

Making The Most Of Your Small Church

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This paper began as a brief listing of the advantages of our small church that was being written for a promotional brochure. The idea was to include a number of reasons why our small church would be a good church to consider attending and joining.

As the idea began to develop, research revealed that there were many valuable things that could be shared with other small churches. Further research led to the formation of this presentation.

It is this paper's goal to help us all understand the distinct advantages we have in our small churches, and to maximize these advantages. Admittedly, some of the ideas contained in this presentation are based on personal opinion and observation rather than proven fact. Nevertheless, perhaps there will emerge some worthwhile information and thought-provoking ideas.

WHAT IS A SMALL CHURCH?

How shall we determine what a "small church"? Average Sunday attendance? Baptized members? Average Sunday offerings? Perhaps it is a combination of all of these. Making such a definition is a very subjective thing. Perhaps from our perspective, a church of 200 baptized members might be considered rather large; but for the purposes of this presentation, we shall assume this definition: The small church is a church of less than 200 baptized members.

With this as a definition, it has been estimated that over 50% of the congregations in most major denominations could be considered "small." Lyle Schaller states that "the normal size for a Protestant congregation on the North American continent is one that has fewer than forty people at worship on the typical Sunday morning." (*Small Churches Are Different*, p.9)

In the WELS, 55 of the 113 congregations (49.4%) have 200 or fewer baptized members, according to the 192 statistical report. In the North Atlantic District, however, 31 of the 34 congregations (92%) have fewer than 200 members.

For a number of reasons, we tend to think that the average congregation is much larger than 200: 1) Most of the pastor who are now serving in our district came from the Midwest, and were involved in a larger congregation as a vicar or pastor. 2) We also hear and read about the larger churches much more than we hear or read about the smaller churches. 3) Much of the material which we receive is aimed at the larger church (for example, the Parish Leadership Seminars of Rev. Don Abdon and the stewardship programs of the WELS).

Schaller points out that one half of all church members and a majority of our denominational leader come from large churches. Therefore many church leaders appear to assume that the very large congregation is the normative institutional expression of the Christian congregation. Nevertheless, these large churches constitute only 1/7 of all Protestant congregation in North America.

A quick glance at the statistical Report of the WELS reveal that the same thing is true in our circle of fellowship. The majority (80%) of the baptized souls in WELS are members of the larger congregations, and the average membership in WELS is 32 members/congregation. we think that most of our churches are large (over 200 members churches. Yet, 50% of our churches have less than 200 members. To put it another way, 20% of WELS members belong to 50% of the churches.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SMALL CHURCHES AND LARGE CHURCHES

In his excellent book, *“The Small Church Is Different”*, Lyle Schaller says that small churches are much more different from large churches than we often realize. Here is a summary of some of his points:

- 1) Small churches usually manage their finances in a more informal and less systematic way than that followed by large congregations. In larger congregations, giving is carefully estimated and planned. In smaller churches, giving responds to needs.
- 2) In small churches the members note who is absent and who is present at worship. In large churches the members are more likely to note the overall size of the crowd and the number of vacant pews.
- 3) In small congregations the focus tends to be on the health of each individual, while in large churches the primary focus tends to be on the health of the institution.
- 4) In small churches people tend to emphasize their relationships with one another. In large churches members tend to focus their attention on the institution.
- 5) In small churches deaths and moves have a much bigger impact than in larger churches.
- 6) Small churches need less time for planning than do their larger counterparts.
- 7) The dropout rate in larger congregations is 5-6% annually. In small churches it is only about 1-2% of the membership.
- 8) Smaller churches tend to emphasize the “relational aspects” of the pastor (he cares, he knows the Flock, he loves each one). The larger churches tend to appreciate the “functional aspects” of the ministry (he’s a good preacher, he’s a good administrator, he’s a good leader).
- 9) The small church relies more heavily on volunteers (in positions such as organists, choir directors, Janitors, etc.)
- 10) Small churches have more “generalists” than in large churches e.g. the pastor also paints; the treasurer also teaches Sunday School, etc.)
- 11) In small churches the members tend to perceive the needs that require their giving. In larger churches giving is less personal and members don’t easily comprehend the scale and variety of financial needs.
- 12) In smaller churches, it is individuals that do the work. In larger churches it is committees that do the work.
- 13) In smaller churches there is less need for specialized ministries than in larger churches because the small church is inter-generational, while larger churches form social groups around age and special situations.
- 14) Small churches emphasize participation more than performance. In larger churches the emphasis on performance is much greater.

These differences may not apply in every case, since they are generalizations. Nevertheless, you may be able to identify with some of these differences in your own experience. In any case, it should be obvious that the small church is not just a miniature big church. The small church is different, and it should not be expected to operate well on a scaled-down big church program.

PROBLEMS TO BE OVERCOME IN SMALL CHURCHES

1. Poor Self-Image.

There are a few problems small churches need to recognize and strive to overcome. Perhaps the greatest problem is a poor self-image. Many small churches perceive themselves as mediocre

and non-viable. Sadly, this may be true in some cases, but it is not always. Nevertheless, these negative images may be so strong in some small churches that they become self-fulfilling prophecies. In other words, if a congregation thinks that it's no good, it eventually may live up to its own estimation.

The small church with a negative image tends to magnify its fault and weaknesses and, in so doing, obscures its strengths and accomplishments. No church is to be judged on the basis of its size, but on its faithfulness to its calling in the light of its resources and setting. The leaders in many congregations underestimate the strength, resources, assets, and potential of the small church.

Today, of course, it is the large church that is held before us as beautiful and exciting. In addition, we are told that our churches ought to be growing, and many programs are being promoted which specifically aim to help small churches grow by leaps and bounds. If the small church does not grow as some think it should, it is regarded with disdain and condescension.

Another reason for the small church's poor self-image is that many seem to think, perhaps subconsciously, that the smaller churches are manned by the less competent clergy. It seems to be a rather general assumption that a man pastors a small church either because he can't handle a larger church, or because he is a "rookie" trying to work his way up to the higher salary and prestige of a larger church. In other words, pastorates of small churches are sometime viewed only as stepping-stones to bigger and better pastorates back in the Midwest.

Closely connected with this is the short tenure of pastors of small churches. The young pastor comes from the seminary, stays three years, and then accepts a call to another congregation. Then the congregation calls for a new pastor, has five calls returned, and finally goes to the assignment committee again. When this happens repeatedly, it is easy to see the negative affect on the congregation's morale.

Protracted scrutiny of its handicaps may also contribute to a small church's poor self-appraisal. Continual mention of the problems of the church in meetings, sermons, and open discussions just reinforces gloom, pessimism, and low self-esteem. An excessive amount of time lamenting weaknesses, bemoaning shortcomings, and emphasizing limitations will destroy a congregation. Instead of continually bemoaning how small our church is and how many problems we have because of it, we ought to consider more often the many positive factors of being small.

Another factor that may contribute to lack of self-esteem is synodical subsidy. Some congregations may feel restricted, weak and helpless until they are weaned from their subsidy.

This poor self-image may have an impact on the growth of the congregation. In attracting new members a strong positive self-image can be very helpful. For example, consider how your members view their church. Do they "poor mouth" it when talking with their friends or do the members have a healthy pride in the congregation? In most growing churches the members are enthusiastic about (a) their faith as Christians, (b) the congregation of which they are members, and (c) their minister. However, there is a significant number of unchurched persons who would find the friendliness, the ability of most members to call everyone by name, the spontaneity, the caring, the fellowship, the intimacy, and the warmth of the small church to be what they seek in a church, but all of their previous experience with churches have caused them to believe this does not exist anywhere today.

2. Lack of Adequate Resources.

Money, manpower, and talent is often in short supply in small churches. Some small churches may experience a hand-to-mouth existence for years. Because so much of the

congregation's income is spent on the pastor's salary (40-70% is not uncommon), the programming of the congregation may suffer.

Every congregation must meet certain financial obligations to survive. The pastor must be paid, the building must be maintained, the utility bills met, and various supplies must be purchased. When the financial base is small, survival may become a congregation's sole purpose and focus. In addition, synodical subsidy can also be a problem because it creates dependency on the synod for a longer period of time than needed or desired. To have a sense of independence and integrity, the congregation wants to be self-supporting, but may find that goal very hard to reach.

Lay leaders are also in short supply in the smaller churches. Though the small church may have the same amount of committees as in the larger church (evangelism, stewardship, elders, Christian education, trustees, maintenance, treasurer, etc.) there are fewer people to handle these positions. The larger churches can pick and choose among many qualified people. The smaller church, with fewer people, may have a larger percentage of members involved, and so "fatigue-of-the-faithful-few" may quickly depress its growth and ministry.

When the resources are limited, they must be used efficiently. Good management requires planning, goal setting, and establishing of priorities. With fewer lay people in the congregation, their time and energy needs to be carefully managed. Meetings must be well prepared, not too long, and should not be called just to have what the big churches have.

In spite of these shortages, the small church can still fulfill the Lord's commission, even though it may not be able to meet the cultural expectations of the community or the congregation. There may not be enough tenors in the choir but the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not shackled by the small number of people to hear it and share it. Small numbers may limit the activities of the church, but not the transmission of the Gospel. The Sunday school in the small church can do an excellent job of leading little ones to Christ, but if one is convinced that the Sunday School must have a class for each age level, he will find the small church frustrating because it cannot live up to that expectation. The pastor may be the most frustrated of all because his congregation does not have the people, the money, or the facilities to carry on the program he has been taught to expect.

3. Inadequate Facilities and Equipment.

Small churches usually have small buildings. The worship area may also be used as a fellowship hall and for Sunday school classrooms. The building may lack adequate kitchen facilities. There may be a very small narthex, or no narthex at all. The Sunday school especially may struggle with poor facilities. Teachers must strive to create attractive learning atmosphere in a corner of the nave, or in part of the furnace room. The Sunday School "rooms" may be poorly lit and noisy—both conditions which make learning more difficult.

Likewise the equipment in the small church may be inadequate for the variety of programs which are desired. There may be a shortage of projectors, or no projectors at all. Many small churches hesitate to purchase equipment like TV's and VCR's because if they do, they would have no place to store them.

4. Short Pastorates.

Another handicap to small churches is the short pastorate. With a small salary and the pressing financial needs of a young and growing family, a pastor may find it difficult to stay in the small church for very long. Some of the effects of this will be discussed later, but we may mention at this time that one short pastorate after another will result in a congregation that will only conduct

short-range planning (one year at a time) for fear that the situation may be entirely different two years from now.

What can the small church do to encourage its pastor to stay longer? Among other things, the small church can make a strong affirmation of the pastor's ministry; provide housing appropriate to the pastor's need; make a strong affirmation of the pastor's spouse; enhance the opportunities for the pastor to gain a feeling of satisfaction from his ministry; provide better compensation; and work out, together with the pastor, a three-to-five year plan of ministry.

5. Feelings of Isolation and Powerlessness.

Closely related to a poor self-image, is the tendency to feel isolated in a small church. The small churches that try to keep up with or compete with big churches and their "norms" will quickly become discouraged. Many small churches fail to sustain good programs or try new ones because they feel that the response does not justify the effort. This may, however, Just be an effect of perspective.

For example, compare the 150-member church with the 900-member church. The pastor of the small church calls a meeting to study prayer, and four people show up. These five people think of all the others that are not there, become discouraged, and drop the effort. Meanwhile, the pastor of the large church calls a meeting to study prayer and 24 come. Soon there is an interested group of enthusiastic people. At the next pastoral conference the pastors of the two churches meet and the large-church pastor relates with enthusiasm the concern his members have for prayer. The pastor of the small church wishes that he had such members.

As one examines the two situations, it is discovered that actually the same percentage of members responded in both cases, but the small church has a hard time feeling good about the percentage that participated when the group is so small.

Another example might involve worship. The pastor of the small church preaches to 75 people on a typical Sunday. On that same Sunday the pastor of the large church preaches to 400 people. The attendance in the small church is much higher in proportion to the membership, but the preacher only sees the small crowd.

In that same small church there are 12 youth. Six of them come to the meetings and the group struggles. The large church has 80 youth. Twenty-four come and the group sails along. The small church's ministries and programs have attracted a larger proportion of the people, but it is the larger church that has the appearance of success. This is reinforced by the limited number of people with which the church has to work. As the members get to know each other, there sometimes are feelings that no matter what is tried, nothing will ever change.

Feelings of isolation and powerlessness can easily overtake the pastor of the small church. It may not be unusual for him to be the only one around the church six days out of the week. Sometimes it may seem to him that he is a "Lone Ranger" fighting the Lord's battles, just as it seemed to Elijah at times.

STRENGTHS OF THE SMALL CHURCH

In spite of young and inexperienced leadership, in spite of often-inadequate facilities, in spite of its feeling of inferiority, the small church has some distinct advantages over the large church. The small church has much to offer to the member and the community, and it can be mightily used by God.

"Small is beautiful" has become a truism everywhere—everywhere, that is, except the church. For many years a basic assumption of churchmen, as well as the general populace has been that bigger is better, that quality is measured by quantity, and that success is to be equated with

size. But the small church has its own unique opportunities and advantage. Smallness can be a positive attribute, not a negative one.

Carl Dudley, in his book *Making the Small Church Effective*, sums it up very well:

“In a big world, the small church has remained intimate. In a fast world, the small church has been steady. In an expensive world, the small church has remained plain. In a complex world, the small church has kept feeling. In a mobile world, the small church has been an anchor. In an anonymous world, the small church calls us by name.” (p.176)

The small church is not necessarily better than the large church, but each has its own advantages and disadvantages. If we define the church by the business “B’s” of religious institutions—budgets, buildings, and bodies—the small church comes out on the short end. But the small church appears much stronger when measured by human relationships. If the church is defined by the number of people who know and care about one another, by name, then the small church is bigger than we think.

1. Intimacy and Caring.

The first and foremost strength of the small church is its intimacy. The people can know each other. The bigger churches have two or more services each week, and oftentimes the people who attend the early service don’t know the people who attend the later service. But in the small church when someone is absent from worship he is missed. The absence is felt and the member who missed worship is apt to be called.

In larger churches a special group is assigned to pray for and call on the sick and shut-in. In the small church these things are often carried out spontaneously among members who know each other and care about each other. Small churches have unique opportunities for intimacy, caring and support that big churches don’t naturally have.

Smallness provides the opportunity to develop lasting ties in an informal, caring setting. Church members become close friends, even though they may be separated by considerable distances geographically. It is not unusual to have members of the small church organize activities among themselves just so that they can be together in more ways than the church schedule provides.

The small church can be a close, supportive fellowship in which people can develop commitment to one another because each can personally know one another well, each shares in the joys and sorrows of others. Their experiences provide a foundation for a meaningful fellowship. The celebration of communion provides a unique opportunity to emphasize this fellowship. In a variety of ways the members have opportunities to appreciate the contributions each can make. By working together on various projects, they develop a sense of oneness. They all attend one service each Sunday. Large churches recognize this as a great advantage and make efforts to create effective small groups within the large congregation.

2. The Pastor Knows the Sheep.

Another distinct advantage of the small church is that the pastor can truly be a shepherd who knows all the sheep and is aware when one is missing. In the small church the pastor can have meaningful, on-going personal relationships with every member, knowing each one’s strengths and weaknesses. He has more personal influence on members than is possible in a large church.

In the small church the pastor has regular, sometimes daily, contacts with the members. They know him well. There is no need for pretenses, for the members also learn to know the

pastor's faults, and he learns theirs. They can both be what they really are, and minister to each other without pretense or masking.

The pastor can also take the time to be personal. Although the pastor of the small church is certainly kept busy, there still is time to sit and talk with the member who calls or stops in the church office. Hospital and shut-in calls can be personal and take as long as desired. The pastor of the large church who has dozens of shut-ins and many hospital calls each day, must carefully restrict his visits to quick stops.

The small church pastor also has the time to make calls in the homes of the members. Many pastors of large churches have practically ceased home visits for sheer lack of time. The pastor of the small church can visit the home, discuss the church's news and programs, learn about the lives of the family members, and take the time to include Scripture, prayer, and maybe even a hymn.

The pastor of the small church, though busy, has a less frantic pace to his ministry. The phone doesn't ring every five minutes. He is under less pressure with a lighter schedule, and he can be more relaxed. ("You bet I'll be over, Jim!") He is able to concentrate on fewer projects, and do what he does well. The worship service can be tailored to meet the needs of the small congregation.

3. Development of Each Member's Potential.

The small church also provides the advantage of opportunities for the full development of each person's potential and for adequate recognition of each one's contribution. It is important for the pastor to be able to assess each member's abilities and appreciate the constraints that education and culture place on them.

The members of the small church have a strong sense of ownership about the church and its programs. They know they are needed. Everyone must share in the responsibility if the congregation is to function. They also know that because there are fewer candidates for church offices, they are more likely to be elected to an office than in the larger church.

This also may have something to do with the higher attendance percentages at worship and other church meetings. The members of the small church know that their attendance is essential and they will be missed if absent. They can't hide in a small church!

THE PASTOR OF THE SMALL CHURCH

There are some interesting effects which the small church has upon its pastor which we would like to discuss at this point.

We have already mentioned that one of the challenges that faces many small churches is short pastorates of their called ministers. Sometimes the members even come to expect their pastors to move on quickly. Not too long ago, a member of a small church who had just heard her new pastor's first sermon, said, "Well, he won't be here very long. His sermon was too good." Like many pastors, these people feel that the small church is just a young pastor's stepping stone to service in a larger, more prestigious congregation. Perhaps neither the congregation nor the community expects the pastor of the small church, especially the pastor of a small Wisconsin Synod church on the East

Coast, to be a permanent resident. Oftentimes the pastors in our area have a difficult time identifying with their churches. They were born elsewhere. They had a uniquely different education, and their homes and relatives (and favorite teams) are back in the Midwest.

In some denominations there is a broad policy that encourages long pastorates in large membership churches. However, an unofficial, or informal policy begins to question the

competence, the ambition, or the responsiveness of the minister who has been serving the same small-membership church for twelve consecutive years. These pastors may even feel pressured to accept a call to a larger church to maintain the respect of their colleagues as well as their own self-respect.

Another factor is the human nature of the preacher who envies his co-worker that prepares a sermon for 500 people every Sunday, while he preaches to 50 or 60. The temptation may arise for the small church pastor to regard his sermon preparation lightly because he preaches to so few. This man may even recognize this all-too-human tendency and feel that he must accept a call to a larger church before his preparation habits are irreparably altered.

These things we just mentioned are temptations which pastors of small churches may face. We ought to be aware of them, and feel free to discuss them with others. The work of the Lord is at stake and Satan will do anything to hinder it. But sometimes we sense that these short pastorates are the result of the pastor simply being unhappy in the small-church setting. Why would he be unhappy? There may be a number of reasons.

He may be frustrated by the congregation's inability to support programs he feels are important. Fresh out of the seminary, the young pastor of the small church often views himself as a producer and pusher of programs. The mission board and the synod stress statistics and programs as measures of success or failure. So the pastor of the small church arranges his study to produce the programs he feels he is expected to produce and promote. There is a large desk, a voluminous library of impressive books, all of the machines and equipment needed to produce the programs, a swivel chair, and stacks of paper and supplies.

Yet he is frustrated. There is too much to do, and too little time. Many programs are not well received. He sees what he regards as poor response, and becomes discouraged. The people don't seem to appreciate the time and effort he put into the program.

Another important factor may be the church treasurer. The treasurer of the small church on a tight budget knows that there is little income with which to meet the church's needs. Therefore he may unconsciously develop a conservative and protective stance which questions, and sometimes even attempts to quench, all enthusiasm for new programs or expansion of existing programs. The pastor who stresses new programs will find this frustrating, and eventually impossible to deal with.

Yet, these frustrations could be avoided if the pastor would only realize that his small congregation does not want him to be a program pusher. In a small church the development of relationships is more important than the development of programs. The small congregation wants him to be a "people lover." They want him to care about them, talk with them, and show them by word and example the Christian life.

The pastor of the small church is not a specialist or even a generalist. He is a LOVER! What is a pastoral lover? A pastoral lover has a different set of satisfactions than in statistical reports. He finds his rewards not in measurable statistics, but in relationships with people. The pastor who finds his joy in statistics will not be satisfied with the small church. But the pastor who finds his rewards in relationships with people will be happy.

The pastor of the small church may have fewer people in the congregation, but they can be known and loved in many situations. He may have fewer programs, but a higher percentage of church membership at each. He may receive fewer comments on the sermon, but more caring for him and his family.

In short, pastors of small churches succeed or fail, not on their ability to preach, nor on their knowledge of history; not on their Biblical understanding, nor any of the scholarly matters, but on their ability to effectively communicate a Christian concern for people.

Another area of frustration for the pastor in a small church is his unresolved feelings about his compensation. On the one hand, it costs money to live; and on the other hand, he has received a Christian calling. Many small church pastors, especially those who are also fathers of growing families, have a need for modest salary increases. Yet they feel unable to raise the subject directly with the officers or the congregation. Sometimes pastors leave their congregations with the impression that there was a rift between him and the people, when the real problem was a conflict within the pastor—between the desire to serve the Lord and the need to provide sufficient income for his family.

There are several important factors in resolving concerns about adequate compensation. One of these factors is the pastor's wife. Some pastor's wives are satisfied to live on small income, and regard it as a challenge to provide for the family on a "shoestring." Other pastor's wives are willing to work outside of the home in order to have sufficient income to meet the needs of the family. Of course, it would be better if our churches required neither of these ideals from the pastor's wife.

Another important factor would be someone within the congregation who would be able to serve as the pastor's confidants in the area of financial compensation. The pastor needs someone who will look out for him and his family and see that he receives compensation adequate for his needs. The voice of a concerned layman at the budget committee or voters meeting is much better than requiring the pastor himself to ask for salary increases. Perhaps this confidante, with whom the pastor and his wife can speak freely and openly about finances, might be a member of the Board of Elders. Perhaps he might be the president of the congregation. In any case, he would be a valuable asset to a congregation that seeks to provide adequately and appropriately for its called servant.

A final factor might be the guidelines of mission boards for ministerial compensation. Oftentimes these guidelines do not and cannot take into account local conditions. A 30-year-old pastor who lives in the Washington or New York area with a family of four has much greater financial needs than does the 60-year-old pastor whose family has all left the nest and who lives in Iowa or Indiana. Congregations in areas of greater cost of living need to be able to alter the mission board guidelines to provide adequately for their pastors.

Another area of concern is the congregation's use of the pastor. It needs to be recognized that their pastor may be their most valuable resource. This may be seen just by the percentage of the congregation's budget that is spent on the pastor's support. Sometimes the congregation assumes that since its pastor has fewer members to call on, that he can certainly take care of other things around the church. Maybe he is expected to do the evangelizing of the unchurched in his "spare time." Perhaps he is expected to change the altar paraments, or to clean the church, or to be the congregation's purchasing agent, or to make the parsonage repairs, or to handle some of the maintenance of the church property, or to inspect the architect's drawing for the new building, or to paint the church sign. The problem with all of this is that the pastor's time and energy is diffused by a multitude of tasks, some of which could be done and should be done by volunteers in the congregation. The pastor needs a clearly defined set of goals, and a clearly defined set of functions that both he and the congregation agree upon and adhere to. The pastor is too expensive to be used for activities that can and should be handled by the members.

We have talked about three areas of tension which pastors of small churches feel: self-image, programs, and finances. We would be amiss if we did not also speak about the great satisfactions which small churches provide for their pastors.

These satisfactions are overwhelmingly in the area of personal relationships. The pastor of the small church has the joy of working closely with people and observing their dedication to Christ

and His cause. Pastors in small churches have the satisfaction of sharing the lives and crises of people, of feeling loved and supported, of preaching and calling on people and speaking directly to them, applying God's Word in specific ways that cannot be done in the larger churches.

Pastors of small churches need to realize that their congregations are not just stepping-stones to better ministries. They need to understand and appreciate the opportunities for a meaningful and full ministry in the small congregation to which they have been called. There is nothing degrading about serving a small group. It is not evidence of one's inability to handle a larger congregation. Nor is it depriving the young pastor of opportunities to serve the Lord. The young pastor of a small church ought to count his blessings: He has a group of people he can learn to know and love. He has the opportunity to spend more time with his family with the less hectic schedule of the smaller church. He has the time to carefully prepare sermons and Bible classes and to row through personal study. He is part of a group of God's people who care about him and his family.

SMALL CHURCHES BECOME BIG CHURCHES SOMETIMES

Life in the small church can be very satisfying—sometimes too satisfying. The problem is that the small church, at least our small mission church, should grow. And when it does, it cannot remain a small church. It will not be the same.

The members of the small congregation must want their church to grow so much that they are willing to give up the satisfactions of knowing, or knowing about, everyone else in the congregation. They must be willing to sacrifice the satisfaction of being a small church.

When an energetic young pastor brought five new families into a small congregation of 100 people, one of the older members of the congregation confided, "With so many new faces, I hardly know anyone anymore."

This type of attitude can be an obstacle to growth. Members of the small church may feel that their congregation is already the right size. Everyone knows everyone. There are enough people to maintain the programs of the congregation and pay the salary of the pastor. The people are satisfied and comfortable. They like their church the way it is. They realize that their congregation cannot grow without giving up its most precious appeal, its intimacy.

Since the small church may already have reached the point where it is difficult to care for more people, they may be reluctant to take on more. The pastor may share this reluctance. He and the members of the congregation he serves may have reached the limits of their personal compassion for all the members. For the sake of the Lord's commission, they want to reach out, but they know that growth in membership may affect their satisfaction in belonging.

Synodical officials may whisper uncomplimentary reasons why they believe that our small churches aren't growing. They may say that the people are lazy and small in vision. They note the lack of a "Full church program." They do not understand why the church isn't growing, and may become critical and dissatisfied with the pastor and the people.

Small church members may not understand why they cannot grow, either. They would like for their church to grow, and are baffled by the absence of new members, when the church seems so satisfying to those who already belong. Perhaps part of the problem is an unconscious attitude on the part of the pastors and members of the small church, an attitude that their church is perfect the way it is.

Small churches need to learn how to change. They need to find ways to maintain their strengths and take advantage of them while at the same time reaching out to the community and opening their doors and their hearts to new people. The mission of the church is not to maintain the status quo, but to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to the whole world.

In the meantime, we who are part of a small church need not feel ashamed, inadequate, or unfulfilled. Our small church has strengths that we should recognize, enjoy, and for which we should thank God. These strengths can also be the foundation for further growth and outreach.

WORTHWHILE READING ON THIS SUBJECT

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