministry that sustained and made the shepherd pastor so good at providing ministry—"caring for the flock" through intimate personal relationships—become increasingly difficult to maintain. And in fact, in a larger congregation that highly personal pastoral leadership approach becomes ineffective as the need to give more attention to increasingly complex management functions becomes critical.

If the congregation grows numerically the pastor will need to spend more time on ministry development and organizational maintenance. This includes the creation and launching of homegrown ministries along with the necessary lay leadership development. Often, this entails bringing on staff persons, which means that the pastor now must function as a head-of-staff supervisor. In conjunction with this, the pastor now has to help shift the decision-making structure to facilitate a more democratic process. More and more people need to be involved in decision making, which is quite a challenge for a pastor who previously had the convenience and the mandate to be the "decision-maker" for the congregation.

With the increased complexity in the system, the need for new and intentional ways of communicating becomes critical. This in itself is a challenging shift in both the ways people relate to each other and in how they do things. Formerly, when a decision was made in a committee or in a staff meeting in the office, no one had to think much about or work hard at "getting the word out." Everyone knew that, upon leaving the meeting, no memo needed to be written, no announcement needed to be made, and it really didn't need to be reported in the church newsletter. If what was decided in a committee or staff meeting was important, the system of relationships was intimate and efficient enough to ensure that, one way or another, everyone would know sooner or later. Rarely would anyone be left in the dark about important decisions. But as a congregation grows numerically, with an increase in complexity, more specialized committee or board functions, and new relational configurations, the pastor and staff need to work differently and intentionally to ensure that everyone's on the same page. This means setting up information networks where they did not formerly exist. While this is best done proactively and in anticipation of the needs of the organization, most congregations don't deal with this until one or two unfortunate miscommunication crises.

The two additional new pastoral functions that the Shepherding-Size congregation needs to undertake are critical, complex, and time consuming. First, they must forge a more formal networking relationship with the church's denomination at both the local and national level. Second, they must develop the physical plant needs, which for a growing Shepherding-Size congregation will mean building or relocating. The level of pastoral leadership required for giving effective attention to both of these pretty much ensures that the pastor will have little time or energy to maintain a shepherding relationship with the church. Some members will perceive this as a distancing on the part of the pastor—correctly sensing that the pastor is not as available as she or he once was.

Given the hidden life dynamics inherent in the Shepherding-Size congregation, is it any wonder that most congregations plateau at this stage? But understanding these hidden life dynamics may help us appreciate that there may be legitimate reasons for this plateauing. These reasons have less to do with a lack of faith, a lack of commitment to the mission of the gospel, or with a lack of pastoral competence, and more to do with the nature of systemic relationships present in that size congregation. Rather than perceiving a Shepherding-Size congregation that maintains itself at 150 members as a failure, we need to appreciate that it maintains its size to provide the very things people want and need from their church: intimate relationships among the members, a sense of belonging with a clear sense of one's "place" in the church, and a caring, intimate personal relationship with a pastor who is easily accessible. Why would a church want to lose that? Apparently, given the numbers, most churches do not want to lose that communal intimacy and find ways to ensure that they do not.

### Large Congregations

The names we'll use for the two types of congregations that fall under the "Large Congregations" category are: the Programmed-Size church and the Corporation-Size church. Large churches have memberships of 150 or more. This makes them fewer in number in terms of the demographics of all congregations, but they tend to be more prominent and influential, if only in terms of how they are perceived. Large congregations exhibit a higher and more complex level of institutionalization, which bring about hidden life dynamics not present in smaller congregations. These emergent dynamics call for different functions and foci in both leadership and in the congregation's educational enterprise.

### The Programmed-Size Congregation

Should the Shepherding-Size congregation navigate numerical growth well enough to break the plateau barrier, it may follow the trajectory of morphing into a *Programmed-Size congregation*. The number of active participants in this congregation runs between 150 to 350 members. A Programmed-Size congregation tends to be more democratic in organization and in its decision-making processes because more members actively participate in leading a myriad of programs and activities. While the pastor remains at the center of these programs and activities, his or her involvement is more as a planner, catalyst, and supervisor. Effective leadership functioning sometimes involves getting out of the way once a ministry or program is launched and in the capable hands of lay leaders.

One relational shift that happens once the transition to this size church is made is that the pastor becomes less accessible to the members for personal pastoral care. While the pastor will still visit church members in times of crises or during nodal life events, most of the time he or she will be available "by appointment." I remember reading a blurb in a church newsletter of a congregation that had just moved from a Shepherding-Size congregation to a Programmed-Size congregation. The notice, framed by a thick-lined box for emphasis, announced that, from now on, the pastor would be available by appointment only, and gave the contact number for the church office. I'd never seen this relationship shift so overtly announced, and could only chuckle at thinking about some lifelong church members saying, "I've been a member of this congregation for twenty-five years, and you're telling me that if I want to see my pastor I have to make an appointment?!"

One hidden life dynamic in this congregation is that the pastoral function needs to shift from interpersonal pastoral caregiving to programmatic management. When additional paid staff are hired to help oversee and lead program and ministry emphases, two critical pastoral roles emerge. The first is to provide the binding vision that will lie at the center of multiplying activities and ministries. The second role is that of "resident theologian," in which the pastor interprets the mission and ministry of a church that is getting busier and busier. The role of resident theologian serves to remind the members of the *why* behind the activities and practices in which the church engages. Additionally, to the extent the pastor can provide the function of resident theologian, he or she provides the congregation with the important ability to be discerning—to make appropriate decisions in legitimate ways not only about *what* to do, but also *what not* to do.



The members and potential members of a Programmed-Size congregation relate more to small groups and ministries for their spiritual and personal needs, and become less and less dependent on the pastor's personality and direct intervention for these. It is possible that one hidden life shift for the Programmed-Size congregation is to become what sociologist Penny Edgell Becker calls the "House of Worship Church," in which members find identity and meaning primarily in corporate worship events and church programs rather than intimacy of relationships.<sup>6</sup>

As the Programmed-Size congregation grows larger, its need for additional varied and multi-tiered programs makes it highly dependent on competent paid staff. Excellence in staff performance becomes an issue—whether in musical performance, program design, administration, worship leadership, or running a meeting. Expectations rise for staff professionalism, evidenced in matters like spoken or written communication. This becomes critical because new members in this congregation will be attracted by the quality of the programs it offers. Investment in quality staff—finding them, keeping them, and developing them—is critical for this congregation's continued success. As Programmed-Size congregations become more specialized and localized, they tend to develop a "niche." This means that this congregation will depend on a competent and professional staff that has the ability to craft and create programs and products specific to its context as the church discovers that it cannot depend on religious publishing house products or their denominational office for their specialized programming needs. This becomes more so if the congregation takes seriously its calling to impact its local community context.

In its hidden life dynamics, the Programmed-Size congregation shapes the faith of its members by providing a myriad of opportunities and programs to meet the multitude of needs of a widening diverse membership. The repertoire of educational approaches expands as Christian education programs are created to realize a myriad of learning needs (teacher training, lay leadership development, group leaders, pastoral care, ministry specializations, and so forth). Strong leadership development programs become critical, and laypersons are challenged to spiritual maturity through their participation in leading ministries and in their growing competence as spiritual leaders for their church. Because of the complexity in relationship dynamics that numerical growth brings, the creation of small groups becomes critical to maintaining intimate relationships. Staff in this size congregation need to provide seven small groups for every 100 active members. Maintaining this ratio helps ensure that the programmatic structure is able to absorb and accommodate newcomers, by increasing the likelihood of face-to-face, intimate, small-group relation-

ships among the members, as well as providing the diverse kinds of groups necessary to meet the various needs and interests in the congregation. A small group may consist of anything from a traditional Sunday morning Bible study class or a weekday mother's book reading group to support groups or a men's mission action group. Because of the nature of small-group dynamics that cause any group to become a "closed" group soon after its formation, this type of congregation also needs to ensure that new small groups are continually developed and begun. It is easier for "new" members to join "new" groups than established ones.

Additionally, in order to ensure that new members do not get lost in the system, leadership needs to intentionally put in place structures and processes that track new members to ensure that 80 percent of all newcomers (whether formal members or highly participant regular visitors) are involved in a small group within six months. The hidden life dynamic that leadership needs to pay attention to is that newcomers to a church are in a time of transition when they are beginning to create new life patterns. People who are new to the church are making lifestyle changes and choices, including restructuring their time. The window of opportunity that most people allow for that restructuring of their lifestyle and schedules is small. If the church is not intentional and aggressive about helping them make some choices about what they will commit to, something other than church participation will fill up that time vacuum. Getting 100 percent new-member involvement is ideal, of course, but not attainable. Leaders can, however, realistically set a goal of getting 80 percent of newcomers involved in significant ways through intentional programmatic structures and processes designed to facilitate moving people from the periphery toward the center of congregational life.

### The Corporation-Size Church

The second type of congregation that falls under the "large churches" category I call the *Corporation-Size congregation*. This congregation has an active membership of 300 to 500 members or more (although its official membership roll can be in the thousands). This is a more complex and diverse congregational system with a pastor who functions much like a CEO of any other corporation. He (but rarely she) may be unknown personally by most of the members yet serves as an important personified symbol of this congregation's vision and character—sometimes even enjoying a kind of celebrity status if his or her influence extends beyond the boundaries of the congregation's ministries.

Some Corporation-Size congregations develop the characteristics of what Becker calls a "Leader Church." This type of church makes a qualita-

tive shift away from the relational community dynamics exhibited even in the Programmed-Size congregation. As Becker describes it,

... intimacy is less valued here as a public good. Providing members with intimate connections or a feeling of belonging are low priorities . . . although here too some individuals can find close friends by seeking them out. These congregations are participative, but they are more like branches of a social movement organization, with a strong mission, than are democracies, which have a more diffuse mission.<sup>7</sup>

This type of congregation is perceived as "big," and members take pride in that, seeing bigness as a sign of God's blessing—if not also a sign of their own abilities to embody effectively what successful church ministry can be. It is this bigness that tends to attract newcomers initially, and the church provides multiple entry points to facilitate a way for people to find a point of connection in a complex and diverse system. Personal relationships, friendships, and formal educational and discipleship networks are fostered in intentional small-group experiences—sometimes with overtly stated high accountability expectations not found in smaller congregations.

Because of its size and complexity, the Corporation-Size congregation tends to have a large paid professional staff, many of whom specialize in focused ministry enterprises. Some of this paid staff may be "homegrown," having received their theological training and practical ministry experience in the church itself. Staffing is a major challenge for this size congregation, which needs to maintain a ratio of one full-time staff member for every 150 members. Specialized ministries, including those that target particular groups and populations, will increase that ratio. The Corporation-Size congregation can grow quite large—at times to the so-called "megachurch" category. And while there may be localized impediments that may limit growth, it seems that a theoretical limit to how large a congregation can grow has not been determined.

### Size-Independent Congregations

In the case of some churches, the congregation-by-size schema breaks down and is insufficient to describe or understand their nature. These congregations are best identified by the preeminence of the hidden life forces driven by their locale, their spirituality style, their theology, or their stance (a congregation's stance has to do with how its members view their corporate mission and ministry. Often a congregation's stance is determined by its immediate context, but sometimes it is determined

by a doctrinal or a mission task emphasis). Because the hidden life dynamics of these churches create different ways of relating, organizing, and practicing their faith, they may be large or small, but their numerical size will be independent of their systemic nature in the ways that size influences the hidden life dynamics of most congregations. Some are more truly faith communities than the institutional congregational model can contain. One can think, for instance, of communal religious systems like those of the Amish. Other churches are more like organized groups than congregations, ranging from cultic to intimate, ongoing faith groups in which people attempt to live out a more intentional and overt response to Christian discipleship than most congregations can support. Some of these size-independent congregations may seem similar to the Family-Size congregation, but actually are more defined by familial, cultural, missional, or tribal dynamics than by their formal organizational structure.

### How Size Shapes Faith

In using the congregation-by-size schema to examine the hidden lives of congregations, I must again stress that the point is not primarily to glean insight into how to help a church grow numerically. Despite all of the hype, print, and anxiety surrounding "church growth," finding ways to cause a congregation to increase in numerical size is almost beside the point. The reason is that there is no theological or qualitatively missional difference between large and small congregations. A small congregation of 70 is no less authentically Church than is a large congregation of 1,000. In other words, congregational size, while neither an indicator of theological authenticity nor necessarily an impediment to carrying out a local congregation's missional mandate, is important because the size of the congregation shapes the nature of corporate relationships. In turn, the nature of corporate relationships shapes the faith of the members in the congregational system.

Congregational size gives rise to the hidden life dynamics of congregations in at least two areas, the first of which is in the role and function of the spiritual leader, primarily, the pastor. As we've seen, the function of the pastor changes dramatically as a congregation moves from one size church type to the next. The two main dynamics that necessitate this change in function have to do with institutional development and relationship dynamics. As a congregation grows in size, the organizational structures and processes grow more complex. The level of intentional control and attention required to maintain and, more importantly, to develop the organization increases. Pastors who reside in growing con-



gregations must become more competent in new managerial skills as the church's leadership needs move from relational to institutional. In addition, as the nature of the corporate relationships change with the increase in numerical size, the pastor needs to make a shift in how he or she relates to both the individual members and the congregation at large.

In congregations transitioning from one church size to the next, perhaps the most hidden life element is the change of pastoral function to the *institutionalizing dimension*. One reason for this is that congregations and their leaders fiercely resist the idea of the institutionalized church—despite the reality that a congregation's nature is in fact an institutionalized expression of religion. Beginning in the early stages of the Programmed-Size congregation, the pastoral leadership functions need to shift to that of institutional developer. This is a challenge to most clergy, who have a strong orientation toward personal relationships with their parishioners and who value intimate pastoral care as part of who they are and what they do. To make the shift in focusing their *primary* responsibilities and attention to the *institution* of church, and not to the individual members, is often too much of a stretch for some pastors. For example, institutional development often means that a leader needs to choose to make an institutional choice over maintaining a personal relationship. This is a tough stance for any leader, but for a pastor who is trained to focus on the spiritual needs of individuals and who has a heart for people, this can be an overwhelming, if not oppressive, decision to have to make.

The second hidden life dynamic of how size shapes people's faith has to do with *the nature of systemic relationships*. Persons exist as part of systems that provide for certain personal needs—ranging from basic survival and safety needs to more existential spiritual needs, such as the formation of values, of a functional worldview, and the acquiring of a healthy self-understanding. How systemic relationships in the congregation provide for those needs depends to a great extent on the size of a congregation. But, more to the point, the way the systemic relationships can or cannot provide for those needs shapes the faith of the members. Smaller congregations, like the Family-Size congregation, shape people's faith primarily through personal relationships that stress intimacy, trust, a strong sense of corporate identity, a clearly bounded world view ("Us" and "Them"), and a genuine sense of community that unapologetically lets the members know their place in the system, if not in the world. In these smaller relationship systems, the narrative structure of the community's story is intricately intertwined with both its members' individual life narratives and with a highly selective faith narrative, biblical or otherwise. In the small Shepherding-Size congregation, faith often is shaped through the

influence of the pastor's personality. How one perceives self and God, and one's perspective of the world may be more influenced by the personal views and teachings of the local pastor—for better or for ill—than by a grounding in denominational traditions and teachings. In the systemic relationship makeup of the Shepherding-Size congregation, faith may be more "caught than taught"—and it is caught, in larger measure, from the pastor's personification and example of religious practices.

The nature of the systemic relationships maintained by larger-sized congregations also shapes the faith of their members, but in qualitatively different ways. The experience of faith, and how faith is formed, is different depending on the congregation's size. This may provide yet another insight as to why transitions—especially from the Shepherding- to Programmed-Size congregation—are so difficult, especially for those who've been a part of the congregation for any significant amount of time. The transition will result not merely in an increase in numbers, programs, or resources, but in a change in how people experience faith and in the way their church will shape their faith. When a congregation changes from one size type to the next, certain identity components will change, including symbols, the community story, and the language and communication patterns. These impact people's faith because they are part of the "stuff" of faith. Transitions are as much about a change of faith as they are about a change in organization. They are difficult to live through because, as theologian James Fowler pointed out, "We are a language-related, symbol-borne and story-sustained creatures. We do not live long or well without meaning."<sup>8</sup> If we accept Fowler's understanding of faith as "an irreducible *relational* phenomenon . . . an active 'mode-of-being-in-relation' to another or others in which we invest commitment, belief, love, risk, and hope,"<sup>9</sup> then we can appreciate that the fundamental issue of a congregation's size has more to do with how it will shape its members' faith than with how many members it has.

One suburban congregation had grown from a Shepherding-Size church to a Programmed-Size congregation. In the process, they built a new sanctuary—moving from a 1950s-style, cinder-block starter building to an 800-seat, elegant auditorium. This transition changed many things the church had not anticipated, including its worship style and its theological language. As one member put it, "We moved from being a 'Jesus' church to a 'God' church." This shift in worship theology, culture, and the accompanying growth in numbers, which shifted relationships and the ways the pastor functioned, meant that not everyone who was an intimate part of the former congregation was able to make a transition "into the new building" which they had supported financially and enthusiastically. For years this church maintained connections with members

who remained a part of the congregation in their own way, but who never attended that congregation anymore (some never even set foot in the new building, confessing that it just was no longer their church).

### Conclusion

The hidden life dynamic of how size shapes relationships, and in turn how relationships shape faith, is that the nature of systemic relationships gives the members the ability to foster a sense of identity that informs them about “who we are,” and therefore, “why we do things this way.” The shared and highly localized faith culture of a congregation—its system of knowledge, beliefs, practices, habits and custom, and its curriculum of faith—are built up over time, negotiated, and adapted through personal interaction. This contextual faith culture—each congregation has its own—provides a matrix through which a congregation understands its mission and its identity. It is in the way people in a congregation relate to each other that such things as processes and outcomes are decided, what programs develop (and how), and how conflicts are resolved (or not). This complex relational matrix, bounded by the impact of the congregation’s size, is what gives shape to members’ faiths. These help define the boundaries of what it means to be “a believer” and what it means to “belong.” Each size-type congregation provides for these identity and practices of faith differently. And members, as well as potential members, understand this at some instinctual level. This in part explains why people will join one church over the other, and why members will either resist or welcome transitioning into being another kind of church.

## Chapter 6

### The Hidden Life of Spirituality Styles of Congregations

ONE WEEKEND, WHILE OUT OF TOWN DOING WORKSHOPS, I TOOK the opportunity to visit a friend I’d not seen in a while. He is what I call an “informed layperson,” a lifelong churchgoer and astute lay student of the Bible and of matters ecclesiological: theology, the Church, denominations, and current affairs related to religion and culture. He is a deacon in his church, teaches Sunday school, and has provided significant leadership to his congregation during trying times when difficult decisions needed to be made.

During the course of catching up with each other, he shared candidly about where he found himself in midlife (he was in his mid-forties). He had just survived a company downsizing, dropped his first son off at college four states away, is struggling with his newly diagnosed adult ADD, but, fortunately, is managing to keep his depression under control. He is supportive and encouraging to his wife, a recent college graduate who is entering her professional field in midlife after raising a family. As a result of work with an ongoing support group, he is making a trip to reconnect with his younger sister as part of his family-of-origin work. His sister is lesbian, but that remains the “family secret” that he suspects has kept him cut off from her and has resulted in several difficult relational dynamics in his own family.

In the midst of all this, he expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with his congregation. He was insightful enough to say, “It’s not so much that the church has changed, but that I have changed.” The issues and concerns that take up so much attention and energy in the congregation—of which he was an integral part in the past—hold little interest for him. The questions that his fellow church members are dealing with he finds of little importance to him personally, and some he considers trivial. He recognizes that he is in a different place spiritually, and he struggles with the real possibility that he may leave the congregation in