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Contemporary Challenges Facing North American Evangelical Churches: Differences Between Smaller and Larger Congregations

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Abstract

Contemporary churches face a myriad of challenges that will impact their future. However, the challenges that individual churches face vary according to the church. One factor that might be associated with different challenges is church size. This study of 129 evangelical churches in North America seeks to understand better what these challenges are, which are the greatest, and how they relate to church size. Church leaders were asked to indicate how difficult each of the 50 challenges was for their church. A factor analysis extracted 13 families of challenges. The four factors representing the greatest challenges were Evangelism and Youth Ministry, Leadership Support and Development, Spiritual Development, and Lay Involvement. The factors that accounted for the most variation between the churches were Cultural Changes Threatening Stability and Poverty in the Local Community. Two families of challenges (High Quality Church Programs and External Threats) were related to church size; specifically, they were greater challenges for smaller churches than for larger churches. The challenges and their relationship to church size are analyzed from psychological, managerial, and economic perspectives to understand the phenomena better.

Contemporary churches, like all organizations, face challenges. How they respond to these challenges will determine their future. To better understand these challenges, this study focuses on the differences between smaller and larger evangelical churches in North America.

With the rise of megachurches (Ellingson, 2009; Hunt, 2019; Loveland & Wheeler, 2003; Thumma & Bird, 2015), several differences between larger and smaller churches have been noted. For example, larger churches provide services to members that are more economically efficient than smaller churches, but they also suffer from more free-riding members who do not contribute with their time or money (Stonebraker, 1993; von der Ruhr & Daniels, 2012). Similarly, larger churches have a greater proportion of members than smaller churches who do not share the same values and beliefs as the leadership of these churches, at least among theologically conservative congregations (Dunaetz et al., 2022). Larger churches can offer more community services than smaller churches (Powell et al., 2021). Larger churches emphasize growth more than smaller ones (Chaves, 2006; Maddox, 2012). Larger churches can also attract more experienced ministers through better remuneration (Mueller & McDuff, 2002). Yet, they tolerate and struggle with pastoral narcissism more than smaller churches (Dunaetz et al., 2018).

This study aims to provide a better understanding of the specific challenges that contemporary North American evangelical churches face, as viewed by their leadership, and how these challenges differ between larger and smaller churches.

Whereas past sociological studies (e.g., Iannaccone, 1994; Iannaccone et al., 1995; Stoll & Petersen, 2008) have examined the relationship between church growth and church resources ($G_i = dS_i/dt = f(R_i)$, where G_i = growth of church i, S_i = size of church i, and R_i = resources of church i, both human and financial), this study examines the challenges that churches face in order to determine which challenges are related to church size ($C_i = f(S_i)$, where C_i = magnitude of a challenge for church i).

The Concept of Challenges

Although challenges are often examined in academic literature (e.g., Barkema et al., 2002; Galea & Vlahov, 2005; Waters & Jiménez, 2005), the concept of challenge itself is often not defined, assuming the reader has an intuitive understanding of its meaning. However, perspectives from different academic fields shed light on some of the nuances of challenges.

A Psychological Perspective

In psychology, and especially positive psychology (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000; Peterson, 2006; Seligman et al., 2005), challenges are often viewed as a means of growth or a necessary ingredient for optimal performance (Horikoshi, 2023). For example, flow, a positive state of complete engagement,

depends upon facing a challenge while having (or developing) the skills required to meet the challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Similarly, goal setting that includes challenges is necessary for maximizing performance in work situations (Locke & Latham, 2006). Posttraumatic growth occurs as one struggles and overcomes challenges associated with difficult events (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Stress occurs when a person faces a challenge but does not have the resources to respond to it (Folkman, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Horikoshi, in a recent study, proposes a preliminary definition of a challenge as "a situation, task, or problem that is difficult, new, or complex and presents the possibility of testing skills or resources and being interpreted as or transformed into an opportunity" (2023, p. 3). However, this may paint an overly rosy picture of challenges.

Whereas positive psychology was initially focused on positive experiences, characteristics, and states associated with well-being and flourishing, *second-wave positive psychology* presents a more nuanced view of interpreting phenomena as either positive or negative (Horikoshi, 2023; Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). Positive phenomena, such as optimism, do not always contribute to flourishing, especially when pessimism would better prepare for a future reality. Similarly, some negative states, such as anxiety, under certain conditions can lead to greater well-being. Flourishing and well-being are not just associated with positive phenomena but with negative phenomena as well, depending on the challenges one faces. This is especially true of the lay concept of the good life; many people do not ask, "How do I flourish?' instead, they ask, "How do I flourish amid the challenges I am facing?" (Horikoshi, 2023). Positive and negative experiences necessarily go together in life.

In light of this dialectic of positive and negative experiences (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016), challenges must be viewed on a gradient, ranging from negative to positive. They are negatively viewed if they prevent one from achieving one's goal (i.e., they cannot be overcome) and positively viewed if they can be overcome, allowing one to achieve one's goals and perhaps enabling growth through the development of personal resources. In this way, a challenge can be defined as *a situation, task, or problem where the desired end state may or may not be achievable*. The strength of the challenge depends on both the importance of the desired end state and the difficulty of achieving this end state. More specifically, the strength of a challenge can be viewed as the product of these two subjective characteristics (difficulty and importance). For example, in a church context, a pastor may not see mastering a new bookkeeping app as a challenge because, although it is very difficult, it is not viewed as important and can thus be easily ignored. Similarly, a pastor may not see setting aside time for daily prayer to be much of a challenge because, although it is viewed as very important, it may not be viewed as personally difficult. Retaining youth as they grow up in the church may be viewed as a great challenge because it is viewed as very important and difficult. Thus, situations, tasks, or problems are seen as more challenging to the degree that the desired end state is considered important and difficult to achieve.

A Managerial Perspective

Management can be viewed as the means by which an organization reaches its goals by coordinating human effort (Drucker, 1973). It includes vision casting, ensuring that the actions are taken to achieve this vision, and evaluating the results to understand the degree to which the vision has been achieved. Management is especially concerned about coordinating the work of individuals. As the management theorist Drucker put it, "Management is to make work productive and the worker effective. A business enterprise has only one true resource: people. It succeeds by making human resources productive. It accomplishes its goals through work" (Drucker, 2001, p. 15). Effective management is critical because organizations "are increasingly the means through which individual human beings find their livelihood, find their access to social status, to community and individual achievement and satisfaction" (Drucker, 2001, p. 17). Churches are like other organizations; they are composed of people who gather for a common purpose, which is achieved by providing them meaning and direction.

From a managerial perspective, three domains are especially important when considering the concept of challenges: organizational structure, leadership, and culture. When any of these are poorly aligned with the organization's mission, in this case, the church, difficulties arise, which can present challenges.

Mintzberg (1989) describes five elements of organizational structure that are necessary in effectively managed organizations. The first three are top management, middle management, and workers. Top management sets the vision and determines the organization's priorities. In churches, this might correspond to the lead pastor and the board. The workers are those who carry out the majority of the work related to the vision of the organization. In churches, this would include Sunday School teachers, small group leaders, worship team members, greeters, food closet workers, and everyone else involved in on-the-ground ministries; conceptionally, it could also include worshipers who simply attend weekly services. Middle management takes the upper management's vision and plans and coordinates the workers so that the vision and goals are accomplished. This could include pastoral staff, the Sunday School director, and the choir director in churches. The fourth element of organizational structure is technical staff. These are employees or members of the organization who have specific technical knowledge necessary for the organization to function effectively in its context. In contemporary churches, this could include the sound technician, the accountant, the human resources person, or the social media coordinator. The fifth element is support staff, members of the organization who make indirect contributions to the mission of the organization. In churches, this could include administrative staff, custodians, or groundskeepers. Larger churches will be able to have a more complete organizational structure than smaller churches, thus influencing the challenges that they will face.

Another key element of management is leadership, which is the "process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2022, p. 6). Leadership is central to effective management and can be approached from various perspectives. From a skills approach to leadership (Mumford et al., 2007), all leaders need the appropriate skills to influence others to achieve the organization's goals. Depending on the leader's responsibilities, these skills will include technical skills, people skills, and conceptual skills. Different sets of responsibilities will require different mixtures of skills. Larger churches, compared to smaller churches, will likely have a greater leadership pool to draw from to find leaders with the appropriate skills necessary for a position, thus influencing the challenges they face.

The development and maintenance of organizational culture is another important managerial responsibility. Organizational culture is a "pattern or system of beliefs, values, and behavioral norms" shared by the members of an organization (Schein & Schein, 2017, p. 6). Understanding and developing these beliefs, values, and norms within an organization such as a church is an important managerial responsibility. When managers attempt to make changes that do not correspond to the underlying assumptions of the majority of members of the organization, resistance and failure are likely. In churches, even when changes are needed because of the changes in the surrounding culture, such changes may present significant challenges because of entrenched beliefs. As smaller churches are often tighter and more closely knit (Aktas et al., 2016; Bretherton & Dunbar, 2020; Gelfand et al., 2006), church size might influence the elements of organizational culture which contribute to the challenges faced by a church.

An Economic Perspective

The scarcity of resources, including financial, material, and labor resources, and how humans deal with such scarcity is the primary focus of economics (Robbins, 1932; Walras, 1926/1954). In churches, these resources typically take the form of offerings, buildings, paid staff, and volunteer workers; when such resources are abundant, church growth comes more easily than when they are lacking (Iannaccone, 1994; Iannaccone et al., 1995; Stoll & Petersen, 2008). From an economic perspective, a challenge can be framed as something we want to accomplish but for which we do not appear to have adequate resources or appropriate processes. Hard decisions have to be made about the allocation of limited resources. In the real world of imperfect information, we face the additional challenge of determining which potential allocation is superior to others.

From an economic perspective, a challenge can be framed as the difference between what one wants to accomplish and what can be accomplished with limited resources. Because of this difference, hard decisions have to be made about allocating resources, often with no convincing evidence that one approach is superior to another.

When uncertainty of the future is added to the mix, risk plays a significant role in determining how decision-makers in organizations will act. Because of their different backgrounds and contexts, decision-makers will often react differently to risk profiles. In churches, the size of a church has an important influence on the risks that are most salient. In smaller churches, some risks (e.g., the loss of a key family) could result in the complete closure of the church, an outcome unlikely in a larger church. As such, the efforts of smaller churches might be skewed to avert the loss of members, lest their departure bring the endeavor to an end. On the other hand, a larger church with more resources and little chance of catastrophic failure might be willing to take more risks to continue growing. Thus, from an economic perspective, smaller and larger churches will likely face different challenges based on the scarcity or abundance of their resources.

Research Questions

This paper addresses two research questions related to the challenges contemporary North American evangelical churches face. The first is "What are the broad current challenges facing these churches, and which are the greatest?" This is especially important in a new, post-pandemic context characterized by decreased church attendance (Jones, 2024; Saurabh & Ranjan, 2020; Xiang et al., 2020). The goal is to understand better how the many potential challenges churches face are viewed and to make sense of this information in a helpful way.

The second research question is, "How do smaller and larger churches differ in their challenges?" There are theoretical and common-sense reasons to expect that church size is an important factor influencing these challenges. This study seeks to identify these challenges and analyze them from three perspectives: psychological, managerial, and economic.

Methods

An online survey was used to collect data during the Fall of 2022 concerning the challenges that North American evangelical churches would face in 2023. The surveys were anonymously completed by one of the church's leaders.

Participants

Links to an online survey were sent to a convenience sample of members and those on the mailing list of the Great Commission Research Network, a professional and academic organization with members primarily in North America, formerly known as the American Society for Church Growth (GreatCommissionResearch.com); anyone who received the invitation and self-identified as a church leader was invited to participate in the survey. The organization has no doctrinal statement but is broadly evangelical (Bebbington,

1989); the organization focuses on conducting and disseminating research relative to evangelism and church growth, attracting members who tend to be theologically conservative (and thus often have access to important resources; Bibby, 1978; Kelley, 1986; von der Ruhr & Daniels, 2012). Some of the most represented denominations of the members include the Southern Baptist Convention, Free Will Baptists, Church of Christ, and Seventh Day Adventists. In addition, the Asbury Center for Church Multiplication, associated with Asbury Seminary (Wilmore, KY), also participated in the study by sending an invitation (with a different link to the same survey) to church leaders on its email distribution list. The total number of responses collected was 129, of which 64 came from Asbury-related churches.

Because the study's unit of analysis was congregations, no demographic information was collected concerning the churches or the church leaders who completed the survey. However, in a second survey (Ingersoll & Dunaetz, 2025) sent to church leaders using the same mailing list, and that was also distributed by denominational leaders of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Venture Network, and Aspire Ministries (all with historic Baptist roots), demographic information on pastors was collected. In that survey, the average age of the pastors was 54.03 years. Most participants who indicated their race/ethnicity identified as White (81.5%), followed by mixed race (7.2%), Hispanic (4.3%), Black (3.5%), or Asian (2.3%).

The Institutional Review Board of the researchers' university approved the use of this anonymous data collected for research.

Measures

The principal data collected for this study concerned the challenges that contemporary North American churches face and the size of the participant's church.

Challenges

Participants responded to a list of 50 potential challenges; this list was created by the officers of the sponsoring organization, all of whom have a pastoral background and are currently involved in church consulting, education, denominational leadership, or mission organization administration. The 50 items were chosen based on the subjective expertise of officers of the organization because they seem to represent significant challenges in at least some of the churches with which they have worked.

The participants were asked to indicate how much of a challenge they believe each of these items is for contemporary North American churches. They were instructed to use their church as a point of reference if they desired. This approach minimized ego threat (Baumeister et al., 1993; Leary et al., 2009) to the participants by allowing them to respond impersonally. Although this approach

might increase completion rates, it risks attenuating the relationships between the characteristics of the participant's church characteristics and the strength of the challenges (see "Limitations"). Five scaled responses were presented (coded from 1 to 5): Not a Challenge, A Slight Challenge, A Significant Challenge, A Very Significant Challenge, and A Nearly Insurmountable Challenge. The list of 50 challenges is in Table 1. The overall mean score assigned to the challenges across all participants was 2.85 ($SD = .55$), between A Slight Challenge (= 2) and A Significant Challenge (= 3). Descriptive statistics of each challenge are available in the supplementary information (S1, https://osf.io/kf294/) and Dunaetz (2023). The complete survey is also available in the supplementary information (S2, https://osf.io/kf294/).

Church Size

Each participant was asked to respond to a one-item measure of church size. They were asked to select one of nine options to indicate how many people attended their church each week. The options were coded on an approximately logarithmic scale: 1 = Less than 20, 2 = 20-50, 3 = 51-100, 4 = 101-200, 5 = 201-500, 6 = 501-1000, 7 = 1001-2000, 8 = 2001-5000, and 9 = More than 5000. The item was not mandatory, but 125 responses were collected. The mean church size was 3.89 ($SD = 1.99$). The median response for church size was 3.5, indicating that half the churches had an average attendance of 100 or less. This is somewhat higher but similar to the median attendance of 65 for American churches found in a study conducted just before the pandemic (Thumma, 2021). As this is approximately the number of good friends that an individual can interact with regularly (Dunbar, 1993), this natural human limitation is likely to at least partially explain why there are so many small churches (Bretherton & Dunbar, 2020).

In addition, participants were asked to what degree they believed their church to be growing or declining. This study did not use this subjective measure of perceptions of church growth, which may very well be inflated by self-serving biases (Forsyth, 2008). The relationship between perceived church growth and the challenges churches face has been examined in Dunaetz (2023). In contrast, the focus of this study is the relationship between church size and the challenges churches face.

Results

To answer the research question "What are the challenges faced by North American churches?", we performed a factor analysis on the data from the 50 challenges proposed to the participants to gain a broader understanding of which challenges naturally went together, enabling us to create broad classifications to describe these families of challenges. Such classifications are called *factors*. We then created composite variables of each of these extracted factors. The hypothesis

that some challenges are related to church size was tested by examining whether any of these factors were significantly correlated to church size.

Factor Analysis

An exploratory factor analysis (Gorsuch, 1983) was performed on the data collected from the participants ($N = 129$) concerning the fifty challenges presented in the survey. Thirteen factors emerged using a principal component analysis with a varimax rotation (Table 1). An exploratory factor analysis looks for families of items that correlate with each other more than would be expected by chance and account for more variance than any single challenge (i.e., having eigenvalues greater than 1). In this case, the 50 items representing specific challenges, identified in the far-left column, grouped themselves into 13 families of broad challenges, each represented in a numbered column. To read Table 1, an item (i.e., a challenge) belongs to a factor (i.e., a family of challenges) if there is a number (i.e., a factor loading) in the family's column in the row for that item. Factor loading is essentially the degree to which a single challenge is correlated with the factor if we had been able to measure the factor directly; factor loadings closest to 1 capture best the meaning of a factor. Only factor loadings greater than .40 are shown in Table 1. Most items appear in only one factor, but several appear in more than two factors (e.g., active participation in worship occurs in both the third and seventh factors). Approximately 68% of the variance of the responses was accounted for by regrouping the 50 challenges into these 13 factors. The factors are listed in order (1-13), beginning with the factor that accounts for the most variance in the responses provided by the church leaders and ending with the factor with the least variation in responses.

Interpretation of the Extracted Factors

The factors extracted from an exploratory factor analysis can be subjectively analyzed and named to express the essence of what the factor represents. Some factors are more easily interpreted than others. Despite their subjective nature, these interpretations enable conclusions to be drawn by reducing a large number (50) of specific challenges to a more manageable number (13) of broad (or latent) challenges.

Table 1. *Exploratory Factor Analysis of Challenges in Churches*

Challenge	Factor Loadings												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Political Divisions	.77												
Christian Nationalism	.71												
Contemporary Sexual Ethics	.68												
Gender Issues	.65												
Effects of Social Media	.54												
Mental Disorders within the Church	.52												
Substance Abuse	.43												
Poverty in the Community		.82											
Homelessness of Members		.78											
Homelessness in the Community		.76											
Poverty of Members		.76											
Small Group Participation			.70										
Youth Programs			.65										
Children's Programs			.65										
Attractiveness of Programs			.63										
Mobilizing for Evangelism				.79									
Concern for Evangelism				.71									
Community Outreach				.63									
Retaining Young Adults				.55									
Member Mobilization				.40									
Works without Faith					.69								
Effects of Pornography					.56								
Unconfessed Sin					.54			.43					
Bible Knowledge of Members					.54								
False Doctrine					.47								
Church Conflict						.68							
Pastoral Leadership						.57							
Vision Clarity						.55			.48				
Sexual Abuse within the Church	.44					.48							

Challenge	Factor Loadings												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Church Board Effectiveness							.70						
Member Indifference							.62						
Member Retention							.55						
Active Participation in Worship			.42				.43						
Anti-Intellectualism								.68					
Faith without Works								.64					
Quality of Pastoral and Intern Candidates						.42		.44					
Leadership Training									.71				
Leadership Burnout							.43		.47				
Lay Leadership									.46				
Responding to Atheism										.72			
Finances										.63			
Hostility from Nonbelievers										.57			
Cultural Relevancy											.74		
Effective Strategy											.55		
Making the Gospel Attractive											.49		
Preferences for Online Church Experiences												.73	
Online Ministry Effectiveness												.69	
Technology												.42	
Difficult Passages in the Bible													.73
Professionalization of Worship													.47
Eigenvalue (after rotation)	4.03	3.58	3.13	2.97	2.80	2.62	2.58	2.33	2.29	2.18	2.03	2.00	1.59
% of Variance	8.06	7.16	6.25	5.93	5.96	5.24	5.16	4.67	4.58	4.36	4.05	4.00	3.18
Total Variance												68.23%	

Note: Only factor loadings > .40 are shown. Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Factors with lower numbers had greater variation of responses.

1. Cultural Changes Threatening Stability. The first factor, which had the most significant variation in responses from the participants, appears to be composed of items creating tensions in contemporary society both within and outside of churches. These challenges include political divisions, Christian nationalism, the effects of social media, contemporary sexual issues, mental disorders within the church, and substance abuse. These are relatively new challenges that would have been much rarer 20 years ago. This challenge is congruent with Chaves' (1994) understanding of secularization, namely, that a decline in religious participation may be expected when there is a decline in religious authority, such as when other cultural voices play a greater role as culture evolves.

2. Poverty in the Local Community. This second factor included challenges involving poverty and homelessness of church members and those in the surrounding community (Unruh & Sider, 2005). This is likely an especially difficult challenge in churches in poor communities when church members and the local community have the same socio-demographic characteristics.

3. High Quality Church Programs. This third factor differs from the first two in that it relates to challenges within the church: small group participation, youth programs, children's programs, and the general attractiveness of the church's programs. Programs are an important part of the church because they are the planned activities used to achieve a church's goals (Dunaetz, 2019a; McDavid & Hawthorn, 2006).

4. Evangelism and Youth Ministry. The fourth factor included mobilization for evangelism, concern for evangelism, community outreach, retaining young adults, and member mobilization. These challenges are closely related to the recent growth of the religiously unaffiliated and its effect on local churches (Burge, 2023). The presence of this factor is also congruent with Chaves' (1994) argument that, as a culture becomes more secular, churches have less influence on people.

5. Spiritual Development. This diverse group of challenges included works without faith (*sic*), the effects of pornography, unconfessed sin, members' Bible knowledge, and false doctrine. These challenges seem to form a factor focused on a lack of spiritual growth or maturity, that is, beliefs and behaviors that would be expected to change as one progresses in the Christian faith.

6. Pastoral Leadership. This factor focuses on responsibilities and phenomena, especially those associated with full-time leadership positions within the church. These challenges include church conflict, pastoral leadership, vision clarity, and sexual abuse within the church.

7. Lay Involvement. This seventh factor includes church board effectiveness, member indifference, member retention, and active participation in worship. These all concern the participation and involvement of lay members of the church.

8. Superficial Faith. This factor includes the challenges of anti-intellectualism, faith without works, and high-quality pastoral and intern candidates. It is not obvious how these are all connected, but they may relate to a superficial faith that has little influence on one's behaviors and attitudes.

9. Leadership Support and Development. This ninth factor includes challenges related to maintaining the well-being and effectiveness of the church's leadership: leadership training, leadership burnout, and lay leadership.

10. External Threats. This factor is composed of challenges that originate outside of the church but threaten the church. These challenges include responding to atheism, finances, and hostility from nonbelievers.

11. Contextualization of the Gospel. The rapidity of cultural evolution makes contextualizing the gospel challenging for churches. This factor reflects this challenge and includes cultural relevancy, effective strategy, and making the gospel attractive (Hiebert, 1987).

12. Computer-Mediated Ministry. This twelfth factor includes a preference for online church experiences, ministry effectiveness, and technology. These challenges are likely related to the rise of online ministry due to the pandemic and the importance of social media (Cooper et al., 2021).

13. Attractional Issues. The final factor, the most difficult to identify and which had the least variation in responses, includes difficult passages in the Bible and the professionalization of worship. The concept tying these challenges together may be related to the use of an attractional model of the church which focuses on seeker-sensitive worship services (Thumma & Travis, 2007). It may be a challenge to be an unoffensive, seeker-sensitive church and hold to an evangelical view of the Bible. Similarly, having high-quality music associated with modern churches may be a challenge, especially if the worship service is perceived more as a performance than an interaction with God (Cowan, 2017; Sanders, 2012).

Differences Between Smaller and Larger Churches

Factor analyses are commonly used to create composite variables from a large number of items; these composite variables represent latent variables underlying the specific items measured (Fabrigar et al., 1999; Gorsuch, 1983). The 13 factors in Table 1 were used to create composite variables representing broad (or latent) challenges underlying the 50 challenges presented to participants. Each item with a factor loading greater than .40 was used to create the corresponding composite variable by taking the average of all its items' scores. If an item loaded onto two or more factors, it was only used in the factor where its loading was the highest. Each variable created has a potential range of 1 to 5. Higher scores indicated that it was perceived as a greater challenge.

The descriptive statistics for these 13 composite variables are presented in Table 2. It can be noted that 4 of the latent challenges had averages greater than 3.00 (a significant challenge): Evangelism and Youth Ministry ($M = 3.46$),

Leadership Support and Development (M = 3.17), Spiritual Development (M = 3.02), and Lay Involvement (M = 3.01).

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of the 13 Latent Challenges and Their Correlation to Church Size*

Latent Challenge	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range	Number of Items	Coefficient of Reliability	Correlation to church size r
1. Cultural Changes Threatening Stability	2.91	.82	1.14-4.86	7	.84	.15
2. Poverty in the Local Community	2.25	.84	1.00-5.00	4	.85	-.15
3. Church Programs	2.78	.79	1.00-4.50	4	.76	-.23*
4. Evangelism and Youth Ministry	3.46	.73	1.33-5.00	5	.80	-.09
5. Spiritual Development	3.02	.85	1.00-4.80	4	.81	.02
6. Pastoral Leadership	2.69	.87	1.00-4.75	4	.77	.06
7. Lay Involvement	3.01	.74	1.00-4.75	4	.70	-.02
8. Superficial Faith	2.70	.83	1.33-5.00	3	.62	-.05
9. Leadership Support and Development	3.17	.83	1.00-4.67	3	.74	-.06
10. External Threats	2.56	.88	1.00-5.00	3	.68	-.22*
11. Contextualization of the Gospel	2.94	.87	1.00-5.00	3	.67	-.02
12. Computer-Mediated Ministry	2.70	.76	1.00-4.33	3	.58	-.17
13. Attractional Issues	2.36	.82	1.00-4.50	2	.52	.06

Note: *p < .05, 1 tailed. Higher means indicate greater challenges.

To answer the research question, "How do larger and smaller churches differ in the challenges they face?", the Pearson correlation coefficient between church size and the strength of each latent challenge was calculated. Two latent challenges were significantly correlated with church size. High Quality Church Programs, r(113) = -.23, p = .011 (2-tails), and External Threats, r(113) = -.22, p = .014 (2-tails), were negatively correlated with church size, meaning that smaller churches perceive both of them as more challenging than do larger churches. The other latent challenges were not significantly correlated to church size.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the challenges North American evangelical churches face. A factor analysis of the data collected from church leaders concerning the degree to which they found 50 items challenging yielded 13 latent challenges, most of which were easily interpretable.

The four greatest latent challenges were Evangelism and Youth Ministry, Leadership Support and Development, Spiritual Development, and Lay Involvement. From a psychological perspective, these factors are likely to be considered important and difficult hence they are perceived as a greater challenge than the others. The latent challenges viewed as least challenging were Attractional Issues and Poverty in the Local Community. This is likely because they were not considered especially important (e.g., the professionalization of worship) or not especially difficult (e.g., dealing with difficult passages in the Bible).

Only two of the latent challenges significantly varied with church size. Smaller churches found High-Quality Church Programs and External Threats to be greater latent challenges than larger churches. The challenge of high-quality church programs can be best understood from a managerial perspective, and external threats can be analyzed from an economic perspective.

The Challenge of High-Quality Church Programs

This study confirmed that smaller churches find creating and maintaining high-quality church programs a greater challenge than larger churches, a previously observed phenomenon (Thumma, 1996; von der Ruhr & Daniels, 2012). The reasons for this can be understood from a managerial perspective, focusing primarily on organizational structure, leadership, and organizational culture.

Programs in churches and elsewhere are planned activities designed to accomplish the organization's goals and objectives (McDavid & Hawthorn, 2006). Churches, like all well-functioning organizations, need to have top management (who focus on determining the goals and objectives of the organization and the necessary programs), middle management (who are responsible for carrying out the programs), and workers (who do the hands-on work of the programs), along with technical specialists (who provide specialized help) and administrative specialists (who ensure that the programs run smoothly; Mintzberg, 1989). In larger churches, full-time employees typically include top management (the head pastor), middle management (pastoral staff), technical specialists (traditional and social media staff, facilities staff), and administrative staff. Nevertheless, well-qualified volunteers may make up part of the top management (the board) and many of the workers.

In smaller churches, such an organizational structure is not possible. With less than 150 members, it is difficult to have more than one full-time paid position (Bretherton & Dunbar, 2020). The pastor may need to fulfill the roles of top management and middle management for many or all the programs. There may be

few or no technical and administrative specialists, forcing these responsibilities onto the overly stretched pastor or potentially underqualified volunteers. The church's programs may function, but ensuring multiple high-quality programs may be beyond the reach of many smaller churches.

Leadership quality may also contribute to the difficulties that smaller churches have maintaining high-quality programs. Whereas larger churches can hire leaders with the specific skills needed for each position and program (Mumford et al., 2007), smaller churches may not be able to hire more than one staff person, who may not be very experienced or qualified (Mueller & McDuff, 2002). Volunteers may feel the need to take on responsibilities for which they are not qualified to maintain traditional and beloved programs. Larger churches, in contrast, can encourage volunteers to participate in various programs until a good person-job fit is found (Hamann & Foster, 2014; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

A third reason from a managerial perspective that high-quality programs are so challenging for smaller churches concerns the culture of the church, that is, the values and beliefs that lay behind why the current programs are carried out as they are (Schein & Schein, 2017). Small, theologically conservative churches often have a very high level of homogeneity concerning their values and beliefs (Dunaetz et al., 2022). This tends to produce a less tolerant culture of change in habits or deviations from tradition, a phenomenon known as cultural tightness (Aktas et al., 2016; Dunaetz, 2019b; Gelfand et al., 2006). In tight cultures, changes and social deviance tend to be sanctioned, resulting in maintaining the status quo (Gelfand et al., 2004; Stamkou et al., 2019). Thus, when church leaders try to introduce change in small, conservative churches, they often encounter extreme resistance to anything contrary to what the church's organizational culture says is acceptable. Such beliefs often prevent changes needed to improve the quality of the church programs.

The Challenge of External Threats

A second difference between smaller and larger churches concerns the latent factor of External Threats, which include finances, response to atheism, and hostility from nonbelievers. From an economic perspective, this can be viewed as being due to differences in risk profiles. Risk has been studied extensively in economics for decades (Gollier, 2001; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Wildavsky & Dake, 2018; Willett, 1901), but rarely have the developed theories and models been applied to churches. These theories give reason to think that different risk profiles faced by smaller versus larger churches might lead to different perceptions of the challenge involved in mitigating these risks.

Specific external threats may or may not threaten a church's survival. While all churches must contend with managing their budgets, a smaller church is more likely to face financial collapse with the loss of a few members than a larger church. Similarly, hostility toward the church might seem especially personal in a small

congregation, increasing the risk of members leaving. Consequently, external threats to church members are immediate challenges to the church's viability in a way that they are not to a larger congregation.

A larger congregation might also be better suited to provide security to individuals, making them less likely to feel the sway of an external threat. A member of a smaller church who is exposed to external beliefs such as atheism is less likely to find someone in the church who has dealt with such questions (or even understands them) than someone in a larger church surrounded by people with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Moreover, larger churches can provide a social network that can meet the social needs of its members, reducing the need to include people outside of the church among those who are depended upon for support. If a young adult is surrounded by 200 like-minded young adults, a hostile interaction with a nonbeliever or a disturbing podcast would likely have less of a negative impact on the person than if he or she only had one or two peers in the church who shared the same Christian beliefs.

Consequently, a smaller church will see external threats to individuals as a greater challenge, as each individual is more important to the church's survival and more vulnerable than in a larger church.

Limitations and Future Research

Exploratory factor analyses, such as the one used in this study, highly depend on the choice of items to include in the analysis. This study chose 50 challenges that were intuitively accessible based on professional experience. If other challenges had been included in the study, the factors describing the latent factors would likely be different. Similarly, naming the latent factors is subjective; other researchers would create other names. Moreover, the last two factors had low reliability coefficients, indicating that any interpretations of them are quite tentative. Thus, the 13 latent challenges found in this study should not be viewed as a definitive classification of church challenges but rather as a set of groupings of challenges that are statistically justified.

As this is a correlational study, the direction of causation between church size and the two latent challenges (High Quality Church Programs and External Threats) cannot be demonstrated. The causation is likely bidirectional. Church size will affect a church's ability to respond to challenges, and its response to challenges will influence whether it grows or not.

The prompt to indicate how great each challenge was to contemporary churches was phrased in such a way as to reduce ego threat. Participants were told they could either think of churches in general or their church specifically as a point of reference. This ambiguity in the prompt could reduce the magnitude of the correlations between the strength of the challenges and the size of the church, as their particular context (e.g., the size of their church) might not have influenced some participants' responses. However, it is unlikely that such a prompt would

introduce inflated correlations related to church size. It is likely that additional challenges related to church size exist but were not detected in this study.

This study examined challenges facing theologically conservative North American churches as perceived by church leaders. Churches of other theological orientations may very well face different challenges. Similarly, churches in other cultural contexts are likely to face different challenges. Church members not in leadership positions may perceive challenges differently than church leaders, who were the data source in this study. Future studies examining these different perspectives would provide a more complete picture of contemporary churches' challenges.

Conclusion

Church size matters when it comes to understanding the challenges that churches face. Differences in organizational structure, leadership, organizational culture, and resources may affect how church leaders feel about the hurdles they face. This study indicates that larger churches find creating and maintaining high-quality programs less challenging than smaller churches. This may be due to the ability of larger churches to hire and retain qualified staff and to their organizational culture, which may be more open to change. Smaller churches are more likely to struggle in these areas, making high-quality programs more of a challenge. In addition, external threats tend to be a greater challenge to smaller churches than larger churches, likely due to their limited resources creating a risk profile of greater fragility.

However, for the other challenges that churches face, including the greatest challenges (i.e., Evangelism and Youth Ministry, Leadership Support and Development, Spiritual Development, and Lay Involvement), the perceived strength of these challenges was not related to size. For smaller and larger churches, these are the principal challenges they will need to overcome to successfully fulfill their mission.

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