

FIELD-TESTED PRINCIPLES
FOR LEADING A HEALTHY
CONGREGATION OF UNDER 250



**SMALL
CHURCH
ESSENTIALS**

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Chapter 2

Embracing the Small Church without Settling

Several years ago at my church's annual denominational conference, I was listening to the leader give his state of the denomination talk. As part of his assessment, he cited statistics that I had heard many times before. I've come to learn they are surprisingly universal across denominational lines and geographical regions.

"Over 90 percent of our churches are under 200 in weekly attendance," he told us. "And 80 percent are under 100."

He continued to speak, but my mind drifted as questions surfaced: What if that's *not* a problem? What if when Jesus said "I will build my church" what He had in mind wasn't a bunch of pastors wringing their hands because their congregation isn't as big as someone else's congregation? What if Jesus' idea was for churches of all sizes to work together, with mega, big, small, and house churches each contributing something special to the whole?

What if by trying to fix a problem that isn't a problem, we're actually working against a strategy that God wants us to enact? A strategy that sees our small churches as a vital tool to be used, not a problem to be fixed?

Instead, in the last generation or two, we've made big- and megachurches the standard, one that most churches will never reach and one, I believe, many of us aren't *supposed* to reach because we're called to small.

There's nothing wrong with big- and megachurches; I'm grateful for them. How can we not celebrate it when 2,000 to 20,000 people gather in one church to worship Jesus? That's fantastic! But it's also cause for celebration when 2,000 to 20,000 people are worshipping Jesus across 20, 200, or more different churches in groups of 500, 200, 50, and 10. Jesus has been building His church for two thousand years using all kinds of people, all types of methods, all styles and sizes of churches.

Great churches don't happen by mistake. No matter what size they are. They take prayer, planning, hard work, cooperation, and the calling of God. But no church can be a great church if they don't *know* they can be a great church. Too many small churches and their pastors are laboring under a false impression—a lie, really—that their church can't be great until it becomes bigger. We need to put that lie to rest, starting in the heart and ministry of every pastor of every small church.

A LOT OF CHURCHES ARE SMALL—SO WHAT?

Since the church I pastored (and still pastor) was well under 250 when I heard the message of that denominational leader, I knew

the expected response to the statistic should be “Our church is small too. Oh no!” But something inside me broke that day.

Instead I thought “So what?!” So what if our church is small? So what if we’re one of my denomination’s 90 percent? So what if half the people in our denomination are attending small congregations instead of big ones? If they’re doing good, outreaching, Jesus-honoring, kingdom work, *so what if they’re small?*

As I’ve come to learn since then, the percentage of small to large churches says absolutely nothing about the spiritual temperature of the churches in any denomination or geographical region. If a group of churches are in a state of growth and impact, it will include the planting of new churches that are almost all going to be small. So, when the spiritual health of a region or denomination is growing, there are more small churches popping up, keeping the percentage of small churches high.

On the other hand, if a group of churches are in an unhealthy state, the existing churches will be declining in size, so the number of small churches increases that way. Either way, whether we’re doing well or doing poorly, there will always be a lot of small churches. We need new ways to look at church health and growth—ways that include, but are not limited to, numerical, people-in-the-seats growth; ways that measure health, vitality, outreach, and more.

For months after that denominational conference, the question “our church is small, so what?” kept nagging me. I knew that moving from “oh no!” to “so what?” was just a first step to an important, perhaps life- and ministry-altering destination. “So what?” is not an answer. Alone it’s a rebellious spit-

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ball from the back of the class. If it doesn't lead somewhere better, it's an annoyance at best, cynicism at worst.

Then, one day, something shifted. We were working on an upcoming church event, dealing with all the small church issues of trying to do more with less, when it hit me. Instead of asking, “Our church is small, *so* what?” we needed to ask, “Our church is small, *now* what?”

We're not a big church. We don't have the resources they have. We can't do what they can do. But what can we do *now* with the resources we have *now*? Is that even a thing? As it turns out, it is. There's a lot of ministry that can be done by churches while we're small. Including a few things that can be done better because we're small.

Those mental, emotional, and spiritual leaps from “oh no!” to “so what?” to “now what?” became the starter steps of one the hardest, but most important journeys of my life. They can be for you too.

Pause right now and ask yourself that question: “Our church is small, *now* what?” How would your ministry, your church, your *life* change if you could jump from “oh no!” to “now what?”

Let's start answering this new question together, beginning with what small and healthy churches look like.

TYPES OF HEALTHY CHURCHES AND WHY THEY STAY SMALL

Church growth advocates say “we need to increase our sending capacity, not just our seating capacity.” That’s a great idea! Let’s take it one step further. Consider, instead, taking that admonition so seriously that we sacrifice our seating capacity *in favor* of our sending capacity. Yes, sometimes we have to choose one over the other.

In fact, there are a number of churches that are healthy and stay small, either by design or as a result of the kind of work they’re called to do. Here are a few examples:

PLANTING CHURCHES

Like spiritual Johnny Appleseeds, some churches have discovered their mission is to put their growth energy into planting more small congregations instead of growing bigger ones.

TRAINING CHURCHES

Small churches are well-suited to be hands-on training centers, including the church I pastor. During some school years, up to one-third of our church attendance can be college students. We offer internships during which college students from all over the world get to interact with every aspect of the church body.

HOUSE CHURCHES

House churches are a valid, but often overlooked expression of the body of Christ. They are likely to multiply in the coming decades as people grow discouraged with the corporate approach to church and desire to disengage themselves from church mortgages, denominations, and staff salaries.

RETIREMENT COMMUNITY CHURCHES

I have a friend who has been pastoring a wonderful, healthy church in a retirement community for more than twenty-five years. Every year, he performs funerals for 20 percent of his congregation, so he has to maintain 20 percent growth just to keep his attendance level. In any other circumstance, 20 percent growth annually for over two decades would get you noticed. In his case, he has had to overcome unwarranted feelings of failure.

NICHE CHURCHES

I'm convinced niche churches, like house churches, will be a growing segment in the coming decades, especially in heavily populated areas. Sometimes the niche is ethnic or language based. Sometimes the niche is a group that feels alienated from mainstream society. Often, these niches are so small there will never be enough attendees to build a big church, but they need to hear about Jesus in a way that meets their unique sensibilities and needs.

COUNTERCULTURAL CHURCHES

This may overlap with niche churches, but not always. Big and megachurches often grow large and fast because they use methods that tap into the ethos of a surrounding culture. This is an important part of contextualizing the gospel message, adapting methods to fit the culture while maintaining a message that often remains counter to it. But some churches are planted in cultures where the ground is hard and rocky. Or they're called to be countercultural in their methods, not just their message. For instance, my wife and I visited a church in Bucharest, Romania, several years ago. In this post-communist, hyper-capitalist culture, the church members climb into the sewers and minister to the street kids who were thrown out in the years after the fall of dehumanizing communism. Churches like that don't tap into the culture, they walk in 180-degree opposition to it, and they typically stay smaller because of that.

IMPOVERISHED CHURCHES

The faithful, prayerful, hardworking, and loving people called by God to live and minister in these impoverished communities—usually living at poverty levels themselves—should not be placed under unreasonable expectations of unlikely numerical growth.

PERSECUTED CHURCHES

While many of us are preaching the inevitability of numerical growth, that message is being received by church

leaders in regions of the world where the church is undergoing massive oppression. They want help, but that message is adding to their burden, not relieving it. I've sat with pastors in persecuted churches who have told me heartbreaking stories. Entitled church leaders from well-to-do countries have told them their churches would be bigger if they had more faith or adopted church growth methods. But even a cursory look at their environment would reveal that those methods won't work there. As to not having enough faith, all I could think as I sat in their tiny homes and churches was, "If I had half your faith, I'd be a spiritual giant."

TRANSITIONAL CHURCHES

These churches exist in communities undergoing massive demographic shifts. In these communities, much of the population relocates every year, only to be replaced by a new group of people who are unlikely to stay longer than three to five years. Certainly an influx of new people presents opportunity for a church, but it takes an enormous amount of work to maintain a church's current size, let alone grow numerically, when your community loses so many residents yearly.

STRATEGICALLY SMALL CHURCHES

Some churches are small intentionally, and they play a vital role in the Great Commission. (I'll explore what that means in the chapter "Is Your Small Church Stuck or Strategic?") A missionary to Japan told me about a huge campaign put on by another well-meaning American

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missionary to build a large church on the edge of a Japanese city. The church building has been vacant since it was built, because it doesn't fit the Japanese culture. When a Japanese person becomes a Christian, it may be seen as shaming to their family and culture, so going to a large church building exacerbates this perceived repudiation.

In addition to the types of churches that stay small, there are important reasons why small works for many churches.

The Pastor Is a Shepherd

We all have different gifts. Not all pastors have the administrative gift-mix that is required to lead a church of 400 or 4,000. Few do, actually; I know I don't. If I have to spend more than a couple hours a week on financial and administrative decisions, my spirit starts to shrivel a little.

If you're a shepherd, be a great one and help your small church be a great church. Please remember that shepherding the church doesn't mean doing all the ministry yourself. That's a recipe for a burned-out pastor and an unhealthy church. A shepherding pastor still needs to equip the saints to do the ministry, but the smaller the church, the more hands-on that equipping will be.

The World Needs More Healthy Small Churches

If we didn't have healthy small churches, what would the alternative be? Obviously, no one is proposing that we close them down if they're not hitting certain growth rates. Small churches exist because small churches are needed.

Your Congregation Wants to Be Pastored by Its Pastor

Most healthy big churches work hard at simultaneously growing bigger and growing “smaller,” which happens through small group ministry. Pastors of larger churches need to delegate much or all of the personal pastoral care to under-shepherds, and it’s appropriate that they do so. But some people thrive better in their spiritual lives when they are pastored by their pastor, not a small group leader, and they’re not wrong for needing that.

Many People Won’t Go to a Big Church

Some people prefer their church experience to be small. From the corporate executive who wants to slow down on the weekend, to the parents who prefer keeping their children in an intergenerational environment instead of another divided-by-age classroom, small simply works for them.

This includes longtime churchgoers as well as the un-churched. The idea that everyone is enamored with a bigger room, more people, and high-end production values has never been true. Just as there are people who prefer a local diner to a chain restaurant, there are people who are looking for smaller environments to discover and live out their faith.

I know, when I say not everyone prefers big churches, I’m running the risk of sounding like Yogi Berra, who famously said of a popular restaurant, “Nobody goes there anymore. It’s too crowded.”¹ It’s not that I think big churches are dying or not meeting a need. Obviously, they’re thriving and blessing a lot of people. That’s one of the reasons most big churches got big.

But they're not for everyone. We need to be sure there are quality options for people who prefer a smaller worship experience.

God Might Have a Plan

Everyone in ministry should be in agreement that God's ways are higher than ours, and that the church is His idea. So, while we try our best to discern the smaller details of His will, we need to keep a sense of humility in our strategies. God may have a plan for our church that can only be fulfilled by being small and healthy.

**“GROW IT OR CLOSE IT”
AREN'T THE ONLY OPTIONS**

Many healthy churches remain small and simply need encouragement and resources. Unfortunately, most small church pastors will tell you that they feel like they've been given this ultimatum: grow it or close it.

At times, that pressure seems to come from everywhere—from our congregations, our denominations, and perhaps the toughest critic of all, ourselves.

Because of the common misperception that “all healthy things grow” means numerical increase, many people in ministry don't think a healthy church will stay small. Numerical growth is inevitable, right? If so, any church that *does* stay small mustn't be

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healthy. With that underlying belief, it's no wonder we haven't developed adequate tools to help struggling small churches become healthy small churches. We don't even think it's *possible!*

We live in a culture that is so obsessed with a bigger-is-better mindset that we've allowed it to creep into the body of Christ. This default thinking has prevented many people in ministry from seeing another option: we can help struggling small churches become healthy small churches. I don't mean helping churches become healthy as a stepping-stone to becoming bigger, although it's good if that happens too; I mean becoming healthy as an end in itself.

If many of the churches in the world are small, maybe we don't have a size problem as much as we have a health problem. Imagine if every small church became healthy, strong, and vibrant (as many are already); would being small matter anymore?

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