

Blessings and Challenges in Big Church Ministries

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F. Scott Fitzgerald began one of his short stories by observing, "The rich are different from you and me." To which Ernest Hemingway replied, "Yes, they have more money." What did Hemingway mean? Did he mean there is no real difference between the wealthy and the rest of us? They just "have more money"? Or did he mean having a lot of money *does* change people? And if so, how?

We could, I suppose, adapt Hemingway's comment to say: "Big churches are different from other congregations. They have more members." True. But it is not just that they are bigger. It is not just that a congregation of a thousand members is twice as large as a church of 500. Just because St. John's-by-the-Kwik-Trip has twice as many members as Shepherd-of-the-Off-Ramp does not mean that St. John's has twice as many people at worship or in Bible class, or that its Lutheran elementary school has twice as many students, or that each year it confirms twice as many adults, or that its budget is twice as large. As churches get bigger, older, more comfortable, more institutional, they change.

You may be familiar with Lyle Schaller's comparisons of different sized churches. The truly small fellowship he likens to a cat: independently-minded, self-sufficient. The small church is comparable to a sociable collie, which adores his master and craves affection in return. The mid-sized church is like unto a garden: the poor gardener never finds time enough to finish the weeding. The mid-sized church that's expanded to an awkward (perhaps adolescent?) size is similar to the house next to the garden: more complex, requiring greater maintenance. The large church (225-400 at worship) can be

compared to a mansion that requires a large staff of specialized servants to maintain it. The huge church (450-700) is comparable to a ranch, markedly diverse, packed with activities, many of which occur at the same time; in this church it is impossible to attend everything that is going on. Finally, those churches with more than 700 at worship are virtual nations unto themselves, sometimes labeled mega churches.¹

In defending his congregational analogies, Schaller remarked,

The congregation averaging twenty people at worship is not a miniature version of the congregation that includes one hundred at worship. They are different orders of creation....When a congregation moves from one size bracket to another, it also changes some of its basic characteristics. When long-time members say, "It's not like it used to be," they are correct in their appraisal. It is different.²

"One of the most important responsibilities of the senior minister," Schaller commented concerning the ranch-sized congregation,

is to help the members, and especially the lay leadership, realize that this is a ranch and must be operated like a ranch. A big source of frustration for the senior minister is the large number of leaders, often including some staff members, who insist this is really a mansion or a house or a garden or a zoo and fail to see the larger picture.³

That is one good reason for us to conclude that big churches *are* different. Here's

another. (And this is something I cannot prove statistically or support with expert quotes; I can only offer my take on things.) In a previous generation, the typical (perhaps the ideal) career pathway for a minister would go like this: after graduation from Seminary, he would receive his first call to an outlying district (usually in one of those rectangular-shaped states west of New Ulm), where he would serve two or three years in what both he and his congregation understood to be a pastoral apprenticeship. In time he would receive and accept a call to a large, established congregation in the WELS heartland, where he would serve, God willing, for the remaining 35 or 40 or 45 years of his ministry. Some pastors stayed long enough to baptize parents, their children, and the grandchildren of many members. Some pastors came to assist, and later replace, their fathers.

That used to happen a lot; it still does, occasionally, but not nearly as often. Why not? Partly because congregations are (if I may generalize) a lot harder on their pastors than they used to be. **It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful**, Paul said (**1 Corinthians 4:1**), but for Boomers and Xers and Millennials, “faithful” is not always good enough. “Dynamic,” “visionary,” “creative,” “exciting,” “enthusiastic” are now essential components in the job description; “faithful,” alone, won’t cut it. Besides that, big churches simply do not look as attractive to young pastors as they once did. You know the litany of complaints against the big congregation: mountains of administrative minutiae; meetings without end; a long, imposing list of shut-ins; a longer, even more forbidding list of delinquents; headaches with Christian day school students, parents, and sometimes teachers; a hundred hospital calls a month; and two dozen funerals a year. Some years in my second parish I performed more funerals than were conducted in entire synodical *districts*.

So, a young, energetic pastor may accept a call to the big church, only to leave three or five or eight years later. Or he may never accept a big church call at all. Teaching looks more

interesting. Foreign missions sound more exotic. Or he may just prefer a stateside call in a congregation small enough that he can be close to all his members, or new enough that he can start from scratch.

Yet many of us serve in and belong to large congregations. Maybe it is a matter of circumstance. Maybe your big church is the only one you have been a member of, or the only WELS church in town. More likely, if you belong to a big church, you do so by choice. You would not be happy in a parish so small that, as one wag put it, when the pastor says, “Dearly beloved,” all the women in the front row blush. There are decided blessings in the big church, but each blessing brings with it a challenge.

Preaching in the Big Congregation

The most obvious difference in big congregations is that every Sunday they worship with hundreds, maybe a thousand or more, members and visitors. Preaching teachers used to tell future pastors, “It is in the sermon that week in and week out [a pastor] addresses the largest number of people.”⁴ If that is true in smaller congregations, where a pastor could conceivably call on every one of his members in their homes *every month*, think how much more that is true in the big church, where the sermon is the primary contact a pastor has with his people, and the only contact many of his people have all week with the gospel. (That’s not how it *should* be, but we know that’s often how it is.)

What an extraordinary blessing in the big church! Each Sunday, among hundreds of brothers and sisters in the faith, we are reminded that the great God of the universe, whose friendship we shattered by our sin, chose to become our Brother, shoulder our burdens, take upon Himself our guilt, become our Substitute, provide the righteousness we could never give Him, trade places with us under divine justice, die so we can live.

What a powerful place the pulpit is—for sharing the good news and for shaping the

attitudes of a congregation! It was not an overstatement when preaching teachers also said, “Every good thing in your congregation can somehow be traced back to the pulpit. And every deficiency in your congregational life finds its source, somehow, in the pulpit.”

We still say things like that in this church body. We have not joined the great lament over the decline of preaching and the powerlessness of the pulpit. It is still a significant day for students at our seminary when they preach their first sermons in homiletics class and at local congregations. But do we not need to be concerned that the crush of other activities and responsibilities, particularly in a big church, can crowd out the preparation time needed to do commendable pulpit work? When a seminary student first learns to preach, he may wonder, “How will I ever be able to stand up in front of a group of people and talk *for 20 minutes?*” But before too long it is no sweat standing up and talking for 20 minutes; then the big question becomes, “How will I ever be able to come up with *something worth saying*—and *worth listening to*—week after week?”

If we are going to have good preaching in our big churches, congregational leaders must, in concrete ways, provide preachers with the study time necessary to do the concentrated, unglamorous-looking labor where good sermons—textual, biblically sound, organized, relevant, engaging—are hammered out. Preaching used to be a flowery, oratorical thing; one is reminded of the famous 19th-century pulpit master who, it was said, could make women weep at the mere sound of his voice pronouncing “Mesopotamia.” Sophisticated sound systems have made it possible for a preacher in even the hugest church building to preach conversationally—as though he were talking just to you.

The kind of preaching needed for the nineties and beyond is somewhat different [than the old, formal, flowery style]: personal, intense, eye-to-eye, well-researched and yet down-to-earth, poured out from the heart, with the smell of spontaneity, clearly outlined,

simple, logical, with real applications to real life, talking and thinking out loud with your friends rather than orating at an audience, using all the storyteller’s arts, even humor, radiating the joy of being a member of the royal family of Jesus Christ.⁵

But a preaching style less oratorical and more conversational is not born of haphazard preparation. It flows from a thorough familiarity with the text, and that takes time. A pastor who gains a reputation for being *everywhere* and being busy doing *everything* all week will not get that time. Church leaders have to help him get it.

Richard Caemmerer’s *Preaching for the Church* should still be required re-reading for every pastor. “Sometimes,” he wrote, “[the preacher] may find himself writing: ‘I want my hearer to understand...’ or ‘I want my hearer to realize better than before the truth of the statement that...’ Notice that then he has not been thinking of a goal at all. He has committed the old and easy fumble of confusing goal and means.”⁶ Better understanding of the text, the context, the story, the doctrine, is only the means toward the goal. The goal is always stronger trust in God’s promises, and greater resolve to live the new life in Christ. If our preaching is tidy, accurate, even interesting, but seems not to be going anywhere, it may be because we have confused means with goal. As Harry Emerson Fosdick once put it (in one of his few theological remarks with which we would agree), “The purpose of preaching is not to explain a subject but to achieve an object.”

Francis Rossow argues for greater room for doing something different once in a while.

I am always uneasy whenever someone prefaces a discussion of creativity in preaching with the reminder that ultimately, of course, the success of the preaching venture rests in God’s hands, not in human effort....The reminder... may be a “cop-out.” The implication seems to be that since the results of our preaching are all God’s doing, we can

continue in our customary vague, lackluster and soporific style of sermonizing.⁷

If 50 or 51 weeks a year your pastor's preaching is orderly, organized, sticks to the text, but a bit predictable, but then, one or two weeks a year, he tries something different—a first-person dialogue for Lent, or a chancel drama, or maybe even a creative adaptation of a nursery rhyme, or role playing⁸—support him. Be one of his defenders. He will already have detractors.

Staff Ministry in the Big Church

The vast majority of churches in the WELS—and this is even more true in most other church bodies—conduct all their affairs with a paid staff of one. The pastor is the only full-time guy on the premises. Almost everything that needs doing, he is there to do it. Another great blessing of the big church is that a pastor need not be the Lone Ranger. (He may insist on functioning as the Lone Ranger, but that is a different problem—one, by the way, well worth addressing.) The staff at a big church may include another pastor or two, a vicar, grade school educators and a Lutheran elementary school principal, perhaps a student teacher, a preschool administrator and staff, a director of adult Christian education, a youth and family minister, a music minister, a minister of administration—not to mention a church secretary or secretaries and a custodial staff. Plus a host of volunteers, often managed with remarkable efficiency.

I recall so many marvelous men and women who shared the ministry with me: Ron, my senior associate, who every year we were together saved me from at least five years' worth of stupid mistakes; who unfailingly urged me to dream bigger dreams; whose ministry radiated the joyful optimism voiced by Ethel Waters: "Jesus don't sponsor no flops." Arnie (everyone over 12 years old called him "Arnie," with no trace of disrespect), the grade school principal who, with patience, caring, and gentle humor, helped heal a bruised congregation during a painful transition in its history. Gary and

Cheryl and Shirleen, who employed their abundant musical gifts to enrich congregational worship and who taught little kids what a good thing it is to make a joyful noise to the Lord. Max, truly a freethinker, never one to offer blind submission to any sort of authority, yet one who demonstrated uncommon sensitivity toward so many children who never quite fit the mold. Cheryl and Shirleen again, and Nancy, women whom the Lord had not blessed with a husband and children of their own, but who brought a mother's love to their classrooms. Lois and Marge and Carol, so consistent, so longsuffering, with their Lord's little ones. A church councilman like Charlie, who would never let us get away with the notion that second best should somehow be good enough for a Savior like Jesus. Steady leaders—Leroy and Don come to mind—who could be counted on to right your mental and emotional ship when it had gone off keel. And so many hard workers, like Leona. When Luther wrote that faith "is a living, busy, active, mighty thing" that "does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them,"⁹ he was thinking of people like Leona.

How good and pleasant it is when brothers [and sisters!] live [and serve] together in unity! says the Psalm (133:1).

But isn't the flip side also true? How sad and destructive it is when brothers and sisters coexist in strife—when they mistrust and misunderstand one another, when they damage their ministries and poison one another's reputations and frustrate their congregations. One observation: When *members* of a congregation feud, the big church is usually so busy, and there is so much inertia, that the feuding does little damage to the church's ministry. But when *leaders* feud (or when leaders fail), it sends huge ripples, and the heartache goes on so much longer, in the big congregation. An African proverb applies here: "When elephants fight, the grass suffers."

Maybe it is true, to paraphrase Mark Twain, that bad news can travel halfway around the

world while good news is still putting on its boots, but doesn't it seem that we hear an awful lot of tales about tensions between pastor and pastor, between pastor and teacher, between teacher and principal, between pastor and principal, between church council member and called worker, etc., etc.? It's an easy generalization to say Satan works hardest inside the church to cause dissension and discontent. It cannot have enhanced pastor-teacher relationships in the past when one or two men each year transferred from the pastoral education track to *Dumb Man's Last Chance*, although the insulted parties usually smiled gallantly. I shudder to recall how rudely we treated each year's new crop of Seminary Juniors who had come to us from Bethany (some of whom were far better synodically connected than most of us). We distrusted WELS Lutheran Collegians as hopeless *Enthusiasts*. Although doctrinally we insist that the one gospel ministry may take a variety of legitimate and useful forms, what we practice more often suggests that all other offices and functions in the church derive their legitimacy through the pastor. It has been a long time since a pastor could expect to be the only person in his congregation who had gone to college, yet the myth seems at times to persist among us that a seminary degree makes one competent—even expert—in every phase of human endeavor.

It is a great gift of God to belong to a congregation that has a staff of men and women in its service. **There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord (1 Corinthians 12:4-5).**

The Care of Souls in the Big Church

The membership list of the large congregation is pages and pages long, containing hundreds of names. Updating it requires continual effort. I was grateful that our Synod conducted its massive stewardship effort *Reaching Out* two decades ago, but not for reasons you might think. During the vacancy at my second parish, prior to my arrival, the administrative procedures necessary to conduct *Reaching Out* moved one of the

councilmen there (Charlie, if I remember correctly) to update the congregation's mailing list. As a result, when I wrote my first newsletter, I was fortunate to send it only to about 10 dead people instead of the 30 or 40 to whom I surely would have sent it had that effort not been made.

But what a great blessing to be called as leaders of large churches, to serve so many of God's saints with Word and sacrament! The longer pastors and church councilmen and board members work at it, the more those many names cease being merely alphabetically arranged lists, and the more their faces and histories and personalities become clear. A most impressive feature of leaders in the big church is how they come to know all those names, those stories, those hurts, and yet all the grace God has lavished on them—not in a gossipy sort of way, but because they know and love their fellow saints. How impressive, too, when councilmen and other congregational leaders know the culture of their church and their community so well that the plans and dreams they have for their congregation will neither discourage nor underestimate the souls in their care.

What was once a controversial question—Is the pastor a shepherd or a coach?¹⁰—seems less important to ask today. We have an ever-expanding assortment of new plans, new schemes, new modes, new paradigms—the pastor as rancher, subdividing his flock into corrals; the pastor as CEO, directing the myriad activities of the parish through a complex administrative maze; MBWA (management by walking around), and more. But “tragic to relate,” observes John Stott, is that “many [pastors] are essentially administrators, whose symbols of ministry are the office rather than the study, and the telephone rather than the Bible.”¹¹

Why did our pastors go into the ministry of the church? And what do we want our pastors' duties to look like? Do we want them to be CEOs, only in an ecclesiastical setting? Did they eagerly desire the office of pastor so that they could labor primarily in the administration of the church, designing full-

color charts and graphs, devising detailed five- and ten-year management by objective documents, sampling (or maybe even designing) the latest church software? Or did they go into the ministry because they loved people? Was any young man ever persuaded to become a pastor after hearing an inspiring recruitment sermon describing all the exciting church board meetings he could attend? or because he watched his pastor enter the latest congregational statistics into the database? Don't we get nervous when the body of believers seems to be treated more like pieces on a chess board, or customer units to be managed, rather than people to be loved and served?

I would never argue against the value of church administration, or labor-saving devices such as the computer. At the risk of oversimplification, however, let me suggest that every administrative method, every newly improved software package and office device and seminar, is valuable only to the extent that it frees pastors and other spiritual leaders for the real work of doing one-on-one, heart-to-heart ministry. And administrative methodology, ongoing ministerial education, and the latest upgrade from Microsoft, no matter how efficient, become detrimental when they rob leaders of the time they would have devoted to being with God's people, serving them with Word and sacrament, offering them a sympathetic ear, praying with them, and loving them into the kingdom.

The Big Church Impact on the Community

Consider the newly organized mission group, so tiny that all its members can fit comfortably into a rented meeting room each week. Their task is to make their presence known in an enormous metropolitan sprawl, in a corner of the United States where the local population is unfamiliar with Lutherans. Already there is a religious smorgasbord out there—hundreds of denominations and assemblies and conventions and fellowships and parishes, each claiming possession of the truth, each seeking to develop the necessary market strategy in order to beat the

competition in offering Boomers and Busters and Xers the most user-friendly spiritual environment. How does such a little flock crack the market? Niche-marketing? Massive advertising? Telephone outreach? Or something truly risky?

The above difficulties are not shared by large congregations, particularly big churches with long histories in small towns—which the Wisconsin Synod has hundreds of. The challenge for big churches is more likely to be that they already *have* a reputation in the community—which may not be entirely flattering, accurate, or centered in the gospel. “Aren't you that church that's against...?” or “Is your congregation the one where they won't let you...?” You may fill in your own blanks.

Yet even when saddled with a negative reputation, big churches have the potential to make a great impact on their community. You may not agree with the proof passage Schaller used, but his observation seems on target:

[One]...reason why large churches deserve special attention is found in the imperative of Jesus, “Every one to whom much is given, of him much will be required, and of him to whom men commit much they will demand much more” (Luke 12:48). Denominational leaders, nonchurchgoers, community leaders, members of small congregations, and the members of large congregations place heavy demands upon those large churches that have obviously been given much.... Large churches are often seen as the pacesetters in any community or denominational program.¹²

The big church can make an impact *as a corporate entity*. Your church steeple may be the most recognizable landmark in town. Your church bells provide an expected and welcome sound. Your well-maintained buildings and attractive grounds beckon people to visit. The high quality of your worship, the intensity of your educational

programs, and the commitment of your community outreach may already have done much to overcome past misunderstandings about Boy Scouts or pancake suppers. The large church can be a good neighbor, particularly when it becomes clear that the church cares about its neighbors *not for what it wants to get from them but for what it wishes to offer them.*

The big church can also make an impact on the community because it is made up of *so many individuals*, who leave the building when worship is over and return to their community. It isn't so much that they *go* to church, as that they remember they *are* the church wherever they go.

Pharisees, Muslims and Mormons may also avoid public evils, but "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" are the best nonverbal witness of God's love to the lost in our relationships. Positive Christianity-in-action is the warm, clear light that attracts others....And should not the application of light "set on a hill" and "out from under the bowl" be an exhortation to be light and shed light in the service roles and public forums of the community? Too easily Christians make their church a fortress in which to hide from the world and a commune that encompasses all of their social relationships.¹³

One of our US presidents early in this century (Harding, perhaps, or maybe Hoover) observed that no new president comes into office with the luxury of a clean slate. How true also for the leaders of large congregations. We inherit the history, the decisions, the successes, but also the failures, of those who have gone before us. We might wish for a different history, with different decisions. But that is to see the glass half empty. St. Paul took the positive view:

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who

waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose....For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. (1 Corinthians 3:6-9)

¹ Lyle E. Schaller, *Looking into the Mirror: Self-Appraisal in the Local Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 14-37.

² Schaller, *Looking in the Mirror*, 23.

³ Schaller, *Looking in the Mirror*, 31.

⁴ Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge, *Preach the Gospel: a Textbook for Homiletics* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982), xii.

⁵ Mark A. Jeske, "Worship in the WELS—Changing Practices," paper presented to the Southeast Wisconsin District Convention, Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, (June 12, 1990), 8.

⁶ Richard R. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 36.

⁷ Francis C. Rossow, book review of *Creative Preaching: Finding the Words*, by Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Concordia Journal* 7 (September 1981): 216.

⁸ Francis C. Rossow, *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1983), 89-155.

⁹ Martin Luther, "Prefaces to the New Testament: Romans," *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1960), 35:370.

¹⁰ See Armin W. Schuetze, "A Shepherd or a Coach?" *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 74 (January 1977): 3-12.

¹¹ John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 124.

¹² Lyle E. Schaller, *The Multiple Staff and the Larger Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 12.

¹³ Paul Kelm, letter to *The Northwestern Lutheran* 73 (September 15, 1986): 313.