

Shoes and Churches that Fit Well

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Shoe shopping daunts me...

As I wandered down the many aisles, a young saleswoman must have noticed my dazed look. She discreetly advised me, “This is the women section. Men’s shoes are over there”, pointing to a large sign that hung from the ceiling- “Men’s Shoes”. All running shoes look the same to me. It was only then I noticed the high heeled shoes display near me.

Having found the right section, my decisions began: foot size (for the record, I am a steady 8.5), width (wide, narrow or regular), purpose (work, pleasure, running, court or walking), water resiliency, colour... and most of all, that indefinable but essential “feel”. How do they feel?

- Amidst the dizzying array of ministry style options, each local church also needs to find the “right fit and feel” for their ministry-the right “shoe size”. Choices include: staffing alignment, governance structures, decision making processes, ministry priorities, vision casting, and of course, worship styles. The church consultant, Gary McIntosh said, churches are like shoes, “One size does not fit all”. (One Size Doesn’t Fit All, Revel Publishers, Grand Rapids: 1999)
- Smaller congregations (generally under 150 attendees) have a different “fit” than medium sized churches and decidedly different than large churches (250 and beyond). For our purposes here, “larger churches” have a weekly attendance of *at least* 250 and some well beyond that number. They also have multiple staff and a minimal annual budget of at least \$750,000.

After decades of interactions with churches, five factors distilled in my mind to discern the ‘right fit’ for a healthy larger church. I am grateful to Susan Beaumont for her book Inside the Large Congregation (Rowan and Littlefield, Lanham Maryland: 2011) whose insights helped me in this process for helping congregations find a comfortable fit. All churches want to “walk worthy of their calling.” Large

churches generally fall into several attendance groupings (250-400, 400-800, 800-1200 and over 1200):

Lead Pastoral Competencies

- Pastoring a larger church requires unique skill sets, distinct from smaller churches. While some pastors can move fluidly between vastly different congregational sizes, most clergy have a preferred sweet spot where they fit well. In my consulting work, incorrect pastoral fit was often a cause for significant ministry rub. Among other traits, effective larger church pastors:
 - Excel at preaching;
 - Demonstrate public confidence and presence;
 - Possess a strong self awareness;
 - Grasp the importance of strategic supervision and team work;
 - Possess an organizational flexibility that can adjust as needed;
 - Work well with the Board/Leadership Team;
 - Keep the big picture of values and vision clearly in focus.

Staff Collaboration and Team work

- Chemistry fit. Every church pastoral/staff team has tensions, but healthy larger churches show the ability to collaborate around budgets, volunteer recruitment and space allocations.
- Competencies. Large church pastoral staff have well honed specific skills. They buy into the vision and values of *this congregation*. They live within clear lines of reporting, yet embrace teamwork.
- Character. Each pastoral staff embraces their current job description without longing for promotions or new ministry roles. They know how to serve, share and stay focused on their portfolios.

1. Governance and Board Effectiveness

Church boards of larger congregations need to discern the tension between management and governance.

- Management focuses upon current ministry needs, including all the minutia of ministry;
- Governance focuses upon the future, such as ministry goals over the next 3-5 years, the development of applicable policies and procedures, due attention to financial management and the vital “soft ability” to discern the overall health of the church;
- However, even effective boards who want to focus on the future sometimes find themselves drawn back to management issues especially during times of conflict or financial stresses;
- They give freedom for the pastoral team and volunteers to do the work of ministry and pursue the ministry goals; they have clear communication and feedback strategies within the diverse ministries of the church;
- They engage primarily with the Lead Pastor.

2. Effective welcoming processes and community development

Although each church welcomes newcomers in their own personal way, larger churches have strategies that guide the newcomer from their initial “welcome booth” visit, through orientation to a fully engaged member and participant in the life of the church. Larger churches also give focus and budget allocation to the vital role of small groups within the church, recognizing the unique nature of the diverse smaller groups within the church

3. Forming and Executing Vision Strategies

- In smaller churches, vision casting is decidedly organic and frankly comes from almost anywhere in the congregation.
- However, visioning in the larger church emerges clearly from the top through the lead pastor, supported by the pastoral team, discerned

among the church board and embraced by a core of committed lay leaders.

- Ironically, larger churches need to be intentional in vision casting and commitment. Although they enjoy all the resources and energy needed to pursue a future vision, large churches can easily become preoccupied with current success and contentment with present ministries. Larger churches need:
 - a clear and unique mission identity;
 - Articulated values (6-8) that guide ministry decisions and clarify church culture;
 - Compelling goals and measurements;
 - an adjustable structure and culture that enables the fulfilment of the ministry;
 - A Lead pastor with an insatiable desire for more Kingdom impact.

Several Closing remarks:

- These five factors often overlap. If one factor is strained, others are as well.
- The healthy relationship between the Lead Pastor and the Board remains central to the life of the congregation.
- An intermediate sized group of anywhere from 50-125 will function as the voice of the congregation, thus acting as a mediator between the board, pastoral team and the larger congregation.
- Large churches need “contentment radar” to discern when we have become overly content with the current and blasé about greater impact.