

Is the Small Church Second Class?

Tony A. Bartolucci, B.S., M.A., Ph.D. in progress

Preaching Pastor



8339 Ridge Road West
Brockport, NY 14420

www.ClarksonChurch.com

Mining the Treasure of God's Word Celebrating the Riches of His Grace

We live in an age where the basic assumption is the bigger the better. Bigger homes; bigger businesses; bigger televisions; bigger egos; and... bigger churches. Bigger churches? Yes, the church isn't exempt from this line of reasoning. Most pastors, church leaders and even church members wouldn't necessarily admit to thinking this way, but the evidence is there none-the-less. A few examples follow.

- What do people usually ask when they are curious as to how your church is doing? Inevitably, it's a question related to size such as, "How big is your church?"
- How often to you hear of a pastor leaving a large church to minister in a small church? Like the reply of the small-church minister who was invited to pastor a much larger congregation—"I'll pray about it while my wife packs!"—pastors climb the ranks of churches like business executives climb the corporate ladder. I've felt the pressure myself. Shortly after starting my first pastorate in a church with little more than a dozen people, the pastor of a nearby mega-church warned me about "wasting my giftedness" on such a small congregation.
- Which pastors are those who write books on the subject of successful church ministry? Who are those who are invited to speak at conferences and seminars? For the most part they are leaders of very large churches. Rarely, if ever, is the pastor of an average-sized church asked to write or speak on subjects related to ministry. The implication is obvious.

Am I saying that there is no connection between the size of a church and the giftedness of the leadership? Absolutely not! I'm just contending that this isn't always the case.

This underlying "bigger is better" attitude has brought about several false assumptions, including: 1) A big church is better equipped for significant ministry; 2) A big church has a stronger pulpit ministry; 3) A big church is a successful church.

Are bigger churches better equipped for significant ministry?

There is no debate that larger churches have more to offer, as far as resources are concerned, than smaller churches. However, more is not necessarily better. Myriads of programs and ministries cannot replace the work of God's Spirit, accountability, and sound theology.

The fact is that smaller-sized churches far outnumber large ones. The face of the church around the world doesn't look like a 10,000 member auditorium with a cappuccino bar in the foyer! If—and this is purely hypothetical—if all of the average-sized churches (and smaller) disappeared tomorrow, there would be a real crisis!

That's not to say that mega-churches don't have their place. Many do and I am thankful for how God is using them. Many of the unique ministries they offer are of great value. I'm simply arguing that there is no hard and fast law that says the bigger the church the more significant its ministry.

Do bigger churches have stronger pulpit ministries?

Several years ago a visiting couple made a comment to this effect: "We were surprised that the sermon was of the caliber you would expect in a much larger church." The comment was most generous. However, the assumption was that qualified preachers are only found in large churches. That simply isn't true. Some of the best preachers I have heard are in churches of 500 or less. There are myriads of tremendously gifted "unknowns" who work hard at their craft as they accurately and passionately proclaim God's Word each Sunday. This they happily do in relative obscurity.

As far as the United States is concerned, it may be that the strongest preachers will be found in small churches as more and more people will refuse sound doctrine in favor of ear-tickling messages that entertain rather than edify (2 Timothy 4:2).

Is the big church a successful church?

This may be at the top of all false assumptions related to the local church. Before the advent of church buildings, churches were comprised of small congregations that met in homes. These small churches effectively ministered the gospel to the utter most parts of the world! Size and success are not equations that necessarily parallel one another.

Don't misunderstand, I'm not against growth. Growth is often a good indicator. I'm afraid, however, that we've taken that premise and extrapolated it to mean that the greater the growth, and therefore the bigger the numbers, the greater is God's blessing on the church.

I would like to see Clarkson Community Church continue to grow. I earnestly desire to see our body increase as a direct result of our evangelical witness— to see God call lost men and women out of darkness into the light (1 Peter 2:9). But we will never seek for numbers to look successful or to increase the church budget. Many do so, however, and often with disastrous consequences.

I know of a young pastor who had as his primary goal seeing his church of 500 become a mega-church. In his misguided zeal for numerical success he literally led the church into the ground. When he saw that his approach wasn't going to work, he left for another church. He now has his mega-church. Unfortunately, the church he jettisoned in the wake of his selfish ambition was left in shambles.

If bigger numbers are a church's goal, it is sure to be on a road paved with compromise. We must remember that it is not we who build the church (Matthew 16:18). And we must remember that faithfulness cannot be measured according to the world's standard.