

DP8.04 Should we Pump it up?

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What is the optimum size for a congregation? From one point of view, the answer seems obvious – you want more and more people in your church because that means more and more people in the kingdom. But it just might be that those two things don't necessarily go together.

In the United States in the last 20 years we have seen the growth of the mega church – huge congregations of thousands of people meeting in well-appointed buildings. However, the reality is that most American church-goers belong to much smaller churches. Should we in Australia be aiming to build mega-churches? Is there something cultural about the optimum size of a congregation?

The Pastor's Answer

If you ask clergy what is the best size for a congregation they will answer – HUGE!

Ministers like big congregations for a number of reasons. One of the most important (and most ungodly) is that pastoring a huge group of people is good for our self-esteem. It makes us feel that we are achieving something, that we are a success. At a more pragmatic level, large numbers of people meeting together can provide a great financial base to fund ministry, which is obviously important. Certain other economies of scale can be achieved also, and it can be very exciting to gather with hundreds of others to church together. Hence the common clergy answer to the size question: PUMP IT UP! Make the size of the meeting bigger and bigger.

The View from the Pew

However, if you ask the average church-goers the same question, they may disagree.

Those in the pews are not interested in economies of scale or the pastor's ego. Their attitude is quite different. Where I minister, people who come to our church are aged between 25 and 50, often single, often separated or divorced. When asked what they are looking for in a church, they use words like intimacy, community, friendship and warmth – that is, a different experience from the mega church. It's not that they are opposed to evangelism or growth, but they are seeking a quality relationship with their fellow Christians.

People sometimes leave larger churches, not for doctrinal reasons but because they feel lost in the crowd. If you go to a church which has a high turnover in people, like a university church, you can find yourself not knowing anyone in the place after a few years. By your mid-twenties, you often desire a smaller number of closer relationships. On the other hand, a group of teenagers will probably want something else. Adolescents travel in packs and like being with large groups of people. They are searching for the crowd experience – the big Youth Convention feel. Intimacy is not what they are after.

In fact, their ideal is having several hundred shallow relationships! Can you remember seeing 16 year-olds shriek "Hi!" and run across the room to embrace someone they think they might have met at beach mission 3 years ago, if only they could remember each other's names? Yes, I exaggerate slightly, but you get the point. Different age groups have different expectations.

Are Aussies different?

Perhaps, too, there are cultural differences between here and the US. Our churches may never be as large because of differences in population size and attitude to religion. I wonder if it isn't also because of our individualist streak. Americans seem to like congregating in large groups and having a corporate identity. But belonging to a corporation (secular or religious) seems to go against the grain for Australians. Australians don't seem to like the authority structures of large groups. If we are told to be in one spot, we'll go and stand a step to the left, just to be perverse!

We want the kingdom to grow, but the infinitely growing congregation may not be ideal. On the other hand I am not convinced that thousands of small, financially unviable churches is the solution. So where does that leave us?

Church 'tithing'

I recently came across the ideas of a writer by the name of Robert Logan. He is visiting Sydney later this year. Logan planted a church in the United States, which grew very large (so what else is new?). The distinctive feature of this church, however, is that they committed themselves to planting new churches continually. Rather than just pumping up the size of the one congregation, they planted new ones in different areas. Their method was to 'tithes' their church every 3 years or so – invite 10% of their people to leave and plant a new church in a geographically separate location. They saw it as a mother-daughter relationship – the parent who brings a child to maturity and then allows it to find independence. The advantage of planting new churches, Logan argues, is that new churches have a growth dynamic. People are excited and challenged to see their new church grow and are committed to evangelism in a way which may not happen in larger churches.

So what might this mean in practice? An established church of several hundred people might decide to plant a church. They don't need to build a building; they can rent community facilities. The mother church would appoint a person to pastor that congregation, and underwrite the cost of the project for the three years or so that it will take to become viable and be able to support a ministry staff. The daughter church may not grow to mega church size, and that may be a good thing, because it can then better provide the intimacy of fellowship that people seek. It may be a small church, but a small growing church, not a small dying one. And part of its vision will also be to plant another congregation at some stage.

The best church may not be a huge one. It may be that the way forward is a fellowship of congregations that are committed to planting new churches in order to see Christ's kingdom grow.