

Size Really Does Make a Difference!

Rev. Stefan Jonasson
UUA Director for Large Congregations

Large congregations are different! This very simple observation is as true for large Unitarian Universalist congregations as it is for those of any other denomination. When we look at the interior workings of a congregation to see how things actually happen, we discover that large UU congregations behave more like the large churches of other denominations than like the smaller UU congregations nearby. You see, not everything we do is determined by theology or our celebrated UU principles. Next to its particular history and culture, size is the most revealing frame of reference for understanding a church. Size really does make a difference!

In recent decades, a whole body of literature has developed, which has come to be known as church size dynamics. Few areas of church life are unaffected by church size dynamics. Whether a church is dealing with staffing, governance, finance, conflict, managing change, growth, or outreach, size will prove to be a factor.

The field of church size dynamics identifies four basic sizes of congregation, where size is determined by the average attendance on Sundays. In measuring attendance, we include the children in the church school, along with their teachers, the youth group attendees, as well as adults at the worship service. Each of the four sizes of church has its own distinctive style.

The Family Church, averaging fewer than 50 people in attendance, is so named because it behaves remarkably like an extended family! As with human families, individuals we describe as matriarchs and patriarchs tend to dominate life in the family church. This is not a value judgment, it's just what is found most often in this size of church. Family churches tend not to have their own ministers but, when they do, the minister is rarely at the center of congregational life. The minister's tenure is usually too brief to develop the influence necessary to hold that important a position. The board is generally not much better off than the minister, since important decisions are mostly made either by the matriarchs and patriarchs or by the congregation as a whole, through a 'town meeting' approach. This is the *only* size of church where it is *really* possible for each member to know every other member. More than one in three UU congregations is family sized.

The Pastoral Church, averaging 50 to 150 people on Sundays, is what most Americans have in mind when they think about churches. In this size of church, the role of both the minister and the board shifts toward the center of the system. The pastoral church is no longer one where "everybody knows your name," as in the television series *Cheers*, so the minister becomes a sort of spiritual bartender, since maintaining relationships becomes a full-time job. As steward of the relational system, the minister's influence grows. The board's responsibility for making decisions on behalf of the church increases, as does the sense in which board members function as volunteer staff. Part-time paid staff is added. Stronger committees begin to develop and their

members round out the volunteer staffing needs of the church. Nearly half of all UU congregations are pastoral churches.

The Program Church, with an average attendance of 150 to 350, is known for the quality and growing variety of its programs. The minister may be joined by another full-time professional and other staff positions also increase. Boards begin to focus on policy-making and oversight of congregation-wide matters, divesting themselves of the liaison responsibilities that are typical of pastoral church boards. A program council will often be created to coordinate the work of the congregation's various program committees. Some experts maintain that the program church will be the most vulnerable to decline during the first quarter of the 21st century. Perhaps one in six UU congregations is a program church.

The Corporate Church, averaging more than 350 people attending each week, is the most varied category of the four. Some can be characterized as super-program churches while others look more like mini-denominations! Few congregations of this size can get by without a second minister (or more) and other professional staff members will typically be part of the team, assisted by a growing support staff. Boards must shift dramatically toward a policy-setting emphasis of governing the congregation's affairs; otherwise they will soon be overwhelmed by their work. Board members are now the church's legislators rather than its managers. Under the leadership of the senior minister or executive team, the staff assumes responsibility for the church's day-to-day operations. Program councils typically give way to staff coordination, while committees are reduced in number, and most of those remaining become accountable for their activities through the staff. While there are only a few more than 40 large or corporate-sized churches in the Unitarian Universalist Association, they collectively account for more individual UUs than the 500 smallest congregations put together!

