

State of the Large Church: *The Trend for 2025*

After pastoring a relatively small church in North Carolina, I moved to another small church, this time as the senior pastor. Over time, we were blessed to become a much larger church. I soon discovered that, as we passed the threshold of 500 members and were speeding toward 1,000, all the trends changed. All of my pain points changed. All of the things that keep me up at night were different.

All of this to say: I get it. Your size church has unique challenges; they're not the same as a megachurch, but they're not the same as a typical size church, either.

We work with a whole lot of churches your size. After working with and learning from the brightest ones that we know, I've put together some thoughts on what we can expect in 2025.

It all comes down to: Context matters.

If you're a congregation that's between 500 and 2,000 people, you are in rare air. The vast majority of the 365,000 Protestant churches in the US are much much smaller than you. Many estimates show that there are only about 5,000 to 10,000 congregations your size in the US. (For our international clients, it's an even smaller percentage.)

But there's not just one set of rules for bigger churches. It depends on context. From my vantage point, there are fundamentally two types of churches your size.

Big church in a small town: If you are 500 to 2000 in attendance and you are in a smaller town, you are probably the big name in town. That means you probably oughta take notes from the largest congregations to see how they are making an impact. I'm a firm believer that a big church can make a big difference. But that requires staffing. So what are you to do when you don't have all the resources of a megachurch, but need to operate like one?

In the 17 years I've been helping churches find their pastor, I've seen success come down to one thing for churches your size: Putting all the eggs in fewer baskets.

The smartest churches are paying more money to fewer people. If I were allocating staffing dollars at a church your size, I would concentrate on hiring exceedingly strong leaders. And I would focus on their ability to recruit, train, and retain volunteers. If you can pay more for fewer people, you'll be able to better equip your saints for more ministry.

Another reality in staffing for your size and type of church is that you will have turnover in the lower parts of your org chart. For a number of years I've noted that turnover in large churches is predictable. At the top of your organization the turnover is very low, and people tend to stay a long time. But toward the middle and bottom of the org chart, the larger the church, the higher the turnover. Even though you're not a megachurch, if you're functioning like a megachurch in a small town, realize and embrace the fact that you will lose some of your people. And rather than be afraid of it, imagine becoming something akin to the best minor-league baseball team in the country.

My church, whether they knew it or not, did a marvelous job of this. As far back as I can find in our church's history, the senior pastor has left to become a senior pastor of a larger church. Associate pastors have left to become senior pastors. We were a rather large church in a very small town. That made us attractive to young talent. And whether knowingly or not, the leadership leaned into the fact that we would retain staff for a while, but that they would eventually move on to serve God in bigger venues. Rather than be ashamed of this or afraid of it, I'd suggest you start recruiting around that reality.

So think about what would happen if you became known as a church that brought in younger talent, gave authority to that younger talent, and raised them up and deployed them as leaders for Jesus' church in another area. I find it interesting that multi-site churches often say one church, many locations. And it's made me realize over the years that it's actually this: One kingdom, many locations.

How cool would it be at your retirement dinner if all the associate and student pastors that have worked for you, who had gone on to bigger positions, came and stood as a testament to the amazing talent that you had nurtured and deployed?

Large churches that are in very large ponds. The second kind of church of your size is a church of 500 to 2000 that is in a very large—or even global—city. You're not a small church, but you're not nearly as big as the big church in town. How should you think about staffing if this is your reality?

I'd encourage you to think like pastors of a more normal size church, like a church of 100 to 500. Think about what niche, what mission you can fill within your particular community. Find the niches and you will find kingdom riches. I know it sounds cliché, but if you differentiate, you will dominate. Churches aren't designed to "dominate," per se, but there's wisdom in this old saying. How can you set yourself apart from the other churches in town? What can you do to differentiate?

In terms of staffing, it may mean that you're hiring specialists that are experts in the mission you're working toward. This helps establish your church as the expert in your city on whatever cause you have set as your niche. We've done a number of searches for churches that ask us to find someone who knows a particular mission or a particular global cause. Churches that differentiate become known in their community as something special.

One of my favorite pastors at a church your size refers to himself as "pastoring an adolescent church." The church isn't small, but it isn't yet fully grown. Judging by what I see in pastors of churches your size, this in between size can be the most fun to pastor.

But while the joy should endure, the fun isn't meant to stay. If you anticipate and work within these trends, you'll quickly find yourself moving out of the adolescent phase and into a larger, more fruitful ministry in 2025. I'm looking forward to that, and I hope you are, too. Thanks for all you were doing to serve right on the front lines of team Jesus, it's an honor to work alongside you.