



Church Size

How does it relate to church health?

John Benton

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Introduction

The size of a church, in terms of numbers of people attending, markedly sets the culture and character of a church. Can this influence the spiritual health of churches?

We may think that the chief differences in churches are to do with denominational affiliation or theological stance. But how a church is organised, and the way it operates, usually makes the biggest practical impact on its members and this is affected by church size. This booklet seeks to investigate this issue and make some suggestions.

Growing churches

All true Christians should want to see the growth of God's kingdom and therefore the planting and expansion of churches. Pastors and people who are content simply to maintain the *status quo* and keep their church ticking over are sleeping on the job. Whether a church is large or small, 'ticking over' is not a great option.

We cannot ignore the command of our Lord Jesus Christ: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age,' Matthew 28.18-20.

This authoritative mission directive given to the original apostles, on whom the church is founded, Ephesians 2.20, necessarily gives a responsibility for mission to every local church. The churches are to shine like stars in the universe as they hold out the word of life to the lost, Philippians 2.15, 16. We desire to see an increasing number of conversions and so churches growing. We long for addition and multiplication.

Notice that Christ's 'Great Commission' has a geographical slant to it. The nations are to be reached and, nearer to home, according to Christ's 'banquet parables', the gospel is to be taken to the streets, street corners, the roads and country lanes with the invitation of salvation, Luke 14.21, 23. There is that progression of witness 'in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth', Acts 1.8.

This is the kind of growth in which we all can rejoice. But there are versions of church growth which for various reasons do not fit this pattern. Such growth is frequently problematic.

Problem growth

Unhealthy growth may not have come about by deliberate disobedience, but often through laziness. Here are three examples of church growth about which alarm bells should ring for us.

- *Growth by transfer*

This is where a church grows simply by people who are already Christians moving into the area or switching churches. Obviously there will always be a legitimate element of church transfers. People change jobs and have to move house, or perhaps relocate in order to care for an elderly relative. But if people have left a perfectly good church to come to be in a big church for no good reason and when the majority of a church's congregation have joined this way and it is a long time since anyone was converted from outside the church, something is not quite right. It makes us uneasy and rightly so. It speaks of a lack of genuine spiritual life, John 15.5.

- *Growing but not going*

It is especially unnerving when a situation like that described in the previous paragraph pertains and the church does not bother to put much effort into evangelising outsiders or planting other congregations. The church is large, everyone is 'enjoying the ministry' – why be concerned to do anything else. This is the problem of 'growing but not going' – contrary to Jesus' command to 'Go'. It is reasonable to see this as a problem of the original church in Jerusalem established at Pentecost, Acts 2. Thousands of people were attending, but there was no move to reach out to a lost world. Thus, the Lord scatters the church through persecution. And then we read of the refugees, 'Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went,' Acts 8.4.

- *Selective growth*

This happens where a church does evangelise, but it directs its outreach to a defined target group. Whereas John's Gospel, for example, emphasizes that Christ is for 'whoever' and 'anyone'; often young people are targeted over older folk, and so the whole way the church conducts its services is tailored to the young. And, if the music group folds, or the 'cool' pastor moves on, the church disappears. It was not really the gospel that built the church but the way it was

packaged. This is church growth via marketing methods not the power of the Holy Spirit.

What are we aiming at?

Frequently the aim is to make a church as big as possible. If the building where the congregation meets becomes too small, the first thought is to look for larger premises. Or if that is not possible, you look for another building to which the church services can be relayed and have a video link overflow there. The aim for many seems to be to make the church as large as possible.

But is that really a Scriptural ambition? Though the kingdom should grow as much as possible, does that mean that local congregations should be as large as possible? Or actually, is focusing on the one congregation what might restrict the spread of the gospel?

Small churches

I know that for pastors of small and struggling churches such questions might seem so theoretical as to be a fantasy. They are encouraged to see even thirty or forty people in attendance. But it is a question which concerns smaller churches because it is often the 'sky is the limit' view of church size which sucks members away from smaller churches to enjoy the buzz of the big church. Taken to its extreme, smaller churches would close, while larger churches mushroom in the 'marketplace' of churches. But would that be right in God's sight? Would that be a healthy situation? It would quite probably leave the vast majority of towns and villages in our country without a gospel church or any viable witness.

So, looking at the NT, this booklet will encourage a thinking through of the question of church size and how it relates to spiritual health.

1: What makes for long-term healthy churches?

When it comes to the wellbeing of churches the headline requirement is ‘truth in love’, Ephesians 4.15.

The word of God

At the centre of the church must be the word of God, the preaching and teaching of the Scriptures. God’s word is truth, John 17.17. Though written by human beings, the Bible is from heaven. It is breathed out by God. It is the trustworthy voice from outside our dark world which brings light, 2 Peter 1.19. In Scripture, God has spoken and continues to speak.

The word of God brings spiritual life. Christians have been ‘born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God,’ 1 Peter 1.23. It is spiritual food, Matthew 4.4. It is through the ministry of men gifted to preach and teach the word of God that churches and Christians are brought to maturity, Ephesians 4.11-13.

A true preacher, according to the Bible...

- Is sent by God, Romans 10.14, 15
- Is an ambassador for Christ, 2 Corinthians 5.20
- Is one through whom Jesus himself speaks today, Ephesians 2.17; Romans 10.14
- Is one who brings the message of God, 1 Thessalonians 2.13

It is through God’s word, that the church engages each Lord’s Day with God himself. Therefore, it is impossible to build or maintain a healthy church without the Bible being at the centre of everything and the people of the church understanding and respecting that.

The priority of love

And the truth of God is meant to generate love – love for God and love for our fellow human beings. Without such love Christians and churches (of whatever size) are a spiritual zero. ‘If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing,’ 1 Corinthians 13.1, 2. But love transforms everything.

Given the truth, it is love that makes a church the dwelling place of God. The apostle John has two key verses in his writings which begin with the words ‘No-one has ever seen God but...’ The first refers to Jesus. ‘No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side has made him known,’ John 1.18. The second refers to the loving church. ‘No-one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us,’ 1 John 4.12. God lives in a loving church and people can ‘see’ him there. A healthy church is more than a congregation. We want God to be obviously present.

God has loved us, and so we love. And that love to God and to others will inevitable show itself in joyful obedience, heartfelt worship, kindly fellowship and urgent evangelism. When we observe a church marked by such things we are looking at a healthy church.

Today’s struggle

Current society pulls people in the opposite direction. We are encouraged not to love God or others, but ourselves. This attitude has sadly infiltrated even the ranks of many church going people, 2 Timothy 3.5. The Millennial generation are those born between 1980 and 1994. These are the people who are presently coming into their 30’s and 40’s but are often either missing from the churches or are on the fringes of the church. Professor Jean Twenge, an American psychologist and sociologist writes: ‘Why is religion less popular with Millennials? In short, because it is not compatible with individualism – and individualism is the core value of Millennials above all else.’¹

With God’s word challenging the individual to forsake living for self and to love others, church health is a struggle – especially in today’s cultural climate. Of the first church in Acts, we read that the new converts, ‘Devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer,’ Acts 2.42. We could legitimately paraphrase that, ‘they devoted themselves to the church.’ But the ethos in many of today’s churches is to hang loose.

Building community

By contrast to the world’s individualism, a church should be a close-knit

¹ *Generations: the real differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers and Silents and what they mean for the future*, by Jean Twenge, Atria Books, 2023, page 301

community. In his teaching on church planting Tim Keller² has five goals for the vision of a healthy church. They are worth noting:

- An *accepting* community reflecting the grace given us in Christ
- A *holy* community which urges people to live God-pleasing lives
- A *truth-telling* community – that is free to repent and allow others to repent because of the gospel
- An *encouraging* community which builds others up
- A *sacrificially generous* community that spends its life and wealth on others.

This is a picture of a healthy church. Truth and love will express themselves in these ways. With these ideas in mind, we will try to think about church size and how it relates to church health. But first we must deal with a red herring...

² *Papers on Urban Church Planting*, Tim Keller, Good Book Company

2: A second look at Acts 2

The Day of Pentecost saw the initiation of the NT church by the power of the Holy Spirit and the apostolic preaching of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

‘Those who accepted (Peter’s) message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day’, Acts 2.41. It was growth by conversions. The 3,000 brought to the Lord was startling and must have been hugely exciting for those who were there. Pentecost is often seen as legitimizing aiming at large numbers. The message at church growth conferences can be that ‘by the power of the Spirit your local church could be just as big.’ But while we should not doubt the power of the Holy Spirit, is the main teaching of these verses really meant to be that big churches are good and that all churches should seek to be as big as possible? If it is, the corollary, of course, is that small churches are failing churches, perhaps even disobedient churches. Is that is meant to be our ‘take home point’ from the passage?

There are a number of reasons given the Biblical context, which indicate that such a reading is rather superficial and misleading.

Moses, Jesus and 3,000

The text begins by stating the date on which the coming of the Spirit occurred. ‘When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place,’ Acts 2.1. ‘They’ refers to the 120 disciples who we meet in Acts 1.15. Why is the date highlighted?

Pentecost was a harvest festival. It was the day on which the new grain of the wheat harvest was presented to God, Leviticus 23.16, 17. Also, ‘In later Judaism (Pentecost) was reckoned to be the anniversary of the giving of the law at Sinai – a reasonable deduction from the chronological note in Exodus 19.1.’³ Both of these parts of the background to Pentecost are important but to begin with we will concentrate on the latter.

On the day that the law was originally given at Sinai, 3000 people *died*! Exodus 32.28. Moses had come down the mountain to find Israel worshipping the golden calf. He ordered the Levites to slay those who ignored the call ‘who is on the Lord’s side?’ and were running wild.

³ *The Book of Acts*, by F. F. Bruce, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, London 1977, page 54

The great lesson of the 3,000 converted on the Day of Pentecost is to underline that though the law brings death, Romans 7.10, the gospel of Christ brings *life* – eternal life, Romans 6.23. We are meant to register the wonderful contrast between the old and new covenants and to rejoice – we are not under law, but under grace, Romans 6.14.

This number of 3,000 therefore has something of an inaugural significance for the church. It speaks of the nature of the gospel itself. It brings life not death. Of course, the Holy Spirit can and does sometimes bring huge numbers of people to Christ. We see this in times of revival. But such times are in God's hands and are not something a church can engineer. Therefore, to read Pentecost as a blueprint for the aspirational size of all churches is something of a mis-step of interpretation. Small churches are not meant to feel oppressed by the spectacle of Acts 2. They are meant to celebrate that they too know the life of the Spirit.

Pentecost and eschatology

As we have previously noted, Pentecost was also a harvest festival. In the Gospels we find that Jesus' parables frequently use the harvest theme to point to the end of the world. Explaining the parable of the weeds, Jesus tells us, 'The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels,' Matthew 13.39. Christ, risen from the dead, is spoken of as the 'first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep', 1 Corinthians 15.20, indicating that the general resurrection at the end of time is the full harvest. Harvest is very much an eschatological concept.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that Acts 2 and the Day of Pentecost is steeped in eschatological motifs. Peter's sermon begins with him speaking of what God will do 'in the last days', Acts 2.17. His quotation from Joel references 'the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord', Acts 2.20 – judgment day for the lost, full salvation day for believers. The Spirit is poured out on the church by the exalted Jesus as he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, Acts 2.34, bringing his return. It is against this background that Peter pleads with the crowds to 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation', Acts 2.40.

And, continuing the eschatological theme, there are clear indicators that the church created in Jerusalem at Pentecost is a type of the final heavenly church we meet in the book of Revelation.

- Revelation speaks of 'the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven', Revelation 21.2, and the first church in Jerusalem comes into being as the

Holy Spirit came 'like a violent wind from heaven and filled the whole house', Acts 2.2.

- Revelation tells us of a 'great multitude that no-one could count...standing before the throne of the Lamb', Revelation 7.9, and the sudden salvation of 3,000 at Pentecost is redolent of that countless gathering of the saved.⁴
- Revelation indicates that this huge number of saved people will be 'from every nation, tribe, people and language,' Revelation 7.9 and the narrative of Acts goes out of its way to emphasise that 'there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven', Acts 2.5. Further through the miraculous gift of languages given at Pentecost, people from all the various nations, Acts 2.9-11, heard 'them declaring the wonders of God in (their) own tongues', Acts 2.11, 6, 8. The parallel is impressive.

And, with the first church being formed in Jerusalem and the final church being called 'the new Jerusalem', the link between Pentecost and the end of time is made very clear.

Though there are some things about the nature or essence of the church created on the Day of Pentecost we can transfer into the life of all local churches, e.g., Acts 2.42, size does not readily fall into this category. Later it is indicated by Luke the writer that large numbers were a source of difficulty for the church, Acts 6.1. The growth of the original church in Jerusalem is much more to do with the growth of God's overall kingdom, not particular local churches. It does not legitimise a 'the sky is the limit' approach to church size.

In fact, the original Jerusalem church was very transient. It was soon scattered. Remember also, that at this point in redemption history there was literally nowhere else to go to hear the gospel. Rather than just 'proof-texting' from Acts 2, there are more important factors to bear in mind when it comes to considering the size of churches.

⁴ In Jesus parable of the Sower the smallest harvest is 30-fold and the biggest 100-fold. Maybe the 3,000 suggests that both small increases and big increases combine in the end-time harvest? $30 \times 100 = 3,000$

3: Church size and the essence of church

The size of a church – the number of members and the numbers of those attending services – alters things.

From Scripture, a reasonable definition of a NT church would be something like this: a church is the local family of born-again believers, committed to Christ and to loving each other according to God's word, who gather for worship, and fellowship and who seek to make Christ known, 1 Timothy 3.15; Ephesians 4.15, 16 etc. There is much more that could be added, but this is the essence of what the NT means by a church.

In particular, when it comes to practicalities of church life, the chief descriptions of the church are those of the family of God and the body of Christ, 1 Timothy 5.1, 2; Romans 12.5; 1 Corinthians 6.6. The ethos of a church should be that of love and belonging to each other, 1 Corinthians 12.21; 1 Corinthians 13.1-7; Romans 12.5. The church is essentially a corporate entity.

Communication

Let's take a practical example of how size affects things within a church. Think about communication between the people. If a church has just three people, Matthew 18.20, each of the three only have two others to talk with, so there are only three possible one-to-one conversations that can take place between the members. It is easy for everyone to be well informed. Coordination of the church is not a problem. In a church of 50 people there are now around 1,000 such conversations. This makes everyone being in the know more difficult, but it is manageable. In a church of 300 people there approximately are 45,000 such conversations. Making sure everyone is aware of what is going on and is in harmony is now much more problematic. The growth in lines of communication is almost exponential. And as the number of possible conversations grows there are far more possibilities for miscommunication and misunderstanding.

This can lead to real problems in a church. In Acts 6 we read of the original Jerusalem church: 'In those days, when the numbers of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food', Acts 6.1. There is nothing in the text that indicates that this neglect was deliberate. Rather it seems that it was simply to do with not being aware, busyness, miscommunication and the problems of size.

A family needs to communicate to function as a family. The parts of a human body need to be coordinated if it is to perform properly. But large numbers make the integration of everyone increasingly difficult. Often normal communication between everyone becomes extremely superficial or is largely abandoned. This begins to erode the corporate essence of what a church is meant to be.

Relationship

Whereas in a smaller church everyone can know everyone else and hopefully a good team spirit can therefore prevail, in a large church it is not so easy for all the members to know one another at any depth. This makes the inter-personal relationships and therefore the unity of such a congregation quite shallow.

There are numerous 'one another' commands in the NT as to how church members should treat one another. Here are a few examples. 'Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves', Romans 12.10, 'Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud but, be willing to associate with people of low position', Romans 12.16. 'Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ', Galatians 6.2. 'Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you', Ephesians 4.32. Such attitudes and actions require a depth of knowledge and trust and are essential if we are going to be real churches.

But such involvement with one another begins to break down as a church becomes very large. Recently I heard (again!) a story from a man who approached someone in the large church he attends to welcome them as a newcomer, only to be confronted with the response, 'I've been a member of this church for 10 years – who are you?' I have heard similar stories countless times and probably you have too. With the best will in the world, this is not a church which is functioning as a close family or a healthy body.

With such loose attachments, absenteeism from Sunday services in large churches can be quite marked. An elder of a large church confided to me that on any given Sunday up to a third of the membership can be missing – doing other things. They do not feel their church attendance is that necessary. The church can cope without them – and there are relatives to visit, children's parties to attend, etc.

In order to bring more depth of relationship, a church is sometimes broken down

into fellowship groups, of say 15 to 20 people to meet together mid-week. It is useful for most churches to do this. However, if because of the size of the church, commitment is already relatively superficial and Sunday attendance sporadic, this easily transfers itself into the small groups too. Anecdotal evidence indicates that often fellowship groups of a dozen or more only manage to attract 6-8 regular attenders.

Participation

A friend who joined a church with a membership of just over 300 shared his experience with me recently. He said, 'When we joined the church, we did not intend to become passengers, but we have'. He explained that the input that he and his wife could offer was not really wanted. Besides supporting the work financially, they are only required to fill the pews on Sundays. The church full-time 'staff team' do everything else.

But the NT churches were essentially participatory. This is what is behind the metaphor of a body. The apostles speak of all Christians being given a spiritual gift by God to use for the common good of the church, 1 Corinthians 12.7. Paul likens the church in Corinth to a human body in which each member has a part to play. No-one is not needed, 1 Corinthians 12.21. The way that Paul sees a church working is that leaders are to 'prepare God's people for works of service,' Ephesians 4.12. And then 'From him (Christ) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work,' Ephesians 4.16.

Notice, that last verse makes it clear that the whole body, which includes the individual, is built up and comes to maturity as 'each part does its work'. It is often through being given a responsibility in the church that not only do individuals feel needed and so 'own' the church, but also, they themselves grow and mature as Christians. It was part of Jesus' own strategy in discipling the twelve, that he not only taught them, but he sent them out to preach and act for themselves, and then report back, Luke 10.1, 17. Instead of identifying and using the gifts that God has given to members, in larger churches, very often, people become 'passengers'. When participation is restricted, we actually hinder spiritual growth. The NT churches were full of unpaid amateurs. Many larger churches are now run by paid professionals. And often this leads to people being loosely attached to the churches they attend. The church can run without them.

However, there is another side to the coin. I have another friend who has

recently planted a church under the auspices of a larger church. He was able to take a number of people with him to the new church. And, to his joy he has found that people who used to be ‘passengers’ at the large church, are now fully committed and willing labourers in the new situation. It seems they really wanted to be workers but did not have the opportunity in the bigger setting.

Community

The secular society of the 21st century is saturated by individualism. People are taught, ‘Only one life – so live it’. And that means make sure you do what *you* want with *your* life. And of course, Christians who have been infected with that attitude find larger churches very conducive. They are not necessary to the working of the church. They can dip in and out as they like with little to get in the way of pursuing their individualistic aspirations for self, job and family. In other words, being a ‘passenger’ suits them. They attend church on Sundays (once?) and that’s them done.

But church is not meant to be simply a spiritual one-stop shop for people wedded to individualism. Church is essentially corporate – a family, the body of Christ.

Social contact and commitment are important in maintaining the cohesion and corporate nature of a church. These are dependent on the ability of people to recognise, understand and to some extent empathise with others. According to research, initially carried out concerning team-spirit within businesses I think, Dunbar’s number, the natural upper limit to the number of people we can easily relate to in a group of human beings was found to be around 150. A *New Scientist* article on this says that ‘although an individual’s social network may include many more people, 150 contacts marks the cognitive limit on those with whom we can maintain a stable social relationship involving trust and obligation – move beyond 150 and people are mere acquaintances.’⁵

A church where half the people are ‘mere acquaintances’ does not seem to be in the spirit of what the NT is looking for in churches. The word ‘fellowship’ means ‘shared life’.

However, interestingly, the Dunbar number is not too dissimilar from the group of 120 we find in Acts 1, and who prayed for and saw the Day of Pentecost.

⁵ <https://www.newscientist.com/definition/dunbars-number/>

4: Church size and leadership issues

The size of a church not only changes things for the congregation, it also affects things for the church leadership.

For a start, there are far more souls to care for. 'Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,' Acts 20.28, is Paul's word to the Ephesians elders. That becomes more difficult to do properly when church numbers are reckoned in hundreds rather than in tens. One way of coping with this, if men of the right calibre are available, is for the church to appoint more elders or deacons (as was the response in Acts 6 to the problems of larger numbers). But this will inevitably mean that the leadership team itself will have to become more organised and more cumbersome and to develop procedures in order to cover things satisfactorily. This expansion of leadership has an upside as Jethro pointed out to his son-in-law Moses. Delegation to others will avoid the few leaders wearing themselves out, Exodus 18.18. But on the other hand, there can be a loss of intimacy and deep brotherhood among the leaders. Elders become less like fathers in the family, 1 Timothy 3.4, 5, and more like managers in an organisation.

Let me point out three areas to do with where large numbers begin to distort the NT pattern of the church leadership.

Knowing the members

Church members are human beings made in the image of God. Our God is Trinitarian, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, knowing and known by one another, yet one God, Matthew 11.27; 1 Corinthians 2.11. As those made in the image of God, human beings have a need to know and to be known. Large numbers in a congregation put a great strain on the ability of leaders to know their people.

This can be addressed by assigning certain members to a certain elder. But this means that a group will only relate to their particular leader and so this strategy tends in the direction of an incipient fragmentation within the body of the church. Not only do church members have quite a superficial relationship with others in the congregation outside their group (fellowship group?), but they also have a shallow relationship with the majority of the leadership team.

In particular, it will mean that church members will be relatively unknown by the pastor. It is not easy for him to recognise individuals amidst the crowd of heads

he faces each Sunday. This is unlike the good shepherd, who knows his sheep by name (as individuals), John 10.3. If the members of a church end up being treated more as customers than as friends, we are letting them down as human beings. It is because the sheep are known by name that they follow the shepherd.

Members knowing their leaders

For leadership in a church to work well, there needs to be a solid degree of trust between members and leaders. Not only must the leaders know the people, but the people know their leaders. In Jesus' parable of the Good Shepherd, the sheep know the voice of the shepherd and so they follow him as he goes first and leads them, John 10.4. They follow him because they know they trust him. So, when they hear his voice they are ready to follow.

But in large congregations, the pastor becomes quite an inaccessible figure, something of a stranger. The congregation may listen to him, but they don't really know him. And in a church where people might know one elder, but not really any of the other leaders (including the pastor / preacher), they will be reluctant to ask for help. It is difficult to call for help from a group of men they hardly know. This means that perhaps the most serious problems in the flock are hidden and never break surface for the leadership to deal with.

Let's take an example. The need for an intimate connection between church members and leaders struck me afresh reading Rosaria Butterfield's recent book, *Five Lies of our Anti-Christian Age*. She addresses the situation in which a Christian marriage has gone wrong, and the husband is acting unhelpfully towards his wife. What is she to do? Rosaria Butterfield writes, 'A godly woman's best defence against a potentially abusive husband is church membership in a Biblically faithful church...Why? Because one crucial mark of submission is the godly woman who knows when it is time to call the police or the elders...' ⁶ But clearly, if the elders or the pastor are not really people she knows or who know her in any depth, that phone call is highly unlikely to take place. In fact, perhaps she is more likely to call the police before she calls the elders. The distance between leaders and authoritative leadership in a large church can be a huge problem.

In handling pastoral matters, it is well known that if leaders have a close relationship with the church member *before* a crisis emerges, they are far more

⁶ *Five Lies of our Anti-Christian Age*, by Rosaria Butterfield, Crossway 2023, page 162

likely to be listened to and their help received *in* the crisis. But in larger churches there is a paucity of such close relationships between members and elders.

Church meetings

In the NT, in accord with the ideas of the church as a family and the body of Christ, we find that church members have a major say in the big decisions concerning the church.

If there has to be church discipline, this is in the hands of all the church, not just the elders, Matthew 18.17; 1 Corinthians 5.4,5. When the 'proto' deacons were appointed following the debacle over aid to widows, it was the congregation who were asked to select the appropriate men, Acts 6.3. The great matter concerning the nature of the gospel, which was addressed at the Council of Jerusalem, included the participation of 'the whole church', Acts 15.22. Perhaps quite astonishingly, the 120 had at least some involvement in the appointment of a new apostle to replace Judas, Acts 1.15, 23.

But in large churches, where there is not the scope for many ordinary church members to take part, church 'business' meetings become much more directive and less participatory. The elders can end up telling the members what they have decided, and the wisdom of others is not aired. Church meetings become merely an exercise in rubber stamping. It is felt there is no time for anything else. The NT pattern is gently set aside.

In fact, when a congregation becomes so extremely directive rather than participatory, the unconscious attitude of many tends towards seeing the elders as 'the church' rather than the congregation – rather in the same way that many Roman Catholics refer to their clergy as 'the church'.

5: Church size and church planting

The church at Antioch was planted through Christians who were scattered from Jerusalem by persecution following the death of Stephen, Acts 11.19, 20. Under the ministry of Paul and Barnabas it became a large church. 'For a whole year Barnabas and (Paul) met with the church and taught great numbers of people,' Acts 11.26. But this large church knew its obligation to grow and go. It was this church which, at the Spirit's prompting, Acts 13.2, sent Paul and Barnabas (arguably their best leaders) to launch the mission into Turkey and Europe, planting churches.

Larger churches ought to be at the very forefront of church planting and the renewal of failing churches.

Take as many as will go

This is wonderful when it happens. I know of a church on the south side of a large British city which was failing. The old pastor, seeing the situation approached a large church in the city and asked for help. In that church was a young man with some experience in seeking to church plant and he felt burdened to take up the challenge. The response of the senior pastor of the large congregation was exemplary. He said in effect, 'please approach anyone you like in the church, leaders, anybody, and ask them to go with you. Take as many as will go. That is fine.' In the event the young leader spoke to 70 people in the church and 40 moved with him to the needy situation. Over subsequent years the church was revitalised and grew. And the sending church did not lose out.

But that is not the end of the story. The church that had been revitalised, was then approached itself by another church in the city which had fallen onto hard times. Could they send a team and help to re-establish and grow the work? Recently, the same leader (now not so young) has gone, and with about 30 others from the congregation, and thrown his lot in with that church. It is early days as I write, but God tends to bless this kind of faithfulness.

The struggle

Faced with such kingdom needs and responsibilities, the ongoing struggle for larger churches is to remain zealous and sacrificial for the cause of the gospel. 'Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord,'

Romans 12.11. Sadly, in contrast to the story above, there have been situations where larger churches have been asked for help and refused. Or if they have said 'yes', the actual support given to a church plant, or a church revitalisation has been minimal. The root of the problem is that often both leaders and congregation have become too comfortable. And it is very easy to become too comfortable in a large church. As we have previously noted, when someone joins a large church with a staff team, they often end up as passengers in the church. The step from being a passenger to being part of a front-line full-on team seeking to church plant, requires a huge change which people are simply not ready for. From passengers they must become pioneers! As we have already seen, large congregations have their problems, and this is another one. The comfortable congregation is in spiritual danger. The church at Laodicea which saw itself as rich was rebuked by Christ for being neither hot nor cold – but lukewarm, Revelation 3.16.⁷

Leaders of large churches face a challenge to keep themselves and their congregations on their toes and ready for sacrificial service. Part of this must be leading by example, being willing to follow in the footsteps somewhat of Paul and Barnabas as they left Antioch at the prompting of the Spirit.

Growing sacrificial leadership

In a larger church which does not take up the challenge to grow and go, the leadership tends to become static. If not the same pastor, the same eldership team can be in place for decades. This becomes a bottleneck which restricts the growth of new leaders. They are not needed. All the bases are covered. And without new blood in the leadership a church tends to become an institution rather than a dynamic body.

But where leaders are prepared to take risks and lead a church plant or revitalisation, and perhaps are ready to move house to a new district in order to support that project, then gaps are opened up in the leadership team which enable younger men to come through.

Sacrificial leadership is particularly learned as we see examples of it. To the younger man Timothy, the apostle Paul was able to write, 'Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Jesus Christ,' 2 Timothy 2.3. Jesus warns the large crowds against the path of the easy option: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple

⁷ For a good example of a large church in which the congregation was full of zeal and good works Geoffrey Chang's book *Spurgeon the Pastor*, B&H Publishing 2022, and the chapter titled 'A Working Church'.

must deny himself take up the cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will save it,'
Mark 8.34, 35.

6: What should a church do as it grows?

It is a marvellous thing when a church blossoms and expands. A growing, healthy church is something of great beauty and a joy to belong to. But as a church grows decisions have to be faced.

How big should the congregation grow? What should we do with all we have for the good of God's kingdom? It may not be a clear, black and white, decision to make. Wisdom is required. We have noted in this booklet that bigger is not always better. But here are three principles to bear in mind.

Responsibility

Growth brings responsibility. In the context of a master whose servants have not done as he required, the Lord Jesus said, 'From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked,' Luke 12.48.

Large churches have been given large resources of people and usually money too. For a church and its leadership to be complacent in these circumstances is very unwise. We must all, one day, answer to the Lord. Elders are men who must give an account, Hebrews 13.17.

Dependency

The way of NT Christianity is often upside down compared to the world's way of doing things. The world likes strength and control before embarking on any project. When these things are in place, they feel they are ready to take on the task.

But the apostle Paul, saw things very differently. He looked for a strength and control that were not his own but were from God and were given to him in his weakness. 'I will boast all the more gladly in my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest upon me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses.... For when I am weak, then I am strong,' 2 Corinthians 12.9 10. But if it is not careful a large church moves away from this attitude. No longer does it pursue ministry out of weakness and utter dependence on God. It has resources of its own on which it can rely.

Humility

The great chapter addressing humility is of course Philippians 2, which focuses on the humility of Christ Jesus – who being in very nature God made himself nothing for our sakes.

Paul uses Christ's humility as the supreme example as he calls upon Christians to 'consider others better than yourselves' and to 'look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others,' Philippians 2.3, 4. How can the large church use its resources in the interests of others? This must be a consideration as a growing church thinks about its future.

'We must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive,"' Acts 20.35.

So what should a church do as it grows? The leaders and members need to confer carefully about how to avoid the danger of complacency, and to be ready to embrace sacrificial service for the wider kingdom of Christ.

