FIVE ADVANTAGES OF SMALL CHURCHES

Additional Handout for Ordering a Community Around Evangelism (2)

BRANDON O'BRIEN

For the past thirty years or so, the focus of most literature on local church ministry has been church growth. Whether they offer advice on how to develop a winning vision statement, attract and retain visitors, multiply your small groups, or manage a building campaign, the dominant voices in the most popular ministry literature promise to help you increase attendance in your services and programs. These materials suggest that the small church is somehow deficient, ill-equipped by definition to be stewards of God's great Gospel of grace and redemption. If a small church wants to be better, it has to be bigger.

Frankly, I disagree. I believe that small churches – which, by the way, make up the majority of churches – are uniquely equipped for ministry success in the twenty-first century. In the following paragraphs, I offer five strengths that I believe are inherent in small congregations. These qualities are not limited to small churches only; they can be found in larger churches, too. But smaller churches can better leverage these characteristics for ministry success.

Authenticity

'Authenticity' has become an important American value. Authors James Gilmore and Joseph Pine claim in their best-selling book, Authenticity, that instead of searching for high-quality goods and services, 'people increasingly make purchase decisions based on how real or fake they perceive various offerings.' This consumer value has influenced what people look for in a church. Almost intuitively, church leaders recognise that their church needs to be perceived as authentic if they want people to visit and come back. Spend a few minutes looking at church websites online, and you'll find 'About' pages describing churches as having 'authentic worship', 'authentic community', and 'authentic service.'

These instincts seem to be accurate. A poll at the website ChurchMarketingSucks.com reveals that the number one reason people return to churches after an initial visit is because they deem the church 'authentic.' The next most popular reason is the pastor's preaching. The church's programs only pulled five percent of the vote.

What this means for churches is that authenticity is a consistent factor in a person's choice to join a worshiping community. In his book, Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches that Reach Them, Ed Stetzer writes, 'One hundred percent of churches [we] interviewed, deemed effective at reaching young people by our criteria, hold authenticity as one of their highest values or have a commitment to being authentic.'

At the risk of oversimplifying this complex issue, I offer two statements to get us thinking about what authenticity means for the local church, and why smaller churches are at an advantage for putting it to work.

First, be yourself. My first pastorate was in a tiny country church many miles from the nearest street light. Our music was off-key; my preaching was fair to middling at best. But college students showed up in droves, because they appreciated the unpretentious, 'authentic' community we fostered. If we had tried to 'glam up' the worship service, we would have turned these students away. As Mike Sares, pastor of Scum of the Earth church, says, 'The more glitzy something is, the less people trust it.' The more glitzy, 'professional' worship services at larger churches can turn off some worshipers who are looking for a more authentic worship experience.

Second, make sure your behaviour lines up with your stated convictions. Large churches can struggle with this not because they are less faithful, but simply because their size can be a liability. Churches of all sizes will claim to be a family, but the larger the church, the more likely it is to be run like a business – the worship and programming becomes professionalised, and congregants become less directly involved in the church's ministry. Small churches, on the other hand, more often truly function as a family – with all the blessings and challenges that includes.

Lean and Focused

One reason larger churches can attract attendees from across a region is because they have the resources to offer a little something for everyone. According to the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, megachurches provide 'many ways by which people [can] craft their unique, customised spiritual experience to meet their needs.' Smaller churches often don't have the financial resources or the volunteer pool to run a broad schedule of church programs. Not to worry.

Instead of running a multitude of generic programs, a better use of resources and energy in the small church is to zero in on one or two programs that focus on the unique needs of your local context. A smaller congregation can benefit from learning to value depth over volume. They can channel their limited resources into a smaller number of programs and potentially do these fewer things with greater depth and effectiveness.

Eleven years ago, Edgewater Baptist Church in Chicago felt

called to reach out to its community by meeting a neighbourhood need. There were plenty of needs. The neighbourhood houses a large gay community, is the American home of a large population of Bosnian refugees, and faces the challenges of homelessness. Given the church's size – around 130 members – its leadership realised it needed to focus on only one of these issues. There were already a couple of gay outreach programs in the area and a Bosnian church plant in the neighbourhood, but one important need that wasn't being addressed was a lack of childcare for less affluent neighbours. The children of working parents had nowhere to go after school until the end of the work day.

So Edgewater Baptist started Safeplace, an afterschool program and summer day camp that provides space and time for kids to work on homework, play games, and learn about abstinence, nutrition, and other practical health and safety issues. The church's decision to subsidise tuition demanded that it streamline its programming, but Safeplace is now Edgewater Baptist's single major ministry. And their commitment has paid off: over 120 kids regularly attend Safeplace during the school year, and even more attend the summer day camp.

If several of your church members work at a nearby school and feel compelled to ensure the quality of education for the children in your neighbourhood, perhaps your church's unique ministry could focus on adopting the local school and providing mentors, tutors, and scholarships for extracurricular activities. If a majority of your congregation works at the local mill, perhaps your church should consider providing whatever support is necessary and unique to the people in that profession. The possibilities are as unique and endless as the neighbourhoods we live in, our church's gifts, and the families we want to reach for Christ.

People-Powered

If a small church limits the number of programs it runs, then the lion's share of the church's ministry will have to come from its members. One creative way small churches are addressing this challenge is by finding ways to equip their congregants to minister where they are already active during the week. Chances are you have parents in your congregation who are active in the PTA. Perhaps someone is active in prison ministry or in some form of compassion ministry to the homeless or dispossessed. Rather than pressuring church members to turn all their gifts and service churchward, some small-church pastors are learning that their ministry has a greater impact in its community when they equip and encourage their people to keep serving where they are already active.

Empowering and releasing members to minister in the community requires that you know your congregants well enough to know what they are passionate about, gifted for, and already involved in. In other words, this strategy for ministry plays to one inherent strength of the smaller congregation – the pastor often knows his or her flock intimately and can more directly help congregants discover how to turn their regular responsibilities and unique giftedness into ministry opportunities.

Intergenerational Relationships

The statistics are sobering: Some commentators project that nearly 80 percent of young people who grow up in church and youth programming end up leaving the church by the time they reach college. Sociologist Christian Smith says that the reasons teens give for leaving aren't dramatic. 'Many cannot explain their disengagement from religion,' he explains. 'Many seem simply to have drifted.' Thom and Sam Rainer state the matter more succinctly: 'Churchgoing students drop out of the church because it is not essential to their lives.'

Fortunately, there is hope. In her research through the Fuller Youth Institute, Kara Powell has discovered a common denominator among young adults who continue to make the local church a vital part of their lives. Students who actively seek a church home after high school are those who have had meaningful relationships with other adults in the church besides their parents. Those who had been given opportunities to serve younger children in the church were also more likely to view the church as important to their lives. In other words, intergenerational relationships within the church are an important factor in making sure young people keep the faith.

Small churches may feel the weight of this topic even more heavily than larger ones. Even as I write this, there are families in our church that are considering leaving because our children's and youth programs don't appeal to their kids. But some small churches have discovered that the solution to the generation problem may be counter-intuitive; instead of providing more exciting age-specific ministries, they find hope by bringing the generations together. Whether in the worship service, Sunday school, or through service projects, these churches look for ways to develop relationships across generational lines. And for this effort, the smaller the church the better! In large congregations, the generations have few opportunities to intermingle; in smaller churches, opportunities abound.

Ministry on the Margins

According to the Hartford research referenced above, the largest churches attract a fairly well-defined demographic. The average age of a megachurch attendee is 40. Nearly a third of them are single and, on the whole, the megachurch crowd is more educated and wealthier than the average members of smaller churches. In terms of distribution, there tend to be more megachurches in

suburban rather than in urban or rural areas.

But which churches are reaching the people who fall outside this demographic and location? Small churches. Some pastors, including megachurch pastor Dave Gibbons, are finding that smaller churches can become an integral part of the local fabric of their communities and reach the people on the margins who often are not attracted to larger congregations. Dave was leading an ever-growing mega-ministry in the Los Angeles area when he felt a clear call from God to minister to the down-and-out and overlooked. At the core of his change of heart was a radical realisation: For his calling to reach people on the margins, size was a liability. So instead of continuing to grow his church into an ever-larger megachurch, the congregation now expands its ministry reach by planting small churches worldwide. Dave calls these congregations of between 30 and 300 people 'verges,' because they are 'a convergence of the best features of a small and a large church.' They provide the critical mass necessary to remain energetic about mission, but they are intimate enough to be conducive to authentic community.

For Dave, smaller, nimbler congregations are the only way to reach the margins. In fact, he believes that congregations of 300 and smaller are 'going to be the most effective in many places around the world.' He doesn't think 'bigness is going to fit most people or most cultural contexts where the church needs to grow.'

Recognising these qualities of small churches as strategic advantages may require rethinking ministry success. None of them is guaranteed to grow a church numerically (nothing is, in fact), but fostering the authenticity that comes more naturally to your smaller church will make your church a safe place for the disillusioned. Streamlining programming and fostering people-powered ministry can make your smaller church a more integral, visible part of the local community. Intergenerational relationships can increase the percentage of youth who persevere in the faith, and ministry to people on the margins extends the gospel to populations that other bigger churches fail to reach. These efforts may not be as glamorous as church growth strategies. But they will equip us to participate in Kingdom growth – to watch how God can take our mustard seed and turn it into great harvest for his glory.

Brandon O'Brien is editor at large for Leadership journal and a writer for their popular blog, Out of Ur. Brandon served as pastor of two small congregations right out of college and is now a doctoral student in Christian History at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Learn more from Brandon at his blog and in his book, The Strategically Small Church.