

The Small Church

In 2020, congregations averaging less than 100 at worship will represent 45 percent of all Protestant churches in the USA and Canada.

Numerical growth should never be the top priority. Change is the number one issue. The understood assumption is that small churches cannot enjoy substantial growth without making changes many will identify as unwelcome or disruptive.

If the goal is numerical growth, accept that you will be competing with other churches for prospective new members. ***Intercongregational cooperation on ministry and programming is not compatible with a strategy for numerical growth.***

Widespread ownership of the private automobile, especially the hundreds of thousands owned by teenagers, means that small churches are competing with other churches for new members.

To encourage intercongregational cooperation in programming

OR

to recognize that competition is the new fact of life.

Criteria for evaluating small church ministers:

(a) skills in interpersonal relationships; (b) depth of Christian commitment; (c) instant availability; and (d) willingness to focus on the members' agenda.

In a large church, the criteria are more likely to be (a) professionalism; (b) leadership ability; (c) effectiveness in completing an assignment with better than anticipated results.

Those that prefer a small church tend to come from people born before 1940, those who place relationships above the quality of ministry, adults on the liberal end of theology, and adults who spend their formative years in small- town or rural communities.

Continuity in small churches tend to be (a) local traditions; (b) real estate; (c) kinship and friendships ties; (d) relationships among the people; and (e) volunteer leaders.

The smaller the number of members, the more the focus is on Sunday worship with the members as the number one constituency.

The limitations on discretionary resources means that the small church can offer people only two choices: "Take it or leave it."

Small churches often maintain a plateau in size for decades.

The financial needs of the church are often the number one motivating force for giving in the small church.

The small church usually thinks of Sunday morning as the number one entry point for newcomers.

Small church advertising is the “tombstone” ad that carries the name of the church, the name of the pastor, the address and the schedule; whereas the large church will focus on the needs of the reader.

Loyalty in the small church is to the congregation; whereas in the large church it may be to the choir, the youth group, the ladies group, etc.

In identifying prospective new members, the small church usually begins by focusing on kinfolk, friends or neighbors. By contrast, the large church thinks regional, not neighborhood, focusing on people’s spiritual needs rather than on established kinship ties.

In the small church, the term “ministry of music” means four or five singers and a leader.

The discussion of “quality” in a small church always turns to interpersonal relationships, and the compatibility of minister and congregation.

In the small church, everyone is known by name. The greatest compliment an adult can offer a child is to call that child correctly by name.

In a large church, greeting another is oftentimes no more than, “Hi” or “Good morning.” In a healthy small church, it is more likely to be, “Hey Dan, we missed you last Sunday. Where were you?” or “Hello Martha. How’s Jim doing this week?”

What Is the Common Thread of a Healthy Small Church?

All healthy small churches live out the second of what Jesus defined as the two great commandments: “loving your neighbor.” Newcomers are warmly welcomed regardless of age, gender, marital status, education, income, or theological stance.

In the healthy small church, the minister must often combine the roles of pastor, therapist, parental role, worship leader, facilitator, cheerleader, friend, teacher, confidant, enabler, and urban missionary. The congregation is largely a passing parade of people moving from one stage of life to the next. A dozen or so of solid, stable, dependable, and deeply committed members provide most of the stability

The best of the larger churches are organized primarily around the first commandment and people's spiritual needs expressed through high-quality worship, preaching, teaching ministries, music, modeling, missions, learning, drama, visual communication, and the challenge to discipleship.

The second commandment in a large church is implemented through face-to-face groups, adult study groups, redundant system of new member assimilation, well-organized system for world missions, local community outreach programs, mission trips, and the ministry of music.

The *primary*, or central organizing, principle in the healthy small church is the interaction of the people. A *secondary* organizing principle is a healthy, meaningful response to the spiritual longings of people. The ideal would be to excel in both, but that is both difficult and rare.

Five Questions

Why do so few small churches experience growth when the population in the community is increasing? The answer is that first-commandment churches concentrate on identifying and responding to the spiritual agenda of people. To compete, the second-commandment church would have to change and become a first-commandment church.

Why are second-commandment churches rarely able to be transformed into first commandment churches? Resistance to change is number one. Also, congregations organized around interpersonal relationships and/or building a sense of community are less likely to attract strangers.

Why do so many of the longtime members drop into inactivity or switch to another church when their small second-commandment church is transformed into a first-commandant church and doubles in size? The answer is in the question: they prefer a second-commandment church.

Why are small churches small? The normative size for Protestant congregations is fewer than 100 at worship. But why is it that way? The best answer is: "It's always been that way." The endangered small church is the one that can no longer afford a full-time minister.

Compete or Cooperate? Leaders in the large churches accept the fact that competition among the churches is part of the reality; whereas the leadership in small churches believes that cooperation should be the norm. **Interchurch cooperation blurs the distinctive identity of each participating congregation.**

The Central Question

Do we, as a small church, plan around a theme of 'competition' with other churches in this community or around a theme of 'cooperation'?

If the goal is to strengthen ties with other congregations, the cooperative path is the one.

If the number-one goal is to respond to complaints, "There are too few of us to do that," one response is to seek to build a group by joint programming.

If there is broad-based support for numerical growth, and if the setting makes that a reasonable goal, then the best advice is to ignore opportunities for interchurch cooperation.

Instead, focus **(a)** on matching the local competition in quality; **(b)** in publicity; **(c)** in creating additional entry points for newcomers; **(d)** in identifying and responding to those on a spiritual quest; and **(e)** in serious in-depth Bible study.

Only when a small church is no longer able to compete for new members should it begin to explore cooperative arrangements with other congregations

Five Forks in the Road

- For many the most attractive path is the easiest, which is to avoid making any decisions and simply drift along.
- The sharpest fork is the one described as the choice between being a second-commandment church or a first-commandment church. The temptation is to be both, which is rare.
- For one-third of all small churches, the road into tomorrow is symbolized by the size of their parking lot, defining their service area with a radius of ten-to-thirty minutes travel time on Sunday morning, or defining it more narrowly by those that live in a one-to-two mile radius.
- A fourth fork was described as the choice between cooperation and competition.
- For many small churches, the most attractive scenario is find the pastor who brings in one body a magnetic personality, transformational leadership skills, inspiring preaching, a compelling vision of what God is calling this congregation to be & do, a high Christology, a deep Christian commitment, and a productive work ethic.

When he/she calls out, “Follow me!” everyone eagerly falls into line. There are three important reservations about choosing this direction:

- 1) There is a severe national shortage of leaders with all of these qualities.
- 2) Such leaders tend to prefer large congregations.
- 3) Most small congregations do not have a congregational culture that is compatible with this leadership style.

Summing up: No one congregation can be all things to all people, nor respond to all the spiritual needs of every individual. Therefore, your church must ask two questions. First, what does this church do best? What do we have to offer? Second, who are the people your church will seek to reach, serve and challenge? What are the characteristics of the people whom we are seeking to reach?

Courses of Action

- All of these alternative courses of action begin planning on the basis of responding to the spiritual and personal needs of people.
 - 1) *Establish or reestablish the primary role as a neighborhood church.* Identify the people who live within two miles as the primary constituency for tomorrow. This strategy includes **(a)** making the church building the center of community life; **(b)** scheduling at least eight events at the church designed to meet the needs of nearby residents; **(c)** knocking on every door (“I dropped by to invite you to this special event”) at least four times annually; **(d)** an excellent teaching adult ministry; **(e)** a worship service that a complete stranger from any spiritual tradition will find easy to share in and meaningful; **(f)** door-to-door and face-to-face delivery of the invitations; **(g)** a long pastorate.
 - 2) *Become a regional church for a precisely defined constituency* (families with children, families with teens, mature adults, missions, issue-centered). These churches expect to draw from a ten- to twenty-five mile radius.
 - 3) *If you follow a liturgical approach to worship, seek to reach those from non-liturgical churches.*
 - 4) *Focus on the leisure population that has more than one residence.* Nearly one-half of all males are partially or fully retired by age 62. Suggested strategy: **(a)** Offer outstanding preaching; **(b)** use advertising; **(c)** offer outdoor worship experiences; **(d)** offer music concerts; **(e)** encourage your “repeat visitors” from last year to bring their friends.

- 5) *Carve out a distinctive niche.* If you are more than one of three or more congregations of the same denomination in that general area, identify and fill a clearly defined niche. It can be based on music, constituency, schedule, specialized programming
- Seeking to identify tomorrow's constituency, their needs and how your church can respond, is the best approach to planning for tomorrow in the small church. The second and more popular approach can be summarized in the wish, "If we can find the right pastor who is a skilled leader, our troubles will be behind us."
 - A third beginning point is to look at the total program and how it can be strengthened. One reason for not beginning here is that there is a temptation to conclude, "Let's do yesterday over again, only better." A second reason for not beginning with program is that it greatly depends on the gifts, skills, experiences, preferences, energy, vision, and availability time of the pastor and volunteers. If you do begin here, what can you do?
 - 1) *Schedule four to six major events annually, creating new entry points for newcomers.*
 - (a) Schedule a Constitution Day every July, inviting teachers, community leaders, people in law enforcement; (b) invite every adult who lives alone to come and eat Thanksgiving dinner at your church; (c) organize a community rummage sale annually; (d) design a Labor Day worship service for those in your community; (e) schedule a Tuesday evening debate among candidates for public office.
 - 2) *Change the music.*
 - 3) *Become a seven-day-a-week church,* adding one new weekday class or event annually (weekday nursery school for per-kindergarten children or after-school care).
 - 4) *Promote what you do best.* Seek to reinforce, strengthen, expand, and give greater visibility to that particular ministry, program, class, or experience. What do you do best? Brag about it. Improve it! Give it greater visibility!
 - 5) *Become a grant-giving church.* Create an endowment fund to finance a variety of outreach ministries.
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Resource: Lyle E. Schaller, *The Small Membership Church: Scenarios for Tomorrow* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press) 1994.