

## **The Disappearing Middle: Sizes and shapes for future churches**

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### **Introduction:**

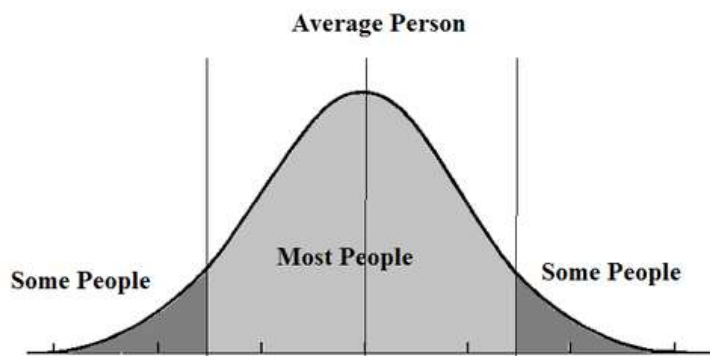
Two social trends are combining to transform the shape of mainstream churches in the Western world, resulting in multiple possible futures.

1. The rise of secularism and the related decline in adherence to established, traditional forms of church.
2. Less-well known, but all-the-more important in its impact because of this is the “disappearing middle”.

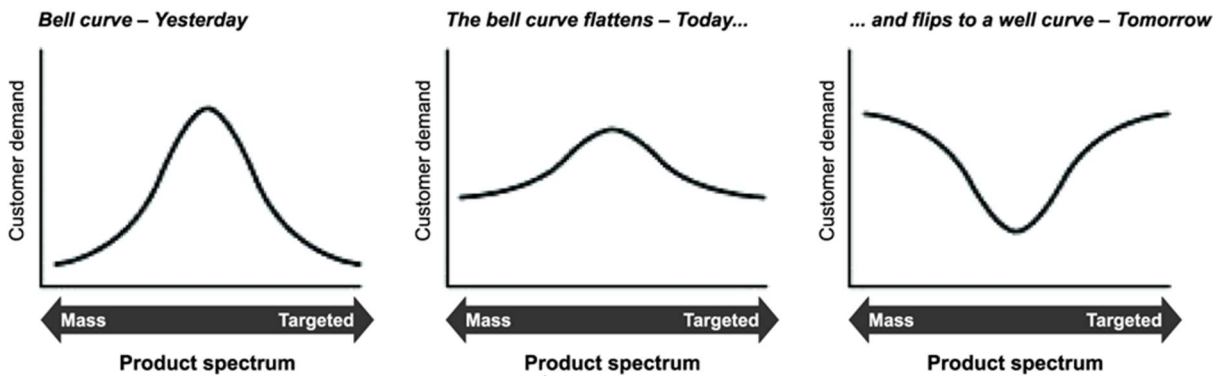
In technology, business, farming and churches, “middle-sized” things are disappearing, with a corresponding rise in the number of smaller and larger ventures.

- The family-sized TV is disappearing, being replaced by smaller hand-held devices, or large home theatre installations.
- Many people operate micro-businesses from home with internet presence, while owners of traditional small businesses are gravitating towards franchises within large chains.
- The family farm is disappearing, being replaced by smaller subdivided “lifestyle” blocks, or larger agglomerated agribusiness holdings.
- The one-minister/one-congregation pastoral church is disappearing, with a range of emerging possibilities.

In the past, most people and entities were distributed around an average in the middle, typically in a bell curve.



However, as the middle disappears, the curve flattens and then flips.



Congregation sizes in the Uniting Church in Australia still appear as a distorted bell curve.



## Church size

### Size of congregations

The median size (midpoint) for Uniting Churches is 35 people, which includes three children

46% of all UCA churches have between 20 and 49 people.

A quarter (25%) of churches have fewer than 20 attenders in a typical week.

8% of churches have more than 100 attenders.

Figure 3: Number of churches by size category

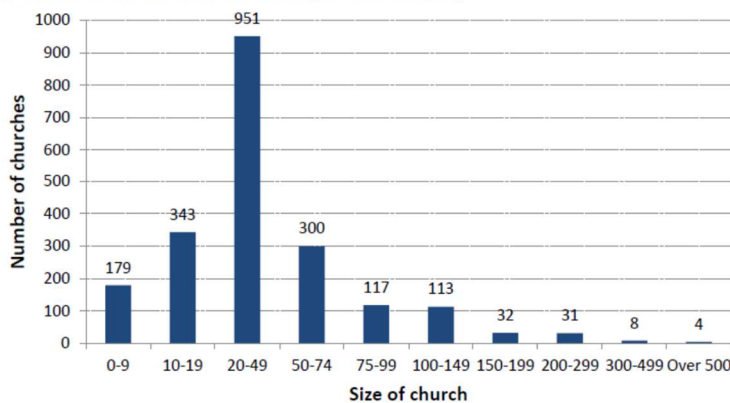


Table 5: Percentage of churches by size category

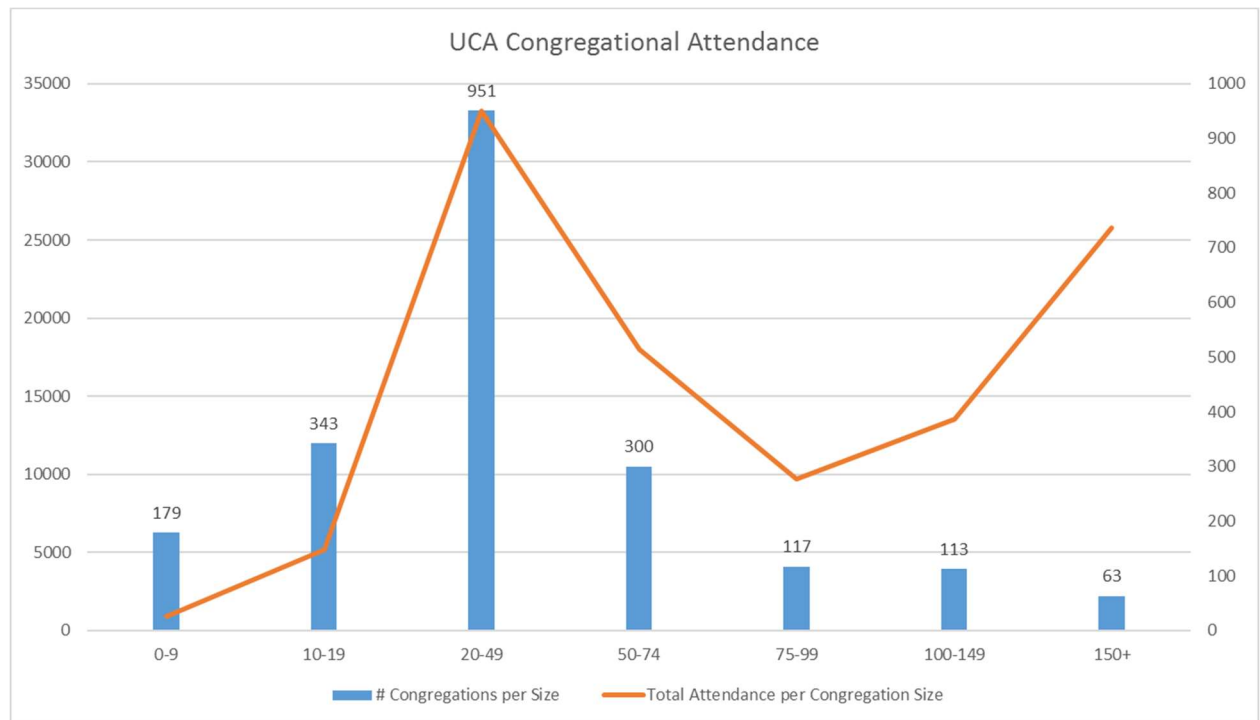
Size of church	% of churches
0-9	8.6
10-19	16.5
20-49	45.8
50-74	14.4
75-99	5.6
100-149	5.4
150-199	1.5
200-299	1.5
300-499	.4
Over 500	.2

Source: 2013 UCA Census. Based on 2,078 locations.



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However, if one counts numbers of attenders rather than simply numbers of congregations, the picture is moving towards a well curve:



There are four main trends in mission and ministry in response to the disappearing middle. These are:

1. The movement towards Program Sized or “Large Regional” churches.
2. The movement towards small, lay-led congregations, resourced and overseen by clergy. We call this “Resource Ministry”.
3. The growth of Fresh Expressions / new forms of church / Next Church / emerging church.
4. The growth of chaplaincy, both in proportion and absolute numbers.

Underneath these four trends are two related demographic shifts:

1. Aging “Anglo” population in the church.
2. Increasing multicultural diversity, especially in younger generations in the church.

Program-sized churches can emerge from growth within one congregation, or more often in the Uniting Church in Australia, by amalgamating congregations within the same area. These situations require many of the same leadership factors, but also some distinctive elements, notably dealing with grief and loss in amalgamations.

Small lay-led congregations can emerge from planting fresh expressions, or more often in the Uniting Church in Australia, by decline from a larger pastoral sized congregation. Planting Fresh Expressions and managing decline require totally different leadership styles.

These four trends and two shifts have implications in numerous areas of mission and ministry.

1. "Recruitment"/discernment
  - a. Selecting candidates for ministry for leadership capacity
  - b. Selecting candidates for ministry for their capacity in educating/equipping/coaching/team-building
2. Mission focus in ministry training: "mission-ready graduates"
3. Flexible pathways to ministry
4. Critical importance of the first three years post-seminary
5. CEM: neither a burden nor a hobby
6. Transitional Ministry
7. Mission Shaped Ministry:
  - a. Fresh Expressions
  - b. Paul's churches and ours: Missional & biblical studies
8. Leadership development
9. Individual congregations having a defined, even "boutique", identity rather than being a generic product
10. Not wasting the multicultural "missionary dividend" before younger generations dissipate.

Many ministers simply say, "this isn't what I signed up for!" The answer from denominational leaders includes:

- Denial
- Outplacement ("ministry transition program")
- Highly intentional appointments
- Continuing education offerings.



## **Resources:**

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Huheey, T "The Emptying Middle"  
[www.interimministries-abc.org/documents/TheEmptyMiddle.doc](http://www.interimministries-abc.org/documents/TheEmptyMiddle.doc)

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Steinke, PL "Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being calm and courageous no matter what" (Alban, 2006)

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