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Pastoral Narcissism & Church Size

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Context Matters: Pastoral Narcissism & Church Size

Imagine yourself in this situation, it is Sunday morning and you are heading to church. It is a fairly large church with many people attending and many services are offered. You notice the lead pastor is arguing with one of the younger pastors. The conversation itself seems a bit loud and inappropriate for the location but it is not the first time it has happened, and no one else seems to notice. The following week, you attend a different church that is smaller in followers. You notice the lead pastor arguing with a younger pastor. Everyone is watching the conversation at this point since it seems as if it is uncommon to happen at all. What is the difference? Why are people more tolerant in larger churches? Research shows that Narcissistic pastors of larger churches have less dominant followers than smaller churches. The reason for this is that there is a fear that if a narcissistic pastor were to leave the church, the number of attendees would drop because of their devotion to the pastor. In this case, having an understanding of why a pastor can either reduce or increase church attendance.

First of all, what is Pastoral Narcissism? Pastoral narcissism is a phenomenon that occurs when a church leader becomes overly focused on their own ego and personal agenda, to the detriment of the congregation they serve. This type of behavior can have serious consequences for the spiritual and emotional well-being of the congregation, as well as the overall health and vitality of the church itself.

Dunaetz et al from their journal *Do Larger Churches Tolerate Pastoral Narcissism More than Smaller Churches?* support this hypothesis in a within-subjects design, recruiting 64 members of Christian Churches in the U.S. to complete an online survey. Each participant was

presented with the method of *The Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16*, which is using 16 pairs of statements, one that goes towards narcissism and one towards humility. The participants would choose the statement they would say best identifies them, in turn, the result would provide the level of narcissism. When asking participants for tolerance of pastoral narcissism, they were asked to figure out what their head pastor believes about himself. The responses were measured in a Likert-type range with 1 being “very inappropriate” to 5 being “very appropriate” (Dunaetz 2018, p. 76). Higher scores for the 16 questions result in a higher tolerance for narcissism, showcasing that the score on the scale of .778 was measuring consistent. The participants were asked the same for measuring the size of their church with 1 being “less than 100 people” to 5 “1000+ people”.

As a result, the idea of the study was to see the relationship between tolerance for narcissism depending on church size. With the sample, the correlation between tolerance of narcissism and church size was positive. With this result, it is safe to say that pastoral narcissism tolerance is positively associated with a person’s church size. Overall, this means that Christians who attend larger churches will tolerate more narcissistic behavior from pastors than Christians that attend smaller churches. With the fact that there is a potential chance for members to leave if a narcissistic pastor leaves, tolerance for dominance for more passive members is critical for churches. While it’s important to note these facts about larger churches, smaller churches as well might have more active members versus passive members. As a result, active members in smaller churches are less tolerant of pastoral narcissism since they are more likely to take on leadership roles over those in larger settings.

With this information in mind, having an idea of who is coming into the church is critical to both larger and smaller churches. Narcissistic pastors might look for larger churches when

ensuring a place of employment since the idea is for them to have a sense of superiority. Narcissistic pastors know how to make a great first impression, so a larger church has to be responsible for ensuring a large amount of humility and serving others featured within the candidate, which is the opposite of narcissism and dominance. While it is important to stay away from narcissistic pastors, they might be aware of their narcissistic tendencies, which can allow them to structure answers to questions regarding narcissistic behavior. Narcissistic pastors as well can become great actors when interviewing for the position. Church board members have to watch for any cues that might signal a narcissist is present. Dunaetz et al (2018) came up with a strategy to interview people that have worked either above or below the candidate. The main goal of this is to establish a pattern of where narcissists tend to be since they are more likely to praise the candidate if such behavior is present. From describing the character of the candidate, establishing anything that could be classified as narcissistic behavior or humility. One area in particular where pastoral narcissism can be particularly problematic is church size. A pastor who is primarily focused on their success and reputation may become fixated on the idea of growing their church and increasing its size. This can lead to several problematic behaviors, such as manipulating data and statistics to make the church appear larger than it is or pushing congregants to invite friends and family members to services to boost attendance.

The pursuit of church growth at all costs can also lead to a neglect of pastoral care for individual members of the congregation. Pastors who are solely focused on church size may view individuals primarily as potential recruits or financial supporters, rather than as people in need of spiritual guidance and support. Ultimately, pastoral narcissism and an obsession with church size can lead to a toxic and unhealthy environment within a congregation. It is important for church leaders to remain focused on the spiritual and emotional needs of their congregants,

and to prioritize genuine connection and community over mere numerical growth.

Fortunately, Dunaetz et al (2018) addresses the idea of the humility of a pastor regarding church size as well and conducted it in a later within-subject design study of 275 participants that were asked to complete an online survey titled “You and Your Church”. The survey required informed consent from the participants over the age of 18 to complete the survey which gave them the ability to have a link to give to others in their social networks of church attenders. Out of the 275 participants, only 244 provided data that was feasible for the results. Data that was not included was from participants with extreme scores or little to no differences in their answers. Church size averaged around 501-1000 attendees, potentially under the number or higher. Many measures were taken in the survey, using the Likert scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” (Dunaetz 2018, p. 131).

To test for humility, the study used *The Honesty-Humility Scale* to get a better understanding of how a participant is honest and humble. High scores meant an individual is sincere, with no will to commit fraud and deception, and lower scores meant to use others for personal gain. The scale, however, was enhanced for the study to get a reading on an individual’s perception of their pastor's humility, which is the opposite of pastoral narcissism. When it came to church size, participants would be asked to use a logarithmic scale with the highest number being 8. Less than 50 members would be a 1 and it would go up to 8 being more than 10,000 attendees. The scale is used to determine a subjective value with how many people that participant believed attended their church.

Dunaetz et al (2018) gave their results from the study indicating participants' perceptions of pastoral humility were positive but church size was negative when it came to a smaller church. Overall, the perceptions of narcissistic pastors make them demanding versus humble pastors that

earn the loyalty of their followers. Positively, messages from a humble pastor gain more of a community versus a narcissistic one. As a surprise result, discovering pastors of larger churches will have to commit more to the church as well as the members since it will decrease the amount of humility that they potentially could have for them if not.

Additionally, although the information collected from the studies may have given a different point of view when it comes to pastoral narcissism, pastoral humility, and church size, several limitations must be kept in mind. Because the information was reported from individuals from both studies, it can be seen as a personal bias that could have influenced the responses that might not be the true result. The first study gives the result that larger churches have more tolerance for pastoral narcissism than smaller churches. Influences from outside sources could potentially work in the favor of a new pastor with narcissistic tendencies. From a member wanting the church to feel like a second home to leaving the church because the previous pastor left. Awareness of these limitations could potentially label a larger church more tolerant of narcissism when they are not.

The same idea applies to church size since it can influence who to bring into the church. A pastor could be brought into the church based on the members' feedback. Since the idea a narcissistic pastor can be a dominant force in the church, they essentially control the population. Anything can influence them to change what happens from services to how they perform their teachings. That brings out the limitation when personal influence comes into play from a larger setting. But a smaller church size could have even more side effects if the information is personal. A smaller church could dramatically change how a new member perceives the church if the wrong leader is in power. Dunaetz et al (2018), explain that participants that value their church instead of judging can potentially mislabel as humility. In turn, it could potentially cause

the church to believe the pastor is humble versus a narcissist.

With this understanding, some future studies could separate the participants based on how many years they have been attending. It could potentially narrow down behavior methods from the pastor, anything odd that could be said, and as well as anything potentially narcissistic they need to worry about. Another idea for future studies would be to flip the sample size, by using the sample size for study 1 from study two and vice versa, different results might change the idea of narcissism and humility (2018). Furthermore, explaining these more in detail will give additional research as to whether pastoral narcissism and church size make a difference. Overall, there is a potential chance more information will have to be researched to narrow down the exact science as to why pastoral narcissism and church size make a difference in the sense of tolerating it. But even changing the sample size can cause potential bias for future studies. One individual could influence results that either favor the church or the pastor. Intensive surveying would have to be completed to rule out any potential bias that could occur.

Lastly, it is important to notice as well that with the personal bias of such an unknown factor in the studies, it might be best to give the survey to a new group of participants. It can clear up any potentially false results that might have been confusing in the studies. Going back to the original example from the beginning where a pastor and a youth pastor are arguing, it matters where the argument happens. While someone in a larger church is not likely to notice, it could cause more potential damage over a longer period versus a smaller church. As a result, unfortunately, there are many factors at play and many to be discovered which includes future research that will help fill in any missing information that could help determine why pastoral narcissism and church size are linked.

References

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