

Alban Senior Consultant Alice Mann draws on her lengthy experience in helping congregations deal with the hurdles and anxieties of change from one size to another. Often, congregations experiencing size change do not realize that they need to change culture and form along with adapting to a new size. Otherwise they will inevitably get stuck and will not be able to accommodate the change. Mann details the adjustments in attitude as well as practice that are necessary to support successful size change, whether growth or shrinkage.

The In-Between Church:

**Navigating Size
Transitions in
Congregations**

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What Happens between Sizes?

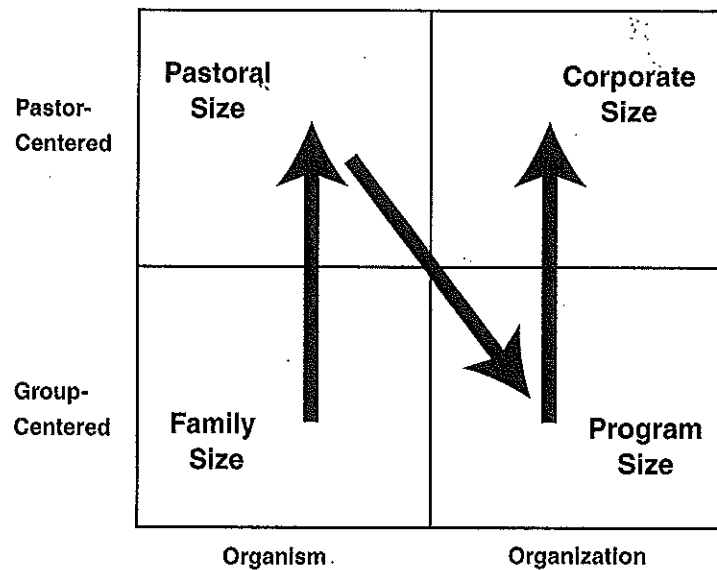
Fault Lines

My brother used to live near the San Andreas fault in California. This is a long rift in the earth's crust that periodically tears open to accommodate shifts in the two tectonic plates whose meeting creates a fault line. As a visitor to my brother's home, I used to imagine myself standing with one foot on each side of the fault, then dropping into a chasm when the earthquake hit.

Size transition is a lot like standing on the fault line. You can make better decisions if you know not only where the rifts occur but also what deeper movements of the earth are driving the surface eruption. Congregations are changing and adjusting all the time. Dozens of different factors are in play, and subtle gradations exist that make any size theory look oversimplified. Still, some of the forces at work are more powerful than others, more determinative of relationships and results. For the majority of congregations,¹ a two-dimensional model of size change will clarify the lines of demarcation.

One dimension of change, shown along the bottom of the following chart, is described by the terms *organism* and *organization*. The other dimension is described by the terms *pastor-centered* and *group-centered*. Churches moving through the plateau zones on the graphs in the last chapter are actually crossing fault lines on this topographical map. As congregations move among Rothauge's four sizes—family, pastoral, program, and corporate—they follow an N-shaped path across the fault lines.

Size Transition "N-Curve"



Organism versus Organization

Family and pastoral size churches resemble an organism more than an organization. Congregations of these two sizes tend to be relatively homogeneous in make-up. Each revolves around a central relationship that can be immediately and intuitively apprehended: the relationship among members as a "primary group" or "single cell" (family size church) or the dyadic relationship between the sole ordained leader and the congregation (pastoral size church). The congregation's identity is largely inherent in these central relationships. Ask the question "Who are you as a church?" in a family size congregation, and someone will probably introduce you around the whole circle of members. Ask that question in a pastoral size church, and someone will most likely tell you about the congregation's relationship with its pastor, often symbolized by the rapport (or lack thereof) between pastor and board. In these two smaller sizes, the notion that a congregation might choose or shape an

identity intentionally would probably seem odd; identity is more of a given, to be preserved and defended.

In program and corporate size churches, on the other hand, the variety and complexity of relationships require conscious attention to matters of identity, purpose, structure, role of leaders, and so on. Neither the members nor the pastor can intuitively grasp the wholeness of the system. The larger membership and the rich variety of programming will only cohere well if leaders construct a clear identity for the church—often expressed in a mission statement, a vision, or a strategic plan. For people raised in smaller churches, this work of construction may seem taxing and bureaucratic. On the other hand, the quest for intentionality typical of a larger congregation might stimulate their imagination about church life, clarify their reasons for participation, and provide richer networks of friendship, growth, and ministry. Membership is more of a choice than a given.

The distinction between organism and organization is not absolute. Small congregations are still subject to the laws that govern not-for-profit corporations in the United States and may be vulnerable to lawsuits if they do not attend well to organizational matters like the employment, accountability, and termination of staff. Larger congregations are still living systems, held together by subtly balanced forces which we may only dimly perceive. Nevertheless, the difference between the two emphases is usually palpable.

Group-Centered versus Pastor-Centered

The movement from family to pastoral size (the upward arrow on the left-hand side of the chart on page 20) involves a change in the way the system centers its life. The family size church feels like a tribe or a committee of the whole. Not everyone on the committee has equal influence, to be sure, but the single cell of members works things through in its own characteristic way. A student minister or part-time pastor who tries to take charge of that cell is in for a rude awakening because a family size church does not generally revolve around the pastor.²

At a worship attendance of about 35 people, that single cell of membership becomes stretched. By the time it hits 50, the unbroken circle of members—that defining constellation of the congregation's life—is

in crisis. In order to increase further, the system must allow itself to become a multi-cell organism, holding together two or three overlapping networks of family and fellowship. And it must establish a symbolic center around which those multiple cells can orient themselves. Typically, it becomes pastor-centered.

A great deal has been written about the dangers of clerical domination in churches, and many have questioned whether this shift to a pastor-centered system is desirable at all. I would not equate "pastor-centered" with "pastor-dominated." The research of Speed Leas and George Parsons suggests that a greater proportion of members may actually participate in decisions at pastoral size than at family size.³ It may be that the heightened role of the pastor in relation to the board moves the congregation's political center from the kitchen table to a more accessible public setting and requires that the ordained and elected leaders work as a team to move projects forward. The pastor's central position as communication switchboard also allows for a great deal of informal consultation and problem solving; he or she can monitor key relationships, initiate needed conversations, and anticipate likely clashes.

As attendance approaches 150, however, the congregation must become more group-centered once again because the pastor can no longer carry around the whole system in his or her head. There are too many individual, pastoral needs to track. The relationships among projects and leaders are becoming too complex to be coordinated solely through board discussion and pastoral diplomacy. A new kind of teamwork becomes necessary in an uneven leadership matrix in which some programs have paid staff, some have volunteer leaders so dedicated that they function like staff, and some have committees at the helm. Board and pastor must find ways to keep the parts connected with each other *directly*—in horizontal networks of collaboration—not just *indirectly* through board reports and liaisons. As in a spider web, the center of this leadership network does not consist of a single point (the pastor) but of a small circle (half a dozen key program leaders—paid and unpaid, clergy and lay) led by the pastor.

In the move to program size, clergy must shift a good deal of their time and attention away from the direct delivery of pastoral care and focus on assembling and guiding that small team of program leaders. They must also find ways to offer spiritual enrichment to the board, whose job has become much more demanding. Skills for this kind of

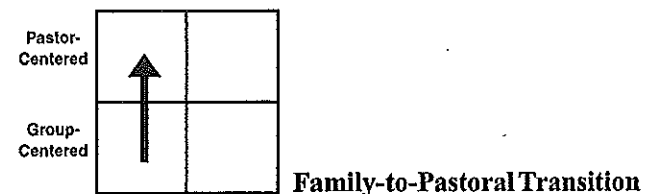
group-oriented ministerial leadership have not usually been emphasized in seminary or employed as primary selection criteria in the ordination process. Hence, many clergy find themselves poorly equipped for a pastoral-to-program transition.

To make things worse, the breakdown of the pastor-centered way of being a church occurs at the same time as the shift from organism to organization. The congregation is now traversing the diagonal portion of the N-shaped path, crossing both the horizontal and vertical fault lines simultaneously. The pastoral-to-program change is doubly discontinuous.

When attendance reaches about 350, the need for more pastor-centered leadership emerges once again. (Note the vertical line on the right-hand side of the chart.) The program church's lively but lumpy network of staff, volunteer program heads, and committees can no longer provide the overview and strategic direction the system needs. At corporate size, complex networks of coordination are still required, but the central pastor must begin to project a large enough symbolic presence—through preaching, presiding, leading the board, and heading the expanded staff—to unify a diverse and energetic community. To be effective, this high-profile leader must find a reliable way to maintain spiritual perspective and must use the aura of headship to help the whole system grapple with its core identity and purpose.

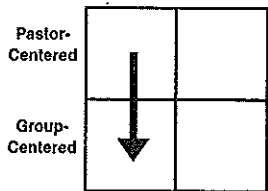
Six Transitions

It may be helpful to summarize some critical issues that must be addressed during the six possible transitions within the Rothauge framework. The placement of each movement on the N-curve is shown.



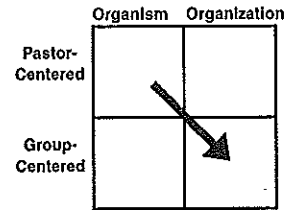
- Loss of self-esteem by matriarchs and patriarchs as they lose decisive influence in the system: Can they be helped to pass the mantle, with pride in the past during which they presided?

- Tendency for unseasoned clergy to take resistance personally: How can congregations find mature pastoral leadership? How can less experienced clergy find mentors to help them handle their own insecurities?
- Reluctance to divide the single cell: How can current leadership weigh what may be gained and lost as they relinquish the expectation that every event (Sunday worship, study programs, Christmas Eve service) must include the whole family?
- Financial realism: Clergy salaries and benefits are rising in most denominations. Can the congregation move solidly enough into pastoral size to attain stability?



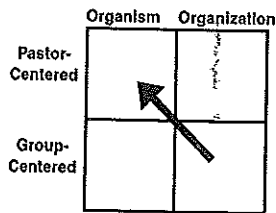
Pastoral-to-Family Transition

- Loss of self-esteem by congregation when it feels it is no longer operating like a "real" church: Will the move signal slow death, or will something new and vigorous begin?
- Ministry development: How will gifts be discerned and developed for a rich variety of home-grown ministries?
- Support and accountability: How will the family size church partner with its denomination (or with parachurch organizations) to monitor the development of sound ministries and open channels to other congregations, leaders, and ideas?
- Physical plant: What is an appropriate facility for this church? Does worship need to be moved so that the space will be at least half full on Sunday (the minimum required to attract newcomers)?



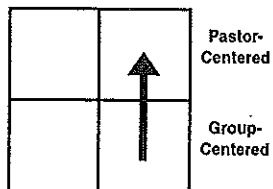
Pastoral-to-Program Transition

- Clergy role: Will leaders recognize the double messages they are giving the clergy about what they expect? (Try the "A-B" exercise in Roy Oswald's article.) Will clergy work on resolving their personal ambivalence about these choices and on gaining the new skills they need? How will staff be augmented to allow for growth?
- Program leadership: How will gifted and motivated people be selected, equipped, and authorized to serve as department heads? Does the pastor have the skills needed to forge these heads into a staff team? Who will help the average member identify gifts for ministry (inside and outside the congregation), and who will make sure that every form of volunteer service to the congregation is a spiritually rewarding experience?
- Communication: How can people involved in implementing different programs stay personally connected with leaders from other programs? Will formal information channels (newsletter, bulletin, spoken announcements, telephone trees) be improved and intensified, so that timely, accurate, and thorough communication is the norm?
- Democratic participation: What channels will be provided so that every member can have a say and a stake in the shape of church life? How will members remain aware of, and accountable to, a central purpose?



Program-to-Pastoral Transition

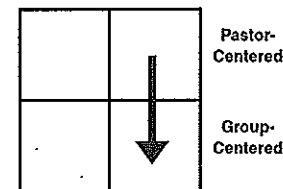
- Reshaping expectations: How will the congregation refocus on a few central strengths? Will there be attention to the sense of loss and grief that may accompany a consolidation of energies?
- Clergy role: What satisfactions and status must the pastor relinquish? How will simpler patterns of pastoral care be established?
- Sunday morning: How can the worship and education schedule be made manageable without reinforcing a cycle of decline? Can the church maintain at least two worship options of somewhat different styles?
- Ministry development: Healthy pastoral size churches still foster active lay leadership, especially in new-member incorporation, education, and community outreach. How will the pastor shift to a less formal style of delegation and mentoring? How will the number of committees be reduced in favor of small, hands-on ministry teams?



Program-to-Corporate Transition

- Depth and quality of programming: How will the church step up to a higher level of expectations? Do staff members need new position descriptions (focused on empowering others for ministry) and a definite plan to gain new skills?

- Symbolic presence of central pastor: Is the senior minister ready to step into a lonelier, more spiritually hazardous role? Will he or she put in place new disciplines such as regular spiritual guidance, adequate time for sermon preparation, and use of third-party help in planning, conflict, and staff development? Who will mentor the central pastor around new and difficult responsibilities (personnel issues, endowment, delegation)?
- Strategic direction: In a system as hard to turn as an ocean liner, how will senior pastor and central board keep their focus on the big questions about the church's purpose and role? How will they engage the rest of the system in those questions without abdicating leadership?
- Small group connection: Will the congregation establish an excellent pattern of small group ministry through which members can connect faith with daily life? Will small group leaders be trained through apprenticeship so that the more experienced leaders can constantly be forming new groups?



Corporate-to-Program Transition

- Relinquishing status: Will the church be honest about its decline and resist the temptation simply to keep up appearances?
- Use of endowment: Is the church steadily spending down the gifts of the past, rather than facing the need to consolidate programs and to develop a relevant approach to evangelism?
- Cavernous buildings: Does the sea of empty seats reinforce the cycle of decline and undermine the vitality that could be developed?
- Clergy role: Can the central pastor establish a more collegial relationship with the major program leaders and help the board to take

back the spiritual leadership which may have been relinquished in the past to a small group of trustees?

In the case of impending transition to a smaller size, each congregation will need to assess its growth potential and outreach commitments. Don't reconfigure for the smaller size if you intend to move through the plateau zone within the next couple of years.

The Double-Minded Church

A classic prayer asks for the grace to love and serve God "with gladness and singleness of heart." Both joy and single-mindedness start to run short in a size transition; they are replaced by profound ambivalence. Once a church has entered the plateau zone, the strength and appeal of the previous size are already compromised, while the virtues of the next size are not yet in place. Leaders find themselves in a lose-lose position because two competing sets of expectations are laid upon them. Confusion, anxiety, and indecision often result.

Some of the most poignant passages in Exodus and Numbers describe the ambivalence of the faith community in its transition from the land of bondage to the land of promise. When the people first left Egypt, they were so daunted by their transitional circumstances that some of them wished aloud, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread" (Exod. 16:3).

Once they had received the Law and moved on from Sinai, they even began to remember *Egypt* as a place flowing with milk and honey—a description usually reserved for the promised land. Their attention constantly drifted from God's mighty acts to the most domestic of details: "We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at" (Num. 11:5-6).

In the next chapter we will look more at questions of ambivalence and discernment, but the following Biblical Reflection questions may help you get in touch with your own inner conflicts about size transition.

Biblical Reflection

1. Read Numbers 10:33 to 11:9. Why do you think the passage from Numbers talks about food in such detail?
2. Can you imagine yourself wanting to go back to Egypt? Why or why not?
3. As your church considers issues of size transition, what do you already miss that might be comparable to the Israelites' longing for savory smells from their kitchens in Egypt?
4. If your congregation moved solidly to next size (smaller or larger, depending on your circumstances), what do you imagine to be the greatest loss you personally would have to deal with?

Application Exercise

1. Which, if any, of the six transitions discussed on pages 23 to 28 is your church experiencing?
2. Review the critical issues (bulleted items) which commonly accompany that particular transition. To what extent has your congregation encountered each of these issues? What other issues have you experienced as a result of your change in size?