

Is there a church size that's right for you?

The number of people who physically regularly attend a church dictates how that church can be structured to most effectively meet congregational and community needs. What works at one size misses the boat at another size. Because each size has its own unique needs and characteristics, it's definitely not one-size-fits-all.

Each size distinctly determines:

- How people connect
- How decisions are made
- How information is communicated
- How leaders are selected
- The roles, responsibilities, and requirements of members, staff, and volunteer leaders
- What attracts potential members

But which of these 6 church sizes best fits you?

Small Group Church: 40 or fewer

This highly relational church structure functions as an extended small group in which everyone knows everyone intimately. Its pastor serves as a volunteer or bivocationally, and prioritizes personally tending member needs over leading or preaching. Many decisions are made by informal relational process. Members feel known by the pastor, volunteer significantly in multiple roles (often regardless of ability level), and feel that they have a say in decision making. Volunteer leaders have a history of devoting time and money to the work, fulfill numerous key ministry roles, are extremely powerful, and emerge relationally rather than being appointed or elected. Communication is by word of mouth, and information moves swiftly through the whole membership. Guests come because they are invited and befriended rather than through a "program" of outreach.

Small Church: 40 - 150

One pastor personally shepherds member needs as a full time focus. Members feel personally known by the pastor and other members, and volunteer significantly in multiple roles as needed. While leaders are appointed or elected often on the basis of their tenure, individual members – regardless of their official status – carry congregational trust and significantly influence opinion, though decisions are processed relationally and informally by the entire congregation over a period of time. Communication is mostly word of mouth, and relatively swift. Program planning, organizing volunteers, and other administrative tasks become more formally addressed. Guests are attracted by the relationships in the congregation or with the pastor. The church board fulfills many key ministry tasks, and if working to create new activities in tandem with the pastor, can initiate a growth spurt. (80% of all US churches have 200 or fewer members.)

Transitional Church: 140-300

Member needs are tended to by the pastor, one or two additional staff, and key leaders, though the pastor's focus shifts towards growth and supervising volunteers and programs to do ministry. Decision making is transitioning from key core members toward the staff and volunteer leaders. Members feel a sense of familiarity with the congregation and staff, and volunteer in more specialized roles. Incorporating new members is more intentional, and they tend to take their cues more from the staff than from the volunteer leaders. Communication is more deliberate instead of relying on word of mouth alone. The church may add a second service to handle growth and space issues.

Medium Church: 250-450

The pastor and 2-4 other staff focus on recruiting, training, and organizing volunteers to do ministry. While members feel a sense of familiarity with the congregation and staff, the pastor is less accessible because of the need to balance creating informative and inspiring sermons with the need to train, support, and supervise ministry and administrative staff. Relational connection often comes through participation in a class or program (generally about 10-40 people). Attention to congregational needs has diversified to focus on various people groups represented (i.e. older people, youth, young families, seekers). The inherently conservative church board is transitioning to being selected more on the basis of maturity and ability, and may be drawn from those who oversee influential committees and tend to drive change. Volunteer ministry leaders rise up to lead teams or committees because of skills or giftedness rather than tenure. Decision making happens through key committees and teams. Growth is connected to improved quality in ministries and to their effectiveness to meet real needs.

Large Church: 400-750

Members feel a sense of belonging and connection primarily through a small fellowship groups (usually of 4 to 15 participants) that are more of a “miniature church” than a class or ministry, though shepherding may still be addressed through larger programs, affinity classes, and groups run by staff or volunteer leaders. The church has multiple participation options, multiple generalized or specialized staff, and a more formal and deliberate assimilation approach. The pastor delegates organizational administration and functions primarily as a vision caster, preacher, and staff overseer. Church leaders take on a commitment to the church’s distinct vision and mission, which is empowered through key ministries and program strengths, and becomes an important reason that members join. The church board may no longer be comprised of volunteer ministry leaders, and works with the senior minister to set overall vision and goals, and to evaluate how the church and ministries are doing as a whole. Decisions happen “top down” from staff and key volunteer leaders. Growth is connected to vision casting and the quality and transcendence of the worship service experience.

Very Large Church: 800 or more

The church’s missional focus is championed by staff and executive leaders, and is identified with a distinctive senior pastor who articulates this vision and who also may be the only staff person recognized by the majority of the congregation. The pastor delegates individual shepherding and concentrates on preaching, large group teaching, vision casting, and strategizing. Church ministries may focus on reaching nonmembers without directly benefiting congregants (i.e. church planting, mercy and justice ministries). The majority of members are in very well-run small groups providing pastoral care in addition to Bible study. Staff are competent, specialized leaders of leaders, having more authority to make decisions in their area without approval from the senior staff or volunteer board. Overall church leadership structures and procedures are formalized. Decision-making power has migrated away from the senior staff and pastor to the individual staff and their leadership teams. Assimilation, discipline, and incorporation of newcomers is highly organized and supervised. Members expect excellence in the quality of arts, teaching, and programs. Members may be multiculturally diverse, from a wider geographic area, or have a greater variety of interests and preferences. There are options regarding the schedule or type of worship, learning, and support services. The increased percentage of young people who attend reinforces a tolerance for change. The higher percentage of seekers appreciate visiting without having their presence noticed immediately and feeling pressured to make a decision or join a group. The church may provide a greater range of family support systems, recreational opportunities, faith-based holistic ministries, and broader church research and development. The church communication system is continually upgraded to handle changes in ministries and participant needs.