

Choice Points: Group Size and Evangelism/Discipleship
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In a familiar poem Robert Frost wrote that on some distant day he would look back, as old men are inclined to do, and tell of the significant choice made at a point where two roads diverged.

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

Not all of the choices we make are so significant. Among the sayings attributed to Yogi Berra is one that is also about a choice of roads, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” Supposedly, either branch of the fork in the road on the way to Yogi’s home in New Jersey passed by his house, so when he gave directions, this instruction made sense. It appears to be a good example of an inconsequential choice as well as an example of Yogi’s unique ability to communicate. In contrast, John Wesley taught us that an individual Christian’s choice to commit to a primary group – a class or band – could have life changing consequences. (D. Michael Henderson, 1997: 93).

While we do not always recognize their importance, congregations and denominations also make choices that affect the very nature of the group. In an address in 1979 at the annual Leadership Conference of the Church of the Nazarene, Timothy L. Smith observed that John Wesley’s “movement was not bound to a foreordained cycle of defeat, nor are those of his successors.” However, the address identified some “elements of compromise” – choices – that had a significant impact on Wesley’s movement and suggested “lessons learned from the long history of Methodism’s relation to the doctrine of Christian holiness [that] will help Nazarenes keep it in its central place in our faith and fellowship.” (*Nazarenes and the Wesleyan Mission: Can We Learn from Our History?*, 1979)

Vital religious movements do not inevitably change their nature and become established institutions, but it happens often enough that sociologists of religion throughout the last century have theorized and conducted research about the differences between these types of religious groups and the tendency toward change. When Max Weber visited the United States in 1904, he observed a contrast between the nominal, obligatory character of membership in the state churches of his experience and the religiously and morally qualified, voluntary character of membership in what he called protestant sects – for example Methodists and Baptists. He reported that his use of the ideal type “sect,” in contrast to “church,” was later expanded by his friend Ernst Troeltsch (1946: 302-322, 450). Others have used these ideal types to analyze the nature of religious groups and their tendency to allow significant change in their nature.

Unfortunately, the ideal-type methodology and sect-church terminology introduced by Max Weber and Ernst Troelstch were as problematic as they were helpful. So, in 1968 Thomas F. O’Dea proposed a way of moving away from the dichotomy of the ideal types “church” and “sect”. He suggested “replacing the global concept with a number of dilemmas or choice points which give rise to one kind of organizational tendency rather than another.” This would involve “breaking up the ideal types into tendencies which vary from group to group along a series of continua” (1968: 134).

The idea of choice points seems especially helpful to me as an aid to our thinking about churches. Therefore, this paper seeks to apply O’Dea’s suggestion to the Church of the Nazarene. My goal is to explore the concept of choice points, to identify choice points presented in Nazarene and sociological literature; then to explore especially some of the issues involved in the group size choice point; and finally to consider some of the probable consequences of group size choices for evangelism and discipleship.

Significant Choice Points

Congregations and denominations make many choices. Although they may not be recognized as such at the time, a few of those choices are so important that they change the very nature of the group. Some of these decisions in major choice areas are intentional, carefully considered. Others are less conscious, more the result of drift and informal consensus than of formal decision. Choices do not need to be overt or intentional in order to move a group away from its original zeal and commitments toward a different type of organization.

One of the great challenges for congregations and denominations is to identify the choices that are pivotal. In the distant future the consequences of our choices may become clear, but at the time we make these decisions it may be difficult to see far enough down the road to know which choices will significantly affect the nature of the organization. In the last lines of his poem, above, Frost makes it seem as though the road less traveled was easy to recognize, but in the beginning he wrote,

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.*

Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

Fortunately, leaders in the Church of the Nazarene are not left merely guessing which choices really matter or what the consequences may be of choosing one option over another. Nazarene and sociological literature has identified some of these pivotal choice areas.

In his address to the 1979 Leadership Conference, Timothy Smith said, “The history of the people of God in Old and New Testament times as well as in the 19th century offers instruction on how by God’s grace we can, if we will, avoid the errors that would weaken or frustrate the mission our Lord calls us now to fulfill.” He challenged Nazarene leaders to “Look with me, then, at what I have concluded—studying all the facts that my years of freedom to study have allowed and thinking as sympathetically as I know how—were the five principal elements of compromise that led historic Methodism away from its Wesleyan mission. (1979)

These five elements are:

- “1. The willingness to accept the adequacy of ministers whose quest for Christian perfection had not yet led them into the experience of perfect love.”
- “2. The slow abandonment of the discipline of class and band meetings in which the early Methodists had cultivated the pursuit of holiness.”
- “3. Active resistance to the revived emphasis of mid-19th century Methodists on Wesley’s clear teaching that the second blessing of entire sanctification was an indispensable step in the lifelong process by which the Lord perfects His children in righteousness.”
- “4. The growing tendency of the Methodist ministry to allow as normative the enjoyment of unconsecrated wealth and social eminence.”
- “5. Last in time and perhaps also importance—the decline of the doctrine of holiness in Methodist colleges and theological seminaries.”

The sociology of religion literature also suggests some significant choice points. Summarizing the sect-church literature and applying O’Dea’s concept, J. Alan Winter identified five “major dimensions or choice-points facing religious congregations,” as they maintain or change their nature.

These five choice points are:

1. What will be required to be a member? “On the one hand, membership may be open to all who are born into the organization.” “On the other hand, membership may be restricted to those who volunteer for membership and who pass some sort of test.”
2. How and how much will members be expected to be involved? “In some cases, there is a deep and personal fellowship, in which the members truly regard each other as brothers and sisters and have few, if any, social contacts outside their immediate religious circle. In other cases, many members, even in the same local

congregation, are merely passing acquaintances, who barely recognize each other on sight and whose close friends are outside their religious circles.”

3. What will be the nature of leadership? “Here the sect-church legacy highlights two subissues: (1) what the degree of the leadership’s formal training is to be, if any, and (2) how authority is to be shared by the leadership and the membership.”
4. How much tension will there be between the group and the larger secular society? Will the attitude of the group be “to accept the status quo for what it is, to take it on its own terms, and then seek to influence the secular order slowly through a process of adaptation and compromise.” Or will the attitude be “to gather a select group and either to withdraw them from the world or to place them in sharp opposition to it.”
5. Who will be the focus of ministry? Will the group draw “its audience and adherents from the middle and upper classes and from other people identified with the established secular order”? Or will it be more connected with the lower classes, with those who suffer relative deprivation. (1977: 110-111).

The early sect-church literature raises two significant issues regarding choice points. First, decisions made in these pivotal areas are not necessarily choices between right and wrong. While Timothy Smith described his list as “elements of compromise,” it may be that the choice points identified by J. Alan Winter from the sociological literature are not so much a matter of compromise as of choice between legitimate alternatives. Wise, committed leaders of churches and denominations may come to different conclusions in some of their organization-shaping choices. Nevertheless, while any choice along these continua might be legitimate, the choice made would have significant and somewhat predictable consequences for the nature of the church.

The second significant issue identified by this sociological literature is that group size choices involve spiritual – such as evangelism and discipleship – issues, as well as economic, professional, and organizational ones. According to Weber, Troeltsch, and Simmel, this choice point is especially significant for churches and denominations that intend to be made up of Christlike people.

For Weber group size was a critical factor because it affects accountability, the ability of members to know and be intimately concerned for other members in order to provide informal and continuous encouragement to maintain ethical lives (1946: 316). For Ernst Troeltsch the issue of group size was essential to allow the intimacy required for the mutual support that enables righteous living. (1931: 331-341). Georg Simmel thought size was important because mutual caring and shared responsibility were possible in small groups but not in larger ones. However, he believed larger groups may preserve in their subdivisions this advantage of smaller groups. (1950: 101-102, 133).

The Group Size Choice Point

The sociological literature has identified group size as one of the pivotal areas for religious groups. Also, the distributions of churches in most protestant denominations suggest that group size is one of the significant areas of choice.

Mega Churches

At the group size choice point megachurches are an increasingly popular choice. In 1983 the annual ANSR meeting (ANSR II) was given over to the challenging task of editing a book, *The Smaller Church in a Super Church Era*. The exercise was so demanding that ANSR has not attempted anything like it again. Since that time, the popular label has changed from “super” to “mega” church, but regardless of label this continues to be an era of very large churches.

In his H. Paul Douglass Lecture at the 2005 annual meeting of the Religious Research Association, Mark Chaves addressed the question, “Why have very large Protestant churches proliferated in recent decades?” Chaves identified three patterns based on his analysis of data from twelve Protestant denominations, including the Church of the Nazarene. First, “across the Protestant spectrum, there are more very big churches.” Second, “the very biggest churches are getting bigger.” Third, especially since 1970 “in every Protestant denomination on which we have data—large or small, liberal or conservative, growing or declining—people are increasingly concentrated in the very largest churches.” This “[i]ncreased concentration is occurring mainly because people are shifting from smaller to larger churches, not because people are shifting from uninvolved to involvement in big churches.” Chaves explored several possible explanations for this increasing concentration and then tentatively proposed an economic, “cost disease” explanation that “when cost increases outpace revenue increases, people will be pushed out of smaller churches that no longer meet their minimum standards and into larger churches that still do” (2006: 335-336, 343-344).

Large churches have many advantages including visibility, social influence, outreach effectiveness, professional staff, and quality programming. Therefore, in many communities and cultures and as an increasingly popular model of adaptation to tough economic realities the best decision at the group size choice point is to make the organizational and relationship changes that will allow the church to become a large church.

Midsized Churches

While the right decision at the group size choice point may be to become a large church, there is a rational and strategic basis for the alternative choice of establishing multiple churches of 150 or smaller. The subtitle of Malcolm Gladwell’s book, *The Tipping Point*, is *How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. One of the “little things” he identifies as having the potential to accelerate or hold back epidemic spread of a message is a group size choice (2000: 183).

In addition to contemporary examples, Gladwell uses John Wesley and the Methodist movement to illustrate the nature of tipping points. He argues that the lesson of “John Wesley is that small, close-knit groups have the power to magnify the epidemic potential of a message or idea.”

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 making it even stickier." Groups, as Gladwell points out, may be very small or very large. So, if we want to encourage rapid increase – explosive evangelism – in the church, what choice should we make about size? Gladwell asks and then answers this 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 supports this conclusion with reviews of psychological studies as well as the experiences of military, business, and religious groups (2000: 173-175).

As Chaves' research shows, above, there may be significant economic and other reasons for concentrating our people in ever larger churches. However, if evangelism – the rapid expansion of the church – is our goal, multiplication of churches may be more effective than enlarging existing churches.

Gladwell concludes that, "If we want groups to serve as incubators for contagious messages, then as they did in the case of ... the early Methodist church, we have to keep groups below the 150 Tipping Point." "The Rule of 150 says that congregants of a rapidly expanding church ... or anyone in a group activity banking on the epidemic spread of shared ideals needs to be particularly cognizant of bigness. Crossing the 150 line is a small change that can make a big difference" (2000: 182-183).

Small Churches

The large concentration of churches at the small end of the remarkably similar size distributions of churches in Protestant denominations suggests that there is also an important group size choice somewhere around 50 participants. In the introduction to his study of megachurches, Mark Chaves explains that, "a size distribution is a visible trace left by a process that underlies and produces that distribution. . . . So we study size distributions in the hope of learning something about the underlying processes generating those distributions" (2006: 330). His theorizing about the processes that have led to an increase in the number of megachurches has helped us understand the change at the megachurch end of the distribution in recent years. Bill Sullivan's paper at this meeting helps us understand underlying processes that continue to generate the large concentration of small churches in most Protestant denominations.

In a megachurch era it is often assumed that if they could, every church would and should grow larger. While denigration of small churches is rarely, if ever, intended, these churches are often understood as failures. If the members and leaders were just more spiritual or capable, they could be a real church, a significant church.

In contrast, Carl Dudley asserts that, "small churches are not organizational errors to be corrected, but intentional choices of members who put a priority on human relationships." (2003: 11, 29). Nevertheless, existing small churches tend to be condemned among Protestants. And yet while it appears to be somewhat inconsistent with this tendency to disparage small churches,

there appears to be acceptance and praise among Protestants for developments like the house church movement where small units with strong relationships are the norm. Some advocates of these developments promote establishing small, intimate fellowships of believers because the great need of our era is the relationship based pattern of the early church.

In the Church of the Nazarene in the United States and Canada in 2007 in hundreds of small towns, rural areas, and urban neighborhoods small churches are faithfully carrying out the ministry of the church. Like churches of other sizes, some have grown, many are plateaued/stable, some are carnal, and some are dying. However, like other sizes, over the last ten years small churches have made a significant contribution to the ministry of the denomination and the kingdom of God.

Among the churches that existed throughout the last decade (1997 through 2006), those that were smaller than 100 in worship at the beginning of the decade received 108,506 New Nazarenes during the last ten years. Churches of 100 to 250 received 99,838 and churches with a beginning worship average of 250 or more received 81,218 New Nazarenes.

Churches that add new members at higher rates also tend to be the churches that remove members at higher rates. There was a very strong correlation ($r = .829$) between the rate of decadal gains by additions of New Nazarenes and the rate of losses by removal, commendation, or release. This tendency was true among the largest churches and the smallest.

Small churches have advantages including discipleship, accountability, members' involvement in ministry, and human relationships that can provide a community to support the cultivation of Christlikeness. Financial viability for small churches is a significant challenge especially in the areas of facilities and ministerial support. Still, in many settings the best decision at the group size choice point is to choose to remain small while also choosing to find ways to be financially viable and to conserve the fruit of their evangelism by reproducing themselves in new churches.

Discipleship and Evangelism Issues

If only we could look far enough into the future, we might be able to see the consequences of group size choices. Robert Frost seemed to describe this challenge when he wrote,

*. . . long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth*

Unfortunately, we cannot see future consequences as well as we might wish. However, the literature allows us to identify some of the issues.

Discipleship – Small Groups in Large and Small Churches

Human relationships are a significant discipleship issue. As Timothy Smith observed above, it was in the discipline of class and band meetings that early Methodists cultivated the pursuit of holiness. Weber said, "The 'classes' of the Methodists, as the foundation of the co-operative cure

of soul, were the very backbone of the whole organization. Every twelve persons were to be organized into a ‘class’” (1946: 456).

Small groups, which might be class meetings, Sunday school classes, or small churches, are important for growth in grace, discipleship. While small churches are the most common way of making available this important aid for cultivating the pursuit of holiness, small groups may also be an effective part of larger churches. Weber observed that the mutual accountability necessary for informally and continuously helping members maintain ethical lives may be accomplished in churches of any size. He said, “When the communities were too large for this . . . the members were organized into groups, which, in turn, were the bearers of church discipline, as in Methodism.” (1946: 316).

Lessons from the Class Meetings

In John Wesley’s interlocking system of groups – the society for cognitive instruction, the class meeting for behavioral change, and the band for affective redirection – the class meeting was the most influential (Henderson, 1997: 93, 112). Henderson’s analysis of the principles behind the class meeting are instructive for our consideration of the importance of small churches or groups and the group size choice point. Four things stand out.

First, if behavioral change is desired, small groups are not optional. “Every Methodist became a member of a class and attended it regularly—or else he or she was no longer a member of the society” (1997: 95). “Whitefield hoped that those who had been ‘awakened’ would follow through on their own initiative. Wesley left nothing to chance. He made sure that those who were serious about leading a new life were channeled into small groups for growth in discipleship” (1997: 28).

As Weber noted, it is possible in large churches to involve everyone in small groups. However, observers of large churches suggest that it is not uncommon for people to drift through without committing to the discipline of regularly participating in a group that would aid discipleship. For example, in a soon to be published book on mega churches, Scott Thumma and Dave Travis observe that based on their “research experiences, interactions with, and survey data from megachurches” they see five groupings of people, with approximate percentages, participating in megachurches, “the core (5 percent), the committed (15 percent), moderate members (40 percent), marginal persons (30 percent), and infrequent attendees, visitors, and spectators (10 percent)” (*Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America’s Largest Churches*, forthcoming). Thumma’s and Travis’ “core,” their “committed,” and some of their “moderate members” are most likely to be involved in some small class or group that provides discipline and support for development as disciples. “Spectators,” “infrequent attenders,” and “marginal persons” appear less likely to take advantage of the small groups available.

Second, the class meetings were small enough that they could become primary groups. “The class was to be an intimate group of ten or twelve people who met weekly for personal supervision of their spiritual growth” (Henderson, 1997: 95). “The members of a class often stayed together for years, cultivating the most intimate and helpful relationships. In this circle of companionship, it was difficult to be evasive or hypocritical. Deep levels of trust and affection

were engendered: an optimum environment for the cultivation of personal character” (1997: 102). Charles Horton Cooley recognized the value and power of small groups of which the class meetings are one example. Explaining his use of the label “primary groups” Cooley said, “They are primary in several senses, but chiefly in that they are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual” (1909: 25-31).

Not all small groups become primary groups and not all primary groups are healthy. Nevertheless, providing them is important. As Timothy Smith’s second element of compromise makes clear, the class and band meetings were important in early Methodists’ strategic support for the pursuit of holiness. The primary group Jesus created with the twelve apostles was very important for his life and ministry. Within the twelve there were three – Peter, James, and John – who seem to have been the group whom Jesus wanted near him in the great events of his own life.

In an early ANSR meeting (ANSR IV, November ,1984) Tony Campolo reminded us in his devotional reflections that great things can happen when hundreds or thousands of people come together, but that Jesus is able to be with us in a special way when just two or three are gathered in his name (Matthew 18: 20). In a culture where bigger is often assumed to be better that verse in Matthew is usually interpreted to say *even if* only two or three come together in Jesus name, he is there, but Campolo observed that sociologists would know that it is *especially when* only two or three are gathered that something is possible which is not possible in a large group.

Third, the confidentiality, intimacy, and trust necessary for class meetings limited their ability to easily accommodate many newcomers. Visitors were not casually added to the groups. “Obviously, a stranger or an uncommitted outsider could squelch the spirit of confidentiality and acceptance so essential to the class meeting objectives. It was decided by the Methodist leaders that visitors could attend twice before deciding to join a class. If they chose not to apply for membership, they were from then on excluded from any sessions of the class. Also, in order to protect the fragile environment of the class, every other session was closed to all outsiders” (Henderson, 1997: 107).

“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” (Gladwell, 2000: 173). All of us need some place where we can be honest about our spiritual needs. The class meeting provided a safe place to candidly respond to probing questions that furthered the pursuit of Christlikeness. However, the confidentiality required for such a safe place is impossible if there is a continual turnover of participants. It takes time to move beyond superficiality to trust. Therefore a process is needed to welcome visitors while also building and protecting confidential relationships.

Fourth, since class meetings were necessarily relatively closed, evangelism resulted in the multiplication of groups rather than expansion of existing ones. There is a significant principle here. A choice to increase classes or churches tends to result in growth, but a choice to reduce the number of such units tends to result in decline.

Evangelism – Multiplying vs. Enlarging

This issue is very important, but it is somewhat difficult to accept. There can be no doubt that every Christian and every church must be involved in evangelism. As a result of evangelism, new people will find forgiveness of sin and be brought into the kingdom of God and the kingdom will grow larger. This is widely understood and accepted.

There is disagreement, however, about the ideal size for an individual church. The tacit understanding in the American church culture seems to be that failure to choose to grow larger is a rejection of evangelism. However, as Malcolm Gladwell explained, the rule of 150 suggests that the kingdom of God may increase more rapidly if we choose to multiply groups smaller than about 150 rather than to expand existing groups beyond 150.

There can be no excuse for failure to evangelize. The awesome cost of redemption, the wonderful good news of salvation, and the command of Jesus compel us to evangelize. However, following the principal articulated by Gladwell, churches might decide – as a responsible evangelistic strategy – to reproduce themselves in new churches rather than to expand the size of their existing church.

Similarly, as responsible evangelistic strategies, denominations might choose either to multiply the number of smaller churches or to increase the number of people in the existing churches. According to B. Edgar Johnson, during the first four decades of the Church of the Nazarene the strategy of multiplying churches was the preferred choice. “Seen as the ideal way to spread the gospel, small churches spread like wildfire” (in *The Smaller Church in a Super Church Era*, 1983: 83). However, by the late 1940s that ideal may have been changing. At the general assembly in 1948 a general superintendent warned about the challenges presented by the growth of the denomination. He said, “One thing we can and should do is to discourage the development of too large churches. . . . Rather than think in terms of churches of 500 and 1,000, we should think in terms of congregations [that grow to a maximum] of 150-300. . . . We can minister more effectively with a larger number of strategically located congregations of smaller size” (1983: 86). This view is not popular today, but it is in harmony with Gladwell’s position that if we want “groups to serve as incubators for contagious messages, then . . . we have to keep groups below the 150 Tipping Point.” (2000: 182).

B. Edgar Johnson’s analysis was that in the second four decades of the denomination “small churches have succumbed to a less positive image. Their inherent value has been questioned. No longer are they elevated to the plateau of the ideal. Rather, their most highly regarded asset seems to be their potentiality for growth—to become what they aren’t now—big. To fail to do this is to lose status within the denomination, self-respect, and perhaps even the right to remain in existence” (1983: 89). In contrast to the 1948 warning about the dangers of bigness, in 1980 a general superintendent declared that “Every New Testament church is better when it becomes bigger” (*Preacher’s Magazine, Nazarene Update*, June-August 1980).

Given this change in values and strategies, perhaps it is not surprising that in the twenty years from 1987 through 2006 the number of active congregations in the Church of the Nazarene in the United States declined by 78, from 5,017 to 4,939. There have been, of course, significant

changes in the American culture. “Mom and Pop” stores are not as popular or viable as they were during the first four decades of the Church of the Nazarene. In many places small establishments have been replaced by huge firms with many attractions and nearly limitless products and services. This is an era of mega stores. Still, with a different strategy and value on small establishments, during about the last twenty years Starbucks has increased their outlets in the United States by about 9,000 and greatly increased the number of people they serve.

Strategic Size Mix for Evangelism and Discipleship

There is something very valuable about the combination of megachurches, midsized churches, and small churches found in the Church of the Nazarene and other Protestant denominations. Each size has advantages, but each also has liabilities.

Large churches seem to have a special temptation to neglect discipleship. Small groups and Sunday school classes are generally offered, but there is some danger that many people will not become involved in the discipline of a small group that could provide a supportive community where new beliefs and behavior could be expressed and nurtured. This is a significant issue. Looking back on his ministry, 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” (quoted in Henderson, 1997: 30).

Small churches seem to have a special temptation to neglect evangelism. The relatively closed nature of strong primary groups makes it difficult to incorporate new members. Having made a size choice, churches tend to be very effective at protecting their decision. Perhaps unconsciously they subtly find ways to make new people unwelcome and to undermine ministry that might result in growing beyond the size range chosen. This is a significant issue. Evangelism is not an option for Christians or churches. We are salt and light in a needy world. Our lives and ministries must produce fruit and this fruit must be preserved. Small churches must evangelize and therefore even as they protect their decision about size, they must find ways to conserve the fruit of their evangelism.

Together the combination of sizes, the network of churches, which make up the Church of the Nazarene is better able to achieve the shared mission. However, at the beginning of the 21st century in the American culture we find it difficult to appreciate this mix of sizes. Our lack of appreciation may lead us to put most of our efforts into trying to help existing churches grow larger and not enough energy into multiplying churches. If we do, the consequence could be that we will actually hinder our work in evangelism and discipleship.

Conclusions

Decisions made become part of the culture of the church or denomination. In a study of new churches established during the 1980s the Nazarene Research Center found that the church size choice tends to be routinized by the church’s fourth year of existence. However formally or informally decisions are made, they tend to become permanent. Like the poet said, we could revisit these choices, but as time passes they become more firmly embedded in the culture.

*Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

There is a tenacious quality to cultures. They are changeable, but asking for change is not usually an insignificant matter. Beliefs about what is the best organizational choice for the church are often unconscious, but nevertheless strongly and emotionally held. Since these beliefs tend to be unspoken, denominational leaders, pastors, and individual members may not hold the same views, even while they assume that all right-thinking people believe as they do. Carl Green's paper at this meeting challenges us to overt, prayerful, sensitive discussion of these beliefs and the choices available. He encourages us to reframe our understanding and conversations about church size. If we fail to do this, the fruits of evangelism may be lost in organizational conflict.

O'Dea's conceptual framework provides a fresh way of thinking about congregations and denominations. By identifying our current position on a series of continua representing pivotal choice points, leaders may be able to improve their ability to understand and predict the state and future of a church or our denomination.

One of the great challenges for congregations and denominations is to identify the choices that are pivotal. This brief review of Nazarene and sociology of religion literature has identified several choice points. At this juncture in the life of churches and the denomination it seems desirable for sociologists, researchers, and others committed to the well-being of the church to challenge each other to think together about which areas are really critical. The eleven choice areas identified here – five from Timothy Smith, five from J. Alan Winter, plus group size – may provide a beginning for discussions. Other areas may need to be added or substituted. Some of these eleven may not be among the critical few pivotal areas.

Group size appears to be one of the critical choice points for congregations and denominations. Nazarenes have a mixture of small and larger congregations which are in many ways a strategic network. This size mixture is quite similar to other protestant denominations. While there are certainly disadvantages in each of the size groups, there are also advantages. Therefore, it may be that a greater appreciation for each other would be appropriate and helpful. Furthermore, it may be that sometimes the right decision around a size choice-point would be to start another church rather than to increase the size of the existing church.

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