

NORTHERN LIGHT

Digest
MARCH 2017

Grace Communion International Canada / Communion Internationale dans la Grâce, Canada

Do Not Be Afraid

In my first year as a church pastor, I had the opportunity to attend the Billy Graham School of Evangelism.

In my first year as a church pastor, I had the opportunity to attend the Billy Graham School of Evangelism. Being a “small” church pastor, I took in many seminars that discussed some of the unique challenges of pastoring smaller congregations. I still remember the first speaker, who opened his message by encouraging us not to despair if we pastored

small churches. As he explained: “God must love small churches, as he has made so many of them!”

There are times when thinking about the churches I pastor, those words come back to remind me that there is no shame in being a pastor to, or attending a small church. Jesus’ words to his disciples also offer similar encouragement when he said: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). The fact is, regardless of the size of the community with which we fellowship, it is the Father’s intention to give us a place in his kingdom through his Son.

Most of my church going life has been spent in small congregations. In his article that follows, Neil Earle, lists what he sees as advantages of smaller worship groups. I can relate with what he has written. For me, a small congregation creates an intimacy that can be missing in a larger group—if that group doesn’t also have a small group ministry. I guess it is a “small group” in its own right.

Rather than reiterate what Neil has written, I would like to share my small church story.

A few years ago, we had a service that was going to be followed by one of our famous prairie potluck meals. It seemed like we always had a good turnout for those services. One grandmother had invited her family to attend and she was pleased to have her daughters, grandchildren, nieces and nephews come. In addition to being proud of her church family, she was extremely proud of her extended family. While talking to her family before the service, grannie came up to me and said her grandson was a good singer, and really wanted to sing a song to the congregation during the service. Never one to turn down an opportunity to have a guest singer, or discourage any sign of initiative from a young person, I agreed that he should sing his song after the offering and before my sermon.



Stock: zolwiks

After the offering plate was passed through the congregation, and as everyone was getting ready of the sermon, this young lad walked up to the podium without any sign of nervousness. Then without any musical accompaniment he proceeded to belt out the best version of “Dead Skunk in the Middle of the Road” that we had ever heard! It was immediately followed by a round of applause from the congregation. That day he made his grandmother proud and we shared in her pride.

That’s how small congregations live. As spiritual families, we experience and bear each other’s sorrows and troubles. But we also

After the offering plate was passed through the congregation, and as everyone was getting ready of the sermon, this young lad walked up to the podium without any sign of nervousness. Then without any musical accompaniment he proceeded to belt out the best version of “Dead Skunk in the Middle of the Road” that we had ever heard! It was immediately followed by a round of applause from the congregation. That day he made his grandmother proud and we shared in her pride.

celebrate and share each member's accomplishments and times of joy. We learn to laugh and cry together during the ebbs and flows of this Christian journey.

I am so pleased that our denomination, Grace Communion International is committed to serving all of our congregations, whether they be large or small, meeting in a hall, in someone's home or even meeting under a tree (as is the case in some congregations in Africa). No matter what our church family may look like, we all play a role in expanding God's kingdom, in the here and now.

Bill Hall

Sizing Up The Small Church Advantage

“Where is everyone?” I asked a deacon recently as we waited for church to start.

Our congregation, like so many in our fellowship, was now a definite small church—which is defined as anything under 200 people. By contrast a mega-church is a Christian meeting that regularly holds more than 2000 attendees.

Fortunately, people started showing up and we soon had more than enough for a godly quorum eager to fellowship, sing out and learn about God.

Crunching the Numbers

“Where is everyone?” The question is familiar to many ministry teams unless you are a mega-church such as Beulah Alliance Church in Edmonton or People's Church in Willowdale, Ontario. There are some who feel the small church has no future, that members may as well disband and move in to what one minister's wife called: “The big, successful church down the road.”

This is understandable, perhaps. At such times, I remember the wisdom of historian Garry Wills who—after writing a hard-hitting book against the Popes—was asked why he was still a Catholic. To leave my church, replied Wills, would be possibly sinning, sinning against faith, hope and charity. “Faith” that his church was bigger than one person or era. “Hope” that good things could still happen and were happening, if we knew where to look. “Charity”—he felt abandoning those who nurtured him in the faith would be not well-received in heaven. Wills added: “If the church is in difficulty now, that is a special reason for not leaving.”

Wills is a thoughtful nimble observer but not everyone would agree with him. Perhaps there is “a time to lose” as the wise man said (Ecclesiastes 3:7). The surprising thing about the North American churches, however, is that as many as 70-80 % of congregations are estimated to fit the small church pattern. In fact, many, many churches hover around 50 in number and—guess what—many pastors and congregations seem to like it that way.

Just the briefest scan of the Internet shows a host of articles arguing the almost unspoken benefits of regular committed worship in a small church. “A mega-church runs the risk of being a business,” says Henry Van Wyck, the head of a congregational support agency. “Sometimes the pastor is less a shepherd and more a CEO.”

Brandon O'Brien of the respected *Leadership Journal* opines that in an age craving authenticity and deeper relationships, “The more glitzy something is the less people trust it.”

This is not, of course, to discount the vast influence the mega-church has had on North American Christianity. Their ability to attract people looking for everything from dramatic productions to a quick snack before or after services is a magnet. Mega-church leaders can have a big impact on the wider community as the suc-



© iStock: jgroup

cess of Rick Warren's Saddleback Church's and his best-selling *The Purpose-Driven Life* shows. In Toronto, the People's Church is well-known for replacing some of the member-drain that has afflicted older prestigious churches, though that trend seems to be abating.

But no less a personage than Pastor Bill Hybels, one of the pioneer founders among America's 850 mega-churches, admits that if you are not enrolled in a small group or a Bible class, or a support group you are missing what church is all about.

And just what is "church" all about, when stripped to its essence?

Things that Matter

According to children's ministry developer Lindsey Whitney, today's seekers look for 1) God and 2) Friends. Put that way, then, the size of a church may not be that crucial. The New Testament bears this out. The early church in urbanized Jerusalem probably consisted of at least 8000 adults (Acts 2:41; 4:4), while members in the city of Troas could be accommodated in the upper room of a house (Acts 20:6-12). As we know, house churches were quite common in the First Century church, even if some Roman homes could be quite spacious indeed (Romans 16:5, 23).

In the end the small-church feature of 21st Century Christianity has never disappeared across 1900 years. There are, in fact, a few easily enumerated crucial points, important distinctives, that have made the vast majority of Christians think twice before abandoning their smaller congregation for what some feel is a "richer, more fulfilling experience."

Authenticity is usually the first point that comes up when church size is discussed. The fact is, it is harder to hide away in a small church where almost everyone has one or more church responsibilities. "There are never enough volunteers," argues Dennis

Bickers of EthicsDaily.com, even in a bigger church. This makes the smaller church experience of more intimate communal ties a chance for people to rally around when real needs arise. In one church I served with, a member had a house near the South Saskatchewan River which was rising alarmingly as the weekend approached. At church that week the call went out to help city sand-bagging efforts to save our church family's dwelling. After the church meeting we dutifully and enthusiastically gathered to pitch in and the structure was saved.

The ability to communicate quickly and effectively with little lead time is another built-in small-church advantage. This feeds into the issue of flexibility as well. 80 of us showed up at a Bible Study one night in suburban Toronto and the janitor with the key was missing. A pastor's bad dream! Then, a member suggested we assemble at the sports field bleachers and train several car lights on the seats from the side. It worked. "Jeremiah by searchlight." Flexibility indeed.

Intergenerational worship is also much more of a possibility in small churches. Even medium sized

NORTHERN LIGHT *Digest*

Vol.6 No.1 March 2017

Gary Moore

Editorial Advisor

Bill Hall

Managing Editor

Layout and Design

Northern Light Digest is published 4 times annually for members of the Grace Communion International Canada. Editorial contributions and comments on any issue raised in Northern Light Digest are welcome although unsolicited materials may not be returned. Please address all correspondence to:

**The Editor,
Northern Light Digest
101 - 5668 192 Street,
Surrey, BC V3S 2V7**

or email us at:
northernlight@gcicanada.ca

The new online edition of Northern Light Digest is available at www.gcicanada.ca

Unless noted otherwise, scriptures are quoted from the Holy Bible, New International Version, © Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers. Photos: © iStockphoto.com Send all address changes to: Northern Light Digest 101 - 5668 192 St. Surrey, BC V3S 2V7 email: northernlight@gcicanada.ca



All of these advantages speak to the “C” word embodied in such great Christian phrases as community, communication and (of course) communion. “I was glad,” sang the Psalmist, “when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord” (Psalmist 122:1). He wasn’t counting numbers. This family-oriented flavor of small churches is hard to beat. If your shingle hangs out on the street every weekend it is hard to be missed, and to be greeted by a friendly usher seems more genuine somehow when everyone’s presence is appreciated. It takes two miles to turn around an aircraft carrier but smaller craft can manage it more efficiently. Similarly, a change of locations or unexpected guest speakers can be announced over the phone or by e-mail network much quicker when dealing with smaller numbers.

churches find it convenient to split the congregation up into several smaller segments and the New Testament allows for this (Titus 2:1-8). Smaller churches share a necessity, however, for bringing everyone together to accomplish the tasks it sets itself. Whether delivering flyers announcing special events, or participating in seasonal dramas, or helping staff small choirs, everyone is needed. In these cases interaction among age groups occurs more often. This is important. Kara Powell of Fuller Youth Institute, echoes a point many have made over the years: forging relationships with *other adults besides parents* is crucial for young people staying committed to the church. It does something for a young person to be in a choir where a fellow-singer flew 30 bombing missions during WW 2 or the lady in the row ahead helped in the rehabilitation of Rwanda.

The unfortunate tendency to “atomize” the church—which even large-church administrators lament—is less of a problem in churches where most people’s talents and gifts are direly needed and (this is important) more easily recognized by those in charge.

This people-centered tactic is an ongoing imperative for smaller churches. In a small group you are more likely to be missed. My aunt Helen sang in a small choir for 60 years. When she missed services one day due to sickness, her phone nearly rang off the wall from concerned well-wishes. In a church of 60 or less this happens often. It confirms the truism that in a smaller congregation

“people know about it when you’re born and care about it when you die.” In a church that prizes efficiency or a “seamless service” or runs its meetings like a TV special, it is often harder to communicate sympathetically all-important moments such as a death in the group, or that young Betty “who grew up among us” has been accepted to study at Yale.

Community and Communication

All of these advantages speak to the “C” word embodied in such great Christian phrases as community, communication and (of course) communion. “I was glad,” sang the Psalmist, “when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord” (Psalmist 122:1). He wasn’t counting numbers. This family-oriented flavor of small churches is hard to beat. If your shingle hangs out on the street every weekend it is hard to be missed, and to be greeted by a friendly usher seems more genuine somehow when everyone’s presence is appreciated. It takes two miles to turn around an aircraft carrier but smaller craft can manage it more efficiently. Similarly, a change of locations or unexpected guest speakers can be announced over the phone or by e-mail network much quicker when dealing with smaller numbers.

Of course, there are downsides. Smaller churches do have to guard against stagnation and complacency. All Christians have to fight against the syndrome of “sitting on the premises” rather than “standing on the promises.” There is an inverse kind of deadly pride inherent in statements such as “my family built this church” or “I’ve been here for 60 years and like it just the way it is.” It was a wise leader who opined that the last seven words of the church may be “Here’s the way we’ve always done it.”

One stormy blustery afternoon I was guest speaker in our St. John’s, Newfoundland congregation. Frankly, I was delighted to see anyone there. After services, I looked across the room and saw three people huddled around an account box and a ledger. Curious, I walked over to them. They humbly informed me they were gathering a special collection for the Bengali Evangelical Association, a GCI-sponsored mission to some of the poorest people on earth.

The point is that churches have life cycles like other parts of God’s creation. Some cycles are long and some of them are short. After all, where are the churches Paul planted in Greece and Asia Minor? What did Jesus say was the smallest number he would walk up and down among (Revelation 2:1)? “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). As long as a particular congregation reflects the Spirit of God in service to itself and others, in vibrant fellowship and in a reputation for giving and being with people in the deep valleys of their lives, then Christ still lives among them. And is not that the prize all churches seek to embrace?

Neil Earle