

Small Group Ministry in Medium-Size Congregations

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Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups provide the same opportunities and advantages to medium-size congregations as they do to larger or smaller congregations: a way to get to know people in a more intimate and full fashion, an opportunity for a deeper reflection and exploration of the spiritual questions that are a part of our religious journey, and a path and means of service which is an essential part of a life of faith. But there are ways in which it can address the particular dynamics of medium-size congregations.

Alice Mann, the writer and consultant on church size and church transitions, counts a congregation with 51 to 150 child and adult attendance as a pastoral-size congregation, and 151 to 400 as a medium-size or program-size congregation. The congregation I serve has grown from one size to the next and in this article, I will explore how Small Group Ministry can serve both.

The signature element of the pastoral size church is that everyone has or expects a personal relationship with the minister, and the minister is the primary provider of pastoral attention, leading most classes and other activities. This is a common and comfortable size for many congregations and ministers. But for congregations that feel called to share their good news, to welcome and to incorporate visitors and to have a more effective presence in their communities (to grow, in other words), the dynamics of the pastoral-size congregations are severely limiting

A Small Group Ministry Program can not only strengthen the bonds of intimacy and deepen the spiritual resources for those already present, it can change the dynamics that limit growth. As people experience intimacy and spiritual nourishment in groups, without the presence of the minister, the expectation that church is only happening when the minister is present begins to fade; groups can provide spiritual nourishment and pastoral care within their groups and beyond. I like to think of this as empowering the laity for ministry of the church.

Additionally, newcomers who are welcomed into groups more quickly find a place in the life of the church, and a congregation can increase the percentage of visitors who are assimilated into the life of the congregation, which is a key to growth. (It is my contention that most congregations do not lack visitors, they lack an intentional approach to assimilating newcomers into the active life of the church).

In a program-size congregation, according to Mann, the ministry and leadership of the congregation are more widely shared and the role of the minister is to train, equip and inspire the lay leadership of the congregation. Well, what could be more useful in that paradigm than Small Group Ministry? The usual benefits are present: a place for making friends, a venue for religious and spiritual growth, an avenue for service and a means of assimilating newcomers into the life of the congregation.

There is one particular element that addresses the specific needs of the program-size congregation. As a medium-size congregation nears a weekly attendance of 400 children and adults, the larger end of this category, a common problem is that the need for more professional staff to serve the congregation lags behind the numbers needed to support that staff. It is my conviction that, at this point, an investment to support a vital Small Group Ministry by creating, say, a half-time lay coordinator, can leverage the resources of the congregation to effectively empower people for the work of the church. While the minister needs to stay involved, some of his or her time can be freed up for other aspects of ministry, and the membership can maintain the core of health and connection that is essential for the continued growth of the church.

In Augusta, as we made the transition from pastoral to program-size, Small Group Ministry has been essential. Additionally, the ongoing, regular connection of people in small groups where they share their lives in the context of our religious faith, has woven health and resiliency into the fabric of our community.