

SMALL IS BIG AGAIN: RECLAIMING SMALL CHURCH MINISTRY

Although megachurches garner a great deal of attention, these supersized congregations comprise only a small fraction of all worshipping communities in the U.S. The current estimate is that only about 1,650 megachurches (worship attendance exceeds 2,000) dot the landscape out of a total 330,000 congregations across America. In fact, most churches are small: two out of three Protestant churches attract less than 100 worshipers in a typical week. Some scholars predicted that megachurches would essentially put small churches out of business. But the percentage of large churches as part of all churches is growing slowly while the number of small churches has remained stable. While the church's larger mission continues to be carried out by many small worshipping communities, small churches may get locked into self-criticism. However, more congregations are embracing the strengths associated with their small size. As one congregation proclaims: "We're not just any small church. We're the small church that's here!"¹

What Do Small Churches Need?

Lewis Parks, a champion of small congregations, claims that they can do big things with "a little cooperation with the Spirit on the part of those gathered, a little striving for excellence, a little freedom to express local religious creativity, and all things sprinkled with lots of hospitality"² A few other suggestions include the following:

A compelling story about their history, purpose, and mission. Members often possess a common narrative about when and why the church was established and some specifics of that particular historical period. But fewer members know the chapters in the church's history. For example, which pastors or lay leaders exerted a major influence in embracing new mission or overcoming risks? What community events (such as rapid population growth, departure of a major employer) affected the church in a major way? How do mem-

bers describe the current chapter in the church's narrative? Too often, the church's story that clearly reveals the congregation's ongoing ministry remains implicit. When members share greater awareness of the church's mission and history (how did we get here?), they gain greater clarity about the congregation's unique identity. Consider engaging members in an exercise that surfaces the church's history, experiences, traditions, and untested assumptions.³ Then, create a vision statement that captures these insights and use it on your website, with social media, and other church communications.

Intentional efforts to increase visibility. Effective approaches are size-specific. Every small church can creatively send the message to newcomers and the community—"we are here, we care about you, and we welcome you!" An electronic presence (website, Facebook, Instagram) establishes a virtual welcome mat. A well-maintained and lighted church building signals a physical "home" that anticipates visitors.



OUR OLDER DEMOGRAPHIC INTERPRETED
"AN ELECTRONIC PRESENCE TO INCREASE VISIBILITY"
AS STRINGING TWINKLE LIGHTS AROUND THE STEEPLE.

Participation by members and leaders in community events suggests commitment to the well-being of neighbors. Hosting community events, speakers, workshops, and the arts indicates that the church is a willing partner in promoting their neighbors' quality of life.⁴ Form a team of six members to test the congregation's visibility by instructing them to approach five people they do not know. Next, have these members inquire: "Have you ever heard of (the name of your church)? What do you know about it (for example, location, programs, etc.?)" Reconvene these volunteers and share the results. Based on what you learn, devise one or two new action steps to increase the congregation's community profile.

Customized methods for outreach. Context is everything when developing strategies to welcome newcomers. Would your community be described as active or sedentary, family- or career-focused, a stable or mobile population? A family-focused and stable community is more likely to respond to family and friend networks. If a population is career-focused and mobile, investments in electronic and social media will likely pay dividends. Have leaders discuss the key characteristics of the church's community five years ago, currently, five years from now, and ten years in the future.⁵ Refine the church's strategies based on these observed changes.

Purposeful efforts to pass along the faith to future generations. Following the words of Robert Schuller, congregations should view faith development as planting seeds: "Anyone can count the seeds in an apple, but only God can count the number of apples in a seed." Research shows that when congregations value nurturing faith in children and young adults, that emphasis and their hard work bears fruit. How does the church measure success in this ministry area?

Seed-planting congregations in this way also make ministry with millennials a priority. Parks makes a convincing argument that small churches are best suited for reaching out to this age group—adults born between 1981 and 1996.⁶ Millennials' life experiences differ greatly from previous generations and one in three are religiously unaffiliated.⁷ They were more likely to be raised in a nontraditional family and are more culturally diverse than past cohorts. Despite growing up in an online world, they place a high value on friendships and relationships. Small

churches offer them the unique opportunity for intimacy and caring relationships. They are looking for safe spaces for themselves and their children. Review the demographics within a fifteen-mile radius of the congregation to determine the age profiles of residents and to create updated strategies to reach unrepresented groups.

Accept reality and build on strengths. Garrison Keillor famously said: "I believe in looking reality straight in the eye and denying it." Small churches cannot afford to deny reality. Leaders can accept the things that cannot be changed while identifying the advantages that small size affords. Sometimes, cherished programs or even the church building have to be sacrificed in order for the congregation's future mission to thrive. Consider a four-session group study to discover new insights for small-church ministry.⁸

Making Small Big Again

Margaret Mead's statement inspired many in earlier generations: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." A parallel truth applies to congregations. Never doubt that small churches have changed the world and they will continue to do so.

1. Lewis A. Parks, "A New Way to View Small Church Vitality," Lewis Center for Church Leadership, October 14, 2015 (<https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/a-new-way-to-view-vitality-in-smaller-congregations/>).

2. Ibid.

3. Trey Hammond, "Timeline of Place," *Leader Guide for Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location*, 2008 (<http://www.uscongregations.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/leaderguide.pdf>).

4. Cynthia Woolever, "Keys to Growing a Small Church," *The Parish Paper*, August 2012 (Vol. 20, No. 8).

5. Statistics available by county, city, town, or zip code at U.S. Census (<http://factfinder.census.gov>).

6. Parks.

7. Michael Lipka, "Millennials increasingly are driving growth of 'nones'" Pew Research Center, (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>).

8. Use the free online resource from The Parish Paper, "Coaching Small Congregations toward Positive Change," <https://www.theparishpaper.com/sites/default/files/resources/Church%20Effectiveness%20Nuggets-%20Volume%2027.pdf>.