

Congregation Size and Church Growth in the Episcopal Church

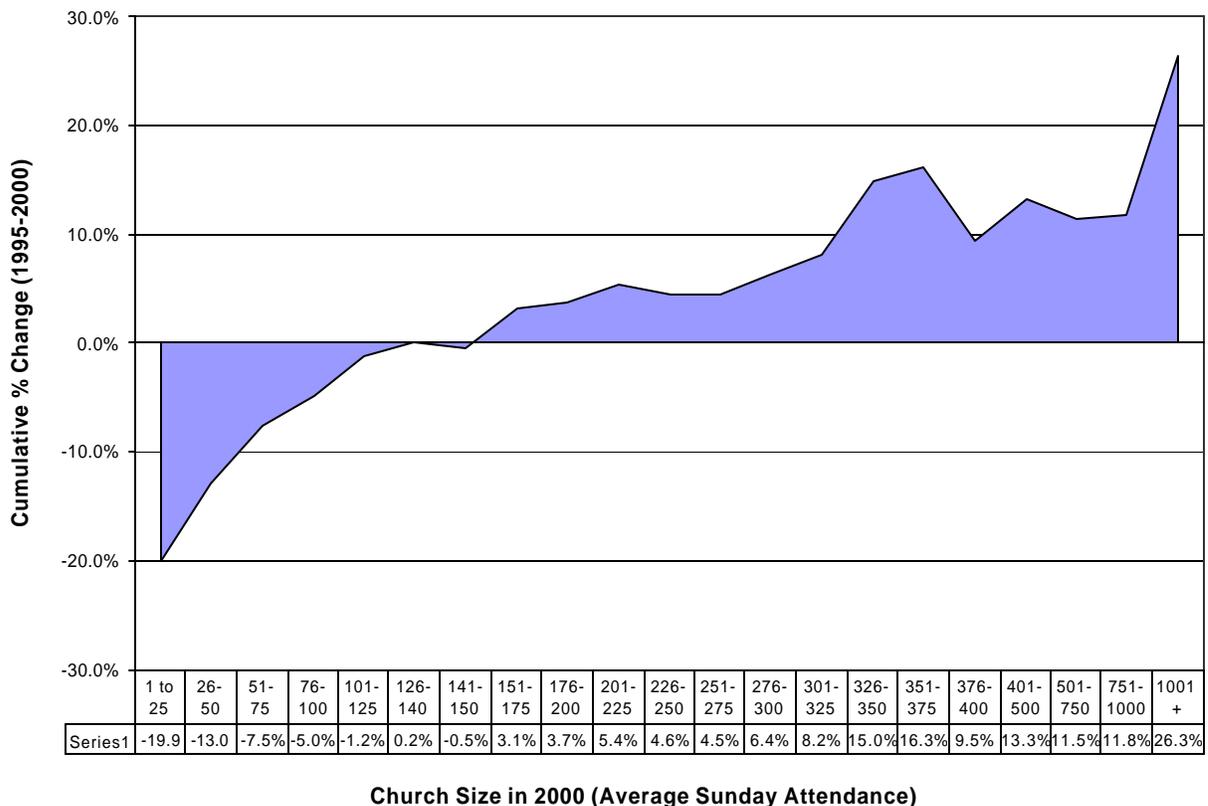
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The relationship between congregation size and church growth is surprisingly tricky to measure. Various ways of looking at the relationship are presented in this report, along with interpretive difficulties that should be considered.

The most obvious way to look at size and growth is also the most problematic and gives a very misleading picture of the relationship. The chart below is a recreation (using 1995-2000 data) of a figure that has been circulated recently in the Episcopal Church, which seems to indicate that smaller churches are declining seriously and larger churches are growing rapidly. Indeed, it would appear that the larger the church the more likely that church is to be growing. Such a conclusion should not be drawn from this chart, however.

Figure 1:
Cumulative Change in Average Sunday Attendance by Church Size (2000)



There are several problems with Figure 1. The first, and most serious, is that churches are categorized by their size at the end of the measurement period rather than at the beginning. Rather than showing that larger churches tend to grow and smaller churches tend to decline, the chart actually shows that larger churches have grown and smaller churches have declined. The measurement of growth and decline is after the growth and decline have taken place. In other words, many of the churches are now small because they have declined into smaller size categories; and many of the larger churches are now large because they have grown into larger size categories. Two examples may help illustrate the problem. One congregation in Texas had average Sunday worship attendance of 73 in 1995, but declined to only 23 by 2000. In Figure 1 the net decline of 50 attendees in this congregation are counted as losses for the smallest category of church (which it declined into), rather than as losses for the third category of churches (51-75 ASA), its size in 1995. Conversely, a congregation in California grew from 253 to 913 in average worship attendance from 1995 to 2000. But in Figure 1 this growth of 660 persons was counted as a gain for the second largest category of churches (751-1000 ASA), which it grew into, rather than for its size category in 1995 (251-300).

Losses in the first category (1-25) are disproportionately large because churches cannot grow into it; they can only grow out of it. So in 2000 the only churches left in the first category are those that remained very small or declined into the category from a larger category. Small churches that grew substantially tended to grow out of the category. This effect is less dramatic, but still present, in all of the smaller size categories, which tend to have a disproportionate number of churches that declined from larger size categories.

The problematic effect of measuring size in 2000 rather than 1995 is exacerbated by the large number of discrete size categories—particularly at the lower end. It doesn't take much growth to leave a category. So for instance, if a church with attendance at 25 persons or less in 1995 grew even minimally it would jump into a larger size category in 2000, leaving mostly churches that were either stable in attendance or declining.

A third problem is that the chart measures aggregate change in worship attendance rather than the tendency of churches of various sizes to grow or decline. Thus, large changes by a small number of churches can skew the overall growth or decline of all of the churches in a size category. This problem is particularly acute in the larger size categories, which are populated by smaller numbers of churches (only 17 congregations in the 1,001+ size category).

Size Measured in 1995

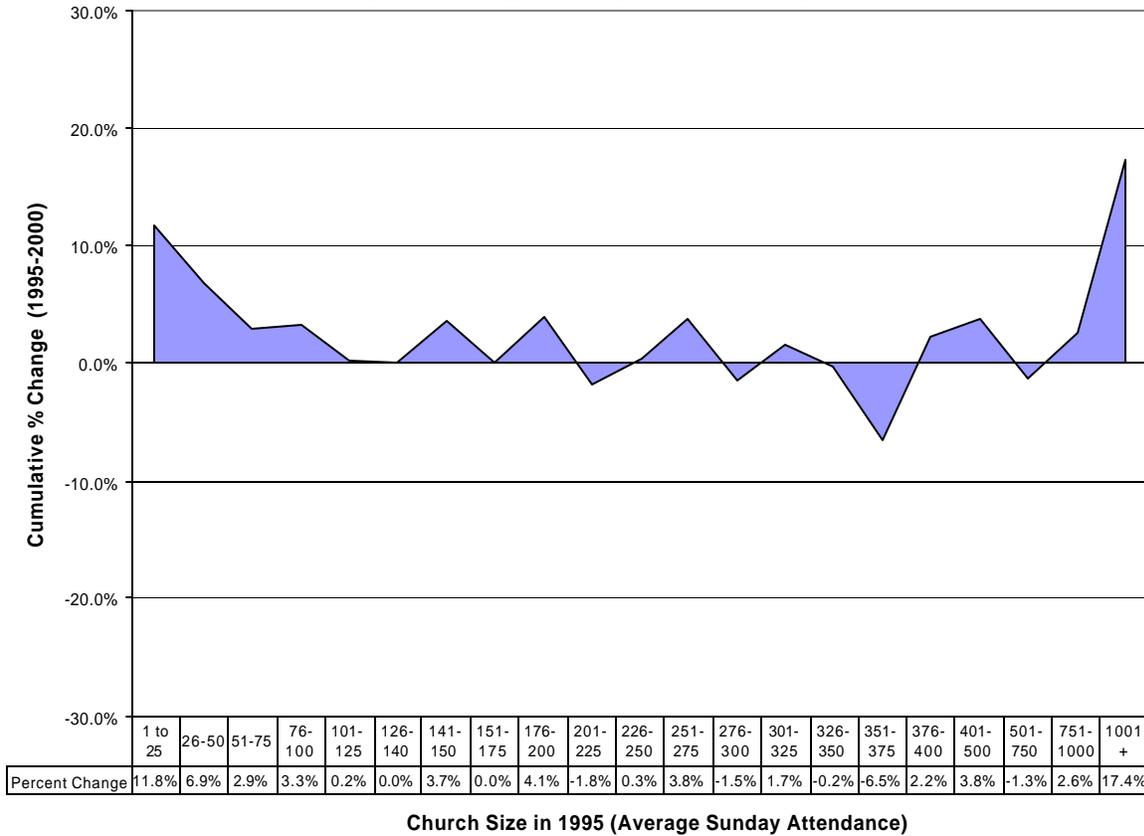
If we are interested in determining whether larger churches or smaller churches grow in the aggregate, size should be measured at the beginning of the growth period, rather than at the end. Figure 2 replicates the size categories in the first

graph, but uses 1995 attendance rather than 2000 attendance as the basis for determining church size.

As can be seen in the Figure below, there is no clear relationship between church size and the tendency of churches to grow (in the aggregate). Indeed, the only apparent pattern is for the smallest and very largest churches to grow more on an aggregate percentage basis than churches in any other size categories.

It also should be obvious that Figure 1 (which apparently showed that smaller churches tend to decline) is in error. It displays a statistical artifact that results from measuring size at the wrong time.

**Figure 2:
Cumulative Change in Average Sunday Attendance by Church Size (1995)**



Measuring the Likelihood for Growth Rather Than Growth in the Aggregate

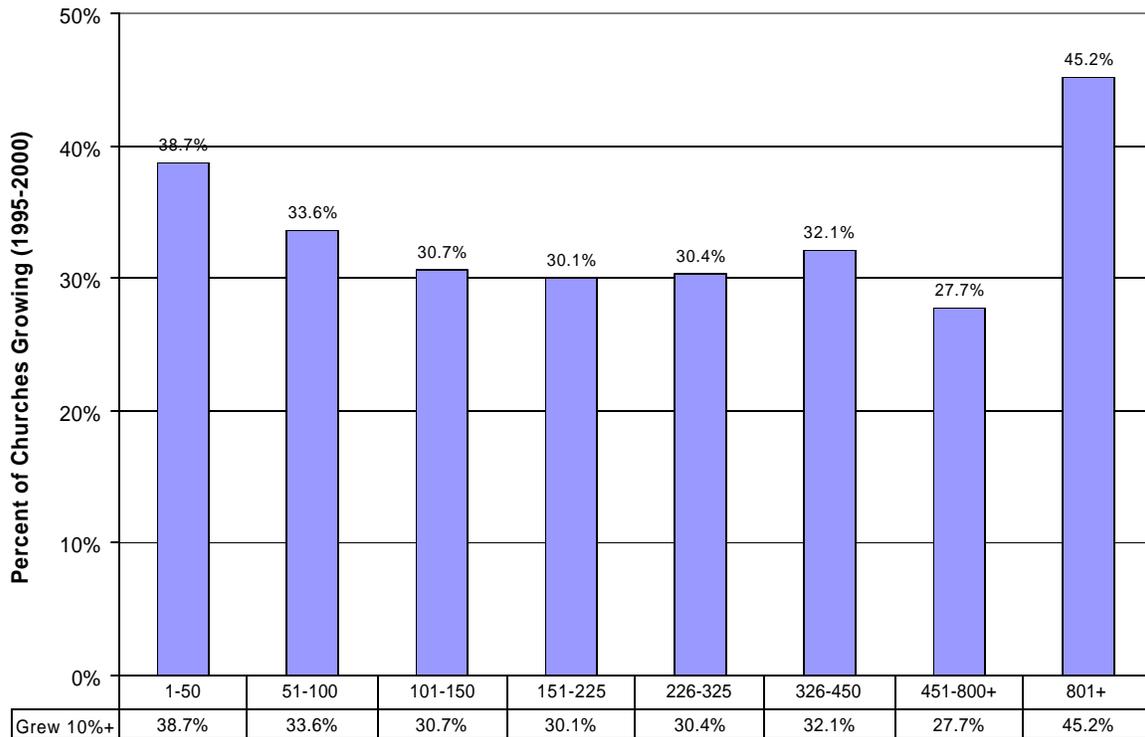
Although it may be somewhat useful to know to what extent churches in a given size category grew or declined at the aggregate level, even more valuable is information on the tendency of individual churches to grow or decline. For this reason we calculated the proportion of churches in each size category that grew from 1995 to 2000. For our purposes, a growing church is one that increased by

at least 10% in average worship attendance from 1995 to 2000. Furthermore, to eliminate the problem of random variation in growth rates (due to size categories with very few churches) the number of size categories was reduced from 21 to 8.

Figure 3 below shows that 38.7% of churches with attendance of 50 persons or less grew (by at least 10%) from 1995 to 2000. The percentage of growing churches tends to drop as churches get larger, until the largest size category. Of the 31 Episcopal churches with average worship attendance of over 800 persons, 45.2% grew between 1995 and 2000.

So what is the relationship between size and growth in the Episcopal Church? Actually, there is not a strong relationship, but to the extent that a relationship exists, it is the smaller churches and the largest churches that are most likely to grow.

**Figure 3:
Percent of Churches Growing in Worship Attendance by Size Category**



Worship Attendance in 1995

But the fact that small churches are more likely to grow is not the whole story. Smaller churches are also more likely to decline than churches in larger size categories. Of the 2,438 churches that had average worship attendance of 50 or less in 1995, 108 (4.4%) were closed by 2000. Overall, 38.8% of churches in the smallest size category declined or died, followed by 38.1% of churches 51-100 in attendance and 37.8% of churches with average attendance of 101-150. Larger

churches were less likely to decline and none closed between 1995 and 2000. Only 27.7% of churches with attendance of 451 to 800 declined, as did only 19% of churches with 801 or more in average Sunday attendance in 1995.

Size and “Weakness”

One of the reasons that Figure 1 (which used size in 2000 as a base for measurement) seemed plausible is the fact that smaller congregations are obviously “weaker” than larger churches. They have less people, money, staff and programs. Very small churches spend almost all of their income on salaries, benefits and their building (maintenance and utilities). They have little “extra” money for program support or mission work and often have great difficulty paying a full time priest. Indeed, many small churches rely on part time or unpaid ministerial leadership.

As noted above, many smaller churches are declining and some close each year. And the condition of smaller churches seems all the more dire because many of the churches that are smaller now have declined into their current size category. Thus, the presence of very weak, declining churches among the current set of small churches obscures the fact that many small churches have great potential for growth.

Contributions to Episcopal Growth by Size

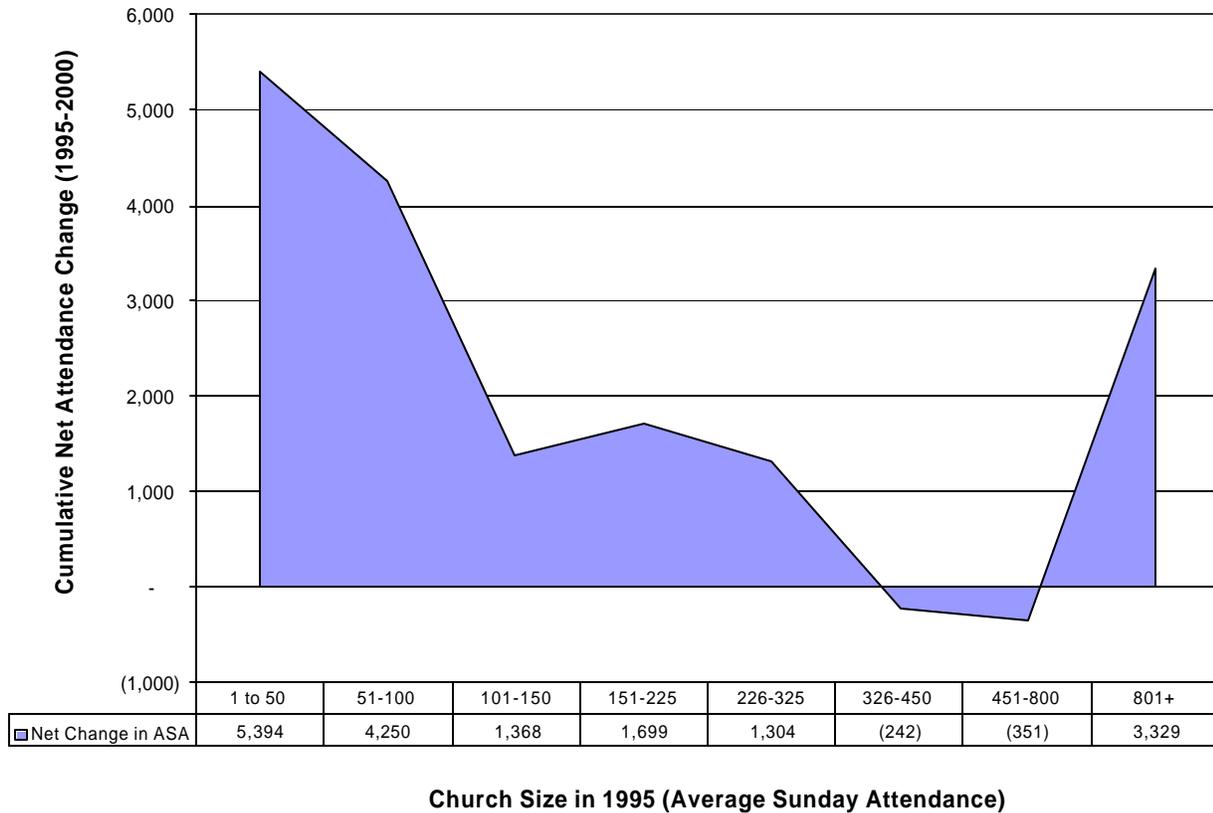
Unlike most other mainline Protestant denominations, the Episcopal Church grew rather than declined in overall worship attendance during the last five years. Not counting new congregations, the Episcopal Church increased by nearly 17,000 attendees from 1995 to 2000.

It might be thought that given their larger size, the largest churches in the Episcopal Church might contribute disproportionately to the growth of the church. However, it should be considered that the largest size category only includes 33 churches (in 2000) and that nearly 60 percent of Episcopal churches have average worship attendance of 100 persons or less.

Figure 4 shows that most of the growth in Episcopal worship attendance was added by churches in the two smallest size categories. Very large churches added substantially to the overall growth of the denomination, but not as much as churches with average Sunday attendance (ASA) of 100 or less. Clearly, smaller congregations are the major source of growth in the Episcopal Church.

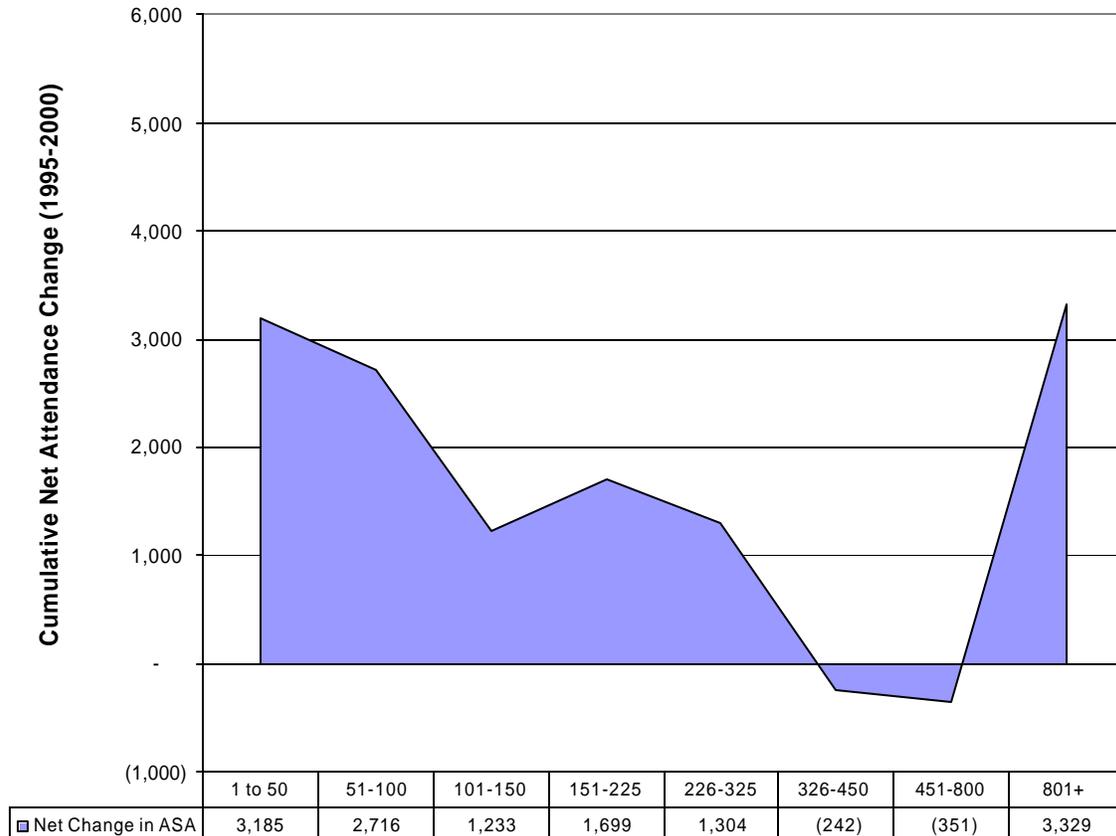
It should be noted that Figure 4 only includes churches that were open in both 1995 and 2000. New congregations are excluded because they cannot be categorized by size in 1995. But the chart also excludes churches that closed during the five year period. Would including churches that closed change the growth/decline situation?

**Figure 4:
Contribution to Episcopal Attendance Growth (1995-2000) by Church Size
Categories: Churches Existing in 1995 & 2000**



Smaller churches are more volatile than larger churches. Smaller churches are more likely to grow, but they are also more likely to decline and die. Of the churches that closed between 1995 and 2000, all were in the three smallest size categories and 84% of closed congregations were in the smallest category (1-50 ASA). So if churches that closed between 1995 and 2000 are considered in our growth analysis, the overall contribution of smaller churches to the growth of the Episcopal Church is reduced. Figure 5 shows that the contribution of churches over 800 in attendance is now slightly higher than the contribution of churches with 50 or fewer in average attendance. Still, the contribution of smaller churches (combining the two smallest categories) remains much greater than the contribution of larger churches.

**Figure 5:
Contribution to Episcopal Attendance Growth by Church Size
Category: Existing Churches and Closed Congregations**



Church Size in 1995 (Average Sunday Attendance)

The Location and Age of Small Churches

Small churches (those with 100 or less in average Sunday attendance) are located disproportionately in towns, villages and rural areas. Over 70 percent of Episcopal churches in such locations are small congregations. However, the vast majority of small Episcopal churches are located in towns or villages (42 percent of all small churches) and in urban or suburban areas (49 percent). Relatively few Episcopal churches are located in rural areas, outside towns, villages or suburban communities. Still, most of the churches that are in rural areas are small.

Not surprisingly, small rural churches are less likely to grow than small churches in any other setting. Small churches in cities (urban and suburban) are only slightly more likely to grow than churches in towns and villages. Small churches

in newer suburbs were the most likely to grow and the least likely to decline of churches in any area.

No consistent pattern exists between age of congregation and church size, other than the fact that very few of the largest Episcopal churches are very young. Small churches are distributed evenly across the age spectrum. The newest small churches (those organized from 1966 to 1994) were more likely to grow than small congregations that were older.

Longer Term Trends in Growth by Size

It also has been suggested that five years of change is not enough to determine the growth trajectory of Episcopal congregations. The argument that short-term volatility in attendance levels might hide a national, long-term, trend has been stated in the following manner: “larger churches get larger and smaller churches get smaller.” Is this trend evident within the Episcopal Church? To answer this question it is necessary to expand the analysis to include ten years of data.

There were 24 Episcopal churches with average Sunday attendance of 801 or more in 1991. Did these churches tend to get larger over the next 10 years? Actually, they did not. Thirteen churches declined in attendance and eleven increased, for an overall loss of 165 attendees. It should be noted, however, that the overall loss would have been a gain of 888 had it not been for the loss of 1,053 attendees by a single church. Out of the 11 large churches that increased between 1991 and 2001, several experienced substantial gains: St. Martin’s Church, Houston, TX grew 66%; St. Michael and All Angels, Dallas, TX grew 59% and St. Mark’s Church, Seattle, WA increased 53% in ASA. Yet as a group it cannot be said that “large churches get larger.”

Perhaps one reason that the “large churches get larger” thesis seems plausible is that the number of large Episcopal churches increased from 24 to 32 from 1991 to 2001 (not counting one new church, Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe in San Jose, CA, that began reporting in 1992 with attendance of 230 and which now has attendance of 829). How could the number of very large churches increase if only 19 out of the 24 original churches with ASA of 801+ remained in that category? The answer is that 13 churches from smaller size categories grew into the largest category (11 from the 451-800 group and two from the 326-450 ASA group of churches).

All of larger church categories (ASA of 226-325, 326-450, 451-800 and 800+) increased in the number of congregations between 1991 and 2001. This happened even though a larger percentage of churches in each size category dropped a size category (declining from 151-225 to 101-150, for example) than increased a size category (growing from 151-225 to 226-325, for example). This is possible because the larger size categories contain fewer churches than the smaller categories. So even though 39 of the 125 churches with 451-800 ASA in

1991 declined to lower size categories and only 11 grew into the 801+ category, the number of churches in the 451-800 ASA category increased to 152 by 2001 because 72 churches from smaller size categories grew into the 451-800 category (and another 5 declined from the 801+ category). Despite the fact that the larger size categories did not fare well as a group from 1991 to 2001, declining at the aggregate level, the actual numbers of churches in the larger size categories increased. What is happening is that smaller size categories (which contain more churches) are acting as “feeders” for the larger size categories. This “feeder” effect also gives the false impression that churches in the larger size categories are growing to a greater extent than churches in smaller size categories because the larger size categories are gaining churches and adding attendees from those churches.

If larger churches do not necessarily get larger, do smaller churches tend to get smaller? Previous sections of this report suggest that they do not, at least at the aggregate level. So it was no great surprise that from 1991 to 2001, the two sets of smaller congregations (1-50 and 51-100) exhibited more growth than any other size category. Still, out of 2,352 very small congregations (1-50 in 1991), only 43.7 percent grew by at least one person in ASA from 1991 to 2001. The rest either lost attendees (48.6%) or closed (7.7%). So how did the set of small churches increase by 4,394 attendees between 1991 and 2001? The answer is that the growing churches grew more than the declining churches declined. Churches with 1-50 attendance in 1991 that lost at least one person, declined overall by 12,900 attendees, whereas small churches that grew by at least one person increased overall by 17,294. So even though more small churches declined than grew over the last decade, it cannot be said that “small churches are getting smaller.”

Basic Statistics on Church Size

A final area of confusion is the numbers and percentages of small churches. It has been reported, for instance, that the average Episcopal Church averages only 30 persons in worship. This is not true. The average or mean size of Episcopal churches in terms of average Sunday attendance is 118 persons. Because this number is skewed upward by very large churches, a more useful indicator of the “typical” Episcopal congregation is the median (the middle value in which 50% of churches are larger and 50% are smaller). The median Episcopal congregation has 80 persons in worship.

The following percentages show the distribution of Episcopal churches across size categories in 2001:

1-50 ASA	33.4%
51-100	25.5%
101-150	16.1%
151-225	12.9%

226-325	6.6%
326-450	3.0%
451-800	2.1%
801+	0.5%

Obviously, smaller churches have smaller numbers of people in their worship services, so the following percentages show the distribution of worshippers on an average Sunday:

1-50 ASA	7.9%
51-100	15.8%
101-150	16.8%
151-225	20.0%
226-325	15.1%
326-450	9.6%
451-800	10.2%
801+	4.5%

Even though 58.9% of Episcopal congregations have 100 or fewer persons in worship on Sunday, these churches account for less than a quarter (23.7%) of all worshippers. Conversely, even though churches with over 450 in worship account for only 2.6% of Episcopal congregations, 14.7% of all worshippers can be found in these congregations on an average Sunday.

The above data also can be presented in terms of the named size categories that are used frequently in the Episcopal Church:

<u>Size Category</u>	<u>Churches</u>	<u>Worshippers</u>
Family (1-75 ASA)	47.4%	15.3%
Pastoral (76-140 ASA)	24.9%	21.9%
Transitional (141-224 ASA)	15.3%	22.9%
Program (225-800 ASA)	11.9%	35.3%
Resource (801+ ASA)	0.5%	4.5%

Conclusions

Small churches are more volatile than larger congregations. They are more likely to die, but they are also more likely to grow. Furthermore, they add more to the growth of the Episcopal Church than do larger congregations.

In general, the larger the congregation, the less likely it is to grow—except for the very largest churches (those over 800 in average Sunday attendance). These very large churches have added substantially to the growth the Episcopal Church since 1995, but because they are very few in number they do not add as many attendees as churches with ASA of 100 or less.

More Episcopal churches are losing attendees than are gaining attendees, but the growth of a vital minority of churches results in overall growth for the Episcopal Church and leads to proportionately more large congregations.

The growth of smaller congregations essentially “feeds” the larger size categories. So even though some larger churches decline into smaller size categories, the growth of churches in the smaller size categories tends to expand the overall number of churches in the larger size categories.

Apparently it is difficult to remain large. Frequently, larger churches slide back into smaller size categories as their original purpose fades or as their population base stabilizes and becomes more diverse. In other words, life cycle effects creep in and rapid growth turns into plateau or slow decline. Helping larger churches re-vision should be a priority for Episcopal dioceses.

Even though small churches are somewhat more likely to grow than are larger churches, not all small churches are equally likely to grow. Small rural churches are most likely to decline and newer small churches are most likely to grow.

The typical Episcopal congregation has average Sunday attendance of 80 persons. It is the typical Episcopal church that has been our primary source of growth during the last decade.