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TITLE: The Small Church Primer

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I recently attended a worship and music convocation attended by more than one thousand people from congregations of numerous denominations and all sizes. One of the classes in the program booklet that caught my attention was titled *The Gifts that Small Churches Bring to the Body*. The booklet described the workshop by saying, "Practical, accessible ideas for worship planning in small churches, along with reasons why small churches are so important for all of us." There were no class handouts, and the format was a lively group discussion rather than lecture. It was moderated by a well-known music and worship person who is prominent in academic circles, assisted by a pastor and a layperson, both from churches with fewer than thirty in attendance on Sunday mornings. I took notes on the 60-minute discussion and managed to get in a few music-related questions. I was impressed with the thoughtfulness of those in the group and with the depth and sincerity with which they shared their own strengths and weaknesses. As I looked over my notes, it occurred to me that there was much there to commend to musicians and worship planners in churches of all sizes.

Although this article largely deals with some of the problems and struggles of small churches, not all small churches, of course, are struggling. Not all the problems discussed affect all small churches. Some are places of dynamic and effective ministry, nurture, outreach, and disciple making. The intent of this article is to examine some of the problems encountered by small churches as discussed by small-church leaders and members in the class I attended.

What are the challenges of being a small membership church?

1. Psychology: There is a psychology that infects small churches, and it is one of small ... smaller ... tiny. Most of what we do is governed by our size. We struggle for ways to define success and our identity that are different from most churches, especially the big ones. We can't point to attendance, increases in baptisms and new members, big choirs, expensive buildings, ever-rising mission and apportionment payments, or hosting great evangelistic crusades. Our small size predetermines so much of what we do and limits our dreaming and planning. We are who we are.

2. Our building: More often than not, our facilities are older, perhaps located in a declining neighbourhood where the residents are fleeing to the suburbs. The building may be large in size and mostly unused by our small congregation. It is in

need of repair – painting; patching ceiling leaks; new heating and air conditioning; stripping away of years of dirt, grime, and neglect. There are probably broken windows and insecure doors. Off-street parking does not exist. Maybe there are lots of stairs that are difficult for the older residents of the neighborhood to negotiate. The chairs, pews, tables, pianos, offices, Sunday school rooms, and carpets are all in disrepair.

3. Leadership development and training: Because the talent pool is so small, so is the number of potential leaders among the membership. We are careful to make the point (and we expect the same of larger churches) that we are no less capable or intelligent. It's just that there are fewer of us. Therefore, we may have to look deeper within those among us and perhaps be even more encouraging of people to be willing to develop and exercise those gifts of leadership they possess. Excellence is not something available only to large congregations, but we may have to be more committed to developing it among ourselves.

4. Money for conferences and training: Conferences, workshops, and training opportunities do not usually offer a reduced cost for registration and expenses for smaller churches. We pay the same amounts as churches ten or twenty times our size. Our smaller budgets seldom include line items for such training events, which means our people usually pay their way from their own cheque books.

5. The struggle for technology: Our small budget makes it difficult to obtain the same level of technology that has become commonplace in larger churches. Computers, software, modems, Internet access, fax machines, copy machines, telephone and telephone services, and other bits of technology are just as important in our work and mission as in larger churches, but our budgets leave little for anything other than salary, utilities, and building costs. We are sometimes the recipients of donations from other churches and individuals. Sometimes we can even make use of the donated items; but most often, the donations are older technology, in worn condition, have outdated software, and are sometimes in disrepair.

6. The travel gap: Smaller budgets mean less travel to conferences, workshops, and training events. Small budgets also limit our reimbursing our pastor for church-related travel in town. Therefore not only are we limited in the number of training events, but our choices of training events may be limited to those that are accessible by automobile rather than air, local rather than distant, commuter rather than a hotel stay.

7. Burnout and over-commitment: We must guard carefully against these two threats in both pastor and people. Because we are so few, nearly everyone participates in nearly everything that takes place in our church. When the doors are open for worship, fellowship, education, a committee meeting, or most functions, we are all there if at all possible. We do not have the luxury of thinking to ourselves, "Oh, the Wilsons will be there, so we don't have to be." We must be even more careful that we do not abuse those among us – including our pastor – who are willing to give additional time and talent as our leaders. They are so few that it is easy to begin to take advantage of their good will and their time. An additional problem, of course, is that if our leaders or our people do become

burdened with burnout or over-commitment, we are limited in whom to contact to replace them.

8. The shallow talent pool: The talent pool is shallow in quantity, not quality. We are well aware that our people are as talented and as gifted as those in any congregation (a fact that sometimes escapes our district and annual conference officials). Our budgets and programs are smaller, our class and ministry offerings fewer, and our leaders fewer in number. The same is true of the number of people we have to draw upon, not just for leadership, but also for participation. We often do not have a choir, not because we don't value or recognize the importance of music, but because we don't have the people. Sometimes we sing a capella because we do not have a musician among our people to lead us. We often must be creative in structuring our Sunday school classes, sometimes combining too wide a range of ages within one class because we don't have the people to support one class for each age group.

What are the gifts and strengths of small membership churches?

1. Sense of community: In so many respects, as with many other churches, our small congregation is its own community. The advantage we have over larger churches is that we know everyone in our community. We also may know people more fully since we all share our church activities together more fully. There is little possibility for isolation. We sometimes share our identity with a sense of loyalty and pride shared by many families. We often have a long history as a congregation, and our traditions and our past bind us together.

2. Involvement and participation: Our small size and shallow talent pool might be seen as obstacles to be overcome; however, they might also be seen as factors contributing to our commitment to be involved in the ministry and fellowship of our congregation. We are keenly aware that the health and effectiveness of our church truly depends upon the involvement and participation of each member. There is no one else to do the work. Such commitment and dedication leads to an uncommon spirit of unity and frequent opportunities to celebrate our vitality as we witness the work of God through the Spirit in what we do.

3. Everything is genuine – lack of glitz: We are aware of the necessity of making the most of our time, talent, and finances. Our relationships with one another are close. We share together the qualities of honesty and intimacy – as in a family. We must guard against burnout and over-commitment, making excessive demands upon our people and pastor. For these reasons and others, we take special care so that what we do is important and meaningful. We value the contributions of our people, and one way to demonstrate that is to see that we do not ask them to squander their time and energies.

4. Demystification of the pastor: In a setting that is so close, so intimate, so revealing, our people get to know all there is to know of one another, the good and the not so good. As has been said, we are a family more than an institution. In this kind of setting, we also come to know our pastor more closely and intimately than in larger churches. We are so few in number that we all are able to establish a relationship with him or her. Our pastor often works alongside us, in the midst of

us, rather than out in front of us. Because we are so close, not only does the pastor become intimately aware of us, our hopes, struggles, successes, and failures; but so do we become aware of those same things in the life of our pastor. There is little chance of experiencing our pastor as a high-and-lifted-up holy messenger of the Creator of the Universe. That is not to say we are unable to appreciate the special gifts of our pastor, the unique calling into the ordained ministry of word, order, and sacrament, or the importance of the pastor in facilitating the ongoing life of our congregation. But all of this is accomplished with the pastor very much as one of the family.

5. We are ecumenical: Small-membership churches are often located in rural settings. But even in a city, it sometimes makes more sense to cooperate with congregations of our size from other denominations than to cooperate with larger United Methodist congregations. We often share more in common with small Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, or other churches than with United Methodist churches five or ten times our size. And if we are to have the wonderful experience of participating in an event of large proportions, we must do it ecumenically.

6. High levels of financial giving and stewardship faithfulness: Although our budgets are smaller than many churches, so are our numbers. Nevertheless, statistically we have demonstrated our commitment to the ministry and outreach of our church through consistently higher levels of financial giving. We give more of our income per capita to the work of the church than do members of larger churches. We do this as an individual and private commitment to God and to our church, and we do this as a committed fellowship of believers and as a family.

What about worship and music in the small membership church?

1. Worship is a central activity: Worship is at the very center of the life of the small-membership congregation. In some of our churches, worship is the only time we gather as a congregation; and Sunday morning is our only opportunity to be the church. In other small churches, there are additional activities of mission, evangelism, education, and stewardship. But in all that we do, we recognize that worship makes us one, helps us understand who and what we are, and continues to form us by the presence of God among us.

2. A different Sunday schedule: With fewer people, we are sometimes unable to have classes for all the different ages found in many Sunday schools. Indeed, it is common for us to not have any people at all in some of those age groups. Further, it is not easy for us to find teachers from among our membership to staff the different classes. Consequently, our Sunday school classes contain a wider range of ages than in larger churches. In some of our churches, there are two classes: one for adults, one for children. In some small churches, everyone meets together in one class for a time of teaching and learning. For others, there is one common worship service for everyone; then after a time, children move out of the service to a Sunday school or time for Christian education. We have learned to be flexible, and we have learned that the Christian or secular calendar or events in our community or culture sometimes call for us to alter our normal Sunday schedule.

3. *Everyone participates:* As with other aspects of the life of a small-membership church, we are always aware of the need for everyone to participate. But in worship, because of its central importance and because it may be the only activity of the church attended by visitors, it is all the more crucial that everyone be in attendance and actively engaged. We do not have the luxury of being able to scout around the vast assembly of people on Sunday to find a substitute for an usher or Scripture reader who doesn't show up. We also know that if we are not in attendance, we create a gap that is more difficult to fill. Even people who hate to sing will at least stand, hold a hymnal, and mumble along rather than read the bulletin while the rest of the congregation sings. We recognize our role in passing on the heritage and traditions of our worship life to our children, and we take care to involve them in each service – and not just in a children's sermon. We train our children to be true worship leaders, in song, in reading Scripture, in prayer, and in assisting with the serving of Holy Communion. We model the importance of participation we want to instill in them through our own participation.

4. *We think in seasons rather than in years:* In general, the focus of our planning calendar is a bit shorter than that of larger churches. Each person's participation is so important, and our effectiveness is so dependent upon everyone's presence, that the likelihood of the success of our plans is increased if they are short-term rather than long-term. We have found it better to plan for a season – Advent, Lent, summer, a calendar quarter – than for a full year or a quadrennium. Of course, we have in mind those things that are recurring every year, and our pastor and some of our leaders must make plans longer than a season. But in general, our planning focus is for a season. One reason for the short-term planning is that we do not have enough people to share the planning and working responsibilities for a full year. Many of the same people in our church will share these responsibilities all the time, and it becomes difficult to plan for a longer period.

5. *Music is a means and not an end:* Here are some of the problems with music experienced by small churches:

- There is a lack of trained leadership to plan and lead the congregation in singing.
- There is no one who can play the piano or organ.
- There is no piano or organ.
- The piano or organ is in such disrepair that it is unusable and beyond repair.
- There are not enough people to form a choir.
- There is no choir leadership.
- There aren't enough funds to purchase hymnals or songbooks.
- There are not enough young people to enliven our services with contemporary music.

Despite these problems, we recognize the importance of music in the church's worship. We also know that music comforts us in grief, teaches our children the fundamentals of the faith, and connects us to the denomination as well as to the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. Music unites us as one community in worship. Thus, despite the difficulties posed by these musical challenges in the small church, we continue the place of music in our worship. Even without grand instruments, choirs, handbells, and trained music leaders, we sing our hymns, songs, and choruses – sometimes a capella, in unison or in parts, sometimes in

uncomfortable keys or even in a variety of keys, with variations of melodies and rhythms. We rejoice in those opportunities when we are able to celebrate the talents of our children and youth or the talents of a visiting musician. Because of the musical problems and challenges, as with all the other challenges present in small churches, we commit ourselves to full participation, fully experiencing God's presence among us; and we are determined that God will be glorified in our music. The challenges become a source of strength and commitment for us.

We may also give less attention to music in our worship than do larger churches, choosing instead to concentrate more on the reading of Scripture, prayer, liturgy, and fellowship. Often, it is these non-musical elements of our service that unite the congregation and give voice to the expressions of our people – something that is often done primarily through music in larger congregations.

6. The impact and reality of short term clergy – the revolving door syndrome:

Consider the following reality of clergy appointments to small churches –

- We are seen more as an entry point for new clergy than as a career advancement by experienced clergy.
- The salary is often the minimum salary. Our benefits paid are few and small.
- Our programs are small.
- We do not usually provide opportunities for clergy to build their resumes impressively.
- Clergy sometimes joke about our church being their next appointment if they anger the bishop.
- Our appointed pastors are often student pastors or retired pastors.
- Our pastors are often part-time pastors, sometimes engaged in non-church employment at the same time they serve as our pastors.
- Our pastors are often in transition – on the way to regular or full-time appointments, or on the way from retirement to whatever their futures hold.
- Sometimes our pastors are received from other annual conferences where they have experienced some difficulty with their congregation or bishop.
- Our pastor may be a layperson without the professional training of the ordained clergy.
- Our pastor often is unable to administer the sacraments because he or she is not an ordained elder.

These are some of the realities about pastors experienced by small churches. We are all too familiar with our shortcomings and our lack of appeal in the eyes of many clergy, and we know we will not occupy a prominent place in the bishop's appointment book. We also know that some of the pastors we welcome in our midst are destined to be short-term. They see us as a very temporary stop on the way to a larger appointment.

Nevertheless, we will accept and cherish those pastors who come our way. We will nourish and love them; we will help them in their task; we will educate and train them as we are able. We will support them in their calling. We will make up for their inexperience and lack of training. We will also receive them with joy and expectation. We will accept their leadership and their direction. We will be partners in ministry. But we know that they will not be with us for very long, for

small churches are often points of transition. And when the time comes for them to pass through our door for the last time, we will bless them with rejoicing and with tears; and we will thank God for the time we shared.

Conclusion

The challenges and problems of the small church are many, but we know what they are and have long experience overcoming them. More important to us are the joys that we know because of our size and the gifts that we bring to United Methodism and the larger body of Christ. There are more of us than there are large churches. We are much more the norm in our denomination. We have been here for a long time and will continue to be a presence in the church. What we have, who we are, and the gifts we bring are important to the entire church.

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