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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle E. Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - www.TheParishPaper.com

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Keys to Growing a Small Church

Small churches *can* grow. A recent national study found that 15 percent of small churches—those with fewer than 125 attendees—grew in worship attendance over a five-year period.¹ However, too many small congregations are like lockboxes that constrain the current size; this lockdown eventually leads to decline.

While increasing percentages of people are attending megachurches, fewer than 2 percent of all congregations attract more than 1,000 weekly worshipers. Small churches are the most common type dotting the American landscape. The nature of these churches is complex, with a more diverse profile than larger churches. They exhibit unique leadership arrangements, member relationships, contextual pressures, and growth barriers. These features make pastoral and lay leadership more challenging because one-size-fits-all strategies do not fit all small churches.²

Size-Specific Methods

Some church-growth principles are applicable to congregations of all sizes. However, size is the most significant single factor in designing effective approaches. These steps highlight how smaller churches can become bigger churches.

Step 1—Increase the church's visibility. Church-growth methods should be consistent with the congregation's biblical understanding and theology, but methods are not the same thing as theology. Methods are simply strategies. Ultimately, the message to newcomers and the community is always: we are located here, we care about you, and we welcome you. Hundreds of high-tech and low-tech tactics help spread that message.

High-tech efforts. An electronic presence enables a small church to create a billboard as large as any megachurch. New forms of social media multiply the ways to advertise for free or with minimal expense. Every small church needs a basic website and Facebook page. For help, consult *Web-Empowered Ministry: Connecting with People through Websites, Social Media, and More*, by Mark Stephenson (Abingdon Press, 2011).

Low-tech efforts. The church building and facilities need to be highly visible to foot and auto traffic by: readable and lighted signage; greeters in the parking lot and outside all entrances before and after services; attractive church exterior seasonal signs, banners, or displays; and well-kept landscaping. If the church is nestled in an area with little traffic, post directional signs at nearby major intersections.

Aggressively advertise through low-cost approaches such as windshield fliers, direct mail to all households within a designated radius around the church, ads in free community newspapers, and posts on community bulletin boards (like grocery stores or gyms). Some churches distribute yard signs for members to display, while others give gift cards for a cup of coffee at a local shop.

Members can attend community events as a group wearing hats or t-shirts bearing the church logo. If parade, walk, or run routes pass by the church, consider organizing volunteers to hand participants cups of water or other refreshments. Many churches



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host a free event once or twice a year to get to know others in the community. Above all, look for opportunities to share church facilities with community groups.

Step 2—Increase the number of worship visitors and visitors to other congregational activities. People cannot visit your church if they do not know it exists, but knowing it exists does not automatically lead to new visitors. Today's small-membership church leaders should target a fifteen-mile radius or more around their congregation for outreach.

Younger people and new residents may do Internet research before visiting a congregation. However, the majority of people visit a congregation for the first time because someone personally invited them. Why do people return? First-time worship visitors say it is because they get a warm welcome from other attendees, enjoy the sermon message, and like the overall worship service experience.³

Growing churches of all sizes need to follow-up with their visitors. The most effective people for personal contacts are new members who joined in the past five years or members who joined during the tenure of the present pastor.

Churches attract first-time visitors of several varieties. People with an active church relationship can become members as *transfers* (those moving their membership from another congregation of the same denomination) or as *switchers* (those who move their membership from a church of a different denomination). Another visitor variety is people with a dormant active church relationship (*returnees*) or *first-timers*. The varied faith background of potential visitors calls for more diverse methods to ensure more results.

Step 3—Customize methods for your community. Glen Daman in *Shepherding the Small Church*⁴ suggests that knowing the predominate community values steers leaders to strategies and programs that work in context. How would you describe your community?

- Active vs. sedentary: Are people's lifestyles filled with activities or do they spend their leisure time indoors? If active, be represented at sports and outdoor events. If sedentary, use windshield flyers or free newspaper ads.
- Family- vs. career-focused: Do people form goals based on their careers or on their family relationships? If family-focused, host a family picnic or offer daycare for a Parent's Day/Night Out. If career-focused, offer evening programs.

- Stable population vs. mobile population: Does the population exhibit a high turnover rate, or is it generally stable? What factors contribute to the turnover rate? If the population is stable, reach out through family and friend networks. If the population is mobile, invest in an electronic presence and direct mail.

Step 4—Build on the unique strengths of small churches. Small churches excel at nurturing members' spiritual growth and training young people to become future church leaders. The best small churches know how to help newcomers feel a strong sense of belonging. To produce the needed changes for growth, do so by addition rather than by subtraction. For example, start new groups and ministries for eighteen- to forty-four-year-olds. Look for ways to change the single-cell church, which operates like one small group where everyone knows everyone else, to a multiple-cell church. The latter adds its sense of mission, leadership, tradition, and location as bonding agents. Also, see *Small Membership Congregations* (http://www.centerforcongregations.org/system/files/Small_Membership_Congregations.pdf).

Step 5—Become a learning congregation. Try new strategies and evaluate them. Learn from what does not work. Rework your methods and try again.

The Bottom Line

Anthony Pappas has said that a small church is like a loaf of French bread. The aroma and taste are great, but what a thick crust it has! Small churches are tough!⁵ Read the above paragraphs with the church's leadership group. Underline the phrases that you feel are true of your church right now and the methods worth considering. What are the next steps to break open your small church?

1. U.S. Congregational Life Survey (www.uscongregations.org).
2. Download the free resource, *Church Effectiveness Nugget, Vol. 14: 25 Turnaround Strategies for Small-Membership Congregations* (www.TheParishPaper.com).
3. U.S. Congregational Life Survey (www.uscongregations.org).
4. Glenn Daman, *Shepherding the Small Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 34-36.
5. Anthony G. Pappas, ed. *Inside the Small Church* (Herndon, VA: Alban, 2002), 125.