

IN CELEBRATION OF SMALL CHURCHES: SIZE AS AN INDICATOR OF CHURCH HEALTH

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Introduction

While mega-churches and their leaders have received much attention over the past half century, numerically the small church still dominates the ecclesiastical landscape in Canada. While the author of this article has not found any hard numbers indicating the exact percentage of churches that fall into the small-church category, there is widespread agreement that the majority of churches are small both in Canada and the United States.

In 1984 Lyle Schaller, former parish consultant with the Yokefellow Institute and author of more than fifty books, stated that 73 percent of churches in North America had fewer than 175 people in attendance on a Sunday morning.¹ In 1990, Ron Crandall, former professor of evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary, stated that “roughly two-thirds of all congregations averaged one hundred or fewer Sunday morning worshippers.”² In research completed in 2003, Outreach Canada found that 73 percent of evangelical churches average less than 150 in attendance.³ In 2015, a study done by Sam Reimer, professor of sociology at Crandall University and Michael Wilkinson, Professor of Sociology and director of the Religion in Canada Institute at Trinity Western University, discovered that five of the six denominations studied had a median number of attendees of no more than 150 with four having a median of 100 or less.⁴

In the 30-year period covered by this brief survey, very little has changed in terms of the percentage of small churches. There is widespread agreement that there are more small churches than there are all other churches combined.

This paper will look at the biblical teaching on the small church, the uniqueness of the small church, the small church in twenty-first century society, and

¹ Lyle E. Schaller, *Looking in the Mirror: Self-Appraisal in the Local Church* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1984), 15-23.

² Ron Crandall, *Turn Around Strategies for the Small Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 7.

³ “*Church Size, Attendance and Membership*” at Outreach Canada, accessed 01 February 2020, available from <http://en.outreach.ca/ServingYou/tabid/2237/Articled/916/Church-Size-Attendance-and-Membership.aspx>.

⁴ Sam Reimer and Michael Wilkinson, *A Culture of Faith: Evangelical Congregations in Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: University Press, 2015), 76.

the impact of the small church. It is intended to be a celebration of the small church and its importance in church life.

Biblical Teaching on the Small Church

One of the first movements to affect the author's life and ministry was the Church Growth movement. Led largely in North America by C. Peter Wagner, professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Missions, the movement privileged numerical growth as an indication of church health.

A model church in the New Testament is the one in Jerusalem which was founded on the day of Pentecost. On that day the nucleus of 120 added 3,000 new members. They were baptized, they grew in their understanding of Christian doctrine, they worshipped together regularly, they developed fellowship groups, they shared their material goods with one another, they exercised their spiritual gifts. As a result the church continued to grow and "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:47) This was a healthy church. And one characteristic of healthy churches is that they grow.⁵

The church experienced an amazing work of the Spirit on that day in Jerusalem. The miracle continued and every day the church experienced new conversions. While acknowledging that the Pentecost story is miraculous, can it be held out as the example that every church should emulate?

Even a cursory reading on the Book of Acts shows that the churches of the first century were quite different from each other. The church in Antioch was a missionary church choosing people from their own leadership to take the gospel to the Roman world. (Acts 13:1-3) Churches in Rome and elsewhere may have consisted of a series of house churches. (Rom. 16:3,5; Acts 16:40; Acts 28:30; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 1-2) The church in Ephesus was a regional church, impacting the world far beyond its own boundaries. (Acts 19:10)

The differences included size. When Paul left the City of Philippi there were only a few converts. (Acts 16) The New Testament doesn't give further details as to the size the church became. To assume that it experienced the kind of growth that the Jerusalem church experienced is to go beyond what scripture states. The

⁵ C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth: The Secret of Pastor/People Partnership in Dynamic Church Growth* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1984), 21, 22.

churches which Paul planted throughout his ministry probably ranged in size from quite small to large but we have no biblical data for determining their size.

The New Testament uses various illustrations to describe the church. It pictures Jesus as the bridegroom and the church as the bride. (Eph. 5:25-27) It describes Jesus as the cornerstone and the church as the building. (Eph. 2:19-22) It uses a picture of Jesus as the head and the church as the body. (Eph. 4:15-16) In each of these illustrations, Jesus is central. It is clear that the relationship between Jesus and the church is not determined by numbers but by relationship. E. Stanley Jones, Methodist missionary to India, expresses this powerfully:

In the person of Jesus Christ the Christian Church holds within itself a motive and power that does produce changed character. So Jesus Christ is the centre of worth and hope of the Christian church. We have this treasure in an earthen vessel. Don't point to the earthen vessel - its cracks, its outworn inscriptions, its outworn shape, its unmodern appearance, but rather look at what it holds. It holds the person of Jesus Christ. As long as it holds him, it holds the most precious, the most potent, and the most present value that this universe holds, barring none.⁶

The value of the church does not depend on the size of its audience, budget or programs but on its relationship to Jesus. Whatever its size, it is an essential part of the church that Jesus loves (Ephesians 5:25). Paul does not state that it is only churches with attendance in the hundreds or thousands that Jesus loved and gave himself for. Jesus loves his church regardless of its size.

The Uniqueness of the Small Church

A small church is not the same as a large church. That seems like an elementary statement but it is a truth that many church leaders fail to grasp in working with small churches. David Ray captures both the difference in small churches and the importance of understanding those differences.

I have two fundamental convictions about small churches. First, they are the right size to be all that God calls a church to be. They are not premature, illegitimate, malnourished, or incomplete versions of "real" churches. Second, they are a different breed of church. A small church is as different from a large church as a Pekingese is from a Saint Bernard. They look, feel, think,

⁶ E. Stanley Jones, *The Reconstruction of the Church - on what pattern?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 9.

and act differently. Differences in size yield crucial differences in form and function. Ministry, not in tune with and tailored to these churches' differences in size, is doomed to failure.⁷

There is little agreement regarding what sets a small church apart. Steve Burt gives ten characteristics of a small church.⁸ David Ray outlines twenty-six characteristics⁹ and Glenn Damon lists fifteen.¹⁰ This article will look at two characteristics that are all important in a small-church setting.

First, a small church is relational. At the heart of small-church life are relationships. Carl S. Dudley, professor of church and community at McCormick Theological Seminary, put it well:

Belonging to a small church is a feeling. It is based on being among people who know you and among whom you feel at home. Members have lived their faith together. They have celebrated their separate victories and shared their individual losses together in the same place, and before the same Father God. They have learned what to expect from one another and when to expect it.¹¹

Because relationships are the heart of small-church life, they should impact everything that a small church does.

The small church is relational. This has already been emphasized, but it needs to be noted again because it is the most important characteristic of the small church. Everything - worship, evangelism, discipleship, teaching, and more - needs to revolve around this fact. The small church is relational.¹²

Churches of all sizes try to build relational ministries into their program through small groups but those groups are rarely at the centre of church life. In most small-church settings, relationships define what the church is. As one pastor put it:

⁷ David R. Ray, preface to *The Big Small Church Book* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1992), viii.

⁸ Steve Burt, *Activating Leadership in the Small Church: Clergy and Laity Working Together* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1988), 22-26.

⁹ David Ray *The Big Small Church Book*, 35-41.

¹⁰ Glenn Daman, *Shepherding the Small Church* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002), 43-51.

¹¹ Carl S. Dudley, *Effective Small Churches in the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 89.

¹² Ron Johnston, *Reality Check For The Church: Discovering a Unique Vision for the Small Church* (Winnipeg: Word Alive Press, 2013), 69.

“We don’t need to form small groups. We are a small group.” When larger churches develop a small-group program, it is so that they can have what should come naturally to a small church.

The danger of relationships in a small church is that the church can easily become ingrown. In ingrown churches, most members would describe themselves as friendly, but in reality they are friendly only with those people who are already part of the church. Members need to move beyond the limits of their own church and offer that same level of love and concern to people in their communities.

Second, the small church is intergenerational. The size of the church forces the generations to mix in ways that rarely happen in larger churches. A large church might have both a youth and a young adult worship service, which means that a person could go from birth to mid-20s without ever sitting in a service with people older than themselves. In a small church, the generations most commonly worship together, in one all-age service.

The generations benefit from their closeness in the small church. Anthony Pappas, former church consultant for the Old Colony Association of the Association Baptist Church of Massachusetts, writes about the importance of the personal nature of small churches:

Small churches have a future. The personal nature of the small church is its divine gift to humanity. In the small church each person is important, each person can make a difference to someone else, each person can experience unconditional love, each person is called to live up to his or her potential, each person is of infinite worth. The people-oriented qualities of small-church life make it necessary to each generation.¹³

In a small church, the pastor probably knows every child and teenager by name. Leaders pray for the younger generations, trusting that they will be future leaders of their church or of churches elsewhere.

The Small Church in the Twenty-First Century

Culture in Canada has changed significantly in the past fifty years. As a result Canadian church leaders understand they are working in a different cultural context. Preliminary studies of The Flourishing Congregations Institute of Ambrose University demonstrate that church leaders see Canadian culture as follows:

¹³ Anthony G. Pappas, *Entering The World of the Small Church* (Alban Institute, 2000), 139.

In short, we heard that participants believe they are in a secular society; that religion and politics do not mesh well in the Canadian context; that Canadians value inclusivity and tolerance in a diverse and plural society; that Christians now operate from the margins of Canadian society; that cooperation rather than competition is highly esteemed; that immigration is believed to be a lifeline to Canadian congregations; and that few Canadian congregations are ostensibly large in weekly attendance.¹⁴

Christian leaders in Canada are wrestling with implications of contemporary culture for the church. While it is beyond the scope of this article to catalogue these implications, it may be argued that the relationship-centred and intergenerational characteristics of the small church are advantages in making a positive impact on contemporary culture.

The Positive Impact of the Small Church

Some people would regard “positive impact” and “small church” as an oxymoron. The two parts of the statement seem so contradictory that it doesn’t make sense to use them in the same sentence. A more careful examination, however, shows that this perspective is not warranted. Small churches have had and will continue to have a positive impact on those who attend, on the community in which they are located, and on the larger church in Canada. This article will look at two ways in which that impact can be felt.

First, we return to the importance of relationships for contemporary culture. Relationships are at the heart of small-church life.. As Reginald Bibby, Board of Governors Research Chair in the Department of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge, points out, relationships embed religious practice in the next generation.

Precisely because religion is “transmitted” through significant relationships, Canadians - like people elsewhere - do not readily abandon the religions of their childhoods. And in the cases where they do, a relationship with someone - such as a friend or marriage partner - is invariably involved.¹⁵

¹⁴ Joel Thiessen, *A Preliminary Look at Flourishing Congregations in Canada: What Church Leaders Are Saying*, ed . Joel Thiessen et al. (Turning Point Global: Kingston, 2017), 36.

¹⁵ Reginald W. Bibby, *There’s Got To Be More: Connecting Churches & Canadians* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1995), 23.

Relationships also are important in reaching out into the community. If relationships are at the heart of a small church's strengths, Crandall argues, small church relationships are central to evangelism.

Small-church approaches to evangelism need to be person centered. This is the pattern and strength of the small church. Super churches attract people through their winsome pulpiteer and their glamorous programs. The small church attracts through the contacts people have with its members.¹⁶

If, in a pluralistic society that values inclusivity and tolerance, the most effective method of reaching out to people is through loving relationships that show genuine love to the people that God brings into a church member's life, small churches have the potential to be one of the most effective tools of evangelism in the world today. Gary McIntosh makes this point:

Small churches are often victims of a bigger is better mentality, which lead them to believe they are less capable of evangelizing their unchurched community. The truth is actually the opposite. Small churches can be extremely effective in outreach. Surveys among non-Christians reveal that they tend to have relational concerns. Are the people friendly? Will I be accepted if I don't dress up? Will I meet people who are like me and who will like me? Will I feel guilty or put down or bored or out of place? The relational orientation of the small church makes it a prime place for non-Christians to find Christ.¹⁷

Second, the intergenerational nature of the small church tends to produce leaders for the church. Young people develop the skills that they will need in future leadership roles through the opportunities for service that a small church provides. Loren B. Mead, founder and president emeritus of the Alban Institute, notes that those opportunities often result in the development of leadership qualities:

One of the greatest gifts that small congregations have to give is effective Christians. Many of the denominational bodies, as well as the city and suburban churches are deeply indebted to the leadership they have received from members whose early nurture in the faith was carried out in small

¹⁶ Crandall, *Turn Around Strategies*, 83.

¹⁷ Gary L. McIntosh, *One Size Doesn't Fit All: Bringing Out The Best in Any Size Church* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1999), 132.

congregations. Everywhere I go across the country, I find leadership in larger congregations disproportionately borne by those who were nurtured in small congregations. Frequently the smaller-membership congregation is not even aware of the power of this exporting of resources, and almost never is the larger church aware of it. The fact remains, however, that smaller congregations produce a larger share of the key lay persons and members that have in several generations produced five to eight young people who grew up, left home and became key figures in churches elsewhere, not always of the same denomination. These are extraordinary gifts.¹⁸

When young people are given the opportunity to serve, they and their church can discover and develop their leadership gifts. This happens readily in intergenerational settings in small churches.

The leadership development potential of a small church can produce disproportionate results. The author is aware of one small church that with an average attendance of between forty and fifty people had a youth group with twenty-five members. The youth group produced a pastor, three pastors' wives, a life-long missionary, the wife of the president of a mission organization, and three other people who spent at least one year in full-time ministry. Other members of the youth group became lay leaders in the churches they attended.

A major influence in these young people's lives was their involvement as teenagers. As members of a small church, they were regularly given the opportunity to serve in a variety of ways. They were prepared for adult involvement in churches and other areas of ministry. The ongoing impact of these people who received the foundation for their life of faith in a small church has been great.

At its best the small church, especially in a small town or rural setting, positively influences the community in which it is located.

Let us be perfectly honest and admit that the church has often been all these things at many times and places. It has amply justified every bitter charge levelled against it. Nevertheless, despite its many weaknesses and its tragic sins the church has been, in every century since its inception, the most powerful force for good on the face of the earth. It has been light in the midst of darkness so dense it could be felt. It has been salt in society, retarding the spread of moral corruption and adding zest and flavor to human life.¹⁹

¹⁸ Loren B. Mead, *Inside the Small Church*, ed. Anthony G. Pappas (Alban Institute, 2002), 96.

¹⁹ Ray C. Stedman, *Body Life* (Glendale, California: Regal Books, 1972), 2.

Unfortunately, this has not always been the case but when it has, the small church has helped to shape its world.

The author is aware of many examples of the impact small churches can have on their communities. Volunteers from one small-town church formed the parents' council at the local school, building strong relationships with the staff there and helping to shape the the culture of the school. In another small-town, church people participated in the Chamber of Commerce, giving them a significant voice in decisions made for the town. In another setting, people from the local church became involved in the fall fair committee and were able to introduce a church service as part of the weekend activities.

A serious problem that many small churches face is low self-esteem. Ray writes about the problems that low self-esteem can cause.

The dominating and most debilitating problem in a high percentage of small churches is low self-esteem, resulting in low morale. Comments like "We're just a little church," "I'm just a small church pastor," and "We don't do as much as the big church on the corner," are common and difficult to eradicate as dandelions. Low self-esteem is a cancer that kills small churches. It reduces the amount of available money, results in poor building upkeep, repels new members, discourages leaders, erodes organizational effectiveness, changes communication from positive to negative, causes church fights, undermines planning and limits relationships with those outside. In short it undermines the ministry and mission of the church.²⁰

Low self-esteem may come from an inaccurate understanding of the impact that a small church can have, and in many cases is already having. Small churches may need to step back and take a fresh look at what they are doing in order to measure the impact that they are having.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to celebrate the small church. Those who lead small churches often face criticism and discouragement. Whatever critics may say, small churches are playing a significant role in the vitality of Christianity in Canada. More than half of the churches in Canada are small. Hundreds of thousands of people receive their spiritual nourishment in small churches. Every small church is part of a very large and significant section of the Canadian church mosaic.

²⁰ Ray, *The Big Small Book*, 141-142.

The small church is biblical. The Jerusalem church with its thousands of members is not meant to be the example for all churches throughout church history. Many of the churches that we read about in the New Testament may have been small.

The small church is unique and in that uniqueness has value in the sight of its head, Jesus Christ. The small church is part of the bride, a stone in the building, and a part of the body of which Jesus is the head.

The small church has an important role to play in the ongoing health of the church in the twenty-first century. In a setting that stresses relationships, it should have an impact on people who are looking for the kind of relationships that the church should offer. In addition, the size of the small church with its intergenerational nature naturally promotes development of future leaders for the church as a whole. Finally the small church can have an impact on its community. Often it has a greater impact than the members realize.

Perhaps the church in Canada needs to take another look at the value of small churches. Rather than a problem to be solved, small churches are as an asset to be appreciated.

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