

A Place to Belong: Small Group Involvement in Religious Congregations*

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Large congregations are commonly criticized as eliciting less involvement from adherents than smaller congregations. Small groups have been heralded as a remedy to drawbacks of increasing congregation size. This study tests the relevance of small groups to individuals' commitment and participation, particularly in large congregations. Analysis features the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey and a survey of congregants at one Central Texas Megachurch. Persons involved in small groups devoted to prayer, discussion, or Bible study report a greater sense of belonging, more frequent attendance, and higher rates of giving. The effect of small group involvement does not differ by congregation size, however. From worshippers in one Texas megachurch, we find that the extent of small group involvement positively relates to commitment and participation. Small groups may not completely resolve problems associated with increasing size, but we believe they do represent a potent source of vitality in congregations big and small.

Key words: congregations; commitment; organizations; megachurches; practice; religious involvement; small groups.

It is a warm Sunday morning. Amy and Jeremy, a young married couple new to the area, are making their first visit to Central Texas Megachurch (CTM).¹ The bustling non-denominational congregation, located in a converted grocery store near the city center, was recommended to Amy and Jeremy as popular with people their age. Popular it is, drawing over 2,000 each

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¹Names of individuals and the congregation are pseudonyms. All details reported are factual and were gathered through informal interviews and church publications.

week to two Sunday worship services. The church sits on a main thoroughfare busy with traffic. By the time Amy and Jeremy arrive, the parking lots surrounding the worship facility are full. Slightly confused as to where they should go, they eventually locate a place to park on a side street and head toward what appear to be the front doors of the church. Once inside they fall into line with a growing crowd and slowly funnel through a set of double-doors into a darkened auditorium. Guitars, electric keyboard, and drums provide background music from an elevated stage at front. Some 1,100 chairs line the floor. Amy and Jeremy find a pair of seats and wait for the service to start. They observe those around them exchange handshakes, hugs, and engage in lively conversation. These people seem to know each other well. The worship service begins. Amy and Jeremy like the music and the preaching. Yet leaving as anonymously as they entered, neither feels a strong attraction to the church. They decide to continue their search. CTM is just too big, too impersonal.

An increasing number of congregations in the United States face a similar challenge to that posed by Amy and Jeremy's reaction at CTM. With thousands in attendance, it is difficult to cultivate the type of in-group bonds conducive to belonging and active participation. Individuals can come and go without a sense that their contributions matter. Thus, critics contend that the back door of huge congregations is as wide open as the front door. For those individuals who do keep coming back, religious participation may involve little more than attending worship services as spectators. Such concerns take on added significance given changing organizational patterns in American religion. The number of very large congregations is on the rise as is the percentage of worshippers that attend large congregations (Chaves 2006; Thumma and Travis 2007). However, there is more to learn from the story of Amy and Jeremy.

A month after their first unsatisfying visit, Amy and Jeremy are back at CTM. Parking on a side street, they enter the building, navigate around the masses exiting the first service, and head toward specific seats in the auditorium. The church now feels palpably different. There is a sense of familiarity and community. Part of this change is due to them attending now for several Sundays in row. But the explanation for why they returned at all resides in the dozen or so individuals waiting for them in their "usual" spot. It turned out that a young couple who lived across the street from Amy and Jeremy were members at CTM. Without knowing that Amy and Jeremy had visited the church, the couple invited them to the small group that met in the couple's home. Meeting other young couples at a similar stage of life appealed to Amy and Jeremy as newcomers to the area. Friendships formed and their search for a church concluded. In this small, home group, Amy and Jeremy found a place to belong. They have been active members of CTM ever since.

Social scientists and religious leaders publicize small groups as a correlate to congregational success (Arnold 2004; Easum and Atkinson 2007; Finke 1994; Stark and Finke 2000). Small groups help break down sizable

congregations into more manageable units that provide individuals with relationships and community; things that are difficult to achieve in worship services of hundreds or thousands. They are a prevalent feature of the Protestant megachurch movement (Thumma and Travis 2007), but their impact within congregations remains inadequately explored. This study aims to address this gap in the literature. We seek to answer how effective are small groups, particularly in large congregations, at promoting ingroup commitment and participation? In other words, is the experience of Amy and Jeremy unique?

Our examination begins with a review of previous research on commitment, participation, congregation size, and small groups, which leads us to two hypotheses. We test our hypotheses using national survey data from the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey and a 2007 survey of participants at CTM. While small groups do not completely resolve the problems associated with large congregations, our findings offer some of the strongest evidence to date for the benefits of small group involvement in congregations.

ACTORS OR ONLOOKERS? INDIVIDUAL INVOLVEMENT IN CONGREGATIONS

Congregations, like all voluntary organizations, depend on committed participants to exist. Individuals' voluntary contributions of time and money are essential resources for congregations. Vital congregations are those that mobilize high rates of commitment and participation. Organizational attributes play a key role in fostering commitment. As Kanter (1972:75) discovered in her study of nineteenth-century communes, "The strength of a group and the commitment of its members will be a function of the specific ways the group is put together."

One feature of groups that impacts commitment is size. It is expected that people would feel a strong sense of belonging to small, intimate, "primary groups," made up of family and close friends; such groups are fundamental to human development (Cooley 1909). In larger, more formalized, "secondary groups," commitment is more difficult to cultivate. Olson (1965) framed the challenge of size as related to incentives. The rationale is that individuals in large organizations get less personal benefit from the collective good and, correspondingly, feel less incentive for its production. Organizational commitment suffers. Rather than relying on individuals' commitment to a common interest, large organizations depend on selective incentives of a social nature to motivate individuals. Friendship, prestige, self-esteem, and shame are the types of social incentives identified by Olson (1965:61). Yet, even these social incentives are more effectively utilized in smaller groups where members have face-to-face interactions than in larger, less intimate groups. Consequently, large groups are prone to "free-riding"—an organizational condition in which individuals benefit from a collective good that they do little to help produce.

Stark and Finke (2000) applied Olson's theory to religious groups. They argued that there is an inverse relationship between congregation size and average level of member commitment. Increasing size reduces the density of social networks within a congregation resulting in less reinforcement for commitment, less efficient monitoring of behavior, and a higher proportion of free-riding members. Ample research documents the negative effect of increasing size on congregational participation rates (Dougherty 2004; Finke 1994; Hougland and Wood 1980; Pinto and Crow 1982; Stark and Finke 2000; Zaleski and Zech 1992).²

The dilemma of large size for religious organizations is a notable one in the United States. People are becoming increasingly concentrated in large congregations (Chaves 2006). Nearly a third of all U.S. worshippers attend congregations with 1,000 or more in weekly attendance, though fewer than 3 percent of all U.S. congregations are this size (Chaves 2004). The number of Protestant churches attracting over 2,000 to weekly worship jumped 400 percent between 1990 and 2005; more than 1,200 of these "megachurches" now exist (Thumma and Travis 2007). Megachurches have been criticized as gatherings of spectators rather than participants (Guinness 1993). Recent empirical evidence supports this claim. A 2008 survey of 24,900 attendees in 12 U.S. megachurches found that megachurch attendees went to worship services less frequently and gave less financially to their church than did worshippers in U.S. congregations overall (Thumma and Bird 2009). Likewise, in a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults, persons in congregations of 2,500 members or more perceived less social support from their fellow congregants than did persons in smaller congregations (Ellison et al. 2009).

Small groups have been heralded as a remedy to the drawbacks of increasing organizational size. Social incentives such as friendship and self-esteem can motivate collective action in a large group, if it is organized as "a federation of smaller groups" (Olson 1965:63). In effect, the beneficial attributes of small groups are retained and simply aggregated to comprise a larger whole. Combating perceptions of anonymity and alienation that plague large secondary groups, interpersonal bonds forged in a small group connect individuals to the bigger organization and motivate their contribution to the collective good. From the fellowship classes of nineteenth-century Methodists to the cell groups of twenty-first-century megachurches, the organization of religious life around small groups has a long and profitable history as an organizational strategy to mitigate the free-rider problem (Stark and Finke 2000). The propensity for free riding in large congregations heightens the significance of small groups in these settings.

²Stark (2008) is an exception. Based upon bivariate analysis of a national random sample of U.S. adults, Stark found those in Protestant churches of over 1,000 to be as or more likely than those in Protestant churches of less than 100 to attend weekly, tithe, and have church friends.

Small groups are not new to religious organizations, but their role in congregations and in U.S. society grew in prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century. The contours of the modern small group movement, and its impact on religion, were the focus of a comprehensive study by Robert Wuthnow in the early 1990s. Wuthnow (1994b) traced the movement to the 1960s and declared it a response to Americans' interest in spirituality and the breakdown in traditional forms of community, such as neighborhoods and families. In 1991, 40 percent of American adults belonged to a Sunday school class, Bible study group, recovery group, book club, civic group, or some other type of regularly meeting small group. Approximately two-thirds of small groups were connected to a place of worship and they operated in congregations of all sizes and across religious traditions (Wuthnow 1994a, 1994b). Moreover, these groups have an effect on individuals and congregations. Wuthnow (1994b, 1994c) found that small group involvement related to greater involvement in other congregational programs, increased financial giving, active attendance, and more close friends in the congregation. Individuals gave credit to small groups for deepening their personal faith and for taking a more active role in their congregation. Social science research has noted other positive consequences associated with congregational small groups, ranging from enhanced racial-ethnic diversity (Dougherty 2003; Dougherty and Huyser 2008; Emerson 2006) to congregational growth (Wilson et al. 1993).

While Sunday school classes represent the most recognizable of congregational small groups, it is small Bible study, prayer, and discussion groups that attract significant current attention. The smaller size of these groups fosters accountability and trust to a greater extent than occurs in congregational education classes (Wuthnow 1994b). Some go further to describe these small, relational groups (also known as "cell groups") as one of the central innovations in contemporary religious life. Popular church growth author and consultant Lyle Schaller (1995:14) declared that a new reformation is underway in American Christianity as evidenced by "perhaps, most important of all, the decision by tens of millions of teenagers and adults to place a high personal priority on weekly participation in serious, in-depth, lay-led, and continuing Bible study and prayer groups." Small/cell groups are prominently promoted in church growth literature (e.g., Arnold 2004; Easum and Atkinson 2007; George 1992; Neighbour 2000).

Use of small groups is widespread in megachurches. The world's largest congregation, Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, with over 800,000 members, grew to its epic proportions using a cell-based model of organization. Home cell groups of 5–10 families provide an intimate setting for study, discussion, and prayer. In the words of the founding pastor: "A cell group is the basic part of our church. It is not another church program—it is the program of our church" (Cho 1984:42). Cell groups are also vital to Willow Creek Community Church (averaging 20,000+ in South Barrington,

Illinois) and the seeker church movement it helped birth (Sargeant 2000). From the 2008 sample of megachurch attendees, 60 percent indicated participating in some type of small group, with groups meeting for prayer and Bible study being most common (Thumma and Bird 2009). Other megachurch studies affirm the influence of small groups on individuals' beliefs and practices (Dalton 2002; Martin 2007; Thomas and Jardine 1994). Ellison et al. (2009) warned, however, that simply having small groups does not produce a warm, caring, religious community. They found no relationship between the number of special-purpose groups in a congregation and a worshipper's anticipated support. This study did not consider the impact of different types of special-purpose groups. Data limitations also prevented measurement of the participation of individuals in small groups. Ellison and colleagues acknowledged "perhaps these members [persons active in small group] within very large churches enjoy a greater feeling of anticipated support from their fellows" (p. 11).

Despite the attention given to small groups in the past two decades, there is a lack of direct empirical evidence for the effectiveness of small, relational groups in large congregations specifically. Are these groups capable of mitigating the complications of large size on individual-level commitment and participation? We strive to answer this question by investigating the effects of small group involvement in U.S. congregations nationally and within one specific megachurch. Two hypotheses drive our investigation:

- (1) Small group involvement will be positively associated with individuals' commitment and participation in religious congregations, regardless of congregation size.
- (2) Involvement in a small group will attenuate the negative relationship of congregation size and individual-level commitment and participation.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Our analysis takes advantage of two sources of data. We begin with a national look at small group involvement in congregations using the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey. A valuable complement to our research is a survey of worshippers at one Texas megachurch built around the cell-group model. Hence, our analysis benefits from national breadth as well as internal scrutiny of one cell-based megachurch.

U.S. Congregational Life Survey

Our first source of data is the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS), a national sample of U.S. congregations and their attendees. Based upon a hypernetwork sampling approach which takes a random sample of individuals to identify a random sample of organizations, USCLS data provide a

representative snapshot of U.S. congregations.³ The USCLS is unique in that it gathered representative data at both organizational and individual levels. Data collection involved a religious leader, who supplied information about the organization as well as a survey of participants in each congregation (Woolever and Bruce 2002). We rely primarily on the survey of attendees administered during worship services on the weekend of April 29, 2001. Organizational features including founding date, average worship attendance, denominational affiliation, and regional location were taken from the congregational profile completed by a religious leader. The combined USCLS data set for our variables of interest resulted in a usable sample of 78,474 individuals in 401 congregations. The nationally representative, multilevel nature of these data make the USCLS an invaluable resource for congregational research (e.g., Loveland 2005; Polson 2007; Scheitle and Adamczyk 2009; Scheitle and Finke 2008; Schwadel 2009; Smith 2010).

With USCLS data, we constructed three dependent variables to operationalize congregants' commitment and participation. Our first dependent variable is a measure of commitment or belonging. Organizational commitment is a multidimensional construct. People can be committed to organizations in different ways and these differences have implications for how they feel about an organization and how they behave (Meyer and Allen 1997). The limitations of secondary data force us to depend on a single measure. The USCLS asked, "Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation?" There are three possible "yes" and three possible "no" answers all with qualifiers. The responses are "Yes, a strong sense of belonging that is growing"; "Yes, a strong sense-about the same as last year"; "Yes, but perhaps not as strong as in the past"; "No, but I am new here"; "No, and I wish I did by now"; "No, but I am happy as I am"; and "Don't know/not applicable." We recoded this variable so the first two "yes" responses where individuals reported feeling a greater or equal amount of belonging to their congregation compared with the previous year are equal to 1, setting responses of declining sense of belonging, no sense of belonging, and don't know/not applicable equal to 0.⁴ Our belonging variable taps the affective dimension of commitment, i.e., the emotional attachment one feels to an organization (Meyer and Allen 1997). Though limited to a single measure, our study fits within a long line of previous studies showing affective commitment as a positive correlate to employee outcomes such as retention, attendance, and job performance (Meyer and Allen 1997).

³In addition to the hypernetwork sample, the USCLS cooperated with eight denominations to generate denominational oversamples. These oversamples are not included in our analysis.

⁴The substantive results reported in this analysis do not change by coding the "Don't know/Not applicable" cases as missing or by including all three of the "Yes" responses as equal to 1.

A standard measure of religious participation is attendance at worship services. The USCLS asked attendees, "How often do you go to worship services at this congregation?" The original response options ranged from 1, "This is my first time," to 7, "More than once a week." We recoded the variable to a six-point scale ranging from 1, "Hardly ever," to 6, "More than once a week," dropping first-time visitors from our analysis. There are limitations associated with attendance as a measure of participation. It is subject to over-reporting, normative differences across religious traditions, and it fails to capture a multitude of other ways that individuals participate in congregations. Fortunately, frequency of attendance is not our sole marker of religious participation. A second measure is financial giving. The USCLS asked, "About how much do you give financially to this congregation?" Respondents selected from five descending categories, beginning with "I give 10% or more of net income regularly" and ending with "I do not contribute financially here." Responses were recoded so that higher values equate with higher levels of giving to the congregation.

The independent variable in this study is small group involvement. We created a dichotomous variable to distinguish respondents involved in "prayer, discussion, or Bible study groups" (coded as 1) from those not involved in such groups (coded as 0). Although the USCLS asked about two other group types (Sunday/church/Sabbath school and fellowships/clubs), we restrict our analysis to the type of relational, cell-group prevalent in megachurches (Thumma and Bird 2009) and advocated in church growth literature (George 1992; Neighbour 2000).

In addition to examining the effect of small group involvement at the individual level, we are interested in investigating whether the effect of small group involvement differs depending on congregation size. We created a cross-level interaction term by multiplying small group involvement at the individual level (level 1) with congregation size at the congregational level (level 2). The interaction term serves to test Hypothesis 2.

Individual-level control variables used for USCLS data include gender (1, female; 0, male), age (limited to 18 and older), race (1, white; 0, other), marital status (1, married; 0, other), children in the home (1, yes; 0, no), education (1, no formal education, to 8, Master's, Doctorate, or other graduate degree), income (1, less than \$10,000 in total household income before taxes, to 6, \$100,000 or more), and how long the respondent has attended the congregation (1, less than a year, to 6, 20+ years). In multivariate tests of belonging and giving, frequency of attendance is also treated as a control variable. Finally, a series of congregational-level control variables are used in all USCLS models: region (1, South; 0, other), congregation size (i.e., average weekly attendance), year founded, and religious tradition (Steensland et al. 2000).

Central Texas Megachurch

A second data set gives us a more detailed look at small group involvement within one large congregation. We make use of a survey conducted for purposes

of self-assessment by leaders of CTM, an evangelical non-denominational congregation located in a medium-sized city. CTM was planted by a prominent Southern Baptist congregation in the area in 1999. A successful associate pastor with a vision for missions and small-group ministry left the mother church to launch a new congregation. About 400 people attended the first public worship service. By winter of that year, the count of people regularly attending Sunday services in one rented space after another was 900. Since 2004, the church has averaged at or above 2,000 in weekly worship services.

Small, cell groups are a basic building block of the church. The stated purpose for these groups is personal growth, evangelism, and the facilitation of community. Groups of 8–15 people, typically at the same stage of life, gather in members' homes to sing, receive instruction, discuss, and pray. Small groups are expected to add members with the intent of eventually splitting from one group into two. Thus, the church promotes continued growth through the process of small group multiplication. In 2010, CTM had over 100 small, home groups in operation. Each small group is led by two individuals. These individuals join leaders from similar small groups to form sections. Every section has two leaders. Once a month all of the small group leaders in each section meet together with their section leaders. This serves to encourage those leaders as well as maintain accountability throughout the church. Each section is part of a zone made up of similar sections. A pastor on staff at CTM provides oversight for each zone. Zone pastors report to the senior pastor and board of elders.

In fall 2007, CTM conducted its own internal survey of congregants. A psychologist, who is a member of the church and experienced in survey research, designed the survey instrument in consultation with church leaders. The intent of the survey was to measure the congregation's spiritual health and religious activity. The church's weekly e-newsletter provided a link to the questionnaire online. A print version of the questionnaire was distributed during Sunday worship services on two occasions and once during a separate college worship service. In the end, a total of 1,014 individuals completed surveys. With an average attendance of 2,000 at the time, the estimated response rate for the survey was 51 percent.⁵ We must acknowledge the possibility that the 1,014 respondents to the CTM survey are not fully representative of the entire CTM congregation. Perhaps they represent only the most highly involved. We cannot dismiss this concern entirely, but the same critique applies to the USCLS which was administered to persons in attendance on one

⁵Calculating a response rate for the CTM survey is problematic. The church uses average attendance as its measure of size. This assumes that the 2,000 people in attendance each week are the same people. One reviewer pointed out the true population of the church could actually be much higher, meaning that the response rate to the survey would be lower than we report. Unfortunately, we have no way to determine what the "true population" of Central Texas Megachurch was in 2007. In working with a church administrator, we only know how many individuals attended weekend services during the time of the survey. The calculated response rate is our best approximation given available information.

particular weekend. Both are surveys of participants. There is variation in the extent of participation in both data sets however. Given the limitations of secondary data analysis, the best we can do is acknowledge these perils and proceed with caution.

Although not identical to the measures in the USCLS, the CTM survey contains questions on belonging, attendance, and giving as well. The CTM survey relied heavily on a four-point Likert scale of agreement/disagreement. Regarding belonging, respondents were presented the statement, "I feel connected to others at [Central Texas Megachurch] (a sense of belonging) and to the church vision."⁶ We created a dichotomous variable of belonging with CTM data in which 1 signifies agree, and 0 signifies disagree to feeling connection/belonging at the church. Regarding attendance, the CTM survey asked, "On average how often do you attend Sunday services at [Central Texas Megachurch]?" Possible responses were "Less than Once a Month," "Once or Twice a Month," "Three Times a Month," and "Every Week." Responses to this question were highly skewed, with 80 percent of respondents indicating that they attended services every week. To address this we recoded the frequency of attendance variable for CTM respondents to be dichotomous, separating those that attend weekly (coded as 1) from those that attend less often (coded 0). To measure the extent of giving, the CTM survey used a four-point Likert scale to measure agreement/disagreement to the statement: "Tithing (giving 10% of my income) to [Central Texas Megachurch] is a consistent part of my worship." Our interest is on the actual practice of giving as opposed to one's attitude. As a gauge of giving level, we collapsed the Likert scale into a dichotomous variable where 1 represents those who do give 10 percent of their income to the church consistently (Agree or Strongly Agree) and 0 represents those who presumably do not (Disagree or Strongly Disagree).

Again, our primary independent variable is small group involvement. As an enhancement to the analysis, CTM data allow us to investigate the extent of small group involvement for individuals. The CTM survey asked respondents how often they typically attend a small group. We created a series of dichotomous variables to differentiate levels of small group involvement: Not in a group, attend once or twice a month, attend three times a month, and attend every week.

Control variables in CTM data include age (limited to 18 and older), race (1, white; 0, other), marital status (1, married; 0, other), children in the home (1, yes; 0, no), and how long the respondent has attended the congregation (1, less than six months, to 4, more than three years). Frequency of attendance is

⁶On this and all other CTM survey items, we quote the questions directly as taken from the survey instrument. The parenthetical statement "sense of belonging" appeared in the original. Regretably, the double-barreled nature of the question conflates sense of belonging with connection to the church vision. Though not ideal, this is the only measure of belonging available from the CTM survey.

included as a control variable in multivariate tests of belonging and giving. For these tests, we use the original four-point attendance scale, ranging from 1, less than once a month to 4, every week.

Methodology

Because the USCLS encompasses two different levels of analysis, individual and congregational, we use hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). HLM analysis offers advantages to ordinary least squares when one level of data is nested within another level. Multilevel data violate the assumption of independence in standard regression techniques and the clustering of individuals within groups results in biased standard errors. HLM corrects for this by recognizing the partial independence of data residing at either level (Hofmann 1997). HLM also allows researchers to investigate the extent to which the higher level can influence the lower level. With data at both the congregational and individual levels in the USCLS, HLM analysis is ideal. Separate analyses were performed for each dependent variable. Model specifications were set to Bernoulli (0 or 1) for the dichotomous sense of belonging variable and set to Normal for the other two dependent variables. In each model, all variables besides those that are categorical were set to their grand means. Additionally, in the giving and attendance models, all variables except female were allowed to vary across congregations. In the sense of belonging model small group involvement, married, white, child in home, and female were not allowed to vary across congregations. This is because in all three cases, these variables did not vary significantly across congregations in preliminary analyses.

The second stage of analysis takes us inside CTM. We begin with a presentation of descriptive statistics for the congregation. Multivariate analyses follow for more rigorous tests of the effect of small group involvement. Since all of the dependent variables in CTM data are dichotomous, model estimation depends on binary logistic regression exclusively.

Before presenting results, one more disclaimer is in order. The cross-sectional nature of our data prevents us from determining whether small groups are a source of congregational commitment and participation. Our analysis can only test whether small group involvement is related to individuals' belonging, attendance, and giving in congregations. We have used this relational language to frame our hypotheses and do our best to interpret our findings in the same way. In the conclusion, we return to the question of causation.

RESULTS

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics of the individuals and congregations featured in the analysis of USCLS data. These statistics give a helpful portrayal of congregational and small group involvement among U.S. worshippers.

TABLE 1 Descriptive Statistics for USCLS (2001)

	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
<i>Level 1 (Individual) (N = 78,474)</i>				
Sense of belonging	0.75	—	0	1
Frequency of attendance	4.90	0.82	1	6
Giving	3.47	1.07	1	5
Small group involvement	0.21	—	0	1
Length of attendance	4.07	1.68	1	6
Education	5.64	1.72	1	8
Income	3.65	1.47	1	6
Female	0.60	—	0	1
Age	51.01	16.26	18	100
White	0.79	—	0	1
Married	0.70	—	0	1
Child in home	0.42	—	0	1
<i>Level 2 (congregation) (N = 401)</i>				
Size	602.39	882.79	9	5,400
Year founded	1,912.76	57.57	1635	1,998
South	0.33	—	0	1
Evangelical	0.28	—	0	1
Black Protestant	0.05	—	0	1
Mainline	0.40	—	0	1
Catholic	0.23	—	0	1
Jew	0.01	—	0	1
Other	0.04	—	0	1

Seventy-five percent of respondents felt a steady or growing sense of belonging to their congregation. The mean frequency of attendance at worship services was two to three times a month. The mean level of giving was less than 5 percent of respondent's annual income. In terms of small group involvement, 21 percent of these congregants reported participating in a prayer, discussion, or Bible study group through their congregation.

Table 2 contains the full HLM results for each dependent variable. Small group involvement stands out as significantly related to individuals' congregational commitment and participation, net of other individual-level and congregation-level characteristics. Persons involved in prayer, discussion, or Bible study groups are associated with a stable or growing sense of belonging, more frequent attendance at worship services, and higher rates of financial giving across U.S. congregations. At the congregation level, size is negatively associated with two of the dependent variables. Both belonging and giving are lower in larger congregations. The cross-level interaction of small group involvement by congregation size is not significant in any

TABLE 2 Effect of Small Group Involvement on Individual Commitment and Participation in U.S Congregations (Hierarchical Linear Modeling)

	Belonging ^a	T-ratio	Attendance ^b	T-ratio	Giving ^b	T-ratio
<i>Level 1 (Individual)</i>						
Small group involvement	0.79***	22.97	0.48***	41.24	0.28***	24.93
Frequency of attendance	0.66***	41.48	—	—	0.33***	49.40
Length of attendance	0.22***	22.93	0.03***	10.99	0.07***	21.65
Education	−0.07***	−8.26	0.01***	3.59	0.01*	2.22
Income	−0.02*	−2.00	−0.01***	−3.68	0.05***	12.62
Female	−0.09***	−4.60	0.03***	4.57	0.06***	9.32
Age	0.001*	1.99	0.01***	15.64	0.01***	26.83
White	−0.20***	−6.54	0.06***	4.52	0.01	0.58
Married	0.11***	4.87	0.05***	5.93	0.18***	17.70
Child in home	−0.08***	−3.73	−0.01	−1.67	0.01	1.25
<i>Level 2 (Congregation)</i>						
Size	−0.0001**	−2.95	0.00001	0.41	−0.00004**	−2.79
Year founded	−0.0002	−0.49	0.0003*	1.96	0.001**	3.03
South	0.09	1.83	0.05**	2.66	0.05*	2.29
Mainline Protestant ^c	0.32***	5.09	−0.35***	−14.61	−0.38***	−12.95
Black Protestant ^c	0.33*	2.54	−0.09	−1.83	0.28***	4.72
Catholic ^c	−0.03	−0.49	−0.14***	−4.88	−0.56***	−16.19
Jew ^c	1.16***	4.08	−1.47***	−15.31	−0.26*	−2.36
Other ^c	0.45***	3.54	−0.50***	−10.07	−0.46***	−8.02
<i>Cross-level interaction (Level 1 × Level 2)</i>						
Small group involvement × size	0.00001	0.42	−0.000002	−0.19	−0.00001	−0.75

Source: USCLS (2001).

^aModel specifications set to Bernoulli (0 or 1) due to dichotomous coding of dependent variable.

^bModel specifications set to Normal for interval-level dependent variables.

^cContrast category is Evangelical Protestant.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

model. The effect of small group involvement does not seem to differ by congregation size.

Several control variables have a bearing on individuals' connections to congregations nationally. Frequency of attendance and length of attendance are positively related to all three measures of commitment and participation as are age and being married. The influence of education, income, gender, children at home, and race are more mixed. Higher levels of education correspond

to decreased odds of feeling a sense of belonging but higher levels of attendance and giving. Income has a negative relationship with belonging and attendance but a predictably positive relationship with giving. Females are less likely to report a stable or growing sense of belonging than males but are likely to attend and give at higher rates. Having children in the home is negatively associated only with belonging. Finally, whites are less likely to report a sense of belonging but are more likely to attend at higher rates than non-whites.

In addition to size at the congregation level, congregation age, year founded, region, and religious tradition turn up as significant. Older congregations and congregations in the south have higher levels of attendance and giving. Evangelical Protestant congregations have lower levels of belonging than all other religious traditions besides Catholics; at the same time, Evangelical Protestant congregations have higher levels of attendance and giving than all traditions except Black Protestants.

Knowing that small group involvement is associated with greater commitment and participation in congregations nationally, we now consider the impact that frequency of small group involvement has on individuals within one specific megachurch. Table 3 takes us inside the doors of CTM. This preliminary profile depicts CTM as a congregation comprised of a very committed, active laity. Nine out of 10 CTM respondents expressed a sense of belonging to the church, 8 out of 10 said they attended worship services weekly or more, and more than 7 in 10 reported that they consistently tithe 10 percent of their income to the church. The cell-based organizational model of CTM also is clearly evident. Only 12 percent of respondents reported not participating in a

TABLE 3 Descriptive Statistics for CTM (2007)

	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Sense of belonging	0.89	—	0	1
Attend weekly ^a	0.80	—	0	1
Give 10 percent	0.74	—	0	1
Not in a small group	0.12	—	0	1
Attend small group 1–2×/month	0.08	—	0	1
Attend small group 3×/month	0.12	—	0	1
Attend small group every week	0.68	—	0	1
Length of attendance	3.06	1.07	1	4
Age	29.57	12.10	18	78
White	0.88	—	0	1
Married	0.45	—	0	1
Child in home	0.28	—	0	1

Source: Self-reported data from 1,014 congregants.

^aIn multivariate models, worship service attendance is measured using a four-point scale with mean = 3.72 and standard deviation = 0.63.

small group at CTM. More than two-thirds (68 percent) said that they attended small group meetings every week. Another 12 percent attended three times a month, and 8 percent attended once or twice a month. Demographically, the CTM sample is fairly young, white, and has a relatively short tenure in the church (less than three years on average). We must acknowledge again that this description is speculative. Like the USCLS, CTM data come from a survey of participants, but it is a survey based on a sample. We cannot know for certain that the 51 percent of CTM congregants who completed the survey were comparable to the 49 percent who did not. We present these descriptive statistics as merely suggestive.

Table 4 reports binary logistic regression results for the frequency of small group attendance and control variables regressed upon our dependent variables. The first set of estimates is for sense of belonging. Attending small group weekly multiplies the odds of having a sense of belonging by 4.1 compared to those not in a small group. It is only at these extremes that statistically significant differences emerge.

Estimating weekly Sunday worship attendance, we see the same pattern. Attending small group weekly multiplies the odds of attending Sunday worship weekly by 6.7 compared to those not in a small group. There is no significant

TABLE 4 Effect of Small Group Involvement on Individual Commitment and Participation in CTM (Binary Logistic Regression)

Variables	Sense of belonging		Attend weekly		Give 10 percent	
	Estimate (SE)	OR	Estimate (SE)	OR	Estimate (SE)	OR
Small group attendance ^a						
1–2 ×/month	0.37 (0.34)	—	−0.02 (0.29)	—	0.12 (0.33)	—
3 ×/month	0.59 (0.33)	—	0.41 (0.27)	—	−0.01 (0.30)	—
Every wk	1.41*** (0.28)	4.11	1.90*** (0.24)	6.71	0.34 (0.24)	—
Frequency of attendance	0.30* (0.14)	1.35	—	—	0.73*** (0.12)	2.07
Length of attendance	0.25 (0.10)	1.27	0.08 (0.09)	—	0.42*** (0.08)	1.52
Age	−0.02* (0.01)	0.98	0.01 (0.01)	—	0.01 (0.01)	—
White	−0.16 (0.32)	—	0.15 (0.25)	—	−0.13 (0.24)	—
Married	−0.32 (0.27)	—	−0.24 (0.23)	—	0.90*** (0.23)	2.46
Child in home	−0.03 (0.27)	—	−0.02 (0.23)	—	−0.31 (0.24)	—
Constant	0.75		−0.20		−2.31***	
PRE	9.7%		12.5%		12.8%	
N	995		995		995	

Source: CTM Internal Survey (2007).

^aContrast category is not in a small group.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

association between attending small groups and the CTM measure of financial giving, net of other effects.

As seen in the national sample of U.S. congregations, the control variable with the most consistent influence on commitment and participation in CTM is frequency of worship service attendance. More frequent attendance at Sunday morning services is associated with sense of belonging and a high rate of financial giving. Similarly, people with longer tenures in the church are more likely to report a sense of belonging and give 10 percent of their income. The only other significant control variables were age and married. Older respondents reported a lower sense of belonging at CTM. The odds favoring the giving of 10 percent of one's income to the church is 2.46 times higher for married people than for people not currently married. Given the absence of an income measure in CTM data, the marriage variable may serve as a proxy for higher income which is a recognized correlate to giving (Hoge et al. 1996).

DISCUSSION

The findings presented provide clear support for our first hypothesis. National data from over 78,000 U.S. worshippers in over 400 congregations reveal that individuals involved in prayer, discussion, or Bible study groups have higher rates of commitment and participation than those not involved in a small group. Small group members report a greater sense of belonging, attend services more frequently, and contribute a higher percentage of their income to their congregation. These findings are consistent and robust.

By looking at participants within one megachurch in Central Texas, we further discover that level of involvement within a small group has implications for commitment and participation. It is in regular involvement in a small group where we see these implications. Increases in sense of belonging and regular attendance at Sunday services are more likely only for those who attend small groups every week. Even though small group involvement has no direct effect on financial giving for CTM worshippers, it likely has a positive indirect effect through Sunday service attendance. Weekly small group participants attend services weekly, and weekly service attendance is strongly correlated with financial giving. Testing indirect effects is beyond the scope of this analysis, so we simply mention the possibility here. Nevertheless, our analysis of CTM worshippers aligns with the findings of Ellison et al. (2009) in demonstrating that simply having small groups is not enough for a large congregation. The key is getting people embedded within these groups.

Beyond direct effects of small group involvement on commitment and belonging, we also considered the potential for an interaction effect of small group involvement by congregation size. Hypothesis 2 tested the popular speculation that small groups help remedy the negative consequences of increasing size. Our national analysis failed to support this prediction. The joint effect of small

group involvement and congregation size was not significant in any model. The benefits of being in a small group do not seem to differ by congregation size. Small group members are more committed participants in large and small congregations. The problem facing large congregations is that the average level of belonging and participation outside small groups is lower than it is in smaller congregations. Alas, the negative consequence of size persists.

CONCLUSION

Huge congregations can be daunting places. The flurry of activity and plethora of people can be downright dizzying to a newcomer. This was the reaction of Amy and Jeremy on their first visit to CTM. They did not intend to return. Even if they had, they likely would have become a pair of passive spectators amid the sea of faces in Sunday morning worship services. Their story took a turn however. This turn is telling for American congregational life in an era marked by the growing prominence of very large congregations.

Amy and Jeremy found a place to belong at CTM through a small group. This point of connection quickly transformed them into active, committed participants within CTM. It is a pattern evident throughout American congregations. Analyzing worshippers across the United States as well as within one Texas megachurch, this study provides important empirical evidence linking small group involvement to congregational commitment and participation. No matter the size of the congregation, individuals involved in small, relational groups that meet for prayer, discussion, and Bible study are more likely to express a sense of belonging, attend religious services more often, and give financially at a higher rate than are persons not involved in such groups. So, stories like that of Amy and Jeremy are not exclusive to CTM. Small groups provide worshippers in congregations of all sizes a place to belong and a foundation for greater participation. In light of our findings, we arrive at several conclusions.

Most importantly, being involved in a small, intimate gathering with fellow worshippers is related to positive religious outcomes for individuals. We intentionally limited our analysis to a specific type of intimate, relational, small group experience. Our interest is the prayer, discussion, and Bible study groups prevalent in megachurches. One in five American worshippers belongs to such a group. For those that do, they feel a stronger connection and they give more time and money to their congregation. There is still much about what happens inside these groups that deserves investigation. How do people join such groups, especially in large congregations? How does the content of group meetings affect individuals' religiosity? Are there benefits to standardizing small group format as done in CTM?

A second conclusion, derived from our findings at CTM, is that the level of involvement within small groups has bearing on individuals' overall

congregational commitment and participation. Crucial differences appeared between individuals who attended small group meetings weekly and those that did not attend at all. CTM worshippers who attended a small group weekly were more likely to report a sense of belonging to the church and more likely to attend worship services weekly, as compared to CTM worshippers not involved in small groups. This mirrors Wuthnow's (1994b, 1994c) observation of the spiritual benefits of regular small group participation; people who attended a small group every week expressed a deeper faith that they attributed to their group involvement when compared with people attending a group less often (Wuthnow 1994b:232–33). Recovery groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) recognize the transformative potential of participation and, consequently, stress regular attendance at group meetings. This type of intensive ingroup activity is an important part of the commitment building process in AA (Rudy and Greil 1987). It is also significantly related to recovery success (Humphreys et al. 1997).

Our third conclusion comes in the form of a caveat. Small groups are beneficial, but their benefits do not eliminate or mitigate the negative consequences of increasing congregation size. People in large congregations feel less belonging and contribute less financially to their places of worship than do persons in small congregations. As noted above, simply having small groups is not sufficient to raise levels of congregational involvement. Individuals have to involve themselves in these groups. This may pose a particular problem in the megachurch context. Some suggest that megachurches are qualitatively different in culture and composition from their smaller counterparts (Schaller 2000). Megachurches attract younger people, more singles, and those with higher levels of education and income; almost a quarter were not actively involved in a congregation previously (Thumma and Bird 2009). Choosing to attend a church of thousands says something about what someone wants and expects out of church. Intimacy and accountability may be aspects of congregational life that people are intentionally trying to avoid by attending a megachurch. If this is the case, the fact that small group involvement sustains rates of congregational engagement as much as it does in large congregations is illuminating. Whether a small group is functioning within a context of 100 or 1,000, the positive effects on individual religious involvement are the same. The challenge for megachurches is getting people into smaller, relational units. Resolving this leads us to a final conclusion.

With due caution, we direct our fourth conclusion to the potential for success we see in the organization of a large congregation as a "congregation of small groups." CTM is a congregation built upon small groups. If these data are reflective of the congregation as a whole, CTM is a church with exceptionally high vitality despite an average attendance of thousands. More than 80 percent of respondents expressed a strong sense of belonging and attended worship services weekly or more. Three-fourths reported giving 10 percent of their income to the church on a consistent basis. Descriptive statistics such as these would

support the contentions of Olson (1965), Stark and Finke (2000), and church growth proponents (George 1992; Neighbour 2000) regarding the value of organizing congregations around small groups. We recognize that CTM is a relatively new congregation with a popular pastor, contemporary music, and a heavy emphasis on evangelism. And questions about data quality loom. For this reason, we cannot definitively conclude that small groups drive CTM vitality, but our findings are suggestive. Improved data and additional testing on the performance implications of cell-based congregations would be a fruitful path for future research.

In closing, we consider the issue of causation. Do small groups push people to greater commitment and participation, or are they the product of committed, active people finding each other? We cannot adequately answer this question with our data. We have no way of knowing how committed or active people were in their congregation before joining a small group. Our sense, based on previous studies and anecdotal evidence, is that causation is apt to go both ways. Certainly, people who desire involvement will find small groups attractive. These are often the same people who sing in the choir on Sunday mornings, assist in the children's program on Wednesday nights, and show up for Saturday work days. For others, however, getting involved in a small group is a step toward greater investment in a congregation. Once again, this leads us to a call for further research. A valuable starting point may be to follow newcomers over time in a congregation in which small groups are prominent. Tracing the transition of newcomer to committed, active member would help sort out where small groups fit in the causal order. The stories of people like Amy and Jeremy attest to the formative role small groups can play in the lives of individuals. By forging relational ties and connecting newcomers with the actively committed, we believe that small groups represent a potent source of vitality in congregations big and small. We invite others to test this claim.

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