

2nd Opinion: Welcome to the church of the casserole

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Many non-megacongregations mistakenly believe they do not have any competitive advantages over a nearby megachurch or one of its satellite campuses.

They are wrong. Their first mistake is believing they have to compete. Their second mistake is failing to recognize their advantages. What advantages do they have? Let me count the ways. Or, at least, let me name a few.



George Bullard During a focus group interview with a congregation, I discovered The Church of The Casserole. Who knew?

One of the questions I always ask in these sessions goes something like this: “What attracted you to this congregation and made you want to stay, connect and be part of this faith community?”

A 30-something couple told me this was their second time to be members of this congregation. The wife grew up in the church. The husband was a member with her for years. Then, after two children, they decided to go to the mega church about two miles away.

It had great worship and a really outstanding ministry with children.

However, with 9,000 people in attendance at three locations, and their inability to connect with one of the weekday small groups, they remained on the periphery of the congregation.

Hungry for connection

They attended about four years until one day they realized if they had a crisis or a death in their family, there was no one to bring them a casserole. Their relationships were primarily surface interactions. Great people. Busy people. Overscheduled people. People who loved the experience of the megachurch.

Just not people who developed deep relationships with others they encountered in the church. That is, unless they somehow made a connection with a meaningful ongoing small group.

So, they returned to their former church. It is not a small church. Attendance is around 500. Parking can be as much a problem there as at the megachurch. They are part of a Sunday small group—yes, still called a “Sunday school class”—where everyone knows their name, has their address, texts them on their mobile phones, and knows how to cook and deliver a casserole.

Amazingly, even the pastor and staff members know their names. They are asked their opinion in places like this focus group as to how to enhance their church experience, their worship of the Triune God, and their spiritual formation and missional engagement. That never happened in a personal way at the megachurch.

Congregations offer three dimensions of relationships.

First is face familiarity, where you recognize someone as being connected with your congregation, but you do not know their name. You smile when you meet them in the hallway, parking lot or during the informal greeting

time of the worship service.

People whose names you know

Second are fellowship relationships with people whose names you do know, who you encounter periodically in congregational events and meetings. You develop memory about who they are and how you relate, but you do not really know them. Nor do they really know you. It is about surface relationships.

Third are true, deep friendships. These are people you know well. You have connection with them outside of congregational events and meetings. You relate to them socially. You have been in their home, and they have been in your home.

You are more likely to have this third type of relationships in The Church of The Casserole than in the megachurch. In the megachurch, you are more likely to have face familiarity relationships. It all depends on how each size and type of congregation helps people develop in-depth relationships with one another as they relate to our Triune God.

Every household connected with a congregation needs at least six other households who would bring them a casserole if they had a crisis or a death in their family. Short of this, the dimension of relationships needed for deep, meaningful relationships may not be there.

The 3 a.m. call

Other ways exist to describe The Church of The Casserole relationship. One was popularized during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. It is the 3 a.m. caller. If you have at least six households you could call at 3 a.m. when you have a crisis, and they would welcome your call, then you have a healthy depth of emotional and spiritual support.

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting in-depth relationships do not occur in megachurches. They do. Every day. All the time. It is just that The Church of The Casserole concept is often a spirited benefit for non-megachurches. What is your experience?

George Bullard is president of [The Columbia Partnership](#), general secretary of the North American Baptist Fellowship of the Baptist World Alliance (www.NABF.info) and senior editor of [TCP Books](#). Contact him [here](#) or call (803) 622-0923. His column is distributed by Baptist News Global.