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Chapter 1

Believe It or Not, You *Will* Pastor a Small Church

There are three realities of pastoral ministry I wish someone had told me about in Bible college.

FACT #1: Most pastoral ministry students will *never* pastor a church larger than 250 people.

FACT #2: Virtually all of us *will* pastor a small church for at least some time in our ministry.

FACT #3: You can pastor a small church well without settling for less.

Look at the class schedules for any ministry training school or seminary. How many of them are telling their ministerial students any of these realities, let alone teaching them the skills needed to pastor a small church? Some? One? None?

Instead, I was taught how to break the 200 barrier, but I was

never taught how to pastor a church *under* 200. I also was never told that this would likely be the way I'd spend most, if not all, my ministry years. Still today, ministry students are taught how to get *through* 200 but not how to pastor well *under* 200.

**FACT #1: MOST OF US WILL
NEVER PASTOR A BIG CHURCH**

According to Carl F. George, “The typical church in North America is small. Half of this continent’s approximately 320,000 Protestant churches run about 80 in weekly attendance.”¹ In addition, George writes that at the 100 mark in attendance, a church has become larger than 60 percent of its peer churches—at 140, 75 percent and at 200, 85 percent.²

So why are we teaching ministry students big-church skills, almost exclusively, when most of those skills may never apply to the majority of their ministry? Instead, we pump small churches up with big-church principles and expectations, most of which apply in only a small percentage of the churches in existence. Then we wonder why so many pastors leave ministry burned out and disillusioned, with damaged churches in their wake.

**FACT #2: VIRTUALLY ALL OF US WILL
PASTOR A SMALL CHURCH FOR A TIME**

George also notes that of the ten Protestant denominations surveyed, 88 percent have a weekly worship attendance (children and adults) under 200, and 95 percent have a weekly attendance under 350.³ In light of the statistics in facts 1 and 2, the odds

are that nearly every lead pastor will spend at least *some* time pastoring a small church.

If you're a ministry student, you may be convinced you'll be the exception to this rule. I knew I would be. But, even if you expect to build a church to megasize, almost no one will be asked to pastor a big church as a first position in ministry. Maybe you'll go to an existing small church, and it will grow to mega. Maybe you'll be a church planter and oversee its huge growth. Even then, here's the reality: before it becomes big, it will be small.

Many of us are convinced we're great speakers and leaders. We have revolutionary ideas no one has ever heard of before. We have faith to move mountains.

But what if . . . ?

What if God's plans for our ministry are different than our plans? What if He wants to use us in the service of a smaller congregation? Can we be okay accepting God's will, if that's what His will is? And if a lifetime of small church ministry is possible, even likely, shouldn't we spend time preparing for it?

FACT #3: YOU CAN PASTOR A SMALL CHURCH WELL WITHOUT SETTLING FOR LESS

Recognizing the universality of small church ministry is not a defeatist attitude or a lack of faith. Far from it. When you recognize, embrace, and passionately fulfill God's call on your life to pastor a small church, you will find it to be a profound privilege and blessing—to you, to the people you pastor, and to the community your church ministers in.

It's not settling. It's not missing out. It's not less than . . . if we don't let it be.

Let's stop acting like we're embarrassed by all the small churches in the world. Maybe there are so many small churches

because they're God's idea, not our failure. Instead of making pastors feel guilty that they didn't "make it" when they pastor a small church, let's help them do it well—and passionately.

Maybe there are so many small churches because they're God's idea, not our failure.

It's time to embrace the wonder of the ministry God has called most of us to do.

WHY TALK ABOUT NUMBERS?

Given that this book is about small churches, and the subtitle is "Field-Tested Principles for Leading a Healthy Congregation of Under 250," there are several questions I'll address up front.

1. What constitutes a small church?
2. Why is this book about churches under 250, not 200?
3. What baseline are you using for your statistical analysis?
4. Why use the term "small church"? Isn't it insulting?
5. Aren't we dividing the body of Christ even further by distinguishing churches by size?

First, when we talk about small churches, we're referring to a congregation of Christians that averages under 250 people in its main weekly gathering. We use average attendance instead of official membership, since membership varies wildly by congregational polity, including churches that keep no membership records at all. Plus, average attendance is a better gauge of congregational engagement, and it affects the way a church structures its ministries more than membership does.

Second, this book targets churches under 250 partly because the term "200 barrier" is used in church growth circles so often that putting that number on the cover could leave the impression that this is another church growth book. Church growth books are great, but this isn't that. Also, the 200 barrier is fluid. Some churches hit the "barrier" at 150, some don't hit it until 300. By using 250 as our maximum number, we're including churches of 10, 50, and 100, plus churches that are nudging up against becoming a medium-sized church, but aren't quite operating under big church principles yet.

Third, unless otherwise mentioned, statistics are based on Protestant churches in the United States. Not because they're more important than other churches or other parts of the world, but because they have undergone the most study, and therefore have the most reliable statistics currently available to the general public.

One of the hopes I have for the church is that we will stop having such a narrow focus and do more to include churches of all sizes, denominations, ethnicities, and countries in our teaching, resourcing, and demographic analyses. But for now, we'll cite the stats that are available.

Fourth, I've embraced the term "small church" because, unlike other terms like "normal-sized," "family-sized," "bistro," and so on, small church is simple and requires almost no explanation. And small is not an insulting term if we don't let it be, so I've decided to reclaim it. It's hard to convince people that small churches can be great churches if we avoid the term.

Finally, we're not making a division between big and small churches, we're just acknowledging their differences. Acting as if there are no differences isn't unity, it's denial. The size of a church is a huge factor in knowing how it operates, how it ministers, the kinds of people it's likely to reach, the way its members will be disciplined, and the kinds of pastoral gifts and skills needed to lead it.

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 worshiping 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-

Instead of asking, “Our church is small, so what?” we needed to ask, “Our church is small, now what?”

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

SMALL CHURCH ESSENTIALS

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 unchurched. 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?