

*“The Grasshopper Myth”
Big Churches, Small Churches
and the Small Thinking that Divides us
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I’ve come to realize that our small church size is not a problem to be fixed, but a strategic advantage God wants to use. My failure has been to not recognize one essential characteristic of my ministry identity—I’m a small church pastor. Too many of us have defined church success and health by numbers—By two specific numbers—Butts in the seats and bucks in the offering.

This drive in smaller churches for greater numbers and larger churches has probably resulted in more pastoral burnout than then we have in healthy, growing churches. I’ll challenge the premise that biblical growth and health can be accurately measured by counting bodies. What is biblical church growth? Forget the numbers. What does Jesus measure? Yes, all healthy things grow. But growth is never as simple as older equals taller or healthy equals bigger. I am not a failure if my church reaches its optimal stage of maturity, then starts growing in ways other than butts in seats for weekend services.

There are a lots of great churches which just happen to be small. But we can’t reach our full effectiveness until we accept our God-given place in the body of Christ and redirect our resources from a false model of numerical growth to a more biblical model. We’ve stopped whining about the problems and challenges that come with smallness and have embraced our strengths and opportunities.

There is a need to train the current and next generation of pastors – 80% of whom will never lead a church of more than 200 people. We are trusting that church statisticians will find a way to redefine church growth as more than the number of people in the seats for weekend services to the exclusion of almost all other factors.

Anyone who was a pastor in the late 1990s remembers the impact Rick Warren’s book (The Purpose Driven Church) had on church leaders. We re-launched our church on October 1, 2000. I just wanted to be faithful to God. That’s still all I wanted. I was being told by the pastors I most admired that the best way to do that was to grow a big church.

At the height of the church growth movement no phrase or concept was more repeated or firmly believed than—Think Like a Big Church. I heard it everywhere. I told it to my church leaders too. It was the main reason for some of the biggest mistakes of my ministry. In a small church when the pastor stops doing hospital visits, ceases having an open-door policy and starts delegating those responsibilities to others, the congregation members feel neglected and unimportant. I’ve talked to many discouraged pastors with stories just like mine, who tried the rancher model only to find their congregation members feeling neglected.

It's true that both the ranching and shepherding models exist in scripture. Most of what we've picked up about ranching is not from scripture, but from business and military practices. The fact that Jesus never directly referred to ranching doesn't mean we can't use it. What matters, of course, is that the lost sheep is found, not who does the finding. Pastors who are called to serve predominantly in the shepherd role should not be made to feel like they have to justify that choice.

Since Jesus constantly taught and used the shepherd model, but only occasionally taught or used the ranching model, shouldn't shepherding be our default setting too? In a megachurch the pastor may indeed have to give up doing the caregiving in order to meet the needs and manage the necessary systems. In a small church the pastor can and should do both.

House churches are a unique sector of church life that operate on significantly different principles than other churches. I appreciate them and am grateful for the people they serve, especially in parts of the world where the church has been driven underground. As a small church Pastor, I've allowed myself to feel intimidated and despised by big church pastors on many occasions.

Half of all Christians in America, and far more than half of Christians worldwide attend a small church. Wanting to worship and serve God in a small church is not a theological error or a personality deficit. It's time we stopped treating it as though it was. The truth is there are great churches that are big and great churches that are small.

Let's look at small church pastors as the home group leaders of the body of Christ. A lot of small churches are not very good, and that's why they're small. We are grasshoppers by choice. We can do better. Much better. We need to allow each church have its own mission and shouldn't try to duplicate the mission of another church, no matter how successful or large that other church is.

As we saw earlier, 93% of American churches are smaller than 350, and 85% are smaller than 200. According to a recent study, those who attend megachurches are likelier to volunteer less, contribute less financially than their Small Church counterparts.

From my perspective, there are four problems that have plagued us in our obsession with numerical growth in the church:

Problem #1: It is growth-oriented, not health-oriented. The health of the church is not seen as the end result, but as a means to an end. That's a problem. Health should be the goal.

Problem #2: It is Problem-Oriented it assumes being small is a problem without considering any of the positive aspects of being small. We all need to do what we're good at without stressing over the things we're not. Instead of being problem-oriented, we need to be (here it comes) strengths-oriented.

Problem #3: It is Too Narrowly Focused. Megachurches aren't what's fueling some of the greatest revivals the world has ever seen. It's mostly happening in new small churches.

Problem #4: Size Matters – But not the way we think it does Let’s stop arguing about which size is best and start seeing what’s best about each size. There are things small churches can offer that big churches can’t.

My pastor knows my name. Most Christians want to be led by their leader. They want to know they matter to the pastor. The bigger the church, the more the pastoral role must change from personal shepherd to administrative oversight.

Revolution has always come, and will always come from the poor, the small, the under-represented and under-appreciated. Small churches need to think like small churches. But thinking small is not the same as small thinking. And it’s definitely not an excuse for having a small vision.

I had to forget about the things I’m not and start appreciating the things I am.

I think the main reason we use numerical growth as our primary indicator is that numbers are easier to assess than healthfulness.

Step one is becoming a healthy pastor and a leading a healthy church—Being content with how God made you and what he called you to do and be. Biblical contentment is never an excuse for settling. Reach the community you’re in by pastoring the Church you have. I have learned that the best way to utilize what we’ve been given is to appreciate and pastor the church we’ve got.

A small church that tries to act like a big church will miss out on all the great things that only a small church can do. We decided to find out what we could do that no one else was doing. Then we did it. That’s been our identity ever since. Buildings cost money. More of that money could be invested in people and less of it in buildings.

In the same way, the megachurch model isn’t the only model of church ministry. The megachurch model works for megachurches. That’s less than 1% of the churches in the world. Our church building may be small, but our vision, our ministry and our reputation doesn’t have to be. I believe that betraying your focus and yourself merely to get the numbers up is a downward trade-off.

Megachurch pastors oversee churches with weekly attendance figures of 2,000 to 20,000 to the largest congregation on earth with almost [gasp!] 1,000,000 congregants every week (Yoido Assembly of God in Seoul, South Korea). But the grand total is still about 100 million people in megachurches at the most, while small church pastors are responsible for one billion people at the least.

Did you get that? Small churches minister to 10 times more people every week than megachurches do! Let’s pastor the church we’ve got, not the one we wish we had. Loving God and loving others is not a church growth strategy. It’s not a means to an end. It is the means and the end. What makes a family healthy and loving has nothing to do with numbers. It should be the same in the family of God.

Could it be that I've have been limiting God's vision for his church by concentrating too much time, energy and money on trying to grow my church? Sometimes what we call a plateau is simply a church reaching its optimal size, then using that size to grow healthful fruit. I think we should measure success the way Jesus did—One person at a time.

Are individual people growing? Is the community being impacted? That's what matters. Counting success one person at a time—Individual growth. Do we even know what that looks like? It's like art. We know it when we see it, but we have no way of quantifying it. That's where our discomfort comes from. We want numbers to verify our successes.

Not every church is called to formally plant other churches. Their main job is to feed the flock – just like Jesus told Peter to do. That's success. And it is truly immeasurable – in both senses of that word. While Jesus' ministry did attract crowds—Megachurch-sized crowds at times—He actually spent more time trying to avoid crowds than trying to draw them. When Jesus attracted crowds, it was almost always unintentional and unwanted. Just because we want bigger and bigger crowds at our church, doesn't mean Jesus wants the same thing.

You mess with Sunday and you mess with payday. Nobody messes with payday. Could it be that Jesus is trying to tell us that he isn't concerned about bucks and butts? That he's actually concerned about people? We don't know as much about the structure of the early church and its meetings as we'd like to, or as we think we do.

I've become convinced that most small church pastors go through emotional stages. The stages I outline here are not the result of a scientific study. They are based on watching and participating in the lives of other small church pastors and on my own first-hand experiences.

Stage 1 – Idealism & Innocence

Stage 2 – Trust & Excitement

Stage 3 – Frustration & Disillusionment

Stage 4 – Anger & Isolation

Stage 5 – Burnout & Resignation

Stage 6 – Redefinition & Contentment

Stage 7 – Fulfillment & Effectiveness

The combination of skills, gifts, circumstances, wisdom, work, anointing, calling and God's timing that are required to grow a church to large or mega size is simply staggering. God has this annoying tendency to do things his way, not ours. While the principles of his way never change, the methods and results are always different in every place and for every church and for every pastor.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for growing churches. Megachurch growth isn't meant for every church. Megachurch mega-growth has always been for a very small percentage of churches and pastors. Can we all just admit that and be OK with it?

Once your church has been labeled small in a church culture that sees being small as a problem, it's hard to break free from it.

Imagine a city of one million people. The churches in it might break down in size like this:

- 4 megachurches averaging 5,000, for a total of 20,000
- 15 big churches averaging 1,000, for a total of 15,000
- 40 mid-size churches averaging 500, for a total of 20,000
- 100 semi-small churches averaging 250, for a total of 25,000
- 500 small churches averaging 100, for a total of 50,000
- 500 house churches averaging 15, for a total of 7,500

For a total church attendance of 137,500

For those of us who are small church pastors, here are some steps to think about:

Step #1: Get Brutally Honest

Step #2: Determine Who You're NOT

Step #3: Discover Who You ARE

Step #4: Start DOING It – Whatever It Is