

## INTRODUCTION

**N**ot uncommonly, those in the middle get overlooked. Middle-born children are often not given the same amount of attention in the family as their oldest and youngest siblings. States in the central part of the country are regarded as flyover zones. Advertisers pay the least attention to the middle-age demographic. Economically, the middle class is getting squeezed out. In politics, the far right or far left silences the centrists. Folks in the middle oftentimes appear invisible.

Something similar has happened to middle-sized churches. They receive relatively little attention from church analysts, consultants, and publishers. In my research for this book I conducted a bibliographic search in the library of the seminary at which I teach. I discovered an entire shelf containing dozens of books devoted to leading the small church. The number of books focusing on large churches filled a smaller section of another shelf, yet it was substantial. However, there was only one book dedicated exclusively to the midsize church, and it was published in 1985, over thirty years ago. Apparently medium-size congregations fit the phenomenon of the neglected middle.

This book undertakes to address that oversight. It provides a comprehensive analysis of midsize congregations and significant resources for their pastors and leaders. Medium churches have the potential to make significant impact for the mission of God. The purpose of this book is to maximize the fruitfulness of these parishes both for the Lord's kingdom and for his glory.

A preview of the book's subject matter provides an initial vision of the purpose, scope, and development of its content. The first four chapters focus on how the midsize church is distinct from other-sized congregations, specifically small and large congregations. These chapters identify cultural characteristics and dynamics that are distinctive of the church with an average worship attendance of 150 to 400 people. They diagnose problems that are typically encountered in the midsize congregation and promote opportunities for flourishing.

Chapter 5 articulates the evangelical priorities to which leaders and members of the midsize church should aspire. These are determined by Scripture and directive for practice. This provides a theological center for carrying out mission and ministry in the medium church. It essentially identifies *what* the church should be doing and *why* it is to do so.

The final five chapters provide guidance on *how* to carry out God's priorities in the middle-sized parish in several critical areas of congregational ministry. This is the most comprehensive section of the book and provides useful best practices for leading the midsize congregation in developing healthy programs, cultivating effective pastoral leadership, forming a staff team, recruiting and equipping lay volunteer leaders, and maximizing overall productivity.<sup>1</sup>

A postscript is appended that identifies resources for navigating the transition of a medium congregation to a large church or a small one.

Lastly, the reader is alerted to the use of gender in personal pronouns. When referring to a person in general terms only one gender is given in any instance. For example, *she* is utilized instead of *he/she*, *she/he*, *she or he*, or other similar combinations. Thus in odd-numbered chapters masculine pronouns are consistently employed (i.e., he, him, his). In even-numbered chapters feminine pronouns are used (i.e., she, her, hers). This alternation in the gender of pronouns is intended to communicate inclusivity and avoid awkward construction.

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1. Throughout this book the terms *lay* and *laypeople* will be used. These refer to members of a church who are not professional church workers. This usage in no way endorses a class system or hierarchical view that elevates clergy and church staff as having more value or status than others in the church. I strongly affirm the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and regard all Christians as having an equal standing before God whose gifts and service are to be equally valued. The usage of these terms is to clarify distinctions in roles, not to differentiate value or status, using conventional terminology for communicating a distinction that Scripture itself makes (see Eph. 4:11–12, Phil. 1:1–2, 1 Tim. 3:1–13, Titus 1:5–9, 1 Peter 5:1–3).

## CHAPTER 1

# PURPOSE

Gordon fumed to himself, “If we please one, we displease the other!” He had just concluded an intense conversation with a founding member of Faith Church, Emily. Gordon was also a longtime member of the congregation, and his friendship with Emily spanned several decades. Both had been integrally involved in the life of this church since its earliest years. Both were emotionally invested in the congregation and cared deeply about the church’s future direction. But on some matters they didn’t see eye to eye. Indeed, the points of contention seemed to multiply with the passing of time.

Gordon was the head elder of the congregation. He had held that role for six years. Previous to being elected the chairperson, he had been a member of the Elders Board for a dozen years. So he knew the workings of the congregation—its issues and challenges. Nevertheless, the pressure of serving in this leadership role was getting to him. The pressure came from two constituencies in the church, each with differing expectations.

## EMILY’S LAMENT

**O**n the one side were many of the older and long-term members of the parish. They remembered when Faith Church was smaller in size. At that time the congregation felt to them like one big family. In fact, the founding pastor frequently referred to it as such. “Welcome to the family of faith at Faith Church!” was the way in which he routinely started the Sunday morning worship service thirty-five years ago. That was back when there was only one worship service, not two. Everybody knew each other, and all the members could greet one another at worship. In fact, people in the church did everything together. They shared monthly potlucks together. They decorated the church for Christmas together. The congregational members made decisions about the church at their monthly voters’ assemblies. Most of all, they all cared for one another in an organic and intuitive manner.

But that was the past. The church no longer was small enough for everyone to know each other and to care directly for one another. The

church had grown, but at a price. Rather than members having a direct voice in the monthly voters' assembly, meetings were held only twice a year to pass the budget and to elect officers. It was the officers of the church council and boards who now made the decisions. A multitude of programs existed at Faith Church—adult education classes, youth group, choirs and instrumental ensembles, children's ministry, missional communities, women's auxiliaries, small groups. This meant that members were associated primarily with niche groups. To Emily and other longtime members, it seemed that Faith Church had become fragmented. She perceived that people were going in many different directions rather than sharing a common life together. "We have lots of interest groups," Emily complained to Gordon, "but little interest in one another as a whole church."

Particularly problematic for Emily, and for others like her, was the fact that the pastor was no longer as available for pastoral care as had been the case in earlier times. He had become more like a manager than a minister, she lamented. As the church had grown it seemed to become more impersonal and atomized. Emily didn't like it, and neither did many of her friends who had joined the church when it was a smaller family-like gathering. So she voiced her frustration to Gordon, whom she respected and felt would listen. She hoped that the head elder, in his leadership role, would share her concerns and work to reverse the direction in which the church was moving. She encouraged him to seek to restore the congregation to its earlier condition as a more personal, intimate, and unified community of faith.

## JACK'S AGENDA

But Emily and other like-minded members weren't the only ones Gordon was hearing from. There was also a group of newer members who held a very different vision for Faith Church. This constituency was composed mainly of middle-aged members who had joined the church within the past seven years. The most vocal spokesperson for them was Jack, who also served on the Board of Elders. Jack was in his first term as an elder, and he had ideas for changes to the church that differed greatly from those Emily advocated.

Jack joined Faith Church four years earlier when he had been transferred to the community by his company. Jack was a devoted Christian, passionate about his faith, but his past experience with church had been in one much larger than Faith. That congregation had an average worship attendance of over two thousand, whereas Faith Church's attendance was 240, about one-eighth that size. The large church that Jack had formerly attended provided a cornucopia of ministry opportunities that dwarfed the number of programmatic offerings at Faith Church. Its worship services had a wow factor that Faith's worship venue could never approximate. A

small army of specialized staff carried out leadership of the multitude of ministry niches available.

This was Jack's experience of church prior to coming to Faith Church. And this was Jack's vision of what Faith Church could, and should, become. So Jack pushed the pastor and congregational leaders, especially the members of the Elders Board, to learn more about church growth principles and practices. His former church in the other city sponsored an annual four-day conference that commended its model of ministry to attendees. Jack advocated that Faith Church's pastor and congregational officers participate. Furthermore, Jack proposed that they follow each step of the megachurch's prescribed process so that Faith Church would similarly grow in size.

## GORDON'S DILEMMA

As a result of the pressures coming from Emily and her ilk on the one hand and Jack and other like-minded members on the other hand, Gordon felt squeezed. The expectations from the two sides were contradictory and contentious. Faith Church, Gordon maintained, was no longer a small church. But neither was it a large congregation as envisioned by Jack. "I guess we are a midsize church," Gordon spoke to himself. "Is that so bad? Is that an unacceptable position to be in? What's wrong with that?"

As a leader in the congregation, Gordon came to realize that he couldn't please either of the parties who contended for the future of Faith Church. But he also recognized that this was not his responsibility. His responsibility was to please God. And that duty wasn't exclusively his; it belonged to the entire congregation. That was Faith Church's purpose—to advance what God had purposed for it to be and to do. Was it possible that the size of the church as it existed today—a medium church—was pleasing to God for that time and place? Was it possible that Faith Church was called to carry out the Lord's work in this community and beyond not as a small congregation, nor as a large assembly, but as a midsize church? If so, how could it maximize efforts toward mission and ministry in a way that most pleased God?

Gordon began to sense that pursuing something that Faith Church wasn't—a small church or a large church—shouldn't be his agenda. God had brought the community of believers at Faith not only for such a *time* as this (Est. 4:14) but also for such a *size* as this. The Lord had called them to be faithful and fruitful in that condition. So Gordon determined to work toward helping Faith Church maximize its positive potential as a midsize church until God saw fit to bring it to a different size.<sup>1</sup>

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1. The narrative depicting the experiences of leaders of Faith Church continues at the beginning of each succeeding chapter.

## PERIMETER PRESSURES

Gordon's dilemma is one that is faced by many lay leaders and pastors in midsize churches—congregations that average between 150 and 400 worshippers each week. Such leaders feel pressure from different sides. They face expectations from the members of their congregations to achieve a congregational culture and ministry conditions that do not fit well with the midsize church. Some want the qualities of a small church with its personal care and intimate relationships among all members. Others want the characteristics of a large church with its myriad of ministry offerings and polished presentation.

Accordingly there is a season of discontent that is endemic to the midsize church. If you are a member or leader of a midsize church perhaps you have experienced this discontentment. You know personally the pressures that accompany it!

## JUST RIGHT

A primary presupposition of this book is that God calls many Christian congregations to function in the capacity of medium-sized congregations (averaging 150 to 400 in worshippers per week). God has created a significant number of midsize churches, and he has a purpose for them. In the United States alone, it is estimated that upwards of one-fourth of all congregations fall into this size category, numbering over 75,000 churches.<sup>2</sup> Thus their vocation is to carry out God's mission as midsize churches. This is their place in God's design for the present time. As such, pastors and leaders of those congregations can be content and not pursue becoming something God isn't calling their churches to be. After all, contentment is a Christian virtue (1 Tim. 6:6).

No doubt you are familiar with the children's story about Goldilocks. The young girl wanders into a cottage in the woods that had been occupied by three bears. Goldilocks literally makes herself at home, finding a size portion of some food and the size fit of some furniture to be "just right" for her tastes.

In the scenario presented earlier featuring members of Faith Church, each individual was seeking the size that she or he perceived would be *just right* for the congregation. Emily thought that a small church culture would be *just right*. Jack believed that the characteristics of a large church would be *just right*. But Gordon settled for what God had provided at that time and place—a midsize church. For him, the size of Faith Church was *just right*.

God uses various sizes of Christian congregations to advance his kingdom. God is no respecter of sizes when it comes to churches. "There is no 'best size' for a church," Timothy Keller asserts. "Each size presents

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2. This estimate will be documented in chapter two.

great difficulties and also many opportunities for ministry that churches of other sizes cannot undertake (at least not as well). Only together can churches of all sizes be all that Christ wants the church to be.<sup>3</sup> The size that your congregation is right now is the size that God has appointed for it, at least for the time being. The American *zeitgeist* assumes that bigger is better. Some who hold a more romantic view of the church affirm that smaller is better. But neither needs to be the case. Any size of congregation can effectively carry out the mission and ministry that God entrusts to it. And that is true for the middle-sized church as well.

It is hoped that you will see that the size of your church may be *just right* for the work that God calls it to. God has a purpose for creating the congregation to be the size that it is. This is what he has given you to lead at this time and in this place. Instead of pursuing what the church is not, accept what it is, celebrate its uniqueness, and embrace its purpose. Learn to apply the secret of contentment that the Apostle Paul commends (Phil. 4:12).

## CONTENT, BUT NOT COMPLACENT

Indeed, contentment is a virtue for Christians. Yet contentment can also lead to a vice. It becomes problematic when it leads to apathy, complacency, and laziness. This certainly is not God's will for us! It is not the divine purpose for his people! Sinful humans are prone to veer toward sinful extremes. One extreme is for church leaders to fail to be grateful for the context of ministry in which God has placed them; they lack contentment. The opposite extreme is to be like Goldilocks—to become so comfortable in the setting that seems just right that one falls asleep in ministry.

The godly virtue of contentment can be taken to the extreme of complacency, leading to a shirking of responsibility and to the benign neglect of the purposes that God has given to the church. Congregational leaders who adopt such a tack, if they can be called leaders at all, fail to challenge the members of the parish to incarnate the difficult life of discipleship and mission. Ultimately they fail to take up the cross and follow Jesus. As a result, the entire assembly misses the purpose to which it has been called.

Leaders of medium-size churches can find satisfaction in the size context of the congregations they serve. But this distinctive context of being midsize calls for our very best! It calls us to work in ways that are both smart and sanctified. It calls us to learn from the insights and best practices of others who have effectively blazed the trail in leading midsize parishes. This book integrates those learnings into a field guide to help medium congregations navigate the terrain of doing mission and ministry in this challenging era.

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3. Timothy Keller, *Leadership and Church Size Dynamics: How Strategy Changes with Growth* (New York: Redeemer City to City, 2010), 2.

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The text in your hands seeks to do more than merely aid Christian leaders of midsize congregations to embrace the realities that accompany churches of medium-size. Its primary purpose is to advance the actual accomplishment of faithful and fruitful work in that context. The goal of this resource is to equip you as a pastor or leader of a midsize church to increase the effectiveness of the mission and ministry carried out by your midsize congregation.

As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, approximately one-fourth of all congregations in the United States fall into the category of being medium-sized, numbering over seventy-five thousand churches. Yet little has been written to champion or support this specific size culture among churches. There are many megachurch conferences for equipping large congregations (and wanna-be large churches). Most of the classical pastoral approaches promoted in seminaries have served the smaller churches well. But medium-size churches, comprising nearly one in four congregations and serving twenty-five percent of the church-affiliated population (over forty million people), are left to find their way through the morass of mission and ministry without a roadmap. A glaring lacuna exists regarding resources designed specifically for the midsize church. Granted, there are up-to-date books, manuals, and online resources that provide some assistance to midsize churches. I am indebted to these in the development of this book, as will become clear as you read it. But what they lack—and here is the lacuna—is a singular and comprehensive focus on the distinctive dynamics of medium congregations.

Leading the midsize church in a manner that best advances the purposes entrusted to it by God doesn't happen automatically. It requires insight, intentionality, and effort. Accordingly, leadership in a medium church may feel like the right fit for you; it may be just right. But don't expect it to be facile if you are being faithful. You are called to lead this midsize ministry to achieve its most positive potential. That is a challenge. You will need help. And that is the purpose of this book. It will aid you in advancing the mission of your church and accomplishing the purposes that God has entrusted to it.

## TO THE MAX

The title of this book expresses its intended outcome—that you are equipped to *maximize* the mission and ministry efforts of the midsize church you serve. Some may read the word *maximize* and assume it means to make larger. In some contexts that is an appropriate application of the term, since dictionaries typically offer the word *enlarge* as an option for its definition. In such a case this book might help you to enlarge the membership of your church so that it grows into a large congregation.



But that is not the primary purpose of this book. Instead, a different meaning of the word *maximize* is intended. It can also mean to make the most of something. In other words, this book seeks to help you to lead a midsize church to achieve the highest level of effectiveness possible given its distinctive culture and dynamics. It guides you to celebrate the unique characteristics of a medium church and to capitalize on those characteristics for the sake of the gospel. It undertakes to help your church reach its fullest potential.

## THE VALUE OF CONGREGATIONAL SIZE CATEGORIES

Congregations that manifest similar cultural traits can be organized into fixed categories. Some similarities are due to ethnic background or denominational heritage. Certainly a formative influence is theology; congregations that share a common theological confession will frequently display similar worldviews and practices. Commonalities may also derive from demographic factors such as the average age, educational level, and income of the members. Environmental factors such as community context (e.g., urban, rural) and regional values play important roles.

Generally speaking, however, a most significant variable that impacts cultural commonalities among congregations is size. Congregational analyst Lyle Schaller claimed that culture and size are the two most effective frames of reference for identifying broad congregational differences.<sup>4</sup> Gary McIntosh, another church analyst who has studied thousands of congregations, maintains the following: “There are numerous ways to define different types of churches. For example, various categories often used are theological position, ethnic heritage, rural-urban orientation, growth or decline, health, worship style, and the age of the congregation. However, the most useful system is to group churches by size. Comparing churches by size reveals more helpful information for faithful ministry than looking at their denomination, location, or any of the other numerous methods of comparison.”<sup>5</sup>

The various distinctions which McIntosh identifies are not insignificant, especially when it comes to theological confession. Yet categorizing congregations according to size is useful because similarly sized churches share similar characteristics relating to organizational dynamics, leadership expectations, management needs, communication challenges, relationship style, and the necessity of planning.

## RIGHT SIZING

Understanding the differences of congregational dynamics based on size distinctions offers benefits for healthy and productive leadership by pastors

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4. Lyle Schaller, *The Very Large Church: New Rules for Leaders* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 27.

5. Gary McIntosh, *One Size Doesn't Fit All* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 2006), 19.

and lay people. As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, congregations fall into three broad cultural categories that reflect differing sizes: small, medium, and large. Each of these categories or types has distinctive characteristics regarding organization, programming, planning, and communication. Recognizing these distinctions in size typology will help you as a pastor or lay leader to understand why members of a church behave the way they do. Such insight will enable you to communicate appropriately and effectively. It guides you to avoid pitfalls and better to deal with problems and conflict when such arise.

Gary McIntosh describes this as *right sizing* the efforts of a congregation and its leadership, as follows: “Churches operate differently depending on the size of the congregation. ‘Right sizing’ the various ministries and processes of communicating, welcoming, training, involving, and a host of other activities is crucial for smooth operation, as well as increased growth, of a church. As a church grows, it cannot simply employ business-as-usual practices. Larger churches are not just bigger versions of smaller churches; in reality they are an entirely different entity that requires different operational procedures.”<sup>6</sup>

In other words, small churches of less than 150 in average weekly worship attendance share a similar personality type, that is, cultural characteristics that are distinctive to their size. Large churches of 400 or more worshippers share distinguishing characteristics that unite them into a culture category. Most germane to the focus of this book is that midsize congregations (150 to 400 worshippers) demonstrate commonalities unique to their size. Wise leaders will recognize and appreciate the differences between the size categories. Aware of these distinctions, they will capitalize on the strengths and opportunities characteristic of the size of the congregations that they lead and serve.

Viewing this from another perspective, the failure to recognize the commonalities within size categories and the disparities between such categories can lead to unnecessary misfires in ministry. A large church is not simply a bigger manifestation of a small church, so one should not import practices that work in a large church to a small one and expect the same results. Nor is a small church merely a condensed version of a midsize church. The organizational and relational dynamics are more complex than that! Timothy Keller observes thus:

One of the most common reasons for pastoral leadership mistakes is blindness to the significance of church size. Size has an enormous impact on how a church functions. There is a “size culture” that profoundly affects how decisions are made, how relationships flow, how effectiveness is evaluated, and what ministers, staff, and lay leaders do.

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6. Gary McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 116.

We tend to think of the chief differences between churches mainly in denominational or theological terms, but that underestimates the impact of size on how a church operates. The difference between how churches of 100 and 1000 function may be much greater than the difference between a Presbyterian and a Baptist church of the same size. The staff person who goes from a church of 400 to a church of 2,000 is in many ways making a far greater change than if he or she moved from one denomination to another.

A large church is not simply a bigger version of a small church. The difference in communication, community formation, and decision-making processes are so great that the leadership skills required in each are of almost completely different orders.<sup>7</sup>

It is for this reason that congregation leaders must literally size up the situation in which they find themselves. They do this by recognizing that differently sized congregations will display differing cultural patterns while churches of similar size will share many characteristics of a common culture. There are predictable ways of being a church that cohere with different size gradients. By aligning to those predictable modes, pastors and church leaders will maximize mission and ministry efforts. They can right size those efforts for greatest effectiveness and productivity.

## MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR CALLING (AND THAT OF YOUR CHURCH)

This right sizing of your efforts as a leader of a medium church is the purpose of this book. It is a resource for pastors and leaders of midsize congregations—churches with an average weekend worship attendance in the range of 150 to 400 people. Its goal is not necessarily to facilitate the growth of a church from midsize to large. If God grants that numeric growth, to him be the glory! But a Christian assembly can faithfully carry out the calling that God gives to it within this size category without eventually transitioning to a larger size. You can be content with the size of your church, but you should never be complacent about its condition. God may not be calling your church to grow large at this time. But he does call you to cultivate its health. He calls you to develop its strengths. He wills for you to maximize its opportunities for mission and for ministry. This book is a resource for you to respond affirmatively to God's call for healthy and fruitful leadership of the midsize church.

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7. Keller, *Leadership and Church Size Dynamics*, 1.