

Q&A – Church Size

"What is the Ideal church size?" *as well as*

"How do you define 'church'?"

"What is the perfect church format?"

For most people the "ideal church size" is a totally subjective issue. Some people prefer the massive programming options that larger churches offer. Other people prefer small atmospheres that enhance intimate worship experiences. Thus, at Substance, we've embraced a model of church that essentially incorporates all forms and sizes of church models.

From a statistical growth standpoint, most Americans are gravitating towards churches under 50 members and *over* 1000 members. This doesn't mean that church sizes in between these numbers "can't grow." Rather, churches that are under 50 and over 1000 have the highest growth in terms of "percentages" (See *The American Church Research Project* more elaborate citations).

Why is this? We can only guess. There are many reasons for various church trends; but, like them or not, that's what Americans seems to be gravitating towards: the ultra big and the ultra small. Currently, people under 40 (as well as religious skeptics) tend to prefer large churches to small almost two to one. Thus, it's not a surprise that we tend to attract both of those categories in droves :)

From a "health" standpoint there's not much of a statistical connection between church size and church health. I've done a huge amount of research on this topic and found that there are a lot of people who perpetuate myths related to this (usually based upon their opinions, not statistical data). A recent Group / Gallup study on fellowship found that "quality of fellowship and church size are totally unrelated." I.e., church health is more related to the *quality of church leadership* than it is to the *size of the church* (Friendship, 2004).

Ironically, the 2004 study found that Christians tended to have more intimate Christian connections *outside* of church experiences in churches over 1000 than in smaller churches. The study debunked the myths that mega-churches are intrinsically more "unhealthy and institutional." To my shock and amazement, the research shows that mega-churches can actually empower more intimate fellowship and confession of sin *more than* many home churches. Small churches can ironically become "more institutional" and programmatic than churches that are ten times their size. Thus, people who presume church health to be inexplicably connected to church size have no real statistical evidence to back them.

For example, no one in their right mind would ever argue: "*Families with 1700 square foot houses are generally healthier.*" Why? Because we all know that square footage has nothing to do with health. Either the family prioritizes good family values or it doesn't. Either the parents execute good parenting skills, or they don't. It has nothing to do with the square footage.

In the same way, a church either values good mentoring and intimate fellowship or it doesn't. The fact that churches over 1000 tended to have more intimacy doesn't so much mean: "larger is better." Rather, *better is better.*

So why did the one church study seem to indicate that large churches are better at facilitating intimacy than smaller? Well, it's probably just because larger churches are simply more aware that they can't take intimacy for granted. Intimacy must be more intentional. But, again, from a church health and church satisfaction standpoint, there is no solid statistical connection with church size.

Don't get me wrong, if a mega-church lacks a serious small group strategy, it has a high likelihood of being unhealthy & non-growing. Studies have shown that unless small groups are *the* central thrust of a mega-churches' programming, it has a very low chance of effective long-term discipleship.

Similarly, when home-fellowships lack connection to a larger assembly or network of local home-churches they have incredibly high odds of becoming ingrown and plateaued. They are also less statistically likely to attract diversity. Most home church fellowships generally only attract those who look exactly like them... a pattern echoed in churches with under several hundred members.

So, my point here is this: It's not the size of the church that determines health; rather, it's how smart the leaders are who are "running the system". There are always methods and techniques that enable churches to become "the exceptions to the rule." And these churches are generally led by people who understand the "underlying systems" of church growth that transcend the specific model.

For example, when I think about what my "true church" really is, I don't often think of Substance's large weekend celebrations. Rather, I think about my small accountability group of 5 guys who I get together with every Tuesday. Each week we come together and confess our sins. Sometimes we simply read God's word with one another and pray. Other times we set goals for our marriages or our workout routines. But the intimacy and traction I've experienced in this group far exceeds anything I've experienced by merely attending a church service.

That's why, at Substance, we say: "*Church doesn't start until the service is over.*" Or, "*church is what happens in between church services.*" You see, we don't see church as a program or a building or a worship experience. The real Biblical church is the people who belong to Christ and to one another.

In fact, the greatest statistical predictor of spiritual growth is nothing more than "quantity of intimate Christian friends." In other words, from a statistical growth standpoint, having many intimate Christian friends is far more important than just about any other Christian behavior or church service format. In fact, you can preach the same quantity of God's word at two different people, and studies show that the "person with more friends" is the one who is "most likely to apply it".

One study found that 98% of church satisfaction can be predicted simply by measuring how many intimate Christian friends our congregation members have at any given moment! Think about that for a second! ...more than tears cried in worship experiences... more than "quantity of church services attended"... more than the quality of the speaking... more than the quality of the facility, the number one cause of church satisfaction was quantity of intimate Christian friends.

Equally as surprising, the #2 predictor of church satisfaction was *ministry opportunity*. When people could serve the body of Christ in a way that was in sync with their gift mix and passions, they were far more likely to be satisfied and growing in their relationship with the Lord than those who weren't. So, you can

start to see that these practices can be "valued" no matter what format a church utilizes.

So, at Substance, this is how we respond to this. We realize that everyone has a different preference of "church size." Even more, everyone has a different definition about what a "deep" church service is. For example, to some, a "deep" service is one where they prophesy over one-another & do altar ministry and worship for two hours. Other people define "deep" as hour-long expository messages on single chapters of the Bible. Of course, to make matters worse: Many people demand that their "version of depth" must be manifested in the Sunday morning service, or else, "you're not a Biblical church." But, in my experience, most people aren't this legalistic. And, as long as we have an opportunity in our church to "jump into the deeper waters," most people are satisfied.

So, at Substance, we make a solid attempt to offer worship formats of varying sizes and experiences. As we grow bigger, so do our options. In fact, we like to define Substance as a "church of churches." Or, as the "methodological geek" in me likes to say: "We are a church of home-churches, corporate churches, and free-market small groups." (And, if you don't know what I mean by that, then, don't worry).

But no matter what service you attend, our core values remain the same: We want it to be easy for you to find amazing Christian friends with whom you can have amazing fellowship. And why is this so important? Because, again, from a statistical standpoint, the number one predictor of spiritual growth is "how many intimate Christian friends you have at any given moment" – NOT, did you attend a church with the perfect worship format or size. And this idea syncs up pretty well with what the Bible teaches about friendship.

For example, at Substance we have an acronym that we constantly repeat called "S.P.A.C.E." This stands for 5 large themes of Biblical fellowship. Of course, we probably could have picked 12 themes; but, to keep it simple, we focused on the following five ingredients: *"Same gender, Prayer, Accountability, and Confession with people of Equal passion."*

S = Same Gender: 2 Sam.1:26 (like David & Jonathan) Prov.27:17 (men sharpening men)

P = Prayer James 5:15, 16b; Luke 11:5-11; 18:1

A= Accountability: I.e., challenging you; setting goals! Prv.27:17

C= Confession: James 5:16; 1 Jn.1:9; Mt.6:14-15

E= Equally Yoked in Passion: Prov.13:20; 1 Cor. 15:33; 2 Cor.6:14ff

Of course, in a second, I'm going to break this down a bit more; but, I often say to people: If you aren't experiencing all five ingredients of "S.P.A.C.E." at least once every three weeks, then you're probably missing God's best for you. I've seen many churches define membership strictly in terms of doctrine and giving; but, at Substance, we define membership as a *"delightful and ongoing experience of S.P.A.C.E. within our community."* i.e., Despite the size, format, or theological emphasis of the given program, our ultimate goal is S.P.A.C.E.

The Prayer and Accountability part of this acronym are self-explanatory. But allow me to unpack the other three ingredients a little more.

By “Same-Gender”, we’re merely referring to the idea that, there are many sin-issues that are easier to tackle along-side Christians of the same gender. Ultimately, if you're married, we want you to have amazing spiritual conversations with your spouse; yet, what if your spiritual problem *is* your marriage. Or, what if your sin problem affects your marriage in a complicated way?

For example, most women don’t want their husbands holding them accountable for their weight. In my family, if I said: “*Hey honey... how ‘bout you eat those carrots instead?*” ...it just wouldn’t fly! And guys, most of us don’t want to have our wives nagging us for not being romantic enough... or for not being a good enough father. You see, there are certain challenges that are just easier to take from a small group of “same-sex” friends. And because I have numerous guy friends like this, it removes a tremendous burden off of my marriage.

When we talk about confession, however, I’m not talking about some Catholic-styled “tell-your-sins-to-the-leader” type of experience. And, frankly, I don't want to see *more* of your dirty underwear. (I love you; but, I believe God has a better plan – for both of us). More specifically, I’m talking about finding a tight group of safe and comfortable friends with whom you can be brutally honest.

Most Christians like to see confession as something we do between ourselves and God during some private worship moment – a “vertically oriented” confession. But almost every time the Bible mentions confession in the New Testament it’s couched in the context of fellowshiping with *other people* (see James 5:16). I.e., it’s “horizontal” confession. In fact, it’s this very life-style of honesty that makes us “children of the light” (1 Jn.1:7-9).

However, this type of honesty and vulnerability makes a lot of people nervous (and understandably so). It’s hard to find safe and mature people who can “handle” a confession. And even when you find these friends, it’s still downright humbling to share some of those idiotic habits of your private life. And if you or your church suffers with any level of legalism or politics, then confession feels more like a death wish than a liberating God-opportunity. So, obviously, use caution! And that’s where the last letter of the “S.P.A.C.E.” acronym comes into play.

The “Equally Yoked in Passion” part simply refers to the idea that you can’t just fellowship with anyone (2 Cor. 6:14). For example, you don’t want to confess your sins to “joe-big-mouth”. A confession is a sacred trust. And if you’re trying to do this with insecure, legalistic, or political Christians, you probably won’t get good results. Hence, it’s important to find other safe Christians who are running towards Christ in the same way that you are.

But the ultimate point here is this: We need to define fellowship as more than “merely showing up at a church service” or merely having shallow relationships with people who happen to be Christians. In the same way, fellowship isn't about “church size.” It also isn't about some elite worship format where we do the “perfect number of songs, with the perfect depth of Bible messages, and the perfect amount of prophetic altar ministry at the end. And if these criteria rest at the foundation for your “definition of a true church”, then I want to challenge you that your understanding of church may be a bit narrow.

At Substance, we prefer to reduce “church” down to the gritty life-giving basics of fellowship and ministry. I.e., You've got “spiritual friends” who've got your

back. It means that you have real Biblical accountability for the real issues in your life.

And remember what's at stake here: The very health and contentment of your family. So, before you pick a church, you need to define what "church" really is. And until we get beyond the silly myths of church health, you'll never know what to look for.