

TRANSITIONING STRUCTURES FOR CONGREGATIONAL SIZE

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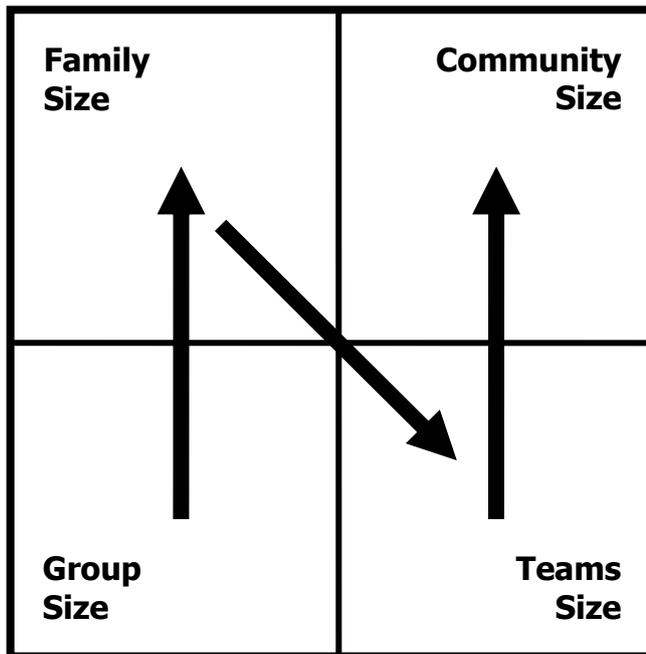
To maximise its effectiveness, a church may need to change the way it operates as the size of the congregation changes. This article suggests structural and leadership changes that may be helpful as a church increases or decreases in congregational size.

The ideas and suggestions about congregational structure in this article are purely practical. Before you seek to apply these ideas to your congregation, there are many prior questions to be asked like, “What does God want of our church?” and “How is God calling us to change?” If you know that God is leading you through any of these transitions, the suggestions may assist by clarifying the issues involved. But there is no stage or size that is more godly or mature or right than another. The question is, “Where is God leading us?”

Four Congregational Sizes (for congregations up to 1000)

The idea of different congregational structures related to size is based on some ideas of Arlin J. Rothauge that were originally published in a small booklet called, *Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry* around 1983. His ideas have been adapted and developed by the Alban Institute and some of its writers (particularly Alice Mann). Rothauge defined four congregational sizes (Gaede 2001, 15) that I have renamed and adapted slightly. Here is a brief outline.

1. *Group Size Congregation (1-50)*. The congregation functions as one group that often consists of tightly knit extended families or “clans” that centre on matriarchs and patriarchs. These matriarchs and patriarchs usually make the decisions and the pastor (if there is one) functions more as a chaplain. If the congregation is a recent church plant, the pastor may be the matriarch/patriarch. The congregation is flexible and can change direction rapidly if the matriarchs/patriarchs are supportive. But if the matriarchs/patriarchs are slow adopters, change can be very difficult.
2. *Family Size Congregation (50-200)*. The congregation centres around the pastor, with some members in loosely knit functional or friendship circles. If the pastor is well respected, they are the hub of the wheel, master coordinator and main pastoral carer. The congregation prides itself on being a family in which everyone is known and cared for with the pastor as the respected and loved parent. Ministry coordinators are permanent task-doers who value a close working relationship with the pastor. Other staff members are usually part-time and perform limited but essential functions.
3. *Teams Size Congregation (200-500)*. The congregation has accepted that they may not know everyone in the congregation or have a relationship with the senior pastor, but they will have connection with one of the pastoral team and will probably be involved in a ministry or Bible study group that builds ownership and commitment. The pastor coordinates/manages/leads a pastoral team that includes pastors and ministry specialists. The church offers a wide range of ministries. It is the nature of the flexible, interdependent teams that marks this sized church.
4. *Community Size Congregation (500+)*. The congregation is so large that it is difficult for anyone to know all the members. Small groups are fundamental to building friendships and ownership. The pastor functions as the leader of the large pastoral team, the leader of the church and the carrier of the vision. The leadership functions as a board of directors and the diverse and high quality ministries operate independently. Effective systems and structures are vital. The church is large and diverse enough to function as a local community.



So here is a summary of the four types of churches according to my categories:

Type	Group Size	Family Size	Teams Size	Community Size
Size	0-50	50-200	200-500	500+
Pastoral Team	Part-time pastor	Full-time pastor (with some support)	Pastor + small team	Pastor + large team
Main Role of Pastor	Chaplain	Father and brother	Manager	Leader
Leadership and Decision-making	Key families	Pastor and congregation	Ministry leaders	Senior pastor and senior leaders
Driving Value	Survival	Family	Ministry	Effectiveness
Main Strengths	Attention	Friendliness and support	Ministries and flexibility	Quality and options
Glue	Key families	Pastor	Teams and ministries	Vision and structure

Common Questions

- 1. Are the congregational numbers prescriptive?*

No, they are just an attempt to give some idea of the size of church. Churches can grow larger than the numerical limit for their type by doing their form of church exceedingly well. On the other hand, churches can transition early if they are focused on growth. So a church of 350 could be a huge family type church (with a very capable pastor), a teams' type church (which is what you would expect at this size), or a community type church (with the structures in place to take it to the next size).
- 2. Can a congregation miss a transition?*

A congregation can be planted as a family or teams' type church, but once a congregational type has been established, the normal transition would be to either the next size up or down. Because each type has so much to offer and is so formative, it's difficult to maintain health while skipping a transition.
- 3. Can a congregation transition back?*

Yes. If for some reason the congregational size is declining, it is necessary to transition to a type of congregation appropriate for that size. I will deal with transitioning for decline later in the notes.
- 4. Is any stage more healthy or mature?*

No. Each type of congregation has its strengths and weaknesses. Some people will find they can most effectively serve in a certain type of congregation, so will some pastors. Size has nothing necessarily to do with maturity or effectiveness in God's kingdom.
- 5. Does a congregation lose the sense of family as it grows?*

Well yes and no. The sense of family that comes from knowing everyone in the congregation and being part of each other's lives certainly declines as the congregation grows. In a community sized congregation, you may come to a church service and not know anyone sitting near you. However, a sense of family continues to be nurtured by relationships with friends in the congregation and a shared vision for and ownership of the congregation.
- 6. What happens if a congregation doesn't transition?*

It eventually plateaus. The inherent structural limits in each type of congregation eventually prevent further growth in the congregational size. New people may still be incorporated, but an equal number of attendees will exit.

Transitioning for Growth

Group-to-Family Transition

1. This usually occurs with the appointment of a pastor who not only chaplains the congregation (which is initially important) but also begins to lead the congregation to new values and ministry. A growing trust in and support for the pastor is usually the catalyst that produces the transition.
2. But equally important is the willingness of the key families or members or gatekeepers who are taking responsibility for the church, to release control to the pastor and other leaders. If this does not occur, a conflict between the new (including the pastor) and the old (the patriarchs and/or matriarchs) almost inevitably follows. If the new win the conflict, as long as enough resources remain, the church will transition through the pain to a family-size church, but if the old win the

conflict, it inevitably reverts to a group-size church, with the authority of the controlling members enhanced.

3. The growth of resources is also important for an effective transition. Finances need to be found to support the pastor. A family-size church usually offers a limited range of ministries, including a children's program and youth group. These ministries need to be staffed by volunteers. It's difficult to transition if the resources are not available. Associated with a growth in resources will be the emergence of new leaders who need to be recognised and given a role.
4. Growing the resources of a church requires the inclusion of new people into the family. People will not support the church with finances or energy if they feel ostracised or unwelcome. So a transitioning church needs to work on including newcomers quickly in the life of the family. Remember that the overriding attraction and value of a family church is "family." Newcomers need to quickly enjoy being part of the family. At this stage of church, the pastor may play an important role in the inclusion of new people.
5. With the group-to-family transition comes a division of the group. Group-size churches generally operate as a single cell. Everyone is welcome at any meeting of the church and all decisions are made together with full access to information. But with growth comes a need to divide into smaller exclusive, more private groups where access is restricted. For example, the Bible study becomes a number of regular small groups. This lack of access to all information and people must be accepted for the church to transition effectively.

Family-to-Teams Transition

1. This is often the most difficult transition because it calls for a radical change in the pastor's role as well as a change in the congregational perception of what makes an effective church. Some pastors and churches will operate most effectively at the family size and probably should not attempt transition. Other options for growth include church planting, moving to a cell-based structure, or even supporting other local congregations.
2. In a strong family church, the pastor knows the congregation personally, ministers to each family in some way, and is trusted and loved by the church. While there may be other members of staff (usually part-time), it is the pastor who takes responsibility for preaching and pastoral care. Pastors in teams' churches have a very different role. They don't know everyone personally, they don't provide pastoral care for the church family, and they don't know everything that is happening in the church, nor do they want to. They share the load of pastoring and leading with their staff and other lay leaders and they act more as managers and conflict resolvers. In other words, they pastor, support and lead the leaders. To make this transition, the pastor has to be willing to relinquish control of the ministries, and the special relationship with each church member.
3. Equally important, for this transition to occur effectively, is the willingness of the congregation to release the pastor. If the pastor operates by a teams' paradigm, but the congregation is not willing to accept the change, then a great deal of pain results. A few steps are essential to a relatively smooth transition. Firstly, the leaders have to really be supportive of the transition. Their support will help ease the grief of the congregation and partially protect the pastor from attack. Secondly, the congregation needs to understand the reasons for the change. This will require constant communication over a considerable period of time. Thirdly, the church needs a few wins with the new paradigm to gain confidence and see that it is not all loss. The new small groups structure needs to work or the new pastoral care system needs to initially provide stronger support than the pastor could provide. May I point out that it's not easy to lose your personal pastor, and it's a brave church family that makes the transition.

4. This brings me to another transition. The family church often values safety, predictability, and commonality. The trusted pastor can be relied on to steer the ship and avoid the dangers. The congregational members know each other enough to trust each other. But a teams' paradigm requires the pastor trusting others to lead and pastor, and the congregation trusting people to lead ministries that they don't even know. In other words, the church has to learn to accept and even value risk. Leaders with differing theologies, cultures and perspectives will influence small groups and ministries. Commonality gives place to diversity in the teams' church. Everyone gives away some sense of control over the outcome. Freedom and risk-taking are encouraged.
5. This change can only be negotiated safely if communication is strong and vision becomes clear. The church needs to unite around something other than the pastor who is moving more into the background as teams become more prominent. The unity now comes through a shared passion for growing God's kingdom that is expressed in the church's purpose and vision. As diversity becomes more pronounced, trust quickly breaks down when communication is poor, so the church moving to a teams' paradigm has to work hard at ensuring communication channels are kept open. This means listening to ministry leaders and ensuring that they are tied into the structure so that they hear first-hand of major decisions. In the early stages, the pastor often is the conduit for this communication, but eventually it has to be built into the structure.

Teams-to-Community Transition

1. While the family-to-teams transition involves the pastor disappearing from sight (to a degree) to give team leaders more profile and providing the pastor with time to pastor and lead the leaders, the teams-to-community transition see the re-emergence of the pastor on centre stage. A community-size church requires a clearly defined leader who represents the passion and commitment of the church. Such a pastor-leader needs to be a hard worker and a visionary who has up-front gifts, a strong relational approach, the ability to tackle and solve problems, and the energy and commitment to lead a large structure. The pastor needs to be seen frequently by the congregation and becomes an essential component of the identity of the church. Not every pastor is gifted or called to lead such a church. In many ways, this is a frustrating role for some pastors because the pastor can spend more time dealing with tough corporate issues than personal pastoral and ministry opportunities.
2. The focus of the pastor becomes church direction, health of the church, up-front ministry (including preaching), and leadership and encouragement of the leadership team including the staff and Board. It is like the role of a CEO. The responsibility for and care of ministry leaders now becomes the province of the pastoral team who are accountable to the senior pastor. This requires a capable pastoral team who can lead leaders and equip ministers, not just lead ministries.
3. While major decisions (like staffing, property, budget) may remain the province of the whole church, and ministry leaders must continue to have opportunity to input into the decision-making process, most significant decision-making is delegated to a small leadership team (Board and senior staff). The staff takes responsibility for the day-by-day running of the church and its ministries and the leadership team take responsibility for policy and direction. For a community structure to be workable, the church needs to be willing to trust the leadership team and staff to make the right decisions.
4. Another major shift in this transition is from freedom and experiment to structure and quality. I don't want to over-emphasise this change, because there is always room for risk in God's kingdom, but community-paradigm churches require quality ministry and effective structures. Policies and clear lines of accountability increase in importance. An increasing emphasis on and measurement of effectiveness of ministries means personnel changes that can create considerable pain. However, without quality ministries and clear policies and structures, the community church will dissolve into

dissatisfaction and factions. Ministry leaders need to support and subscribe to the structures and policies. They can no longer do whatever is right in their own sight.

5. Aligned with structures is the importance of “pathways.” In a teams-paradigm church, people usually find their own way into friendship, spiritual growth and church ministry with a little help from people they know, but in a community-paradigm church, no-one knows enough to help them. People ask themselves questions like, “How do I find friends in this church? How can the church help me grow as a Christian? How do I find how I am gifted to minister? What do I do if I would like to become a youth leader? Do children’s workers need training? Do I join a small group or support group?” etc. In a community church the answers to these questions need to be spelled out so that people have clear pathways to follow for social, spiritual and ministry growth. It won’t happen automatically. The church is too big and complicated.
6. A community church also requires a clear vision. I mentioned vision in relationship to the teams’ church, but in this transition the vision becomes paramount. A huge danger in a community church is that members become consumers. It is their commitment to the vision that calls members to sacrifice their time, energy and money, and keeps them from lapsing into complacency. Without a commitment to a challenging vision, a community church easily deteriorates into a self-serving, consumer-driven organization.

Transitioning for Decline

Sometimes congregational numbers will decline. It is possible to maintain health in decline, but to do so you must effectively transition down. In these cases, changes in size will precede and drive the transition rather than following the transition. A congregation that tries to continue to operate as a type of church that congregational size cannot support will lose energy and health. So effectively transitioning for decline is just as important as transitioning for growth.

Family-to-Group Transition

1. The biggest issue is usually the loss of the full-time senior pastor. With declining numbers, the congregation can no longer afford to pay a full-time salary, so the congregation has to shoulder greater responsibility for the ministries of the church. This may include preaching and pastoral care (the traditional roles of the pastor). If the congregation has no one left prepared to take responsibility for this extra ministry, it is very likely that the congregation will die.
2. There also needs to be willingness among members for a reduction in amount and quality of ministry. A group size church cannot maintain the ministry of a family size church. People cannot expect the same degree of pastoral support or quality of preaching or musical expertise.
3. It will be the degree of unity and commitment to each other that will determine the success of the transition. A group size church functions as a small family. Without strong relations and a sense of inclusion, people will not remain in the church.

Teams-to-Family Transition

1. The pastor needs to accept the loss of staffing support that this transition will bring. Usually the loss of staff pre-empts the transition, but the pastor has to be willing to take a more hands-on approach to ministry with the congregation. The teams-type pastor is a coordinator and manager, but the family-type pastor knows the congregation and pastors them. The pastor will need to get out of the

office and onto the road. He/she needs to build personal respect. When pastoral issues arise, the pastor will need to be available. This is a difficult adaptation and can be associated with a sense of loneliness for the pastor who has lost the camaraderie and joint responsibility of a pastoral team.

2. The congregation has to be willing to abandon some of the ministries and programs that cannot be maintained due to the shortage of resources. This is best done by focussing on a few ministry strengths of the congregation so that people can see that it is only some ministries not ministry itself that is being abandoned.
3. More effort needs to be made in building a sense of family into the congregation. It is now possible to run activities that almost all the congregation can attend e.g. picnics, after-church lunches, social nights. These activities help rebuild the family values that characterise a family-type congregation.

Community-to-Teams Transition

1. The pastor needs to put more time and effort into encouraging and developing the team leaders (often the pastoral team). The pastor becomes more a coordinator and manager rather than a CEO-type director. This may be a difficult transition for a pastor who has grown accustomed to focusing on the big issues, the up-front ministry, and perhaps a wider ministry across churches. Time has to be found for more personal ministry with the leaders.
2. It is likely that some of the ministries will need to close because a teams-type congregation cannot maintain and resource the same number of ministries. There must be careful consideration of which ministries are essential to the direction and future of the church. The process of allowing some previously effective ministries to die can be quite painful, but it is essential to maintaining health.
3. The structure needs to loosen up. The top-heavy structure of the community-type church will stifle the creativity and energy required in a teams-type congregation. Leaders need to feel that they are contributing to the direction of the church and need to be given greater freedom.
4. The vision needs to be reconsidered. With reduced resources it may not be possible to fulfil the vision that drove the community-size congregation.

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