

Pastoring Small Congregations: The Impact of Congregational Size on Clergy Experiences

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About 300,000 worshipers in over 2,000 congregations participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (www.USCongregations.org) conducted by the Research Services office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in April 2001. Congregations were selected by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago using hyper-network sampling to be representative of congregations across the country. In each participating congregation, three types of surveys were completed: a survey distributed to all attendees during worship services; a congregational profile completed by a key informant that gathered factual information about the congregation's programs, staffing, finances, and size; and a leader survey completed by the pastor, priest, rabbi, or other key leader. The leader survey was sponsored by the Pulpit & Pew Project (funded by Lilly Endowment and coordinated by Jack Carroll at Duke University). It was conducted by NORC by telephone shortly after the attendee survey took place. A total of 909 leaders took part in the survey.

This paper examines the impact of congregational size on clergy experiences in ministry and relies on the responses of 269 leaders serving mainline Protestant churches, 354 leaders serving conservative Protestant churches, and 48 leaders serving churches in historically black denominations. Catholic priests and leaders in non-Christian congregations were eliminated from the analyses to ease comparisons. For analyses presented here, respondents were divided into four groups based on congregational size reported by the leader (average worship attendance): small churches with under 100 (n=124), mid-size churches with 100 to 350 (n=344), large churches with 351 to 1,000 (n=143), and mega churches with more than 1,000 (n=45).

Findings show a number of differences in who pastors small congregations, but surprisingly few differences in their experiences in ministry. Leaders in smaller congregations felt called to ministry later in life, are more likely to be second-career pastors, and are less likely to have graduate theological training. More small-church pastors serve multiple congregations and/or are bi-vocational pastors. Their benefit packages (e.g., salary, housing, pension contribution) are less generous than those of leaders in larger churches. Pastors in smaller congregations spend fewer hours per week on pastoral tasks (specifically, administration, pastoral counseling, attending church meetings, and training people for ministry), but the about the same time on non-work tasks (e.g., family life, recreation).

More pastors in larger churches report that people in the congregation often make too many demands on them, yet there was no difference based on church size in reported isolation and loneliness, stress due to congregational challenges, thoughts of leaving pastoral ministry, or physical and emotional health. Small-church pastors were somewhat more likely to have doubted their call to ministry.

Satisfaction with aspects of one's call is similar among pastors in different size churches, with only a few exceptions: small church pastors are less satisfied with their salary and benefits and their overall effectiveness.

Figure 1: Hours Spent on Pastoral Tasks by Congregational Size

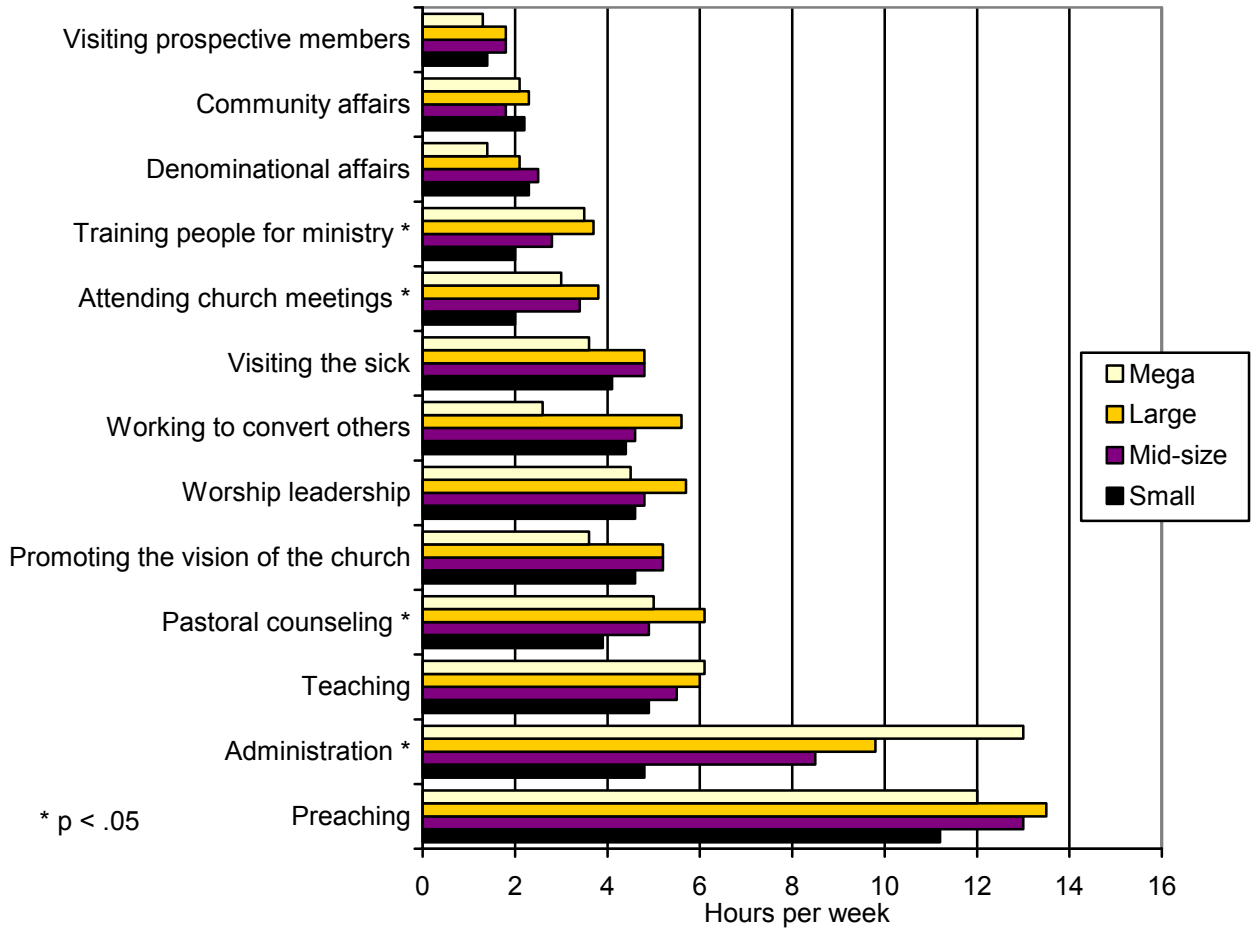


Figure 2: Hours Spent on Non-Pastoral Tasks by Congregational Size

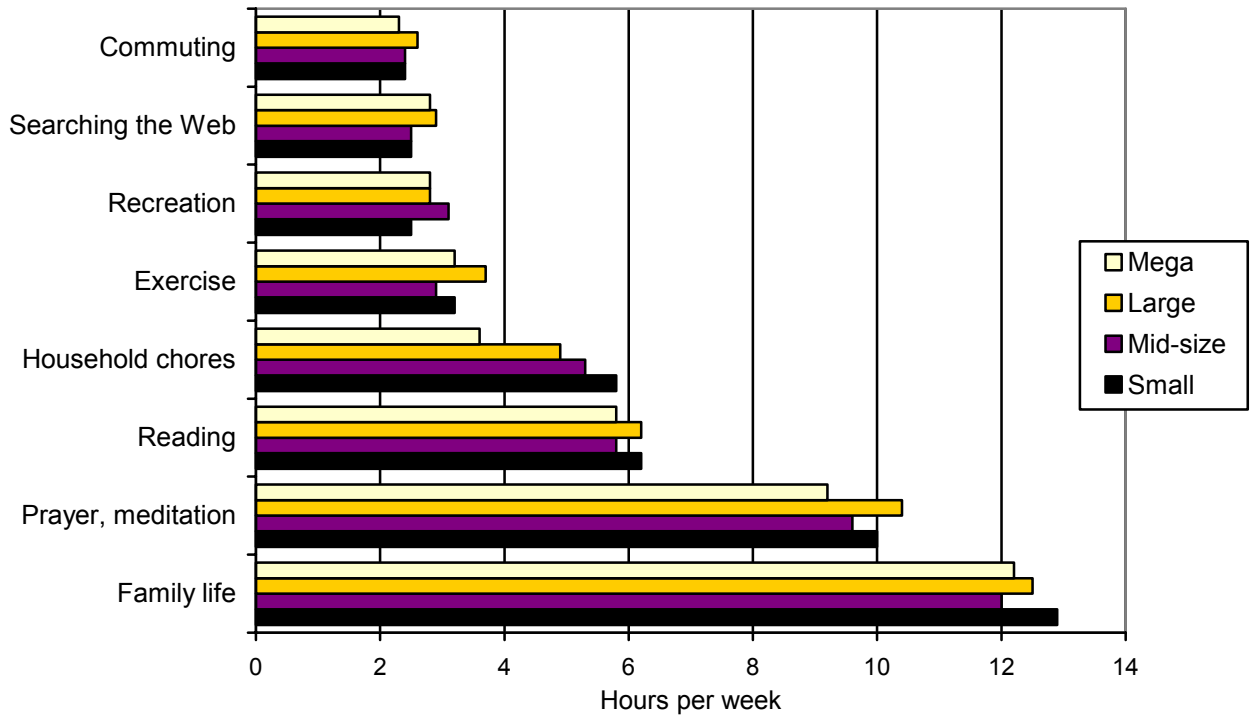


Figure 3: Total Work/Non-Work Hours by Congregational Size

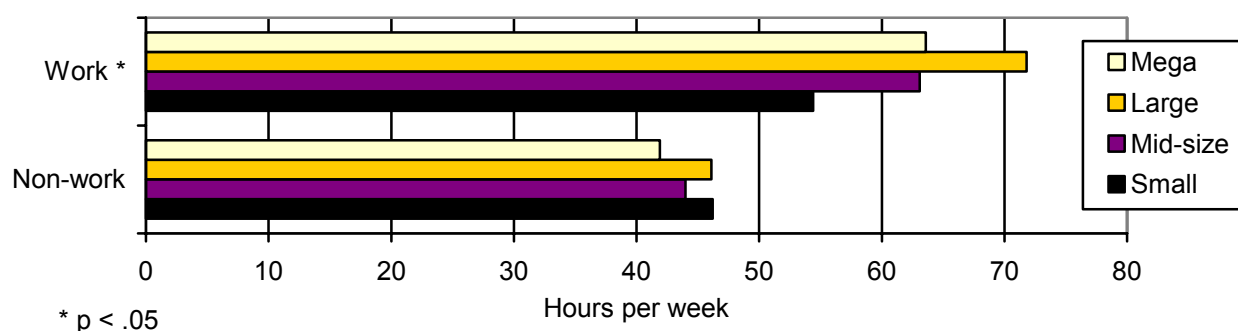


Table 2: Outlook on Ministry by Congregational Size

	Small (under 100) n=124	Mid-Size (100-350) n=344	Large (351-1,000) n=143	Mega (over 1,000) n=45	
Leadership style:					
I make decisions; members follow	6%	6%	6%	16%	**
I inspire others to action	66%	75%	80%	78%	
Lay leaders take the lead; I strongly influence their decisions	16%	11%	11%	7%	
Lay leaders make most decision; I empower them to implement decisions	12%	8%	4%	0%	
Managing change:					
I keep things stirred up; challenge lay leaders with new ideas	26%	32%	36%	49%	*
I keep things running smoothly; introduce change gradually	74%	68%	64%	51%	
Responding to changing world:					
Leaders should be innovative	55%	72%	75%	84%	***
Leaders keep focus on traditions	45%	28%	25%	16%	
Time with lay leaders:					
Regularly discuss and define future needs and directions of the church.....	53%	58%	66%	61%	n.s.
Largely focus on keeping things going and keeping the church functioning effectively.....	47%	42%	34%	39%	

Table 3: Clergy Problems by Congregational Size

	Small (under 100) n=124	Mid-Size (100-350) n=344	Large (351-1,000) n=143	Mega (over 1,000) n=45	
“Great problem” or “somewhat problem” on a day-to-day basis:					
Lack of agreement about pastoral role.....	31%	31%	28%	18%	n.s.
Difficulty having a private life	31%	47%	50%	49%	n.s.
Finding time for recreation, relaxation, and reflection	52%	64%	76%	62%	**
Relationships with other clergy or staff in the congregation	4%	10%	15%	9%	*
People relate to me differently because I’m a pastor	32%	28%	38%	31%	n.s.
Difficulty reaching people with the gospel.....	86%	74%	76%	67%	**
“Very often” or “often” in the last year:					
People here made too many demands on you..	11%	26%	40%	24%	***
People here were critical or you/your work.....	7%	9%	12%	2%	*
Experienced stress because of this criticism....	13%	17%	21%	7%	**
Felt lonely and isolated in your work	18%	18%	20%	16%	n.s.
Experienced stress due to congregational challenges.....	31%	44%	45%	40%	n.s.
Felt work here limited time with children	22%	29%	34%	26%	n.s.
Spouse resentful about time required	10%	21%	14%	15%	*
Spouse resentful about financial situation	14%	10%	3%	7%	n.s.

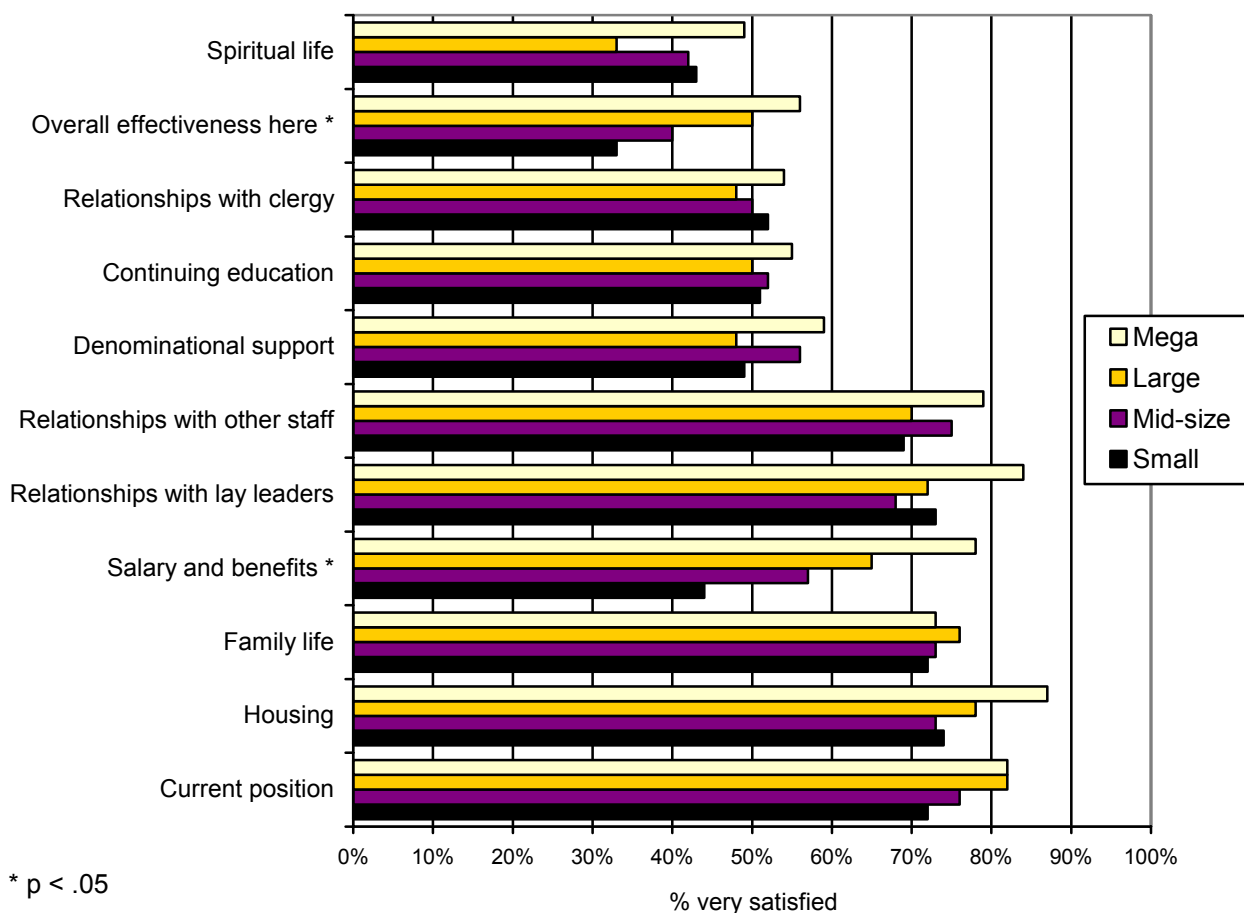
Table 4: Future in Ministry by Congregational Size

	Small (under 100) n=124	Mid-Size (100-350) n=344	Large (351-1,000) n=143	Mega (over 1,000) n=45	
In last five years:					
Seriously thought of leaving pastoral ministry for other ministry position					
Very often or often.....	10%	8%	8%	9%	n.s.
Once in a while	29%	39%	44%	42%	
Never.....	61%	52%	48%	49%	
Seriously thought of leaving ministry for secular position					
Very often or often.....	6%	6%	1%	4%	n.s.
Once in a while	24%	27%	34%	20%	
Never.....	70%	67%	64%	76%	
Doubted that you were called by God to ministry					
Very often or often.....	10%	7%	3%	4%	*
Once in a while	31%	30%	45%	22%	
Never.....	60%	63%	52%	73%	

Table 5: Clergy Health by Congregational Size

	Small (under 100) n=124	Mid-Size (100-350) n=344	Large (351-1,000) n=143	Mega (over 1,000) n=45	
Health:					
Body Mass Index (BMI).....	28.6	27.8	28.3	26.3	*
% obese (BMI GE 30)	31%	26%	22%	16%	n.s.
SF-12 Scales:					
Physical health.....	4.4	4.4	4.5	4.6	n.s.
Emotional health.....	4.6	4.5	4.6	4.7	n.s.
Positive feelings.....	3.8	3.8	3.8	4.0	n.s.
Self-reported health (“excellent” or “good”)...	73%	78%	82%	84%	n.s.

Figure 4: Satisfaction with Aspects of Call by Congregational Size



**Table 6: Predicting Satisfaction with Salary and Benefits
(Protestant Leaders; n=564)**

Position	Standardized		Standardized	
	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.
Currently serve more than one congregation ¹	-0.072	n.s.	-0.068	n.s.
Currently bi-vocational pastor ¹	0.027	n.s.	0.044	n.s.
Time in current position (years)	-0.008	n.s.	-0.025	n.s.
Benefits				
Salary	0.114	*	0.093	*
Housing allowance/value of housing	0.045	n.s.	0.030	n.s.
Congregation provides housing ¹	-0.012	n.s.	0.045	n.s.
Congregation provides pension contribution ¹	0.121	*	0.101	*
Medical benefits from congregation or spouse ¹	0.038	n.s.	0.033	n.s.
Congregation provides sabbatical ¹	0.112	**	0.095	*
Regularly take a day off a week ¹	0.031	n.s.	0.014	n.s.
Continuing theological education ¹	0.014	n.s.	0.006	n.s.
Other				
Age (years).....	0.036	n.s.	0.031	n.s.
Gender (male=1; female=2).....	-0.049	n.s.	-0.025	n.s.
Marital Status (single=1; married=2)	0.014	n.s.	0.018	n.s.
Children at home ¹	-0.087	n.s.	-0.057	n.s.
Amount of other family income (\$).....	-0.029	n.s.	-0.037	n.s.
Amount of educational debt (\$).....	-0.052	n.s.	-0.049	n.s.
Other job before ministry ¹	-0.041	n.s.	-0.056	n.s.
Church size	0.072	n.s.	0.076	n.s.
Satisfaction with:				
Housing ²			0.204	***
Continuing education ²			0.120	**
Position ²			0.180	***
R2	0.097	***	0.206	***

¹ no=1; yes=2.

² Reverse-coded as follows very dissatisfied=1; dissatisfied=2; satisfied=3; very satisfied=4.