

Session J: Growth Transitions

This session is designed to identify opportunities and challenges facing a church community that feels it is stuck on its growth curve. This is a complex area that will require further study by congregational leaders, working through many of the other sessions, and perhaps, help from an expert consultant. This session may not be needed if the leaders focus on sessions A through F, I and J first.

Prayer: O God, you have made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and sent your blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near: Grant that people everywhere may seek after you and find you, bring the nations into your fold, pour out your Spirit upon all flesh, and hasten the coming of your kingdom; and grant that in our vocation and ministry we may truly and devoutly serve you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.¹

Scripture Lesson: Exodus 14:30-31; 15:20-27; 16:1-3

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?"

He cried out to the LORD; and the LORD showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet . . . Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they camped there by the water.

They set out from Elim, and all the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, with is between Elim and Sinai. And the whole congregation of the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Discussion questions:

What's happening in the story, not the meaning, but what concretely happens?
Why are the people angry? Do they have a right to be angry?

¹ The Book of Common Prayer, page 257.

The people are mad at Moses and Aaron. What do they expect them to do? Can Moses or Aaron do it? (In this section, the people specifically blame the leaders and wonder why they just didn't remain in Egypt, i.e. the good old days. It's important for leaders to be aware that they will bear the responsibility for decisions made for the future, even if it is unknown.) Where are the Israelites at the beginning of the story, in the middle and at the end? What happens after the story?

What does this story tell us about the wilderness? (The wilderness or challenges never end – there's a new one around the corner as soon as one is successfully overcome.)

Why is Israel in the wilderness? Why are we called to be in the wilderness?

What are we called to do once we are in the wilderness?

When do we reach the promised land?

What are stumbling blocks for this congregation to grow (barriers to growth)? *Some of these things may be present and need to be worked through. The absence of others may be celebrated.*

- Lack of vision (see Session A)

- Lack of desire or motivation to grow (see Session B)

- Leadership styles (see Session F)

- Maintenance vs. mission mentality (see related article)

- Single cell vs. multiple cell structures (see related article)

- Physical plant (space/parking limits)

- Poor demographic context

What size are we and what size would we like to be?

Congregations of different sizes organize and operate in different ways. Each has its own recognizable way of "being church" and its peculiar leadership style and challenges. How many people are familiar with different size categories of family, pastoral and program and resource?

Arlin Rothauge first identified characteristics based on four church sizes based on ASA (Average sabbath attendance—all ages, all Saturday evening or Sunday worship services combined, over the whole year—is the best single indicator of size for Christian congregations). Other congregational development experts have identified similar categories and breakpoints. My size references are from the Texas model. One thing I've noticed is that the category break points are probably a little higher than they used to be when these models were first developed in the 1960s. This may be because people with busy lives today often give less time to the church than they did, so it takes more people to manage the work of the church.

Alice Mann succinctly defined the church size categories as follows:

Family-size church (up to 50 adults and children at worship): A small congregation that operates like an extended family (and may in fact *be* a biological family network). Just as in the famous tavern from the television series *Cheers*, "everybody knows your name." This church is organized around one or two anchoring figures called matriarchs and patriarchs by Rothauge to indicate their tacit authority in the system. Such

congregations often have part-time pastors, and their clergy tend to adopt a chaplain role— leading worship and giving pastoral care. A pastor who challenges the authority of a patriarch or matriarch, or who presumes to be the primary leader of the congregation, generally will not stay long.

Pastoral-size church (51 to 150): A group of personal networks unified around the person and role of the pastor. Clergy time is largely taken up maintaining a direct pastoral relationship with each member, coordinating the work of a small leadership circle, personally conducting worship, and leading small-group programs such as Bible study. The governing board usually operates like a committee, arranging much of the day-to-day life of the congregation. Members recognize each other's faces, know most people's names, and will notice if someone new is present at worship.

Program-size church (151 to 400): Known for the quality and variety of its programs. Separate programs for children, youth, couples, seniors, and other age and interest groups provide entry points for a wide range of people. The pastor's crucial role is to recruit, equip, and inspire a small circle of key program leaders—lay and ordained, paid and unpaid. This ring of leadership might include, for example, the choir director, the church school superintendent, the youth group leader, the coordinator of lay visitors, and the head of a committee that tracks new member incorporation. Working as a team with the pastor, they reach out to involve others as program participants and as leaders. Decision making is broadly distributed within the wider leadership circle (perhaps 50 people) and pastoral care is shared by laity.

Resource-size church (400 to 1000): Known for excellence in worship and music, and for the range and diversity of its programs. Specialized ministries are provided for narrowly identified groups of people; several of these programs may be known beyond the congregation for their excellence. Often, distinct subcongregations form around multiple worship services. The senior pastor spends more time preparing to preach and lead worship than most clergy and must be skilled at working with a diverse staff of full-time professional leaders. Decision making is carried out by a multilayered structure of staff, boards, and committees. While clergy continue to provide pastoral care, especially in crisis moments, most members find their spiritual support in small groups or from lay visitors. About a third of the corporate-size churches in the National Congregations Study⁷ have at least 10 ongoing groups in addition to their classes, committees, and choirs.

The first three of these size categories—family, pastoral, and program— include the vast majority (perhaps 90 percent) of American congregations, but not the majority of church attenders. According to the National Congregations Study, half of those who participate regularly in the life of a congregation are found in congregations with 400 or more regular participants.⁷ Not all congregations over 400 are the same "size"; Carl George offers further categories labeled super-church (attendances of 1,000 to 3,000), mega-church (3,000 to 10,000) and meta-church (10,000 and beyond).²

² Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-To-Program Size Transition. Alban, 2001 at 7-8.

Churches program size and smaller share one similar characteristic. Most have fewer than three full-time staff positions. So the organization and work generally falls to the members.

What are the differences?

Number of leaders: Fewer people generally means fewer leaders available. About two-thirds of corporate-size churches have 50 or more attendees serving in some sort of leadership role—a fairly good talent pool in relation to the typical number of committees. On the other hand, almost half the program-size churches report **fewer** than 50 attendees serving in leadership roles of any sort. I believe statistics will show that there is a direct correlation between growth and discipleship and the proportional number of leaders involved, however.

Committees: A small church simply can't support all of the committees and probably doesn't need to. Larger churches have 4 to 10 functioning committees. The Vestry will often do this work in smaller churches but needs to be more focused. The challenge for mid-sized, growing congregations is that activity and structure expand faster than the resources required to support them.

We want to be aware of some of the personality that is given to our community by its size and think about how that plays into our operational styles.

Smaller Churches	Larger Churches
Closeness/family	Small groups replace family
Personification of Ministry	Ministry run by groups not individuals
Ad Hoc Committees and Problem-Solving	Standing Committees
Lack of Structural Decision-Making	Individuals, parish, committees, vestry and rector understand roles
De Novo Review by Governing Board of Decisions	Decision made by Committees, ratified by Governing Board if needed
Leaders primary focus on concrete, immediate problems	Leaders primary focus on big picture concerns

What does this mean for the future when we want to have:

- Structures change and become more intentional
- Leadership roles defined and boundaries recognized
- Ministries expand (with more expected of more people)?

Consider how the following Growth Myths will affect our efforts at growth:

- 1: There can be growth without change.
- 2: There can be change without conflict. (The energy is a friend.)
- 3: A congregation that focuses on its own needs can meet its own needs. (Need to take risks to grow spiritually.)
- 4: We can get this right the first time.
- 5: Change (i.e., a new building) will solve problems.
- 6: We can solve the problems if we only do things the old way.
- 7: We can solve the problems. (control vs. responsibility)

What do we bring from our past into the present and to the future?

1. Faith (trust in God and in others)
2. Hope (enthusiasm for new ministries)
3. Agape (love, respect, and honest dealing with each other)

Developing New Leadership Styles and Structures

Other retreat sessions deal with specific growth areas. If these are not bringing about the desired growth, this may be an indication that leadership styles and structures are not fully developed to support growth. We might ask four questions:

1. Do we have a clear purpose that holds everything together? Is this vision articulated and shared by the community, not just the clergy or lay leaders?

If not, return to Sessions A & B.

2. Have we emphasized spiritual development through our Christian formation emphasis and stewardship?

If not, return to Sessions B and D.

3. Have we gotten as many people as possible involved in all of the activities of the church? That includes both volunteers and staff.

If not, return to Sessions B, D, F and H

4. Have we developed real ministry teams?

We need to develop critical Ministry Teams, not committees. These should operate more like small groups and take over ministry areas. We might also have some short term task forces to plan for specific areas or projects. What teams/task forces do we need? (Examples: Evangelism, Christian Formation, Pastoral Care, Stewardship, Outreach, Finance, Buildings and Grounds).

Break into small group discussions about three critical areas (e.g., formation, outreach and stewardship). Answer the following questions: What do they need to do? Who should be on the ministry team? How should the ministry team be led? Who do they report to? What would prevent formation of this team? How do we start creating this team?

Goal Starters

The church governing board needs to set detailed goals for the congregation. Some goals will come from fully answering the following questions:

What committees/ministry teams/staff/volunteers are in place or needed to achieve the mission goals for evangelism, discipleship, worship and ministry?

What committees/ministry teams run the congregation?

What full or part-time staff?

How much staff is needed?

Does each staff member/ vestry member/ ministry team have a job description?

Are the staff, committees and structures adequate to support its operation?

Is there anything that we're doing that we could stop doing? Why?

Is there anything we're not doing because of lack of facilities, resources, leadership or active participants?

How will we build a sense of urgency (beyond us) to grow?

How will we develop a shared vision? (May need a separate retreat or dedicated Vestry time to deal with evangelism, Christian formation)

How will we assemble a guiding coalition?

How (and when) are we going to follow up on this and move it along?

Once goals are defined, we need to create action plans and follow up on them. The easiest way is to create a table with columns for the goal, the particular action step, who is responsible for the action step, the time for achieving the action step and the current status of the project. The governing board needs to review project status and priorities regularly.

Once goals and action plans are defined they must be shared with and affirmed by the broader parish. Leaders need to regularly communicate about progress toward the goals or the reprioritization or addition of goals. In most cases, there will need to be ministry teams to support and carry out the goals.

Resources for Further Study

Ammerman, Nancy T., Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney. Studying Congregations: A Manual for Studying Congregations. ed., Nancy Ammerman. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

Mann, Alice. Can Our Church Live? Redeveloping Congregations in Decline. Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1999.

Mann, Alice. The In-Between Church: Navigating Size Transitions in Congregations. Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1998.

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Rothauge, Arlin J. Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry. The Episcopal Church Center.

Saarinen, Martin F. The Life Cycle of a Congregation. Washington: The Alban Institute, 1986.