



The Sizes of the Small Congregation: Group-Centered and Leader-Centered

by Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh, small church consultants

If you're listening to this CD, chances are you think your congregation is small. But not all small congregations are alike. These differences are not just about numbers. They're about attitude, and group behaviors, and organizational structure. It helps to know how your congregation does things, makes decisions, works together, and welcomes newcomers. With understanding comes the possibility of making your congregation even stronger, more vital, more active, and more relevant to people's lives.

Small congregations generally come in two kinds – *group-centered* and *leader-centered*.

The *group-centered* congregation tends to do everything as a unit. They worship together, eat together, make decisions together, complain together, and laugh together. Whether or not there are chosen or elected leaders, chances are if your group-centered congregation wants to do something or make some changes, people just talk about it over email, on the phone, or at social hour, and it's done. No lengthy meetings, no official process—just informality.

You decide to clean out the basement—done. You decide to create a new affirmation—done. You decide to start a Religious Exploration program—done. The word goes out, people show up, and something happens. Probably the governing board wouldn't dare make the decision to re-carpet the sanctuary (and choose a color!) without approval from everyone. In some group-centered congregations, the elected leaders wouldn't even think of making a big decision without consulting Pat or Gerry, even though Pat and Gerry have not been on the board for years. They're still an important part of the group, for better or for worse.

One of the beauties of the group-centered congregation is that everyone knows everyone—or at least expects to. If Bob doesn't show up on Sunday, you can bet that someone from the congregation will be on the phone to him not long after to make sure he's okay. People warn folks ahead of time if they

won't be present at worship or a special event—the entire group is always expected to show up for everything. It can be nice to know you're missed, and it can also feel burdensome at times. As with many things, positive attributes can sometimes seem negative.

That's also true for the speed at which a group-centered congregation makes decisions. No protocols to follow, no multi-layered committee and staff structure to get multiple approvals from. Idea. Decision. It's wonderful—unless the decision is that Chris and Robin, amateur electricians, decide it's time to rewire the sanctuary. Not only have they neglected to ask the board about it (after all, Chris and Robin have been the building and grounds committee for *years*), they run out of parts in the middle of the job and there's no electricity on Sunday morning. Sometimes it's better to get approval from the leadership.

Being part of a tight-knit group can feel really great—loving, supportive, and part of something important. But some tight-knit groups are reluctant to let new people in—the risk being that the tight-knit group might loosen up and change. People worry that if the group gets too big they won't know everyone and church won't feel so intimate. Newcomers may have to be persistent to be accepted, and even then they may always feel like outsiders. Many newcomers will just drift away if the circle doesn't open up to include them.

Eventually the group-centered congregation becomes large enough that the group cannot work as a whole—there are simply too many people. At that point, one of two things happens.

The group can decide—unconsciously—to shrink back into the comfort zone. You may be part of a congregation that has done this. Your group is growing and things are exciting. There are lots of new faces and the sanctuary starts to feel full. Then suddenly there are half as many people in worship—different faces every week, not the same old core group—and you wonder what happened. After a few months, things settle out at a stable level and a new close-knit group is formed.

The other thing that can happen is that the group recognizes that it's too big to function as a whole, faces this change head on, and finds another way to function. It becomes a *leader-centered* congregation. The group accepts that the leaders—lay or staff—need to coordinate the activities of the congregation. The leadership, in turn, recognizes that the congregation would like to retain the intimacy of the smaller group, and institutes a

Small Group Ministry program, circle dinners, or some other way to break the larger group into smaller, more manageable pieces. And because there are now several pieces instead of one whole, the

leadership has to become true leaders—checking in with each group, making sure they are carrying out the vision of the congregation, and that they have the support needed to thrive. The leadership is expected to know about everything that is going on.

The leader-centered congregation can do wonderful things if the leaders don't get burned out first. They need to remember that they are coordinators, not micro-managers. They need to know what's going on, but they don't need to attend every event. They need to create a system that works for their particular congregation—one that allows for accountability and flexibility. They have to remember that they're not part of a group-centered congregation any more, but have been entrusted to lead in fact, not just in name. This transition can be a struggle for many small congregations. Some are successful with the change; others stop growing and wonder why.

If the leader-centered congregation has a minister, he or she can become exhausted trying to know everyone intimately and meet everyone's needs. The minister tends to become the central focus for the congregation, which is not healthy for anyone. If the minister is popular, the congregation may collapse when the minister leaves. If something happens that people don't like, it's easy to blame the minister. That's why leadership needs to be shared between the staff and the elected governing board. The congregation as a whole still needs to be consulted for major decisions, but is out of the loop regarding day-to-day operations. This can be very hard for some people to accept.

Longtime members may struggle with the transition from group-centered to leader-centered congregation, but newcomers may like it better. Because there are several functioning smaller groups to join, a newcomer may be accepted more easily—not everyone will need to get to know them and make a place for them. When the whole community is gathered for worship, a visitor won't stick out like a sore thumb. It may feel better—more welcoming—as the group becomes less resistant to a new face. It will be easier for a newcomer to find a niche sooner—thus the congregation is more likely to grow.

But numerical growth is not what congregational life is all about. Congregational life is about serving others—the gathered community *and* the larger world. It doesn't matter what size your congregation is—what matters is how you are in relation to one another and the community around you. It's about making a difference in people's lives. You can do that whether you are a group-centered or a leader-centered congregation. You can do it with 10, 35, or 135 people. Understanding different sizes is simply a way to understand that the needs and behaviors of a congregation may change over time. You, as a leader, need to be aware and prepared.

Whatever size you are, know that there gifts and challenges all along the way. The trick is to be the best you can be at whatever size you are. Have quality worship, find one social action project to commit to, pay your bills, take care of each other, learn to handle conflict graciously, welcome visitors, love your children—and be prepared to change, and be changed.

For these and more Drive Time Essays, please visit: uaa.org/drivetime