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**A Network of Congregations:
Congregation Size in the Church of the Nazarene**

Kenneth E. Crow

Introduction

Ideally, Nazarene congregations are more than competing franchises loosely organized within a denomination. They are in many ways a network, or a community of faith committed to the mission of the church. Together they are more able to achieve their shared goals, including being a Christian people, spreading scriptural holiness, and accomplishing a great mission through worship, ministry to the world in evangelism and compassion, encouraging believers toward Christian maturity through discipleship, and preparing women and men for Christian service through higher education.

Thinking of Nazarene congregations as an interdependent, mutually supportive network prompts a consideration of the value, contributions, and challenges of congregations in a variety of sizes and settings. This report examines elements of this network of churches, especially the nature and effects of congregation size.

Much of what we know about congregations is carefully examined, explicit knowledge. Studies have been conducted. Anecdotal observations have been systematically verified or challenged. However, some of what we “know” is more or less unexamined, tacit knowledge. This may be especially true of beliefs about congregation size. An example of this was provided recently by Carl Dudley who wrote, “It appears that many people tacitly believe the optimum congregation size is the megachurch. In contrast, smaller churches are often tacitly understood to be deficient, problems to be solved, seeds to be grown, and especially inadequate in comparison with megachurches.” (*Effective*

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Small Churches in the Twenty-first Century, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, pages 13, 15, 23).

Some other examples of tacit understandings of congregations may include:

- Every New Testament church is better when it becomes bigger
- Effective evangelism normally results in larger congregations rather than more congregations
- Nazarenes are more inclined to have small congregations than are other protestant denominations
- Congregational cultures are generally weak and pliable enough that a “good” pastor can easily change them

Conceptual Frameworks

The size distribution of congregations in the Church of the Nazarene and other Protestant denominations prompts discussions of causes. Why do so many churches remain smaller than fifty? Why are there so few churches larger than two hundred?

The conceptual framework of “*Growth Barriers*” provides one way to think about and discuss the reality that many Protestant congregations do not grow into large organizations. The “two-hundred barrier” has received considerable attention. Although it has received less attention, there appears also to be a “fifty barrier”. This conceptual framework has proven to be useful in helping churches understand their challenges.

The conceptual framework of “*Choice-Points*” provides another way to think and talk about these realities. This framework is not new, although it has not generally been applied to congregational size. Observing that the ideal types, “sect” and “church”, are unwieldy for analysis, Thomas F. O’Dea proposed “replacing the global concept with a number of dilemmas or choice points which give rise to one kind of organizational tendency rather than another” (in David L. Sills, ed., *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, New York: The Macmillan Co. and the Free Press, 1968, page 134). Using O’Dea’s concept, J. Alan Winter identified several “major dimensions or choice-points facing religious congregations,” as they maintain or change their nature—like membership criteria, member involvement, leadership, relationship with society, and audience (*Continuities in the Sociology of Religion*, New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1977, pages 110-111). Congregation or denomination decisions in choice areas such as these need not be overt or intentional in order to move a group away from its original zeal and commitments toward a different type of organization.

It appears that somewhere around fifty participants there is

a significant choice-point for congregations. Particular kinds of fellowship, accountability, and responsibility are possible in churches smaller than about fifty. Above that size other kinds of organizational possibilities and patterns are possible. The choice to grow larger than fifty is not just a matter of overcoming a barrier; it is also a matter of choosing to change from one type of group to a different type. Carl Dudley asserts that, "The small church is not an organization; it is an association that generates and lives by its social capital." Therefore, "small churches are not organizational errors to be corrected, but intentional choices of members who put a priority on human relationships." (Carl S. Dudley, *Effective Small Churches in the Twenty-first Century*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, pages 11, 29).

Similarly, at around one hundred and fifty the members and pastors of congregations reach a choice-point where they may decide to retain valued relationship patterns and organizational approaches or to change them in order to become a different type of organization. This choice is also evidently not merely a matter of overcoming spiritual and organizational barriers. In his tape set, *Embracing Chaos*, Tom Peters suggested both something like the fifty and the one-hundred-and-fifty choice-points as he discussed the need to structure organizations toward smaller operating units. He said that in his consulting with effective companies, small unit size was important, "there's some marvelous anthropological research that ... says one hundred and fifty-three people, to be precise, is the maximum size unit to really get things done in an energetic fashion" (Peters, Tom, *Embracing Chaos* (Tape series), Niles, Illinois: Nightingale-Conant Corporation, 1993, tape 2).

The conceptual framework of "choice-points" should not be understood to imply that congregations usually make overt, formal decisions at these points. In fact, most are probably informal decisions that are nevertheless widely accepted and firmly held. Once these decisions are made, congregations appear to cycle up and down within the range allowed by the organizational issues of the choice-point. They tend to effectively prevent or replace losses that would move them below the chosen range and resist additions that would move them significantly above that range.

The advantages of large churches are well documented and publicized. In fact, the value of larger churches is so widely accepted that it is sometimes difficult to imagine that any congregation would approach a size barrier/choice-point and decide against moving to a larger size. Economically, for example, it is clear that larger churches are more viable. Certainly larger

churches can afford better compensation for their pastors. However, as John Dart, news editor of *Christian Century* observed, while "Most Protestant congregations are small" and changing them into larger congregations would be more efficient, "I don't think that will happen, because congregations are communities of history, connection and value. Most will not give up that community for a more efficient operation." (*Christian Century*, 2003, Vol. 120, No. 4, page 32).

The Fifty Choice-Point

Small groups were important for John Wesley. In the book, *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell notes that, "Wesley would travel around England and North America delivering open-air sermons to thousands of people. But he didn't just preach. He also stayed long enough in each town to form the most enthusiastic of his converts into religious societies, which in turn he subdivided into smaller classes of a dozen or so people. Converts were required to attend weekly meetings and to adhere to a strict code of conduct. If they failed to live up to strict Methodist standards, they were expelled from the group. This was a group, in other words, that stood for something. ... Wesley realized that if you wanted to bring about a fundamental change in people's belief and behavior, a change that would persist and serve as an example to others, you needed to create a community around them, where those new beliefs could be practiced and expressed and nurtured (Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000, pages 172-173).

When John Wesley chose as his goal "to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land" his vision was "an audacious one because England in the mid-1700s was experiencing everything but holiness." However, this extravagant hope was eventually realized as Wesley's movement had a major impact on English society. Small groups were essential. "To the class meeting must go much of the credit which many historians have attributed to Methodism for the radical transformation of England's working masses" (D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 1997, pages 19, 29, 93).

The value of small congregations and small groups within congregations has long been recognized by sociologists. Maintaining the accountability necessary for a membership made up of believers, according to Max Weber, requires small membership size in the local congregation. While he acknowledged that it would be possible for large congregations to provide the accountability necessary for maintaining membership standards

by structuring effective small groups like Wesley's class meetings, he concluded that, "in principle, only relatively small congregations were appropriate" for believers' churches (in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946, pages 316, 456). Georg Simmel noted the importance of the size of any group to maintaining shared responsibility among the members. He believed that as membership size increases the organizational character of the group inevitably changes with resulting changes in members' involvement and commitment (in Kurt H. Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, New York: The Free Press, 1950, pages 87-90). Ernst Troeltsch emphasized the fact that the intimacy possible only in small groups is necessary for internalizing group norms (*The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931, page 331). This small group internalization resulting in behavioral change was an intentional Wesleyan strategy achieved through class meetings, according to D. Michael Henderson, who notes that George Whitefield is reported to have said, "My brother Wesley acted wisely—the souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruits of his labor. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand" (*John Wesley's Class Meeting*, Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 1997, pages 30, 112).

More recently Roger Finke in a study of Southern Baptist congregations, noted that, "For most observers the growing size of Southern Baptist churches is an unequivocal sign of success. But theory and research on sectarian groups and voluntary organizations offer a more cautious assessment. A recurring proposition or warning is: *Increasing the size of an organization reduces the level of commitment and conformity an organization generates from its membership*" (Roger Finke, "The Quiet Transformation: Changes in Size and Leadership of Southern Baptist Churches," *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 36, No. 1, September, 1994, page 7, emphasis in the original).

Decisions made around the fifty choice-point may not be healthy. Undoubtedly some congregational decisions are selfish and others are unwise. However, as even this cursory review of the issues suggests, decisions to retain the values of a smaller association are not necessarily either carnal or short-sighted.

The One Hundred and Fifty Choice-Point

Gladwell's evaluation is that, "Wesley's Methodism spread like wildfire through England and America because Wesley was shuttling back and forth among hundreds and hundreds of groups, and each group was then taking his message and mak-

ing it even stickier. ... The lesson of ... John Wesley is that small, close-knit groups have the power to magnify the epidemic potential of a message or idea." This leaves a critical question, "If we are interested in starting an epidemic—in reaching a Tipping Point—what are the most effective kind of groups? Is there a simple rule of thumb that distinguishes a group with real social authority from a group with little power at all? As it turns out, there is. It's called the Rule of 150." Gladwell then makes a presentation of research and experience supporting the "Rule of 150" including an observation that is particularly relevant to the concept of organizational choice-points. He says, "The Rule of 150 says that congregants of a rapidly expanding church, or the members of a social club, or anyone in a group activity banking on the epidemic spread of shared ideals needs to be particularly cognizant of the perils of bigness. Crossing the 150 line is a small change that can make a big difference" (Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, pages 174, 182-183).

Gladwell's evaluation runs counter to the tacit belief that every New Testament church is better when it becomes bigger. There is little question that in the interdependent, mutually supportive network of Nazarene congregations many should decide to become and remain larger than one hundred and fifty. Indeed, some should be very large. However, Gladwell suggests that there are also valid reasons for a church approaching this choice-point to decide that in order to accomplish God's will in their setting it would be better to create more churches rather than one larger church.

Congregational Size Patterns

Throughout this report Nazarene congregations in the United States and Canada are analyzed in groups by size. Data are drawn from pastors' annual reports. Most analyses use data from fully organized Nazarene churches and NewStarts in the United States and Canada. Four general size groupings are used. First, groupings in increments of 25 are used because there is such a concentration of churches in the lower sizes. Second, the groupings used by the U.S.A./Canada Mission/Evangelism Department in their church size strategy initiatives—1 to 99, 100 to 249, and 250 or more—are sometimes used to provide broader summaries of patterns. Third, since there is considerable variation in the sizes smaller than 100 and larger than 250, the size strategy groupings are sometimes expanded in the report by breaking out the 1 to 99 size into 1 to 49 and 50 to 99 and by breaking out the 250 or larger grouping into 250 to 499, 500 to 999, and 1,000 or more. Finally, one section uses the broad sizes

of 1 to 150 and over 150, based on a theoretical typology of congregations.

Distribution of Nazarene Churches

Most congregations in the Church of the Nazarene have fewer than 100 worshipers on an average Sunday morning. As the graph below and table 1 in the appendix show, in 2003 two out of five (39.5%) of Nazarene congregations reported fifty or fewer worshipers on an average Sunday. The slight upturn on the graph in the size above 1,000 is the result of a broader size group rather than an actual upturn in proportion of churches. More churches reported 26 to 50 worshipers than any other size.

Applying the conceptual framework of choice-points, it might be said that congregations are more likely to have chosen to remain within the range allowed by the fifty choice-point than to have chosen to change the nature of their association enough to become a larger organization.

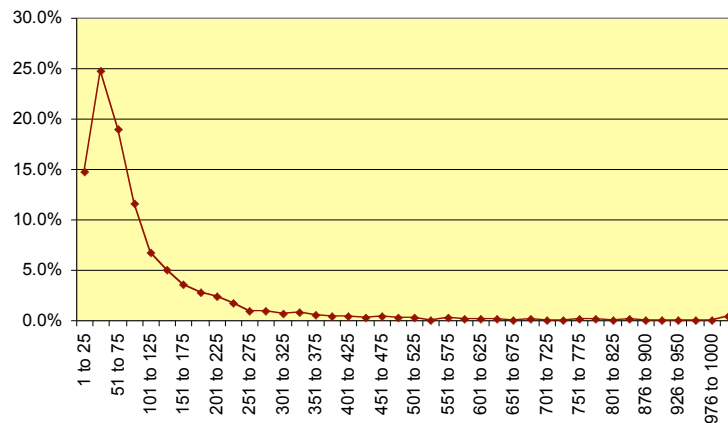


Figure 1: Worship Average in 2003

USA & Canada Nazarene Churches and NewStarts reporting average AM attendance greater than zero. The percentage of churches with over 1,000 worshipers appears larger than other because it includes a size range larger than range of 25 used for each of the other groupings. Table 1 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.

Size Distribution in Other Denominations

This Nazarene size distribution is not unique among protestant denominations. Richard Houseal compared the year 2000 distributions of churches in six protestant denominations. While the resulting graph, below, shows some interesting differences,

the most remarkable aspect of the comparison is the similarity in the distributions of congregation worship size among these denominations.

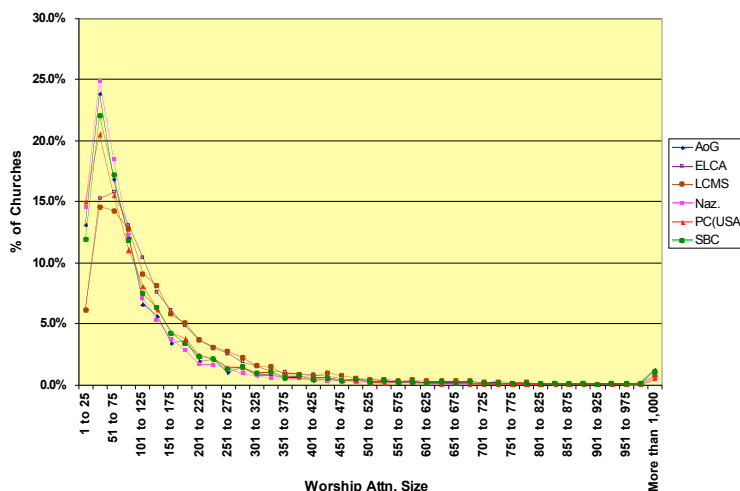


Figure 2: Comparison of Church Worship Attendance Sizes by Denomination: USA 2000

AoG—Assemblies of God. Naz.—Church of the Nazarene. ELCA—Evangelical Lutheran Church in America PC(USA)—Presbyterian Church (USA). LCMS—Lutheran Church Missouri Synod SBC—Southern Baptist Convention. Table 2 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.

Community Size

Community size and population density around the church affect the size distribution of Nazarene churches. In small communities a viable choice to become a larger organization is less likely. In fact, half of the churches in small towns and rural areas have 50 or fewer worshippers on an average Sunday. Not shown in figure 3 below, but included in table 3 of the appendix is the fact that in rural areas churches smaller than 50 are more likely (65%), but even in suburban settings 25% of the churches are in this size range.

On the other hand as figure 3 shows, larger congregations are more likely in more populated areas. In major urban areas 13% of the Nazarene churches are larger than 250 worshippers. This compares with 12% of the churches in smaller urban areas and 3% of the churches in smaller towns and rural areas.

Applying the choice-point framework, it might be said that in the smallest towns and rural areas it is much more rare than it

would be in other settings to actually have a viable possibility of implementing a choice to change the nature of the association and become a larger organization. On the other hand, even in the largest urban areas, some churches apparently decide to be neighborhood churches.

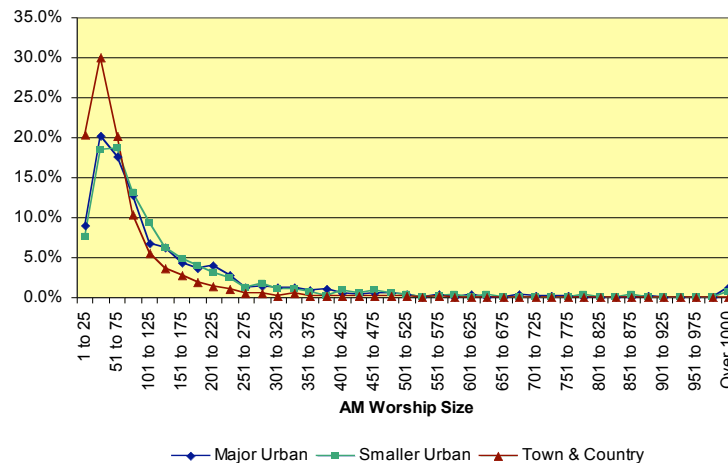


Figure 3: Worship Size Distribution in Three General Community Sizes

USA & Canada Nazarene Churches and NewStarts Reporting Average AM Attendance Greater than Zero. Major urban - At least 10,000 within three miles and 100,000 within five miles (COMMTY A, B, C). Smaller urban - At least 2,000 within three miles and 25,000 within five miles (COMMTY D, E, F, G). Town & Country - Smaller towns and rural areas (COMMTY H, I, J, K). Table 3 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.

Stability—Distribution of Congregations

The distribution of Nazarene churches by size is relatively stable. In spite of a variety of initiatives over the last 25 years that might have affected it, the distribution of Nazarene congregations has not changed a great deal.

The proportion in the smallest size group (1 to 25 worshipers) has increased slightly—from 9.9% in 1978 to 14.9% in 2003. Part of this change may just be a difference in reporting—the lower percentage in 1978 may have been the result of a disproportionate number of smaller churches failing to comply with the new request to report AM worship attendance average. However, this does not explain all of the change. If 1983, when nearly all of the churches were reporting worship attendance, is used as the starting year, the change is slightly smaller but still

an increase— from 11.4% in 1983 to 14.9% in 2003.

As shown in figure 4 below and table 4 of the appendix, the size group with the largest percentage of churches (26 to 50) has remained very close to 25% throughout the last 25 years.

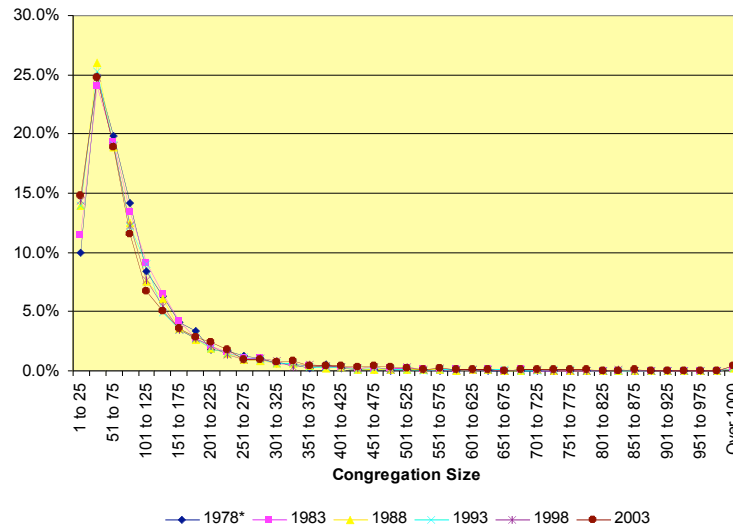


Figure 4: Worship Attendance Size Distributions over Twenty-Five Years—1978-2000

*USA & Canada Nazarene Churches and NewStarts reporting average AM attendance greater than zero. *In 1978 reporting AM worship attendance was relatively new and more than 600 churches did not report an average greater than zero. Table 4 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.*

Stability—Individual Congregations Over Five Years

Not only does the distribution of congregations tend to be stable over time, but also individual congregations tend to remain within broad size categories consistent with size based choice-points. According to analysis conducted by Richard Houseal which is summarized in table 5 of the appendix and figure 5 below, from 1998 through 2002 overall 75% of the fully organized Nazarene churches in the United States and Canada remained in the same size group. There were noteworthy exceptions to this tendency toward stability, of course, and these exceptions tend to have been widely publicized. During these five years, 11% grew into a larger membership size grouping and 14% moved to a smaller size group.

While many churches grew in membership during this five

year period, most did not grow enough to move into another size grouping. Stability is a little less likely in congregations smaller than 100 members. However, even in the sizes where more movement between groups took place, seven out of ten remained within the same grouping. Those churches that changed groups were a little more likely to move up than they were to move down.

When congregations make decisions around the fifty or the one hundred and fifty choice-points, they tend to hold to their choices rather firmly. Occasionally, as the graph indicates, congregations may reconsider their decision. This might be in response to their understanding of God's will, perhaps as a result of pastoral leadership, to population change, to economic realities, to generational transitions, or to other factors. If reevaluation results in a change of their choice-point decision, they may cross the growth barrier and become a different type of organization.

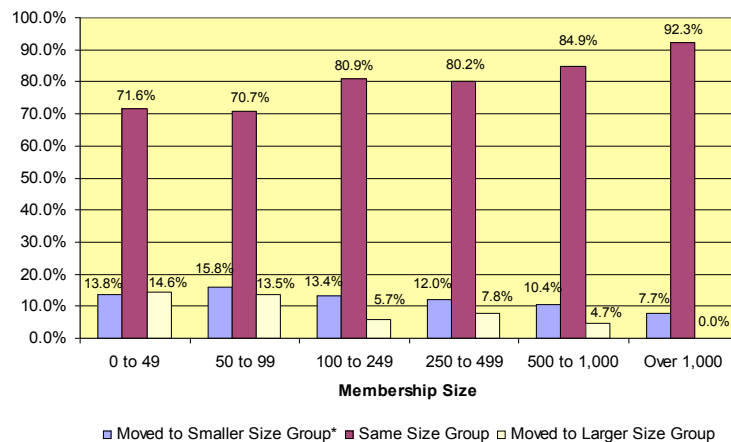


Figure 5: Stability and Change in Church Membership Size

This analysis differs from figures 1-4 in that it uses membership rather than worship attendance and that it uses broader size groupings. Churches moving to a smaller size group include churches that became inactive or were disorganized. Table 5 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.

Stability—Individual Congregations Over Twenty-Five Years

Even over a period as long as twenty-five years, choices made at size choice-points tend to be enduring. If the size indicator is changed from membership to worship attendance and the time period is extended to twenty-five years, change becomes

somewhat more likely than shown above in figure 5. However, as the figure 6 below and table 6 indicate, stability within a grouping is still more likely than either growing into a larger, different type of church community or declining into a smaller one.

Drawing of the insights of Emile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tonnies, Max Weber, and Arlin Rothauge, Charles Crow developed a typology of congregations (*Enduring Cultures of Laity*, by Charles Crow ANSR 1997, available at http://www.nazarene.org/ansr/articles/crow_charles_97.html). The typology predicts that since congregational cultures tend to be relatively strong, they are more likely to maintain the type of congregation they have chosen than they are to accept either growth or decline that might threaten or change their culture.

This typology suggests two basic types of church cultures—family type churches and enterprise type churches. As the typology predicted, over the twenty-five years from 1979 through 2003 most churches did not change types.

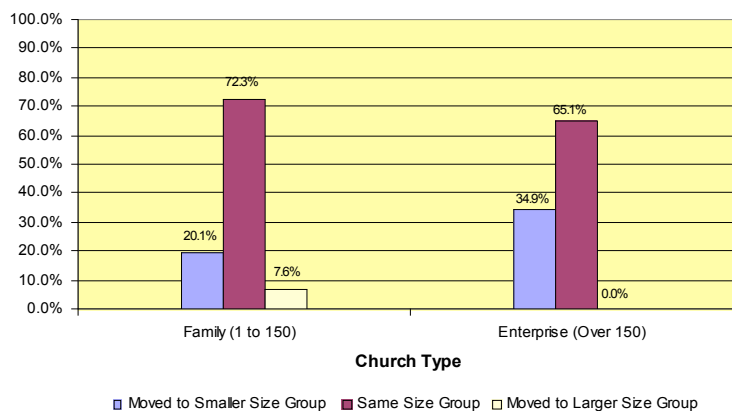


Figure 6: Stability of Church Cultural Types over Twenty-Five Years

For a complete description of this typology see *Enduring Cultures of Laity* by Charles Crow at http://www.nazarene.org/ansr/articles/crow_charles_97.html. In order to establish a beginning category within the *Enduring Cultures* typology, the average Sunday morning worship attendance for the five years 1979 through 1983 was calculated. There were 4,745 congregations reporting worship attendance in each of these five years. Churches that have moved to a smaller size include those that were inactive or disorganized by 2003. Table 6 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.

Participants Patterns

The literature supporting the importance of choice-points in

the fifty and one hundred and fifty range suggests that there would be difference in participation in different size groups. This section examines Nazarene participation patterns. Graphs and appendix tables summarize distributions of worship participants in size groups as well as differences in membership additions, losses, and transfers. They also show differences in financial participation, pastoral tenures, and member attendance patterns.

Distribution of Participants

The nature of numbers is such that it takes a lot of small groups to equal the number of people in a relatively few large groups. This is true for towns, schools, and businesses as well as for churches. So, it takes a lot of small churches each ministering to a relatively few people to equal the number of people in larger churches.

Over the last twenty-five years, each of the three USA/Canada Mission/Evangelism size groupings used in the church size strategies have ministered to approximately one-third of Nazarene worship participants. As shown in figure 7, in 2003 the smaller churches (1 to 99) served 31.5% of the total, intermediate size churches (100 to 249) served 32.9%, and larger churches (250 or more) served 35.6%. However, during the twenty-five years the proportions in smaller and intermediate sized congregations have declined while the proportion in larger churches has increased.

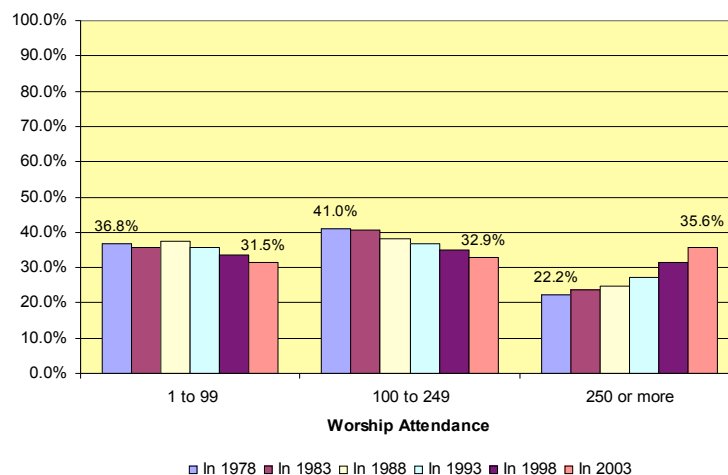


Figure 7: Distribution of Worship Participants by Congregation

Size

Worship Attendance in Active USA & Canada Nazarene Churches and NewStarts Reporting Average AM Worship Attendance Greater than Zero. Table 7 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.

Addition of New Nazarenes

During the decade from 1994 through 2003 over 300,000 New Nazarenes were added in the United States and Canada. This was almost 650 New Nazarenes per 1,000 worshippers in 1993. "New Nazarenes" include additions of members' children by professions of faith, other additions by professions of faith, and transfers from other denominations. Using the 1993 worship attendance for size groupings, figure 8 summarizes these additions per 1,000 worshippers in churches of various sizes. Churches organized after 1993 are not included in this analysis.

Smaller churches tended to add more New Nazarenes per 1,000 worship participants. Churches with fewer than fifty worship participants added 195 children of members for each 1,000 worshippers. This is somewhat higher than the 149 per 1,000 in churches of 1,000 or more. Professions of faith additions of converts who were not members' children were more likely per 1,000 in churches under 500 than they were in churches in the largest groupings. Transfers from other denominations per 1,000 participants were also more likely in the smaller churches.

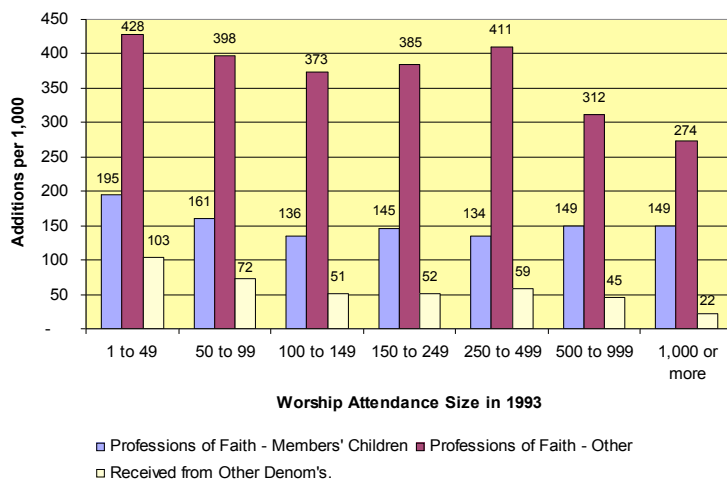


Figure 8: New Nazarenes per 1,000 Worshipers During the Decade from 1994-2003

Churches and Worshipers in 1993 Assembly report are the beginning numbers for the 1994 assembly year. Additions to churches organized after

1993 are not included in this analysis. Table 8 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.

Not only do individual participants in smaller churches appear more likely to have been involved in evangelism, but also a higher percentage of all New Nazarenes received came into the denomination through congregations in the smaller groupings. As shown in figure 9 below, during the last decade 41% of the members' children added by profession of faith in the United States and Canada were added in churches with fewer than 100 worshippers. Churches of 100 to 249 accounted for another 34%, and 25% were added in churches of 250 or larger.

Additions by professions of faith other than children of members were similarly distributed with 38% in churches smaller than 100, 36% in churches of 100 to 249, and 26% in churches of 250 or more.

Members joining by some form of letter of transfer from other denominations were more likely to come into the Church of the Nazarene in small churches than in either mid-sized or large churches. Almost half (48%) of members received from other denominations during the last decade were in churches smaller than 100, with 30% were in churches of 100 to 249, and 22% were in churches of 250 or more.

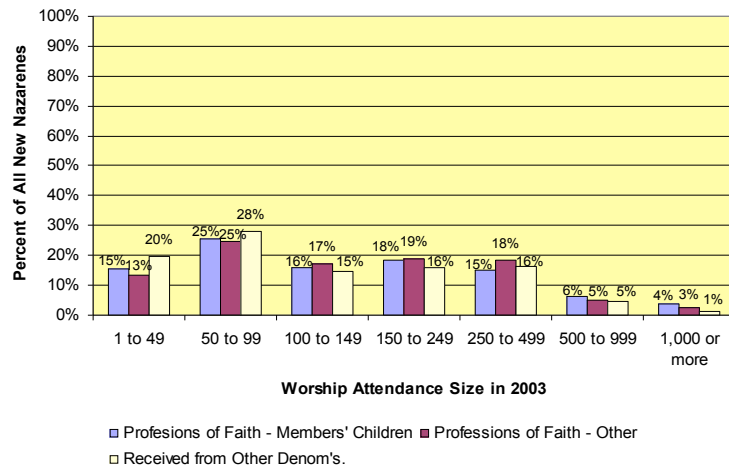


Figure 9: Proportions of New Nazarenes by Congregation Size During the Decade from 1994 through 2003

Churches and Worshipers in 1993 Assembly report are the beginning numbers for the 1994 assembly year. Additions to churches organized after 1993 are not included in this analysis. Table 9 in the appendix

summarizes the data presented in this graph.

The relative effectiveness of small churches in evangelism presents an ongoing challenge to their decision to remain an association rather than become an organization. Too many new members would inevitably change the nature of the group and would, therefore, probably seem threatening. It appears likely that not all new members are perceived as threatening to choice-point decisions. Children from the congregation coming back to the faith of their youth would probably be welcome even if they stretched the size boundaries somewhat. Some new members become welcome replacements for the attrition experienced by churches of all sizes. However, the following two tables show that recorded member losses are also higher in smaller churches. Perhaps some of these losses might have been prevented if churches had been more comfortable with the possibility of starting additional churches rather than just dealing with, and usually rejecting, the option of changing the nature of their association.

Losses by Removal, Commendation, or Release

As noted above, smaller churches tend to lose more members per 1,000 worship participants than do larger churches. However, in all sizes gains per 1,000 are associated with losses per 1,000—the higher the level of gains, the higher the level of losses. In every size category a comparison of New Nazarenes per 1,000 to Removals, Commendations, and Releases per 1,000 gives some cause for concern.

During the decade from 1994 through 2003 in the United States and Canada over 225,000 Nazarenes were lost by removal, commendation, or release. This was 466 losses per 1,000 worshippers at the beginning of the decade. It was a number equal to 72% of the additions of New Nazarenes.

The graph below summarizes these losses per 1,000 worshippers in churches of various sizes. Again, churches organized after 1993 are not included in the analysis. Smaller churches tended to lose more members by official board action to remove names from the roll, by granting of an official letter of commendation to another denomination, and by release from the membership roll at the request of the member.

Corresponding to the pattern observed in additions of New Nazarenes, a large proportion of all member losses take place in smaller churches. During the decade from 1994 through 2003, 40% of the members' lost to the Church of the Nazarene by removal in the United States and Canada were lost from churches with fewer than 100 worshippers. Churches of 100 to 249 ac-

counted for another 34%, and 26% were lost from churches of 250 or larger.

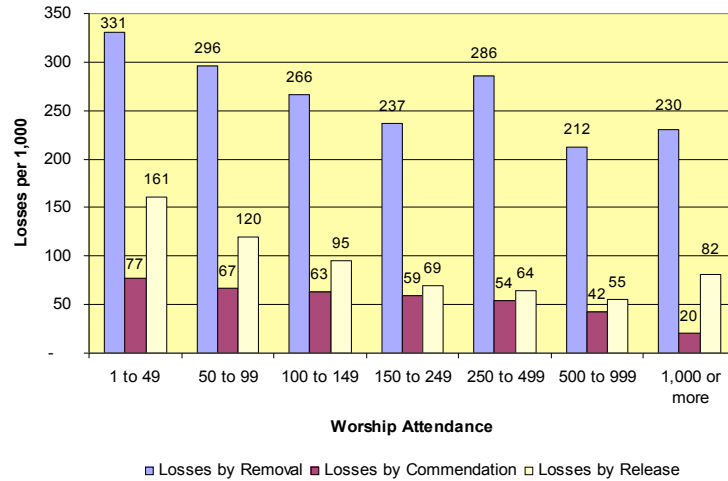


Figure 10: Losses by Removal, Commendation, or Release per 1,000 Worship Participants During the Decade from 1994-2003
 Losses from churches organized after 1993 are not included in this analysis. Table 10 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.

Losses by commendation to other denominations were similarly distributed with 42% in churches smaller than 100, 37% in churches of 100 to 249, and 21% in churches of 250 or more.

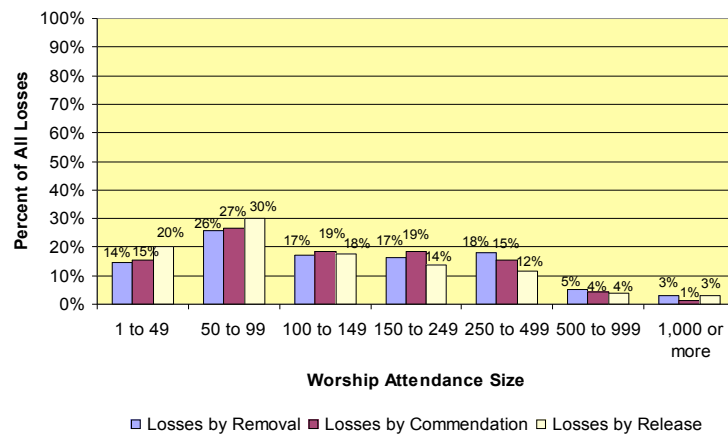


Figure 11: Losses by Removal, Commendation, or Release Dur-

ing the Decade from 1994 through 2003

USA & Canada Nazarene Churches and NewStarts Reporting Average AM Worship Attendance Greater than Zero. Losses from churches organized after 1993 are not included in this analysis. Table 11 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.

Members lost by release at their request were also more likely to leave from small churches than from either mid-sized or large churches. Half (50%) of members lost by release during the last decade were from churches smaller than 100, with 32% from churches of 100 to 249, and 18% from churches of 250 or more.

Gains and Losses by Nazarene Transfer

During the decade from 1994 through 2003 in most size groups transfers in from other Nazarene congregations tended to equal transfers out to other Nazarene congregations. As shown in figure 12, the smaller the congregation, the larger were the numbers of transfers per 1,000 members. Churches larger than 1,000 worshippers were somewhat more inclined to receive more Nazarenes by transfer than they transferred out.

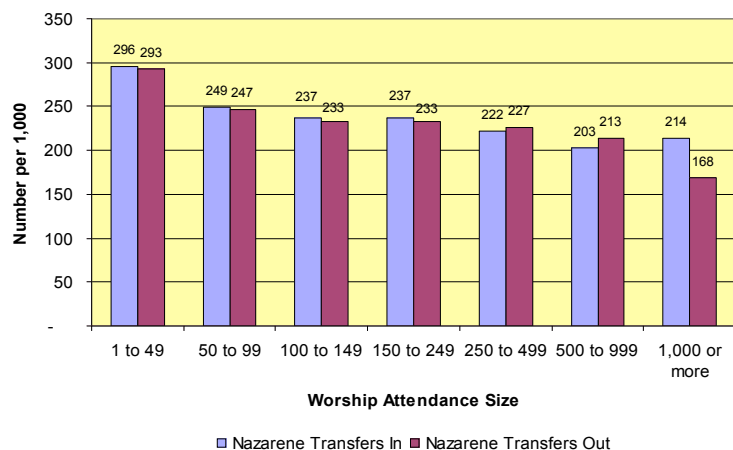


Figure 12: Transfer Gains and Losses per 1,000 Worshipers

Churches and Worshipers in 1993 Assembly report are the beginning numbers for the 1994 assembly year. Transfers into or out of churches organized after 1993 are not included in this analysis. Table 12 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.

Financial Participation

As congregation size increases, per capita raised also increases. Several factors might affect this pattern. It may partly be that smaller congregations receive more "in kind" gifts of time

and energy to do things. For example, participants in smaller churches may be more likely to work on the building rather than pay somebody to do that work.

The differences in per capita raised may also partly be some indication of the relative affluence of the members. While there are no doubt both affluent and poor participants in congregations of all sizes, the higher per capita raised in larger congregations may suggest that working class people tend to prefer smaller congregations or that more affluent people tend to prefer larger ones.

A third possibility may be that major donors are more likely in large congregations. Per capita raised is one of those statistics that are especially sensitive to a few extreme cases. The effect of a relatively few very large donations would make a significantly larger per capita figure.

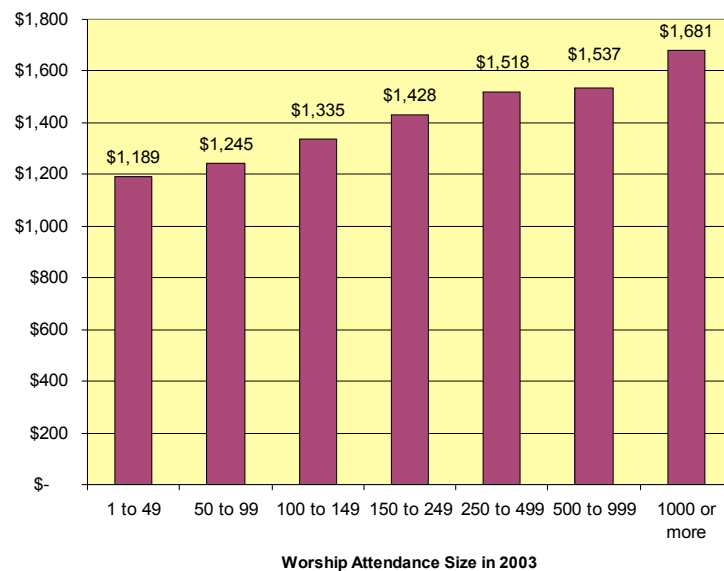


Figure 13: Total Raised per Worship Participant in 2003

Table 13 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.

Tenure of Pastors

Pastors of larger churches tend to have longer tenures in larger churches. Figure 13 shows a tendency for a higher percentage of pastors of smaller churches to have served their current congregation less than four years. This percentage decreases as congregation size increases. Table 14 in the appendix shows

the percentages serving other time periods. For example, 20% of the pastors in churches smaller than fifty worship participants have served ten years or more compared with 52% in churches of 1,000 or more.

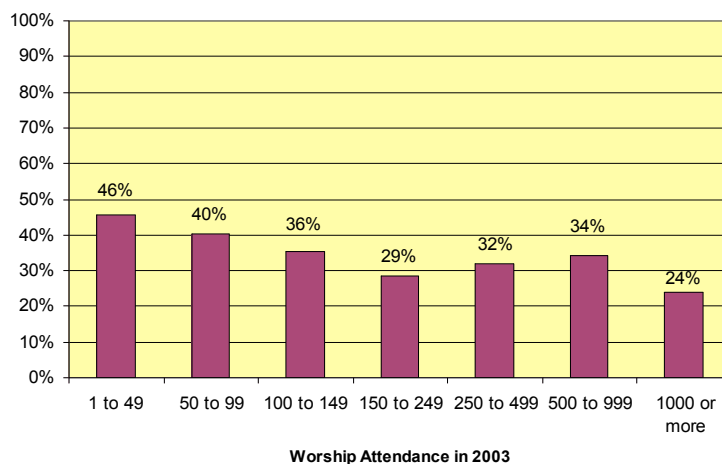


Figure 14: Percent of Pastors Who Have Served Their Current Church Less Than Four years

Table 14 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.

Participation Ratios

Figure 15 presents a comparison of membership at the beginning of the year with participation during the year. It provides an indication of membership vitality or expectations. Two patterns may be seen: Nazarenes appear to have experienced a general reduction in expectations, and smaller churches appear to have higher participation expectations.

First, over the last twenty years Nazarenes in almost all sizes of congregations appear to have lowered their expectation of member participation. As seen in figure 15, in most size groups the bar at the left, 1983, is 15% to 20% higher than the bar on the right, 2003. In 1983 the ratio of worship participants to members in churches with fewer than 50 members was 111%. By 2003 that ratio had dropped to 97%. Similarly, the ratio in the largest churches in 1983 was 95% and had dropped to 80% in 2003. The exception to this general pattern is the 500 to 999 size group where the rate of participation was relatively low in 1983 and is at approximately the same level in 2003.

Second, churches that have fewer members tend to have a

higher ratio than larger ones of worship attendance compared with membership. This is consistent with the theory that as group size increases members' commitment and conformity tend to decrease (Ronald L. Johnstone, *Religion in Society*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, Inc., 1983, pages 69-70; Roger Finke, "The Quiet Transformation: Changes in Size and Leadership of Southern Baptist Churches," *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 36, No. 1, September, 1994, page 7).

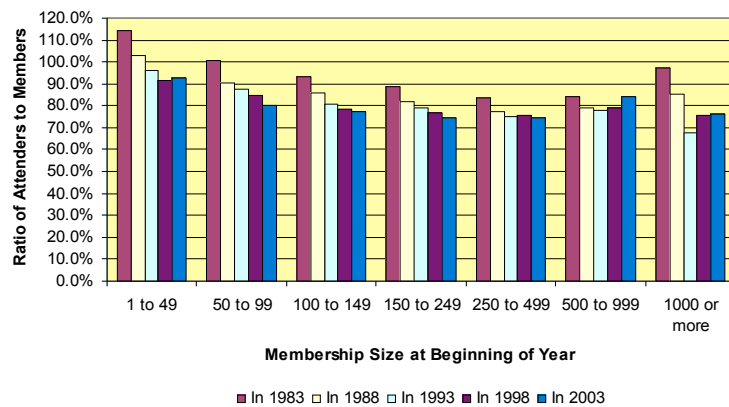


Figure 15: Member—Attendance Ratios

Size categories are based on membership at the beginning of the year indicated. Member-participation ratios are the total worship attendance average in each size category during the year indicated divided by the total membership in that category at the beginning of the year. Table 15 in the appendix summarizes the data presented in this graph.

Conclusions

The Church of the Nazarene is more than a loose collection of competing franchises. It is a community of faith, a network of interdependent, mutually supportive congregations engaged in mission. While this ideal may not be widely understood or experienced, the following observations point to its importance.

Some Nazarene congregations are located in urban settings while others are in suburbs, small towns, or more rural areas. Some have more working class members while others are more affluent. Some are large, regional centers while others are intimate, family-like groups. Since no single congregation or congregation type could accomplish the mission on its own, the network is important.

While the value of large congregations is generally accepted among Nazarenes, the value of small ones is more likely to be

questioned. In fact, it is very difficult for many Nazarenes to accept the possibility that effective evangelism might result in more congregations in some circumstances and larger ones in others; a multiplication of units as well as an expansion of existing ones.

There is some tendency for people and pastors in small churches to see their congregations as inferior, deficient, problems to be solved, and especially inadequate in comparison with megachurches. Since discouraged people are not likely to invite the people about whom they care most to participate in the organizations that are a source of their discouragement, it is important to the mission of the church that the value of these churches be recognized. Unfortunately, we are more accustomed to thinking and talking about their disadvantages than about their advantages. Therefore, some observations toward improving the morale and effectiveness of smaller congregations may be in order.

Small churches tend to be more oriented to relationships than to formal structures. This may be part of what Carl Dudley was talking about when he told the 2002 ANSR conference that small churches never adjusted to modernity, so they are ideally suited to minister in a post-modern society.

When small churches are God's agents in evangelism, they are most effective along lines of relationship. In fact, this is not unique to the small church since most evangelism takes place within significant relationships. However, relationships are vital to the nature of small churches. This is one of their advantages.

While small churches tend to be reluctant to allow new people into their "family," new converts who are already related to the group will probably be admitted. This includes children of members, both when they are growing up and when they come back to the Lord as young adults. Most small churches have room to add a few more people without reaching a choice-point about changing the nature of the congregation.

When pastors and people in small congregations help significant numbers of people find salvation, they have several organizational options. They might choose to change the nature of their congregation—enlarge the existing congregation by adding new groups and more formal structures, preserving as many as possible of the advantages of the "family" way of being the church. Or, they might start another congregation in the same building, using at least some of the same resources—equipment, perhaps the pastor, etc. This may be easiest to accomplish when many of the new converts are from a distinct cultural group making, for example, the need for services in another language

obvious. Or, they might sponsor a new congregation in another location. However, if the mission of the church is to be accomplished, they must be helped not to choose to preserve the “family” nature of the church at the cost of refusing to carry out the great commission.

Members’ decisions made around size “choice-points” are probably most often not fully conscious, carefully considered, formal decisions. In fact, beliefs about what is the best organizational choice for the church are often unconscious, tacit, but never-the-less strong and emotional. Since these beliefs tend to be tacit, pastors, lay leaders, and individual members may not share these beliefs, even while they assume that all right-thinking people believe as they do. Without overt, prayerful, sensitive discussion of these beliefs and the choices available to them, the fruits of evangelism may be lost in congregational conflict. If, for example, a pastor believes that changing the nature of the congregation is the only option and perhaps that this choice has no disadvantages, he/she may experience great resistance from, and conflict with lay leaders who believe there are great advantages in being an association maximizing relationships rather than an organization more like a bureaucracy. While there is no guarantee that prayerful, sensitive, overt discussion of the differences in tacit beliefs will result in negotiated compromises like sponsoring more congregations, there is considerable evidence that conflict and evangelism failure are common to congregations that approach this area without sensitive, overt, prayerful discussion.

Nazarene congregations are in many ways a strategic network. Working together they are more able to accomplish their mission. Nazarenes have a mixture of small and larger congregations. This mixture is quite similar to other protestant denominations. While there are certainly disadvantages in each of the size groups, there are also advantages. Therefore, sometimes the right decision around a size choice-point may be to start another church rather than to increase the size of the existing church.

Sustaining and enlarging this network presents significant difficulties. Small congregations, even when they are strong small congregations (Kennon L. Callahan, *Small, Strong Congregations*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) have limited resources. Recognizing, equipping, and supporting the pastors God is calling to serve small congregations is especially challenging. Providing appropriate facilities will not be easy. Reevaluating tacit understandings about the value of larger and smaller churches is demanding. Still, only with a healthy network of congregations will we be able to fully accomplish our mission.

Writer

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