

Leading a Larger Congregation

Why is this important?

What happens when we try to lead a large congregation as if it were a small congregation? It's like putting on clothes that no longer fit. We need a new set of leadership 'clothes' that will work. Nearly all large congregations started small and grew. Growth is great but it brings new challenges that can only be met by a changing approach. If you have had the experience of being in a small business that became a large company you will know this already. It can be difficult to come to terms with the fact that the congregation has grown and changed just as it can be difficult for parents to see their children grow up and need parenting in different ways. But both experiences, family and business, teach us that keeping the old approach will only lead to problems and inhibit healthy growth.

There are two significant occasions in the Bible when a small group of God's people become a large group. One is when the people of Israel multiplied in Egypt from 12 families to a nation of 12 tribes. It came to a crunch when Moses realised he needed to change his leadership style (see Exodus 18). The other is when the church exploded in size after Pentecost and the apostles also had to adapt their approach (see Acts 6:1-7)

What are the main differences between a smaller and larger congregation?

Tim Keller says: '**A large church is not simply a bigger version of a small church.**'¹ If we grew up in a smaller congregation we may prefer the family atmosphere of everyone knowing everyone else. The reality is that a larger congregation is different in the following ways:

- 1. Contact with the Minister.** In a larger congregation, due to practical constraints, not everyone can see or contact the Minister personally when they would like (Ministers will still be involved in significant events such as funerals, baptisms and weddings).

¹ Many of the insights in this resource have been drawn from a paper by Tim Keller, 'Leadership and Church Size Dynamics', (see <http://theresurgence.com/2011/02/15/leadership-church-size-dynamics>) and adapted for the context of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

2. **Pastoral Care.** As a result of point one; pastoral care must be delivered by Elders and/or a pastoral care team and possibly another paid staff person as well as the Minister.
3. **Connection with the church family.** A larger congregation will inevitably have a greater diversity of people. There will be a need for a greater number and variety of small groups and perhaps even additional Sunday services. The result is that one congregation becomes multiple congregations. The family sense of being church will come more from being part of a small group than being part of a large congregation.
4. **Welcoming newcomers and recruiting volunteers.** A large congregation needs to be more systematic and deliberate about integrating newcomers, recruiting volunteers and communicating information regarding this and other aspects of congregational life.
5. **Doing things to a higher standard.** There is an expectation in a large congregation that things are done more 'professionally'. If something goes awry in a small congregation on Sunday morning it can be more easily overlooked than in a large congregation, for example, if the sound system is not working properly or if the person leading worship is hesitant or disorganised.
6. **Leading with the big picture in view.** In smaller congregations it is often important to keep everyone on board but in a larger congregation trying to keep every last person happy will cause growth to stagnate. Good leadership decisions in a larger congregation will be about reaching more people for Christ and seeing spiritual growth, not about always appeasing those who want things to stay familiar and small. More frequent change is a characteristic of larger congregations because of working with a larger and more diverse congregation. In addition, the Kirk Session must concentrate on major decisions and delegate minor matters to others.
7. **Operating as a large organisation.** Techniques that are used in the business world must be adopted by a larger congregation out of necessity in order to operate effectively as a large organisation. This does not mean the church becomes a 'business'. It means that ways of enabling a large group of people to be organised so that God's work continues must be used. Examples might be more attention to leadership development, the use of delegation, thinking strategically and gathering information in organised ways rather than relying only on impressions or a handful of opinions.

It's often a temptation to go back to what was before. The apostle Peter gave in to this when he went back to only associating with Jews after God had shown him he must share the gospel with the Gentiles too. Paul had to challenge him that the church was bigger than Peter's smaller and more familiar group (Galatians 2:11-16).

Suggested Discussion Questions for Kirk Sessions

The following questions are given as a way to lead a discussion on each of the seven aspects of transitioning the leadership approach from a small to a large congregation. You may have considered some of the questions already and there may be some you wish to add. It would not be practical for a Kirk Session to consider all the questions in one meeting. There are several possible ways to cover the material:

- Use this material as the basis for a Kirk Session Away Day²
- Cover the material over several Kirk Session meetings
- Focus on one or two items that are especially relevant for your situation (perhaps by assigning them to sub-committees/working groups)

Preliminary Question: Are we a large congregation?

Consider:

- Is there still a **'family feel'** about the congregation or has it become more impersonal? (Consider the perspective of newcomers and more recent members and not just those who have been about for a long time who already have well established relationships.)
- What is the **story of our congregation** – how has it changed and grown over the years?
- Do any of the seven points above about larger congregations highlight **issues we have encountered already?** (Don't discuss this in depth – use it to highlight whether the answer to the overall question 'are we a large congregation' might be 'yes').

Question One: Do our expectations of our Minister need to change?

The Minister may want to think about this first especially as the person who would normally facilitate this discussion in the Kirk Session meeting (this question would also be helpful to consider when calling a new Minister). The Kirk Session could discuss:

- How **realistic** is it, given the size of our congregation, to expect the Minister to be able to visit everyone on a regular basis (no matter what their situation)?
- What would **make most sense** for the Minister to concentrate on? Pastoral visiting, his/her teaching role, leadership, etc.? This will depend somewhat on the Minister's particular strengths. The Minister will also have responsibilities in the wider church.
- Are there ways that **unrealistic expectations** of the Minister can be addressed? For example, by others helping with pastoral care (see next question), employing a church administrator or other staff, re-educating the congregation on the role of the Minister?³

² See the resource on Away Days available from the Presbyterian Church In Ireland website

³ See resource on the 'Biblical Basis for Extending the Ministry of Pastoral Care' on the PCI website

Question Two: Is our pastoral care organised for a small or large congregation?

The Kirk Session may have already discussed this when considering the new models for pastoral care endorsed by the General Assembly in 2011.⁴ The following are some general questions which may lead to a re-consideration of those models:

- Is our current **model of pastoral care** effective or do people 'fall through the cracks' because we are a large congregation?
- Do we need **additional ways of providing care** such as a pastoral care team, encouraging pastoral care in congregational organisations such as home groups, Presbyterian Women, youth groups, etc. and/or an additional staff person?

Question Three: How can we increase our sense of being a family?

Two key areas to consider:

- Do we need to establish more **small groups**, for example, home groups, groups for specific people such as a men's group, a regular coffee morning for elderly people, a walking group, etc.?
- Do we need **another Sunday service**, for example, two services on a Sunday morning or an extra service like 'Café Church'? Do we need to evaluate all our services – Sunday morning, evening and the mid-week?

⁴ Copies of the booklet on new models for pastoral care are available to download from the PCI website. Paper copies of the booklet are also available from reception in Assembly Buildings.

Question Four: How do we integrate newcomers and help people become involved?

Key to this question is **communication**. In a smaller congregation, newcomers will be recognised and welcomed. People will know enough about each other to ask others to serve using their gifts. In a larger congregation this needs to happen in a more organised way.

- Do we need to improve in the following areas to **welcome newcomers**:
 - Practical information on our **website** (often the first port of call)
 - **First impressions** – car parking, welcome team, signs for toilets, crèche, etc.
 - Welcome for **families**: crèche facilities, easy ways to take out disruptive children, somewhere to go for breast feeding, clear information about children's church
 - A **leaflet** with useful information for newcomers
 - A plan for **visiting and/or contacting newcomers**
 - Putting them in contact with leaders of **organisations** they may wish to join
 - The expectations we raise amongst the congregation about **being welcoming**

- Do we have a strategy for helping people get **involved**? For example:
 - Have we a way to identify people's **gifts**?⁵
 - Having identified people's gifts, do we have an organised way to encourage them to be involved in **using** their gifts?
 - How can we set the **expectations for commitment** so that people do not feel they are being asked to commit for life? (For example, rotas for areas of service).
 - Do we require (or strongly encourage) all leaders of congregational organisations to have a **deputy or trainee assistant leader**?

Question Five: How do we increase our standards of excellence?

This question will cover many areas of church life and it may be useful to have this as a general question when any of these areas are being discussed. Some specific questions are:

- Are all our organisation leaders, worship leaders, pastoral visitors, children's church teachers or anyone with a position of responsibility **well equipped for their roles**?

- Do we need to improve any of the **technical aspects** of running the church service (sound system, projector, etc.)? (This is a committee question but the Kirk Session needs to take the lead in communicating the need for excellence)

- Are there ways we can make our **electronic and published material** (website, leaflets, church bulletins, etc.) more purposeful and look more professional?

⁵ The 'Prepared to Serve' course produced by the Board of Christian Training is useful in this regard but a starting point could be to ask people what they are interested in perhaps by filling in a form.

Question Six: How do we lead as a large congregation?

This question addresses the overall change in leadership approach. Question seven addresses the practicalities. It is suggested that the two questions are considered together.

- What proportion of time do we spend discussing relatively minor matters compared to **major leadership decisions** regarding the congregation?
- To what extent do we react to issues as they arise or **proactively lead** in important areas of church life such as discipleship, youth and children's work, evangelism/mission, pastoral care, giving etc.?
- To what extent are we prepared to **lead changes**⁶ that will be for the benefit of the whole congregation (and those who would become part of it) compared to our desire to keep everybody happy?
- To what extent have we truly understood our role as the Kirk Session is **to lead as a team**⁷ in order to lead the congregation through understanding their walk with God and helping them come to the place he desires them to be?

Question Seven: How do we organise ourselves differently as a large congregation?

Any large organisation, church or not, needs a more structured way to organise itself. The following questions cover some areas that might need considered:

- How do we **systematically show leadership for all areas of church life**, for example, by having a structured agenda⁸ to consider different areas throughout the year or working groups/teams for each key area of church life?
- How do we **gather information** to make decisions as a Kirk Session? Does this give us a good overall picture? (Personal conversations by Elders with church members, surveys, external information such as census reports, outside experts, etc.)
- How do we **oversee the different organisations** in the congregation? Is there a reporting and support structure?
- How do we ensure organisation leaders know **how much leadership has been delegated** to them? How do they know in what aspects of their role they can make decisions and what they should refer to the Kirk Session?

⁶ The resource 'Navigating to New Places' gives guidance on leading change (available from the PCI website)

⁷ The resource 'Leading from the Middle' may be helpful (available from the PCI website)

⁸ The resource 'Rethinking the Kirk Session Meeting' gives some suggestions (available from the PCI website)