



Four Types of Growth

One lens for examining how churches grow has been created by Loren B. Mead in his book *More Than Numbers: The Way Churches Grow*. The author outlines four dimensions of growth and states that a growing, vital congregation would most likely be attending to each of the following dimensions.

Numerical Growth

When we talk about church growth, we usually describe it as an increase in church membership. A broader look shows us that numerical growth includes growth in Sunday worship attendance, church school attendance, adult religious education attendance, size of the budget, number of activities, and number of active members. The most important number is the number of *active* members, not the number of members on the book.

Examining the trend in growth at a church is more important than looking at a snapshot in time, because this examination allows us to track trends in participation and relate those trends to growth in the wider community. For instance, has this church's growth plateaued, or is the church growing or declining in membership?

To provide a basis of comparison, in 2002, approximately two-thirds of the 1,050 congregations in the United States that made up the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) had fewer than 150 adult members. Eighty-three percent had fewer than 250 members. In 2002, our entire association had 158,607 adult members and 263,080 children and youth nationwide.

In the United States, there are approximately 300,000 congregations of all faith traditions. A 5-year study of 14,301 houses of worship from 41 faith groups conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religious Research (published in February 2001) found that half of all the congregations in the United States have fewer than 100 regular worshippers, and 52 percent of them are in small towns. The study also found that 51 percent of these congregations, especially on the West Coast, reported growth, and the authors concluded that this growth was a result of community service or outreach.

What is the trend for growth in your church? Has your growth plateaued? If so, for how long? Is your growth on an increase? Are numbers declining? How does your trend compare with the growth of the community at large?

Maturational Growth

Maturational growth is growth in the stature and religious maturity of each member, as well as growth in the ability to nurture and be nurtured. A healthy, growing congregation empowers its members to contribute their unique talents and gifts for the well-being of the whole.

Another illustration of maturational growth in a congregation is people using their own unique talents and gifts and challenging others to use theirs, in order to minister to one another and to the wider community. This concept of ministry is important if a church is to be vital and growing.

As Mead indicates, the congregation must be able to challenge, support, and encourage each one of its members to:

- ✚ Grow in the maturity of their faith
- ✚ Deepen their spiritual roots, and
- ✚ Broaden their religious imaginations.

It is important to emphasize the difference in orientation from one of “church membership” to that of “personal ministry”—from the consumer orientation, where members expect the organization to deliver them spiritual care, to that of contributing one’s unique talents and gifts to others through a sense of personal ministry.

Organic Growth

Organic growth is the growth of the congregation as a functioning community. The congregation is able to maintain itself as a living organism and as an institution that can engage with other institutions of society. Organic growth involves having healthy internal organizational systems, such as

- ✚ Policies, processes, practices, and programs.
- ✚ Recruiting and succession planning practices for leaders.
- ✚ Evaluation mechanisms for programs, volunteers, and paid staff.
- ✚ Practices that deal with conflict openly and honestly.

Organic growth helps the organizational structures of the congregation become a launching pad for both internal and external ministry. It can either facilitate or impede a congregation’s capacity to incorporate new members into active participation in its ministry.

Incarnational Growth

Incarnational growth is the ability to take the meanings and values of the Unitarian Universalist faith and make them real in the world and the society outside the congregation. The congregation grows in its ability to, in the words of UU theologian James Luther Adams, “socially incarnate” what the Unitarian Universalist faith is all about.

To make a difference in the world, a congregation must be able to both build up and send forth. It must

- ✚ Build itself into a religious community in which people can deepen their spiritual lives and be challenged to live out their faith.
- ✚ Send its members out to engage in the world in order to make it more loving and just.

Incarnational growth is how a congregation makes a difference in the world and embodies its message and values to affect lives and the social environment in the larger community. When a congregation manifests its faith and principles in tangible ways, people will be able to state, “Oh, that is the church that” (For example, one of our churches in Portland, Oregon, is known as “the church that is the hate-free zone.”)

The Whole Is Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts

These different kinds of growth interact with one another. For example,

- ✚ A member’s ability to articulate her faith may have an impact on numerical growth as she talks with others in the community.
- ✚ A congregation’s commitment to engaging in the “Welcoming Congregation” process may lead to greater diversity in the wider community, lead to the maturational growth of current members, and have an impact on organic systems within the church.

We may be tempted to focus our attention on one aspect of growth at the expense of others, but it is important to attend to each one of them.



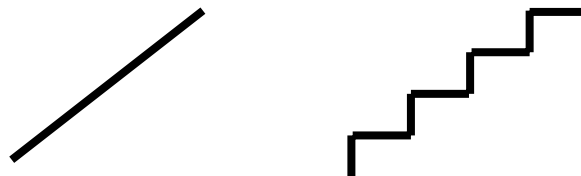
Dynamics of Growth

Much has been written about the dynamics of church growth. According to British anthropologist Robin Dunbar, humans tend to form primary groups of 12 or so and clans of about 50, and this tendency holds within congregations. At about 150 members, a qualitative shift occurs and a true organization comes into being, as evidenced by formal governing, formal communication, formal leadership roles and responsibilities, and explicit procedures. Larger organizations seem to work best when they are built of combinations of these natural-size groups, often referred to in congregational growth literature as *cells*.

The Alban Institute, an organization focusing on effective church management, has identified specific characteristics relating to numerical size and its implications for congregational vitality. Its findings related to church size are summarized as follows:

- ✚ Congregations fall into distinctive size categories and are organized in predictable ways related to numerical size.
- ✚ Average worship service attendance, looking at all ages and all days of the week, is the indicator of size for congregations.
- ✚ Congregations don't grow or decline smoothly but instead tend to plateau at certain predictable levels of attendance.
- ✚ Familiar patterns of behavior must be relinquished for a congregation to grow beyond the attendance plateau.

Over the years, attendance patterns in growing congregations alternate between plateaus and inclines. Intentional effort is required to rise off each plateau and so to increase attendance.



Churches that have been growing steadily tend to hit an attendance plateau, often evidenced by a change in year-to-year attendance. Although the number of visitors, membership, or

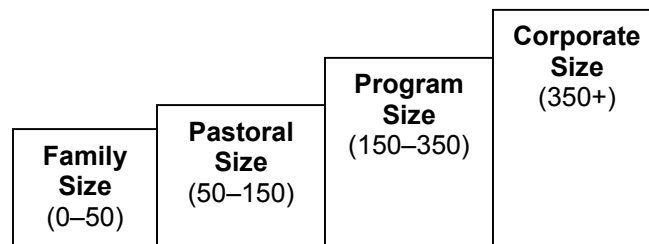
dollars contributed may continue to increase, attendance remains static. An attendance plateau can be caused by the following:

- ✚Community demographics.
- ✚Physical factors (facilities have reached capacity).
- ✚Transition or sociological limits.

Congregational life during a growth transition tends to be stressful and confusing because known “ways of being” are changing. For example,

- ✚Members are constantly coming up against new situations—new ways of relating. Previously valid expectations are no longer reliable. Relationships among members are being reshaped.
- ✚The dynamics of ministry are changing, as are key structures and processes.
- ✚Leaders have a hard time planning because the barometer they once used for predicting and regulating the life of the congregation is no longer reliable.

These difficulties arise both when a church is growing larger and when it is downsizing. Our focus for this workshop is on growth—on moving from a small size to a larger size.



Adults and Children at Weekly Worship





The In-Between Church,
by Alice Mann

Examining Organic Growth

Alice Mann defines two significant dimensions of change in orientation as churches grow numerically:

- ✚ Change from organism to organization.
- ✚ Change from group centered to pastor (or minister) centered.

Organism or Organization?

Because the membership of family- and pastoral-size churches is relatively homogeneous, these churches resemble an **organism** more than an organization. The congregation's identity is largely inherent in the central relationships of the familial bond (family-size church) or the relationship between the ordained leader and the congregation (pastoral-size church).

The variety and complexity of relationships in the program- and corporate-size churches, in contrast, necessitate conscious attention to identity, purpose, structure, role of leaders, and so on. The large number and variety of programs can be unified only through conscious efforts to construct a clear identity for the **organization**.

Group Centered or Minister Centered?

A group-centered church focuses on the congregation as a whole—not on an individual, such as the minister. The family-size church is an example of a **group-centered congregation**, because it often functions as a “committee of the whole” and feels like a large family or tribe. A program-size church may also be group centered, because it focuses more on the teams that run the many programs and less on the minister.

As membership increases, the congregation begins to form networks or small groups that perform the various duties and functions. In the pastoral-size church, these networks are formed from two or more groups of members. In the corporate-size church, the networks are made up of staff, volunteer program heads, and committees.

A **minister-centered church**, however, focuses on the minister. Both the pastoral-size church and the corporate-size church are examples of the minister-centered model, because the minister serves as the *symbolic center* or nucleus for the various networks in these church models. Whether the system of communication is simple, as in the pastoral-size church, or complex, as in the corporate-size church, a center or nucleus is required to bring these networks together. This nucleus or symbolic center is the minister.



Church Characteristics by Size

The Family Church: Up to 50 attending worship weekly.

The family church is also called the *matriarchal church* or *patriarchal church*, or both, because strong lay leaders control interactions. It feels like a tribe or committee of the whole. Often, these fellowships are stable and long lasting.



Membership

- High ownership for survival.
- Groups are usually very homogeneous, with little conflict and little anonymity.
- Members are assimilated by "adoption" and nourished by intimacy.
- Members are very devoted and hardworking. Everyone participates.
- Members know every person by name, and they minister to one another.
- Visitors may find it hard to become a part of the community.

Minister's Role

- The minister, if there is one, is generally part-time. He or she assumes the chaplain role, leading worship and giving pastoral care.
- The minister maintains a direct pastoral relationship with each member and provides home and hospital visits.
- The minister provides quality sermons.
- The minister's term is often short because of funding issues or fit problems in the closeknit community. He or she may find it difficult to work with the matriarch or patriarch and may leave after a short tenure.

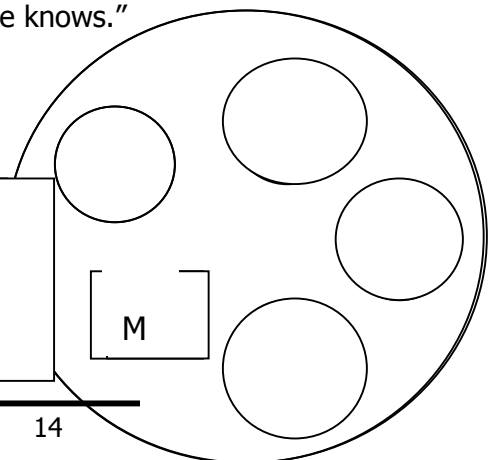
Organizational Structure

- Single-celled organism. The social system resembles an extended biological family.
- The minister acts as a consultant to the matriarch or patriarch.
- The governing board arranges much of the day-to-day life of the congregation.
- The organization often functions as a committee of the whole. Not everyone has equal influence, but members define and change ways of operating in their own characteristic ways.
- Leadership is group centered.
- Communication is informal, usually one to one.

Standards for Leadership

- Leaders collaborate; unity of the team is important.
- Standards (for accountability) are usually set by the whole community and can be voided by objections from any member. The matriarch or patriarch has final authority.
- Few policies or procedures are written, because "everyone knows."
- Decisions are usually based on history.

Matriarch/patriarch are parental figures and control leadership. Minister (M), if present, is pastor and consultant to matriarch and patriarch.



The Pastoral Church: 50 to 150 attending worship weekly.

The pastoral church is a coalition of two or three family and friendship networks unified around the person and role of the minister. The congregation has a sense of family—everyone knows everyone else. The majority of all churches in the United States are this size.



Membership

- Members recognize one another's faces and notice if someone new is present at worship.
- Membership inclusion is easier; more diversity exists.
- Subgroups form in the community like spokes of a wheel, with the minister at the hub.
- Opportunities for conflict grow.
- Members have stronger voices and look to the minister for leadership.
- Most members are involved and take responsibility for the functioning of the church.

Minister's Role

- The minister is central and relates to everyone. Expectations for the minister are high.
- The minister maintains a direct pastoral relationship with each member and cares for members in times of need.
- The minister attends many activities and leads small-group programs.
- The minister coordinates the work of a small leadership circle.
- The minister personally conducts worship.
- The minister recruits and shepherds new members through the membership path.
- Church growth depends on the popularity of the minister.
- As the church grows, it becomes more difficult to maintain a personal relationship with everyone.

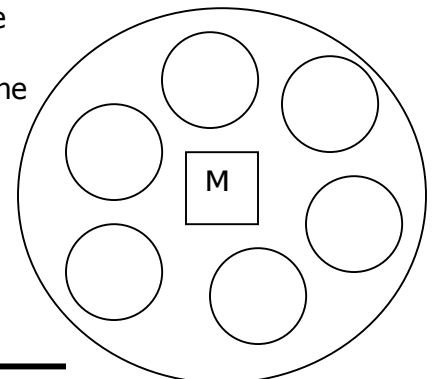
Organizational Structure

- A leadership circle made up of the minister and a small group of lay leaders replaces the matriarch/patriarch paradigm.
- The governing board usually operates like a committee, arranging much of the day-to-day life of the congregation.
- The effectiveness of the leadership circle depends on the minister's ability to delegate authority, assign responsibility, and recognize the accomplishments of others.
- The organization has an organism structure with minister-centered leadership.

Standards for Leadership

- Leaders facilitate.
- Standards for lay leaders and staff are usually informal and not well communicated. Tension may exist around who has authority for decisions and for performance evaluation.
- Standards for leader accountability are usually set by the whole community and can be voided by objections.
- Standards for staff are usually established and maintained by the staff as a team, with the minister at the head of the team.

Minister is central. Leadership circle is minister and small core of lay leaders.



The Program Church: 150 to 350 attending worship weekly.

The program church is known for the quality and variety of its programs. A small team of leaders, led by the minister, creates separate programs for children, youth, couples, seniors, and other age and interest groups.



Membership

- ✚ Entry points through programs are readily available for a wide range of visitors.
- ✚ Members take an active role in the ministry (pastoral care) of the church.
- ✚ Many interest groups, committees, and programs emerge to create the sense of belonging that people miss as the church grows. Members sometimes feel loyal to a smaller group rather than to the larger church community.
- ✚ A newcomer may find it more difficult to feel attached.

Minister's Role

- ✚ The minister is seen as a leader, shares information, and provides continuity across program areas.
- ✚ The minister must recruit, equip, develop, and inspire a small group of program leaders, both paid and unpaid.
- ✚ The minister spends less time with members and newcomers.
- ✚ The minister takes on administrator duties, delegates, or burns out. The presence of additional paid staff is essential.
- ✚ Lay leaders minister to one another in a healthy church.

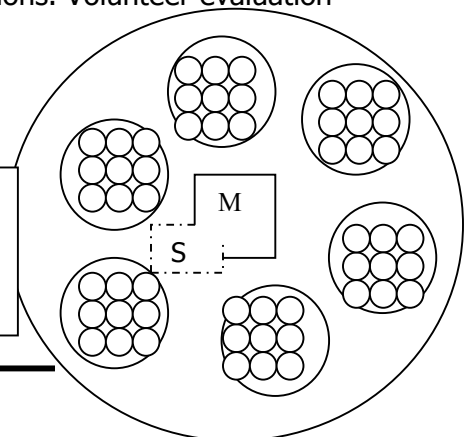
Organizational Structure

- ✚ Stretched cell structure, with many activities and programs expanding faster than the resources required to support them.
- ✚ The church has an organizational structure in which the variety and complexity of relationships require attention to matters of identity, purpose, structure, and the role of leaders.
- ✚ Important decisions are made by a relatively small number of the members.
- ✚ Decision making is broadly distributed within the wider leadership circle (perhaps 50 people).
- ✚ Two-thirds of program-size churches operate with no more than three full-time paid staff of any kind. About 40 percent of all churches of this size make extensive use of part-time workers.
- ✚ The church has a group-centered structure.

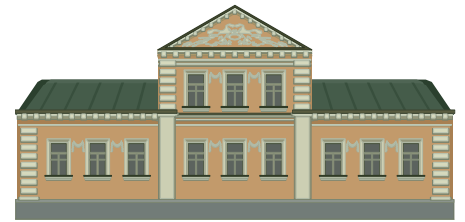
Standards for Leadership

- ✚ Leaders coordinate.
- ✚ Staff members view themselves as participants in a common cause.
- ✚ Standards for staff are formalized, as are performance expectations. Volunteer evaluation strategies take shape.
- ✚ Core lay leaders are experienced in leadership roles, causing processes to be formalized.
- ✚ Standards must be consistent and be communicated across subgroups.

Many cells of activity, headed up by lay leaders. Minister (M) and part-time or full-time staff members (S).



The Corporate Church: 350+ attending worship weekly.



The corporate church is known for excellence in worship and music, as well as for the range and diversity of its programs. Specialized ministries provide for narrowly identified groups of people. Half of the individuals in the United States who participate regularly in the life of a congregation are found in congregations with 400 or more regular participants.

Membership

- ✚ Visitor follow-up and new-member tracking systems are very intentional.
- ✚ Members are willing to sacrifice personal connections in favor of variety in programming and excellent worship services with professional musicians.
- ✚ Members must join smaller communities or feel disconnected.
- ✚ Leaders generate energy and enthusiasm.
- ✚ Distinct subcongregations often form around multiple worship services.
- ✚ Loyalty and responsibility to the church as a whole must be fostered.
- ✚ Most members find spiritual support in small groups, as well as from lay visitors.

Minister's Role

- ✚ The senior minister is a symbol of unity and stability.
- ✚ The minister acts as head of staff and must be skilled at working with diverse staff members.
- ✚ The minister spends quality time on sermon preparation and worship planning.
- ✚ The minister is expected to be visible in the community and to recruit new members.
- ✚ The minister knows fewer members on a personal level.
- ✚ The minister provides pastoral support to leaders.

Organizational Structure

- ✚ Decision making is carried out by a multilayered structure of staff, boards, and committees.
- ✚ The church has an organizational structure in which the variety and complexity of relationships require attention to identity, purpose, structure, and the role of leaders.
- ✚ About a third of corporate-size churches have at least ten ongoing groups in addition to their classes, committees, and choirs.
- ✚ The structure is minister centered rather than group centered because of the need for a skilled head of staff, administrator, and symbolic presence to unite the congregation.

Standards for Leadership

- ✚ Leaders provide a symbolic presence, unite the congregation, and dictate policy.
- ✚ Staff members serve as advisors to the leaders (board president or minister).
- ✚ Several staff members represent special interest groups.
- ✚ The senior minister bears major responsibility for staff performance, sets standards, and provides feedback to individuals and the group.
- ✚ Volunteers are recruited for specific reasons; their performance is monitored and shaped.
- ✚ Leadership development becomes a unifying force across subgroups.
- ✚ Formal staff and volunteer evaluation systems are in place.

Many cells. Senior minister (SM) unites church and leads several full- and part-time staff members, and core of lay leaders.

