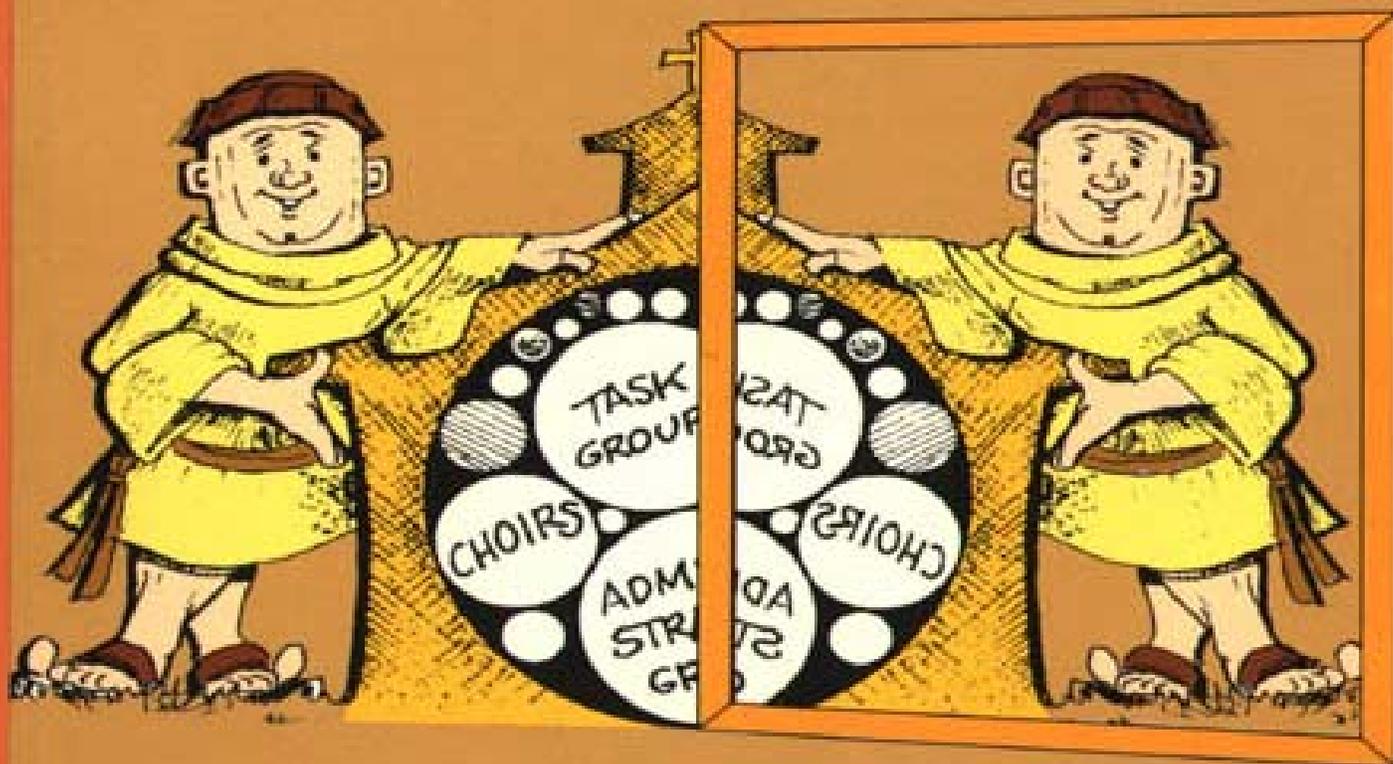


LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

Self-Appraisal in the Local Church



Illustrated by Edward Lee Tucker

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Looking In the Mirror: Self-Appraisal In the Local Church

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*To
Donald L. Houser
Frederick A. Marks
W. Baxter Weant
Martin L. Yonts*

Introduction

"It's one thing to sit in your living room and look at pictures of alligators in the *National Geographic*. It's another thing to be waist deep in swamp water in Florida!" declared the minister in his second year of developing a new congregation in Georgia. The subject under discussion was whether a proposed training event for ministers organizing new congregations should be designed for pastors *before* they were assigned as mission developers or for ministers who had three to six months behind them in their call to create a new congregation. The speaker was arguing for the second alternative.

This book is not about organizing new congregations, but it is designed for congregational leaders both lay and clergy who sometimes feel they are waist deep in swamp water and surrounded by alligators. In part it is an attempt to help the reader understand why alligators flourish in certain places, but are rarely found in most of the swamp land on this continent. In other words, this book is directed at the practitioners who are out attempting to drain the swamps, not at the observers who occasionally share in corporate worship when they are not watching television, but who are not otherwise actively engaged in the life, ministry, pain, outreach, and struggles of the worshipping congregation.

This book rests on three basic assumptions. The first goes back to Plato's admonition in *Apology*, "...the unexamined life is not worth living." Both the Old Testament and the New Testament contain scores of declarations that every child of God should be engaged in self-appraisal. That concept is central to the Christian practice of confession and seeking forgiveness. It is only a short step beyond that to the concept of corporate self-appraisal. In other words, it is assumed that it is appropriate, productive, and good for congregational leaders periodically to engage themselves in the process of appraising the role, ministry, internal dynamics, outreach, and life of that congregation. Like many other areas of human endeavor, there is the danger of overindulgence with a resulting "paralysis from analysis," but every worthwhile venture includes risks. This book is intended to offer a conceptual framework for this process of congregational self-appraisal.

The second basic assumption is that (a) if people can agree on the larger context, it will be easier to agree on details and (b) if people have the benefit of a reasonably accurate diagnosis of reality, they can be more effective than many of them believe in solving the problem or in living with the ambiguity that is present when a problem does not have a neat solution or in resolving diversionary or destructive conflict.

The first four chapters represent an attempt to offer four different systems for looking at congregations. Not everyone will find every chapter speaking to the condition of every congregation. For example, some readers may find it easy to decide whether their congregation resembles a cat or a collie or a garden or a

ranch as described in the first chapter, but may not be able to decide whether it is predominantly a second-person church or predominantly a Bible-centered church to use the conceptual framework offered in the fourth chapter. The sole purpose of the classification systems offered in these four chapters is to help the reader develop a conceptual framework that will explain contemporary reality more clearly. If one of these classification systems does not fit your congregation, please do not worry about it. Simply turn to the next chapter. Perhaps that next chapter will speak to your efforts at self-appraisal.

The third of the three assumptions that provide the foundation for this volume is that self-appraisal and information can be a key factor in overcoming the apathy and passivity that blight so many congregations. This book is based on a central assertion of information theory--that order and sense can prevail against disorder and nonsense.¹ This writer not only believes in God as the creator, but also believes God was and is an orderly creator. This is not a random or ad hoc world in which we live. While there are dangers in an excessive emphasis on a logical, rational, and businesslike approach to the church (that is the thesis of the second chapter), this book affirms the idea that a comprehensive classification system can be a very useful tool in self-appraisal and planning. Sense and order are compatible with a Christian doctrine of creation.

Another way of introducing the reader to this book is to explain first what it is not and next what it is. This is not a book on the Christian faith. It is based on the values and teachings of the Christian faith, but it is not a book about the faith. It assumes the church is a community which nourishes the faith of the members, but this volume is not directed at the personal and spiritual journey of the individual Christian. It is about the corporate life of the worshiping community, but it is not a book about worship.

This book represents an attempt to look at congregational life from nontraditional and nonconventional perspectives. This point can be illustrated by three other books published in recent years. In 1975 Edward O. Wilson's book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Harvard University Press) broke new ground in helping us understand human behavior.² A second example is the impact Walter Wink's *The Bible in Human Transformation* has had in helping us understand the central reason for studying the Bible.³ We study the Bible to know, understand, and reinforce our faith as Christians. The third example is Paul Colinvaux's *The Fates of Nations*⁴ in which the author offers an ecological analysis of military history. While none of these books offers a complete analysis of the subject under discussion, each book helps us broaden our understanding of contemporary reality by looking at the subject from a fresh perspective. That is the purpose of this volume. It is intended to offer congregational leaders several different perspectives in their efforts at the appraisal of that church.

To a limited extent the approach followed in this book parallels that used by Donald A. Schon in *The Reflective Practitioner*.⁵ The contents of this book are

based on thirty years of firsthand observations of what is happening in the churches, rather than from scholarly research or controlled experiments. That can be a useful approach to identifying reality.

By the time they reach the last chapter some readers may be curious about the omission of chapters on the self-appraisal of such traditional programmatic areas as worship, education, missions, social action, and evangelism. There are three reasons for these omissions. The most obvious is that this would increase the length of the book by at least one hundred pages, and some readers will agree it is already too fat.

More important, the distinctive purpose of this volume is to lift up concepts in congregational self-appraisal that have not been covered in other books. Hundreds of books have been published in recent years discussing these programmatic concerns. The primary focus of this volume is to lift up questions and issues that often are neglected in the traditional approaches to congregational self-appraisal. That is the reason for the inclusion of chapters on membership trends, youth ministries, the weekday nursery school, and the building planning committee. In each of these chapters, as well as in the rest of the book, the emphasis has been on considerations that frequently are overlooked.

Finally, this is not intended to be a comprehensive self-study manual. Scores of these have been published during the past three decades. The central goal of his book is to help congregational leaders expand their conceptual framework and ask new questions in self-appraisal efforts.

This book is directed at those church members, both lay and clergy, who enjoy thinking on the reflective or analytical level. Each chapter is intended to stimulate the reader to reflect on the life of the church from a new perspective. For example, the first chapter questions the conventional wisdom of those who advocate the merger of small membership churches. Can you create a collie by merging two cats? Will the union of a cat and a big collie produce a garden? In other words, the reader is invited to playfully reflect on the points raised here and not to take the contents as a rigid set of guidelines.

In broad general terms this volume consists of three sections. The first four chapters raise broad general questions about the distinctive nature of the worshipping congregation. Does your church resemble a garden or a ranch? Do the leaders try to "run it like a business"? Is it primarily legalistic or ideological or behavioral in character? Which person of the Trinity receives special emphasis?

The next seven chapters focus in more on various aspects of congregational life ranging from the turning points of the past to the characteristics of today's members to the conceptual framework for program planning.

The last three chapters raise questions that frequently are overlooked about three specific aspects of congregational life.

In each chapter, however, the central point is to raise questions that will help leaders in their efforts at congregational self-appraisal. When your church looks into the mirror, what do you see? These questions may sharpen up the image you see in your self-appraisal effort.

Chapter I Cats, Collies, and Ranches

"For the past two years I've been trying to persuade the small congregation I serve out in the country to cooperate in programming with the church in town where I also am the minister," commented Tom Parsons who was in his third year as the pastor of this two-church parish. "With the exception of last summer, when we had a joint vacation Bible school, I've had no luck. I can't understand why the folks out in the country don't want to cooperate. The members of my church in town are so open to the idea of the two congregations cooperating in program."

"One of my biggest frustrations is that we haven't been able to get the leaders from our really small churches to come to our training programs," sighed the executive minister of a regional judicatory. "We've had some top-notch training events for our smaller congregations, but the folks from our smallest churches rarely come out."

"I hate to go away for more than three or four days at a time," complained Virginia Burke, the pastor of a congregation averaging 150 people at Sunday morning worship. "Whenever I'm gone for a longer period, there is so much work piled up for me when I get back that it takes the fun out of the trip. All I think about is that mountain of work that is accumulating while I'm away."

These three comments point up the first question that should be asked in the congregation where the members are engaged in a process of self-examination. Who are we? What are our distinctive characteristics as a congregation? What distinguishes this congregation from other churches?

One part of that unique local identity grows out of the origins, heritage, and traditions of that congregation. Another part is a product of the community context. A third component often can be traced back to the imprint of one or two long pastorates.

Another set of clues to help us understand who we are and why we behave as we do can be gleaned from the review of the differences among churches that are an outgrowth of size.

A useful frame of reference is to think in terms of a classification system, rather than simply to compare congregations with one another.¹ The classification system suggested here uses seven analogies to help us picture the differences among churches.

Have You Ever Owned a Cat?

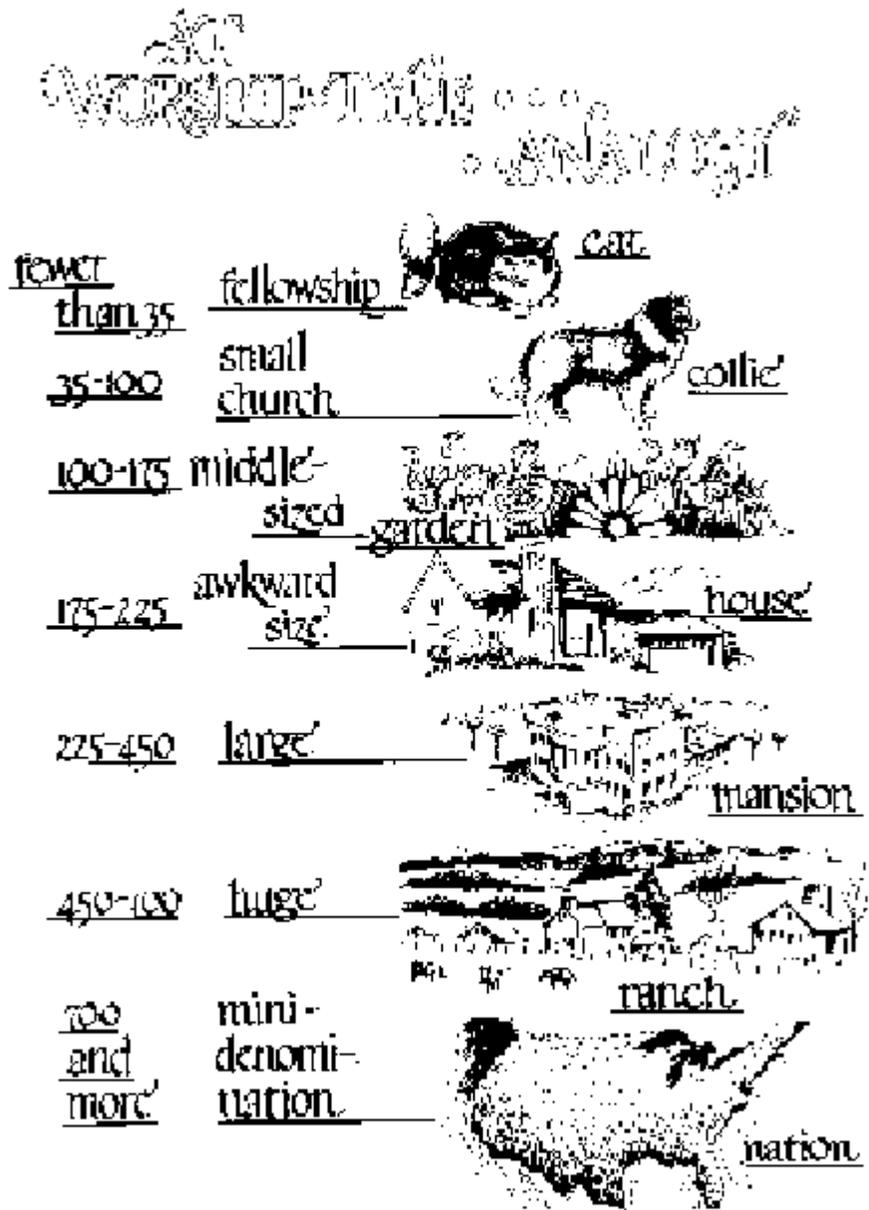
Approximately 100,000 Protestant² congregations in the United States and Canada average fewer than thirty-five people in attendance at the principal weekly worship service. Together these very small congregations account for more than one-fourth of all Protestant congregations on the North American continent and for approximately 5 percent of all Protestant churchgoers on the typical Sabbath.

It may help us to understand the distinctive characteristics of these congregations if we liken them to a cat. Have you ever owned a cat? If you answer yes, you do not understand cats. No one *owns* a cat! You may keep a cat. You may work for a cat. You may have taken care of a wandering cat who came to live with you. You may have a cat in your house as a pet. You may have a cat as a landlord, but you do not *own* a cat. Cats are very independent creatures. Cats are self-sufficient. Cats take care of themselves. Cats do not like to be dependent on others. Cats have powerful instincts that direct their behavior patterns. The female cat instinctively knows how to be a good mother to that litter of hungry kittens. No one has to develop a training program to teach that four-legged mother how to take care of her kittens.

The really small congregation displays many of the characteristics of a cat. These churches, which we can label as "fellowships," resemble an overgrown group more than they resemble the popular stereotype of what a full-blown church should be. Together they constitute a distinctive category in our classification system. Together they account for one-fourth of all Protestant churches on this continent.

For decades the experts in denominational circles have been predicting the demise of many of these fellowships. Folklore proclaims that cats have nine lives. So do most of these very small churches. They can be yoked with a larger church, but they survive. Thousands have survived some of the worst mistakes and poorest sermons of the most inept of the apprentice preachers. Many have survived the determined efforts of denominational leaders to close them. They can survive decades of neglect, abuse, and mistreatment.

Average Attendance...



The vacancy between the departure of one resident minister and the arrival of the successor may be as long as two or three years, but the fellowship church does not appear to suffer any serious negative effects of this neglect. Cats do not like to be dependent on others.

Frequently one hears a minister refer to "my church," but the possessive term rarely can be applied to these fellowships. They do not belong to any preachers. They are independent and self-sufficient. No one owns a cat. No preacher owns

these fellowships. That minister may care for the fellowship, may even regard it as a favorite pet and may feed it spiritually, but that pastor does not own it.

The staff of the regional judicatory often complain that these fellowships do not express a strong sense of denominational identity. They forget that cats are independent creatures and rarely wear anyone's family name.

Likewise the denominational executive, who is upset when representatives from the fellowships seldom attend those training events for people from small churches, should understand that cats rarely are seeking someone to train them. The cat's behavior pattern is a product of instinct, not training. Cats rarely seek advice on how to improve their behavior patterns. Readers who have tried to train a cat can understand why members from these fellowships tend to ignore denominational training programs. Cats do not voluntarily enroll in training schools! Cats already know the answers to all the questions they believe are relevant.

Some of the clergy have considerable practice in making declarations that begin with the words, "Every church should . . ." These ministers gain some useful insights into reality by talking with human beings who declare, "Cats should be trained not to jump up on the table while we are eating." The word "should" has little relevance to most discussions about the training of cats. For example, it is not uncommon to hear the declaration, "Every little church ought to plan to grow into a bigger congregation!" Have you ever encountered a cat that wanted to be transformed into a dog? We can gain some additional insights into the behavior of these fellowship churches as we look at several other categories in this classification system.

Isn't That a Friendly Collie?

More than one-third of all Protestant churches on the North American continent average between thirty-five and a hundred people at their principle weekly worship service. In this classification system these congregations can be likened to collies. Collies come in different sizes. Some are big dogs. Some are relatively small. Occasionally one will encounter a mean dog that has been abused by a previous owner, but almost all collies are affectionate creatures. They enjoy being loved and they return the affection.³ Collies are responsive to sensitive human beings and can be trained to respond to external expectations that run counter to the dog's natural instincts. Many self-identified enablers among the clergy enjoy serving these small churches because they receive a favorable and affirming response to their efforts as trainers. Denominational leaders appreciate collies because many of them respond to the training events planned for leaders from small churches. (Have you ever seen a cat willingly participate in a training event designed for dogs?) When they leave, many of them lavishly express their appreciation for what happened.

When the pastor of the collie-sized church returns from a two-or three-week vacation or from several days at a continuing education event, that minister usually receives a warm reception and finds little has changed during his or her absence. (When the resident of a house that includes a cat returns, it often is a bit disconcerting to be ignored by the cat, who appears to be unaware that you have been gone and is more interested in being fed.)

In thousands of communities one minister serves a two-church parish that includes a friendly collie and an aloof cat displaying little interest in going to visit the collie on the dog's turf or in socializing with dogs. (There are exceptions to that generalization. We have a neutered tomcat whose mother was a long-haired alley cat and whose father was a teddy bear that loves to go out and romp with a fourteen-year-old schnauzer who lives next door. However, he regards every other dog as a natural enemy.)

The pastor of the two-church circuit that includes a cat and a collie traditionally has been advised, "It's important that you treat both the same way. Be sure not to favor one congregation over the other." Better advice would be, "Remember, cats and dogs are different! Be sure to treat the cat like a cat, not a dog. Likewise the key factor with the collie will be to shower it with affection." Some people wonder why these small churches tend to remain on a plateau in size or why church shoppers often do not return after that initial visit. Collies tend to have a strong affection for members of the family, but they often bark at strangers.

Most people enjoy collies and on the typical Sunday in 1984 an estimated eight million Protestant churchgoers attended worship in a collie-sized congregation. Collies account for somewhat more than one-third of all Protestant congregations and for slightly less than one-fifth of all Protestant churchgoers on the North American continent.

One of the more subtle changes in the dynamics of small membership churches in recent years can be traced back to the changing source of pastors. During the first half of this century thousands of young men who went into the pastoral ministry were drawn from among the children who had grown up in rural America and were nurtured in small membership churches. Typically their first ministerial assignment was to a cat or collie-size congregation, or perhaps to a yoked arrangement that consisted of a cat and a collie. That posed no problems since the new minister carried many years of firsthand recollections of the dynamics and congregational life-style of that size church. He knew the characteristics of the cat and the collie.

During the past three or four decades, however, an increasing proportion of persons going into the ministry have come from much larger congregations. Many have had no firsthand contact with a congregation of fewer than six or seven hundred members. Frequently their first ministerial responsibility, following graduation from seminary, is to serve as the pastor of a collie-size congregation.

This can be a difficult experience for both the new pastor and the parishioners. Occasionally the new minister feels rejected. The pattern is the same as when the body of a heart transplant recipient tends to reject that new organ. There is a natural tendency for a body to reject what it perceives as a foreign or alien object. A more cynical observer of this process once declared, "No, what it really resembles is the institutional tendency to throw the new seminary graduates to the dogs."

The Gardener's Work Is Never Done

Another 15 percent of the Protestant churches on this continent average between 100 and 175 at worship. For the most part the 50,000 to 60,000 congregations in this category are very unlike smaller churches. To represent this discontinuity we move out of the animal kingdom to choose an analogy. These middle-sized churches resemble a garden. Some gardens are much larger than others. Some gardens have the benefit of rich and fertile soil. Others are located in barren ground. Most of the churches in this category need, can afford, and do have the services of a full-time resident minister, although several thousand share a pastor with a collie or a cat.

From the ministerial perspective this classification evokes several reflections on reality.

It is much easier to look after two or three cats or a cat and a collie than to take care of two gardens.

The gardener's work is never done. If the gardener is away from home for several days, the neglect is very obvious when that gardener returns. Usually there is considerable work awaiting the gardener's return. In some seasons of the year this is a more severe problem than in others.

While there are natural forces that limit how large a cat or a collie can become, a garden can be greatly increased in size without any radical changes in character. Growth on a large scale means more work for the gardener, and it may be necessary to employ some part-time help, but gardens respond to the concept of quantitative growth more comfortably than do cats and dogs. Eventually, however, the garden may grow to the point that it would be more realistic to refer to it as a truck farm or a ranch than to continue to limit one's thinking by seeing it as a garden. When that happens, of course, the basic responsibilities of the gardener are transformed.

It also means a new and radically different organizational structure for managing the big gardens. In addition, the truck farm is less dependent on volunteers who work in the garden in their spare time and increasingly dependent on an organized and disciplined paid work force. This often is easier for the new owner

to understand than it is for the person who started that garden on a small plot of land twenty years ago.

The garden demands most of the gardener's time and it certainly is helpful to have someone available to answer the telephone while the gardener is out in the field.

The collie wants to love and be loved. The garden needs someone who loves gardens, but is willing and able to accept a leadership role in planning and decision-making, and who has the ability to think in a longer time frame than either the cat or collie believe is necessary. Cats and collies live in today's world, but the garden is dependent on someone who can plan at least one season in advance. The enabler or trainer may be remarkably effective when working with the collie, but the garden needs someone who is willing to take charge.

While some readers may have difficulty believing this, several Protestant denominations operate on the assumption that the best training for a future gardener is to spend several years working with cats and collies.

Finally, several young ministers have complained that the theological school they attended trained them to serve as gardeners, but offered little preparation in the care of cats and dogs.

Why Use This System?

At this point it is appropriate to suggest a half-dozen reasons why this classification system is being used as the opening chapter in a book on congregational self-appraisal.

First, and most obvious, this series of categories emphasizes the discontinuity as churches are classified by size. The congregation averaging twenty people at worship is not a miniature version of the congregation that includes one hundred at worship. They are different orders of creation.

Second, when a congregation moves from one size bracket to another, it also changes some of its basic characteristics. When long-time members say, "It's not like it used to be," they are correct in their appraisal. It is different.

Third, when a minister moves from serving as the pastor of a two-church parish composed of a cat and a collie to a congregation of 150 to 160 at worship, that move results in more than a change of address. It also means a radical change in the ministerial role for that pastor. The gifts and skills that are necessary and appropriate for taking care of cats and dogs are not the same as the gifts and skills required of an effective gardener.

Fourth, the form of oversight and discipline that needs to be exercised in the care of a collie is not the same as for a cat or a garden. Likewise the system of church government that is appropriate for one size congregation may not fit another size.

Fifth, the leadership role of the person caring for a cat is different from that of the gardener. In general, the larger the size of a congregation, the greater the pressures on the minister to be an initiating leader and the longer the time frame needed for planning.

Finally, most of us are more comfortable when we are encouraged to think in visual terms. Jesus taught us the value of word pictures in communicating abstract concepts. Most of us can picture in our minds more readily the differences between a cat and a collie than we can the differences between the congregation averaging twenty at worship and the one averaging seventy. Visual imagery helps us understand subtle differences. This point can be illustrated by returning to this classification system and identifying four other categories of churches.

Who Repairs the Plumbing in Your House?

One Protestant church in twenty on this continent averages between 175 and 225 at worship. These churches include one out of nine churchgoers on the typical Sunday morning. Their congregations can be described as "awkward" in size. Most of them are too large to be adequately served by one pastor without the assistance of other program staff, but frequently the leaders are convinced that "we can neither justify nor afford a second minister." These congregations are not quite large enough to fit comfortably into the large church bracket, but they are too big to function effectively as middle-sized congregations. One common characteristic of many churches of this size is that they include a substantial number of inactive members. They often include more people than they are able to accommodate and care for adequately. Others often fluctuate between 220 and 240 at worship when everything is going well, but drop to 160 to 180 at worship when encountering rough seas. Scores of these awkward-size congregations have fluctuated in that range for decades without even being able to move into and institutionalize a permanent place for themselves inside that large church bracket.

In our classification system they resemble a house. Houses, like gardens, come in widely varying sizes, but a house is a different species of creation than a garden. Some houses are far more complex than others. The house includes several specialized rooms such as the bathroom, the kitchen, and the bedrooms. This size church also usually includes specialized ministries with children or mature adults or individuals with special needs. While some new houses do appear to be carbon copies of others, by the time they are twenty years old, it is safe to say no two are alike. Some are rundown and in need of rehabilitation while others have been completely remodeled recently. Some suffer from

deferred maintenance while others are in excellent condition. Few congregations in this size category find carbon copies of themselves.

The care of a house requires a different set of skills than are necessary to care for a garden. An excessively frequent turnover in the person in charge of the house often results in an above average pace of deterioration.

One of the distinctive characteristics of a house is that many homeowners rely on outside specialists for help. The list includes plumbers, carpenters, electricians, roofers, and specialists in heating and cooling systems. Likewise this size church often turns to an outsider to direct the choir or lead the youth program or plan a financial campaign or revitalize the Sunday school or carry out some of the parish visitation or oversee some other dimension of parish life. When we move beyond the garden-size congregation, the emphasis increasingly is on specialized skills when discussing staff needs.

From a ministerial perspective the work is never done, surprises frequently emerge that need immediate attention, the specialists who are called in sometimes do not meet expectations and stormy weather can create additional chores. The visitors who come by often are highly impressed, occasionally they display signs of envy, but rarely do they comprehend the amount of lonely work that is required to maintain that old house in such fine condition.

A large proportion of church members, especially those who live in single family homes, find the house-size congregation to be ideal. Everyone knows one another. It is not necessary for people to bother wearing name tags. Kinship ties reinforce congregational cohesion. There are enough volunteers to carry the basic work load. Some of the occasional "fixing up" can be done by volunteers. The members care for one another and emergencies reinforce the sense of belonging. Some new members who are not related to anyone in that house feel it is exclusionary and difficult for a stranger to be accepted.

Those who would like to turn the average house into a mansion must face the fact that such a transformation has several price tags on it. These include more staff, more meeting rooms for more programs, a tolerance of the increased complexity, higher per person operational costs, more parking to accommodate the increased number of people, adaptation to a change in how the rest of the community views it and, most important of all, a determination to pay the price of expansion.

That Is Too Rich for Our Blood!

A slightly broader category of churches consists of those large congregations averaging between 225 and 450 at worship. These large congregations can be likened to a mansion--there is a high degree of discontinuity with the previous category, but also some continuity.

Unlike the garden or the house, the mansion almost always requires directional signs to help strangers find their way around the place. The mansion also requires a larger staff of specialists--a pattern that visitors from the garden often view as a luxury. The mansion is a very complex structure and it may appear that something always needs fixing, but the mansion can accommodate a very large number of people at any one time, although most of them will not be able to call more than a few of the others by name. Events planned for the mansion usually have to be scheduled well in advance, carefully organized and adequately staffed. In the house everyone appears to know everyone else, but anonymity is a mark of the mansion.

The person in charge of the mansion should be a well-organized and personally attractive individual who is comfortable and skilled at building and maintaining relationships with strangers, who knows how to make visitors feel welcome, who is unusually competent at remembering names, and who can work effectively with the large staff required to care for such a big operation.

People passing by often are impressed by the sheer size and impressive appearance of the structure. They may wonder what goes on inside, but most are too shy to walk in on their own initiative. A substantial number are convinced, simply by looking at the building, "That's too rich for my blood," and walk past in their search for a smaller house, an attractive garden or a friendly collie. Some outsiders try to rent the facility for a wedding or some other special ceremony. Some mansions are available for rent. Others are not.

Conversations with long-time residents of a mansion often evoke such comments as: "There was a day when I knew everyone who lived here, but now it seems like most of my old friends are gone and all I see are strangers." Or "If you knew how much it costs to operate this place, you would be amazed." Or "There's more going on here in a week than anyone has time to attend." Or "The help we're able to secure today simply is not up to the quality we had when I moved in here thirty years ago." Or "I can't understand why anyone would want to live in one of those little crackerboxes when they could come here." Or "We really have a broad range of people here tonight; it's not like it used to be when everyone you met here was somebody." Or "It seems like the help is too busy now to even talk with us." Or "I can remember when a lady wore a hat and gloves whenever she came in here!" Or "When our daughter was married here in 1955, it took the workmen three days to decorate; now they run weddings through here like it was Reno." Or "It seems to me there was more going on around here back in the fifties than now, but today we have more staff than we had then. How come?"

The really perceptive occupants of the mansion see no inconsistency in the fact that the residents include three cats and a collie or that many people spend far more time in the garden than in the mansion. In fact, several people identify the gardener as their closest friend on the staff. Some folks see the cats as aloof creatures who refuse to socialize with the rest of the residents, but that is the

nature of a cat. The big mansions accept the fact that a few cats and that collie are necessary to make everyone feel comfortable here.

The 35,000 churches in this category account for fewer than 10 percent of all Protestant congregations, but they include nearly one-fourth of all the people at worship on the typical Sabbath.

Who Tends the Ranch?

While the gap between the congregation averaging under 450 at worship and the one averaging 600 may not appear to be large, there is a definite break between the two. In several denominational families, a graph plotting the size of congregations by membership and also by worship attendance reveals a pattern of discontinuity when worship attendance reaches 400 to 450. A disproportionately large number of congregations cluster in the under 450 bracket in worship when compared to the distribution according to membership. A similar pattern is revealed in the growth pattern of hundreds of congregations. As they grow the membership curve continues to climb, but frequently the average attendance at worship begins to plateau. There appears to be an invisible barrier that keeps many congregations from increasing their average attendance beyond 400 to 450, even though their membership may continue to grow.

This break in the continuity of the growth pattern suggests that the congregation averaging 600 at worship is substantially different from the church averaging 400. Field studies substantiate this. It may be that one reason so many congregations level off in worship attendance at 400 to 450, rather than continuing to grow, is that to go beyond that point in size requires a substantial change in role, in self-expectations, in staffing and in internal governance. When these changes do not take place, it appears that the congregation has collided with a barrier. (As will be pointed out in the third chapter, it often is easier for legalistic or ideological churches to move from one size category to another than it is for behavioral parishes.)

This discontinuity is represented by a sharp change in analogies--from the mansion, where the focal point is concentrated in one place, to the ranch, which is marked by diversity and by many activities occurring concurrently in several different places.

Fewer than 3 percent of all the Protestant congregations in the United States and Canada fit into this bracket, but they include more than a fifth of all the Protestant worshippers on the typical Sabbath.

Just as a typical ranch includes a variety of activities in many different fields and buildings, lots of different creatures and a garden, the healthy huge congregation has an extensive program. The small face-to-face groups reflect many of the

characteristics of the cat. The larger groups, such as the chancel choir of seventy-five voices or that big adult Sunday school class that averages more than seventy in attendance or the general meetings of the women's organization held every month resemble the collie. That is the place where a stranger often finds a warm welcome and is made to feel at home.

Various organizations, such as the Sunday school, the men's fellowship, the women's organization, the music program, and the youth group, display several of the characteristics of a garden. They are the places where many newcomers feel needed and where they may gain that initial sense of belonging. Most gardens benefit from the contributions of additional volunteers. The two or three worship services on Sunday morning resemble a house and no two are exactly alike and they vary in size. Some of the lay leaders see the new house that was constructed recently for use on Saturday evening or Thursday evening as not worth the cost. After all, we can accommodate everyone in the two (or three) old houses, so why build a new one for such a small number of people?

Many of the people do not comprehend they are a part of a large complex ranching operation. When asked what they are doing, one responds, "I'm feeding my favorite cat." Another replies, "I'm helping with our smallest garden, but it's growing." A third says, "I'm taking care of the collie." A fourth declares, "We're remodeling the house in order to make it more accessible to the handicapped." A fifth explains, "I'm new here and I don't know what the others are doing, but I've been asked to help take care of this garden and I'm enjoying it. In fact, the main reason I'm here is because I enjoy working in the garden."

From a ministerial point of view, a fundamental factor in being able to be an effective senior pastor is to understand that, "While sometimes I feel like a zoo keeper, I know this is a ranch and I'm a rancher. I'm not a gardener. I'm not a housekeeper. I'm not a veterinarian who specializes in the care of small animals. I'm a rancher!"

One of the most important responsibilities of the senior minister is to help the members, and especially the lay leadership, realize this is a ranch and must be operated like a ranch. A big source of frustration for the senior minister is the large number of leaders, often including some staff members, who insist this is really a mansion or a house or a garden or a zoo and fail to see the larger picture. The primary responsibility of the rancher is to see that larger picture, to operate within a long time frame that is appropriate for a ranch and to resist the pressures (and often the temptation) to plunge in and "do it myself." The rancher spends less time "doing" and more time making sure the job gets done (by someone else) than does the gardener or housekeeper.

A common point of tension and conflict on the ranch is over the role of the laity. Some ranches depend on paid staff to do most of the work. Others project far greater expectations of the lay volunteers to feed the cats, nurture the collies,

work in the gardens, care for the house and serve on administrative committees. The critical points of tensions are: (a) when the lay volunteers do not have a professional to turn to for advice on certain technical or professional issues, (b) no one thanks the volunteers, (c) someone thinks a part-time volunteer can take the place of the rancher or one of the full-time foremen, and (d) a few dedicated lay volunteers are able to mobilize a huge proportion of the available resources for use in one or two gardens while the "rest of the ranch is allowed to run down.

Frequently the excessive expectations on the role of the laity run counter to the fact that it requires an investment of fifty to eighty hours a week to know about everything that is going on across the ranch. Few laypersons can make that investment every week. One result is that lay volunteers tend to specialize in one area (finances, real estate, Christian education, evangelism, or social action) which they can master with a reasonable investment of time and energy. Another result is that the staff tend to dominate policy-making for the ranch.

There are three routes in ministerial circles to becoming a rancher. One is to work on a ranch, be promoted to foreman, perhaps become the assistant rancher and then move to be a rancher somewhere else. The second is to spend several years taking care of a collie, spend some time as a gardener and/or a housekeeper before being "promoted" to rancher. An increasing number of lay leaders believe the first route makes sense. Most of the clergy, including those in charge of ministerial placement, prefer the second route.

A third route, which has been followed by scores of pastors in this century, is to find or plant a garden that has the potential for growth and turn it into a ranch. Sometimes this has meant relocating the garden to a new plot of land. This route usually requires a determined pastor who can see the potential for growth and involves a far longer than average pastorate. A favorable environment can accelerate the process, but that does not appear to be absolutely essential for the transformation. Scores of ministers in non-denominational or independent churches have followed this route and today serve as the chief honcho on a big ranch.

The Autonomous Nation

Approximately 1 percent of all the Protestant churches on this continent average more than 700 at worship on Sunday morning, but together the approximately 3,500 congregations in this category account for at least 7 percent of all the Protestant worshipers on the typical Sabbath. In our classification system these "super-churches" or "mini-denominations" resemble autonomous nations. (While the mansions, ranches, and nations account for 13 percent of all Protestant congregations, they include over one-half of all Protestant churchgoers and contribute nearly two-thirds of all the money that is given through congregational channels for missions.)

By definition a nation is an independent entity. It has its own distinctive history and its own culture, and it acts as an autonomous community with its own leaders. It also is convinced that it has the right to establish its own rules for the behavior of its citizens. It has its own unique procedures for selecting its leaders. While it may be a member of a federation of nations (OPEC, the United Nations, Organization of American States) most nations are deeply concerned that they maintain their own autonomy. Their autonomous role often is placed above their relationships with other nations in that federation.

The nation as an analogy for these exceptionally large congregations helps one understand why (a) such a large proportion of today's super-churches do not have any denominational ties, (b) a disproportionately large number of Presbyterian congregations leaving the denomination are in this size bracket (most of the independent nations in the world today once "belonged" to some other country--nations find it attractive to secede to gain independence), (c) it is not unusual for representatives from these congregations to be absent from meetings of the regional judicatory, but to be very influential in *national* meetings, (d) these congregations frequently ignore denominational channels in selecting the new senior minister and/or other program staff members, (e) several of these super-churches have developed their own curriculum series for adult Christian education (Bethel, Trinity) rather than turning to denominational resources, (f) these churches frequently design their own leadership training events and youth events rather than cooperating in denominational ventures, (g) many of these congregations own and operate their own camps or retreat centers rather than utilizing denominational facilities, (h) many of them sponsor their own foreign missionaries, and (i) most of them see and accept a responsibility for organizing new congregations (some even have used the term "colonize" in reference to starting new churches). Most of the churches in this size bracket bear a closer resemblance to denominations than they do to congregations.

An understanding of these distinctions also helps explain the differences in record-keeping among churches. To understand and administer the nation requires a complex set of records on members, programs, schedules, finances, personnel, and officers. Some specialists contend that to comprehend the nature of a cat, it is necessary to dissect and label each part. Most folks, however, know that the most effective way to identify the distinctive nature of a cat is to place a mouse in front of it.

A far more complex procedure is required, however, to comprehend the distinctive characteristics of a nation. The history of a nation often is written from an outline based on the succession of chief executive officers of that nation.

It also is relevant to note that nations sometimes experience a revolution as a new generation of leaders snatch power from an older generation that is reluctant to give up control of that nation's destiny.

Every year thousands of leaders from other nations, some very large, some very small and most of a moderate size, come to the United States or Canada to study what is being done here. Likewise the nation church often fulfills a very significant role as a teaching church and may even offer formal seminars or host workshops for visitors. It is critical to understand, however, that one gardener can learn more by visiting another garden than the leader of a nation can learn by visiting another nation. Gardens have many similarities. Nations tend to be unique.

The nation's president is in charge of foreign affairs, but usually delegates most of that responsibility. Likewise the senior minister of the mini-denomination church often delegates to staff members most of the responsibility for attending denominational and ecumenical meetings.

Sometimes when members from a collie- or a garden-size congregation go on vacation, they visit one of these super-churches, just as tourists visit a foreign country. When they return home, they may exclaim, "It was an interesting place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there." They conclude that the term "big church" is an oxymoron.*

The president of the nation often is vulnerable to criticism from the press--much of it unfair--and so is the senior pastor of the super-church.

The larger the nation, the greater the proportion of the people who "don't understand where all of that money goes or what all of those paid staff do all day."

While small churches can govern themselves on the principle of functioning as a participatory democracy, the nation-size church fluctuates between a representative democracy and a benign dictatorship, depending on one's perspective. There are frequent complaints, "This place really is run by a small self-perpetuating elite." These complaints may reflect reality. Just as the ranch is run by the rancher and staff, the nation often is governed by the civil service, not by Congress. The civil servant is always prepared to explain "why that won't work here" or "how we tried that once before and it didn't work." In the nation-size church, just as is true in Washington, many interest groups are not concerned about having "our own representatives" on the official board. They know that often the most effective place to be represented is in the cabinet or in the civil service. In the garden it may be very important to have "our representative" on the church council or board or session. In the ranch-size church, however, it may be more important to "know that one of the staff members represents our concerns and our interests."

In his book, *The Governance of Britain*, former Prime Minister Sir Harold Wilson includes in his list of the essential characteristics of a successful prime minister a sense of history and a recognition of the value of plenty of sleep. The senior