

Barna Report (August 2009): How Faith Varies by Church Size
Summarized and posted by Bob Young
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Many of us in ministry, and close observers of churches, have suspected that there are significant doctrinal differences between smaller and larger churches. Now the possibility of such doctrinal differences has been studied—and the results were not what I expected. A Barna report shows that congregational size is related to a congregation's religious beliefs, religious behavior and demographic profile, with statistically significant differences between the smallest and largest churches in terms of the doctrinal beliefs of the members and attenders.

The survey results discovered the following.

- On 17 indicators of religious belief and behavior there were statistically significant differences between churches of 100 or fewer adult attenders and churches of 1000 or more adult attenders. The only item in which there was not a distinction was whether the church attender had prayed during the past week.
- On all 9 of the belief statements tested, attenders of large churches were more likely than those in a small or mid-sized congregation to give an orthodox biblical response – e.g., the Bible is totally accurate in all the principles it teaches, Satan is not merely symbolic but exists, Jesus led a sinless life, God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe, etc.
- On seven of the eight behavioral measures, attenders of large churches were more likely than those of small churches to be active. (This includes behaviors such as attending church in the past week, reading the Bible in the past week, volunteering at their church in the past week, etc.) The average difference related to these seven behaviors was 17 percentage points.
- There were significant differences on six of the ten demographic attributes examined. Specifically, larger churches were more likely to have college graduates (a 22 percentage point difference between those who attend churches of 100 adults or less and those who attend congregations with 1000 or more adults), affluent attenders, and children under 18 living in their home. Adults attending Protestant mega-churches were also more likely to be registered to vote and to be registered as a Republican (a 16-point gap compared to adults attending churches of up to 100 adults). Those who attend small churches were more likely to home-school their children.
- Young adults were somewhat more likely to attend mega-churches than to affiliate with a congregation of any other size. In contrast, adults in their sixties or older were less likely to attend a church of 500 or more attenders than to regularly participate in a smaller church.
- Overall, the profile of demographics, beliefs and religious behaviors was strikingly similar between congregations of 500 to 999 adult attenders and that of congregations drawing 1000 or more adults. Similarly, congregations with fewer than 50 adults were generally similar regarding most indicators to congregations with 50 to 100 attenders.

- The point at which congregational belief profiles were mostly likely to diverge was when churches reached the 200-adult range. Those who attend churches of 1000 or more adults were significantly different from the congregations of those attending churches of as many as 200 adults in relation to six out of the 10 belief statements explored.
- The religious beliefs and behaviors of people who attend house churches, which average about 20 adults in attendance, are more similar to the results for large conventional churches (i.e., more than 500 adults) than they are to the outcomes among those who attend small conventional churches (i.e., less than 50 adults).
- Despite the substantial attention focused on mega-churches, such congregations draw only about 9% of adults who attend church. In contrast, 41% of adults attending church associate with a congregation of 100 or fewer adults. An additional 23% can be found at churches of 101 to 200 adults, 18% associate with bodies of 201 to 499 adults, and 9% can be found in churches of 500 to 999 adults.

[Note: Because the study did not examine when a particular theological perspective was embraced by respondents, the results do not mean that larger churches are more likely to provide members with conservative biblical views.]

Religious Beliefs of Protestants, by Congregational Size

(N=1,334)

Belief description*	1-100**	101-200	201-499	500-999	1000+
Bible is totally accurate in all the principles it teaches	60%	63%	70%	67%	75%
Have personal responsibility to tell others your beliefs	41	44	47	53	61
Your religious faith is very important in your life	82	83	90	88	90
Satan/devil is a living being not just a symbol of evil	30	29	36	38	51
A good person cannot earn a place in Heaven	33	39	47	48	55
On earth Jesus Christ did not commit sins, like other people	49	50	59	65	74
God is the omnipotent, omniscient creator who rules all	81	81	86	86	90
Born again Christian	63	64	69	81	75
Evangelical Christian	9	11	21	24	25
Number of respondents in this subgroup	547	306	247	120	114

*descriptions of the survey questions--not the wording of the questions used in the research

** Average adult attendance