

Voices: Does church size matter?

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A few years ago, [The National Congregational Study](#) posted some findings on the average church size in America. They discovered quite a bit about church sizes and trends, but two specific stats rang out to me:

- *Half* of American churches have less than 75 people.
- Ninety percent of American churches have less than 350 people!

What was it about these stats that made my pastoral spidey senses go off?

Well, I thought America was in the middle of a [megachurch boom](#). Conversations about church growth are on the rise, newly minted [denomination-neutral worship facilities are popping up in every major city](#), and it seems that every keynote speaker at every conference is the pastor of a large church somewhere.

Country, community and neighborhood churches are wringing their hands with worry about attendance because they've been told they should be growing (or that they *could* be growing if they'll just subscribe to so-and-so's simple five-week course for only \$99.99).

With this current church-growth trend running full bore, whether it's outright said or just subtly implied, the message is loud and clear: big church good, small church bad.

A typical pastoral conversation

Just ask any pastor what the first two questions other pastors ask him when they meet for the first time. Nine times out of ten, the conversation goes as follows:

“Oh, you’re a pastor? What church do you pastor?”

“I pastor at First Baptist Church of Somewhere, Texas.”

“That’s great! How many people do you have on a Sunday?”

That second question is rarely about their tenure of service, what it’s like to pastor in Somewhere, Texas, or if they even enjoy the job. That second question is generally, “How many people?”

I wouldn’t speak for any other pastors other than myself on this, but when I receive the question of how many people I minister to on a Sunday, I almost hear it with the hidden inquiries of, “Are you a good pastor or not? Should I respect you because you have more people in your church than I have in mine?”

Like I said, I could be alone here, but I’m willing to venture a guess that I’m not.

Sizing up success

It’s not that growth and size are bad. That’s far from what I’m saying. Keeping count of people in crowds has a biblical tradition, and it helps understand the effectiveness of new stuff we’re trying in services and other beneficial things along those lines. We also can’t ignore that the fewer people who are in the church, the more difficult it may be to keep all of the bills paid.

To add to that, some churches are called to be large. The influence that having large numbers creates is priceless in the kingdom. Ultimately, the only reason Rome and the Pharisees took Jesus seriously is because of how many people followed him. If his followers were in the dozens rather than the thousands, they likely wouldn’t have cared about him.

No, I’m not railing against large churches. I’m concerned with the practice

of using the size of a church as the only means of judging success.

If consciously or subconsciously we associate the sheer size of a church with its success, then we've got a pretty big problem on our hands when we look at the stats mentioned above. Are 90 percent of the churches in our country that bad? Are 90 percent of our pastors failures?

If you talk to many pastors, they'd say yes. Well, what they'd more likely answer is that they think of themselves as failures for not leading a more substantial body. I may be preaching to the praise team here, but believing that church size is all that matters is wrong, and it's time for a change.

The church began small

Nowhere in the Bible does Jesus tell us that all churches are supposed to look the same. All congregations all called to follow some overarching principles of worship and discipleship, but, aside from those, we all have a different purpose in the kingdom, and those objectives don't all look alike.

Simply put, some churches need to be huge, but, clearly, most do not. Remember how God looks at the inward stuff while humanity has a bad habit of looking at the outward (1 Samuel 16:7)? God has just as much interest in the quality of a church as he does the quantity.

Are you praying for the sick? Shepherding the flock? Teaching the word faithfully? Are you making disciples of your people? How about regularly sharing the good news of Jesus with the lost? Are you a good steward of your resources? Then don't stress out over how many pockets are in the multipurpose, padded chairs.

You may not hear this often enough, but, pastor, you're doing a good job. Trust that your work for the Lord is meaningful. It's significant in the eternal sense, but it's also substantial today in the here and now.

Remember that Jesus needed just twelve men to spark a revolution. Believe that if it's full of faithful people, God can do tremendous things in a tiny church.

Don McCaig is pastor of [First Baptist Church Lipan](#) in Lipan, Texas. Connect with him on Twitter [@DonMcCaig](#).