

THE BIG NEWS ON SMALL CHURCHES: RE-EVALUATING THE CONTRIBUTION OF SMALL CHURCHES TO THE FULFILLMENT OF THE GREAT COMMISSION

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Abstract

Although many small churches are declining, research presented in this article suggests that on almost every measure of vitality or effectiveness (including newcomers), smaller churches are doing as well, if not better, than larger churches. Of particular note is that people in smaller congregations tend to find it easier to make friends in the congregation and are more likely to seek to make new arrivals welcome. Indeed, small churches may have a number of strategic advantages that are discussed and identified as ways smaller churches can make a significant contribution to the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

INTRODUCTION

Most churches are small. The Faith Communities Today national study of churches in 2010 identified that 9 million people attended 177,000 small churches with an average attendance of 7–99, representing 59% of all U.S. Protestant churches.¹

¹ http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html.

The Church Growth Movement, and the thinking that has evolved from it, has rightly highlighted the principle that local churches should grow. The fulfillment of the Great Commission demands that there be a growing number of churches with a growing number of Christ followers. However, the emphasis on measuring church growth has been criticized from a number of different perspectives.² One criticism has been that it implies that small churches, which are usually not growing numerically, are somehow inferior to larger churches, *because* they have not grown into larger churches.

In a reaction to this perception, small church pastor and writer Karl Vaters identifies what he calls “the grasshopper myth.”³ When the people of Israel gazed into the Promised Land, they remarked, “All the people we saw were of great size... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them” (Numbers 13:32–33). Vaters argues that many small churches and pastors struggle with this “grasshopper myth.” He documents his own journey into wandering, whining, and placing blame before he finally arrived at the place where he was willing to accept his call to be a small church pastor.

In response to questions about the contribution of small churches to the fulfillment of the Great Commission, this article will report some Australian research on small church vitality and effectiveness. Based on this research, it will make some suggestions on how smaller churches can make their greatest contribution to the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

RESEARCH INTO SMALL CHURCH VITALITY

As far back as 1997, based on the findings of the Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS),⁴ Kaldor et al. identified that congregational size appeared unrelated to a congregation’s vitality.⁵ Size did not appear to be statistically related to levels of growth in faith, willingness to discuss faith with others, invite others to church, or involvement in the wider community. In the U.S. context, Woolever and Bruce also identified that small churches scored better than mid-size or large churches in five of their ten “strengths.”⁶

² Elmer L. Towns, Gary McIntosh, and Paul E. Engle, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 23.

³ Karl Vaters, *The Grasshopper Myth: Big Churches, Small Churches, and the Small Thinking That Divides Us* (Fountain Valley: New Small Church, 2012).

⁴ The Australian National Church Life Survey is conducted every four years and involves about 300,000 participants from 7000 churches and 19 denominations: <http://www.ncls.org.au/>.

⁵ Peter Kaldor et al., *Shaping Our Future: Characteristics of Vital Congregations* (Adelaide: Openbook, 1997), 75.

⁶ Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of US Congregations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 135.

Crossover (a department of the Baptist Union of Australia) and Maleny College, the Baptist seminary in Queensland, Australia, commissioned the NCLS to undertake more detailed and specific quantitative analysis of the vitality and effectiveness of smaller Australian Baptist churches.⁷ The NCLS was asked to check the correlations between church size and a range of other factors measured by the national survey in 2011.

The research showed that church size was positively correlated with the following:

- Church growth (moderate correlation). *Interpretation: Larger churches are more likely to be growing percentage wise.*
- The proportion of “switchers” (people who have switched from another church) in the church (weak correlation). *Interpretation: Larger churches tend to have more switchers.*
- Young adult retention (weak correlation). *Interpretation: Larger churches had a lower age profile and a higher youth retention.*
- The proportion of attenders who strongly agreed that leaders keep the church focused on connecting with the wider community (weak correlation). *Interpretation: Churches where leaders are more strongly focused on the wider community tend to be larger.*
- The proportion of attenders who agreed that leaders are strongly focused on future directions (weak correlation). *Interpretation: Churches where leaders are more strongly focused on future directions tend to be larger.*
- The proportion of attenders who agreed that the congregation has good and clear systems for how it operates (weak correlation). *Interpretation: Larger churches have better and clearer systems.*

Church size was negatively correlated with the following:

- The proportion of attenders who agreed that they have found it easy to make friends in the congregation (moderate correlation). *Interpretation: Larger churches tend to have fewer people saying it was easy to make friends.*
- The proportion of attenders who always or mostly seek to make new arrivals welcome (strong correlation). *Interpretation: Larger churches tend to have fewer people saying they welcome new arrivals.*
- The proportion of attenders who experienced strong and growing belonging (weak correlation). *Interpretation: Larger churches tend to have fewer people saying they have a strong and growing sense of belonging.*

⁷ M. Pepper, S. Sterland, and R. Powell, *Relationships Between Church Size and Church Vitality for Baptist Churches (NCLS Commissioned Report)* (Sydney: NCLS Research, Australian Catholic University, 2015). The dataset was 261 Baptist churches that returned at least 10 forms, which met standard sampling adequacy criteria, and for which there was complete data on all variables.

- The proportion of attenders in a leadership role (moderate correlation). *Interpretation: Larger churches tend to have fewer people in a leadership role.*
- The proportion of attenders who felt that leaders encouraged them to use their gifts and skills to a great or some extent (moderate correlation). *Interpretation: Larger churches tend to have fewer people saying they felt their gifts and skills were being used.*
- The proportion of attenders who strongly agreed that they have a strong sense of belonging to the denomination (weak correlation). *Interpretation: Larger churches tend to have fewer people saying they have a strong and growing belonging to the denomination.*

Church size did not correlate significantly with the following:

- The proportion of newcomers (people who had joined the church in the last five years and had not previously been attending church) in the church
- The length of time the church had existed
- The proportion of attenders who attended most weeks or more often
- The proportion of attenders who participated in group activities
- The proportion of attenders who had invited someone to church in the previous year
- The proportion of attenders who were certain or very likely to follow up a drifter
- The proportion of attenders who regularly gave 5% or more of their net income to the church
- The proportion of attenders who agreed that the congregation is always ready to try something new
- The proportion of attenders who agreed that leaders inspire them to action
- The proportion of attenders who agreed that leaders communicate clearly and openly
- The proportion of attenders who agreed that leaders encourage innovation and creative thinking
- The proportion of attenders who agreed that leaders help the congregation build on its strengths

These findings demonstrate that larger churches are more likely to be growing numerically, but they do so primarily through gaining “switchers” from other churches and by retaining their young adults. This is probably explained by the fact that because of their greater size, they are able to offer more and better ministries that are attractive for Christians, especially young adults. In other words, larger churches get larger because they are larger. In terms of “conversion growth,” though, they are no more effective than smaller churches.

Larger churches are better at some things. Leaders in larger churches keep their church more focused on connecting with the wider community

and on future directions. Larger churches also have better and clearer systems for how they operate compared to smaller churches. These are necessary because of their greater size.

However, on almost every other measure of vitality or effectiveness (including newcomers), smaller churches are doing as well, if not better, than larger churches. People in smaller congregations tend to find it easier to make friends in the congregation, are more likely to seek to make new arrivals welcome (strong correlation), experience a stronger sense of belonging to their congregation and their denomination, are more likely to be in a leadership role, and feel that leaders encourage them to use their gifts and skills to a greater extent than their brothers and sisters in larger churches.

We can conclude that in terms of friendliness, making new people feel welcome, creating a sense of belonging, and offering levels of involvement in ministry leadership, smaller churches are actually *superior* to larger churches.⁸ These findings lend weight to a growing awareness that small churches are not just big churches that need to grow up but are a unique and potent force. The church is the bride of Christ—even the smallest local manifestation of it. Small churches are being urged to realize that smallness is not a problem to be fixed but a strategic advantage God wants to use.

STRATEGIC ADVANTAGES OF THE SMALL CHURCH

IN FULFILLING THE GREAT COMMISSION

So, given that even if a congregation is declining numerically, it *may* still be contributing effectively to the fulfillment of the Great Commission, what are the implications for smaller churches? Frazer speaks of *upcycling*, “The upcycling process attempts to redeem vital functions that have become less effective or non-effective due in part to the forms in which they exist.”⁹ In the church context, the first task of consultants and leaders is to identify the elements worth redeeming and deconstruct them to their basic elements and essential functions. So, what are the basic elements and essential functions that offer a competitive advantage for smaller churches?

Leaders of small churches do not need to be told of the special challenges they face because of their size; lack of human and financial resources and loss of young adults to larger congregations are two of the most acute. However, in the sovereign will of God, small churches have unique advantages

⁸ Obviously these conclusions emerge from the Australian context. However, Woolever and Bruce’s work cited above demonstrates that small churches in the U.S have similar qualities to those in Australia.

⁹ Richard J. Frazer, “Upcycling Church: New Hope for Transforming Declining and Plateaued Churches,” *The Great Commission Research Journal* 5, no. 2 (2014): 165.

over larger churches, which mean they can fulfill a unique function in the kingdom of God.

The most obvious advantage that smaller churches have over larger churches is their intimacy. In a larger church, it is possible for two people who have attended the same church for many years to never know each other. For people who have spent all their lives in smaller churches, this possibility seems hard to believe. Large churches may call themselves a family, but “What sort of family is it where you don’t even know most of the people you worship with?”

David Ray writes,

Worship in small churches is a family reunion and more. People of various generations, who behave like an extended family and are connected by accident, choice, or blood come together to worship their heavenly Parent, identify who is present and absent, exchange greetings and regrets, receive and pass on good news and bad, baptize and confirm, marry and bury, pray and eat, and practice the rituals that tell them whose they are, who they are, where they belong, and what they need to be doing. This familial nature of their worship is one of the distinctive features of small churches.¹⁰

Small groups can go some way to addressing the large church phenomenon of not knowing everyone, and some people actually enjoy the anonymity of a large church. For many people, however, the idea of going to a church on Sunday “where everybody knows your name” is a powerful and attractive notion. Certainly small churches can be cold and unfriendly, but there is something beautiful and attractive about going to a place where you have a meaningful relationship with *all* the others who are gathered.

Brandon O’Brien¹¹ suggests that another advantage that small churches have over larger churches is that they can more easily express authenticity, and authenticity is a highly valued commodity in our contemporary world. In their bestselling book, *Authenticity*,¹² authors James Gilmore and Joseph Pine claim that instead of searching solely for high-quality goods and services, people increasingly make purchase decisions based on how real or fake they perceive something is. You will have noticed how “authentic,” “organic,” and “natural” are important marketing terms these days. Related to this is the appeal of all things “vintage.” People prefer to listen to the hiss of a vinyl LP rather than high fidelity recordings. Many people will pay more for blue jeans that are old, torn, and faded, because they look authentically broken in.

¹⁰ David R. Ray, *The Big Small Church Book* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1992), 61.

¹¹ Brandon J. O’Brien, *The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, Effective* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2010), 59.

¹² James Gilmore and Joseph Pine, *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press), 2007.

Certainly, churches of all sizes can express authenticity, but it is *easier* for a small church. Larger churches, because of their more abundant resources, are able to be excellent; high standard music, children's ministry, glossy brochures, and so on, all contribute to a quality experience for church attenders. However, excellence can also come across as "slick," and for a growing number of people, "slick" is not as attractive as "authentic." Small churches usually struggle for excellence, but they have an abundance of authenticity exactly for this reason. The music might not be the latest, the musicians are few and not always on key, the building is old and small, the coffee is instant, and the car parking limited. This "earthiness" is the beauty of the small church. It may not be perfect, but it is the "real thing."

Another strategic advantage of the small church is its ability to offer all-age worship. In its mandate to provide excellence, the larger church loses its ability to do worship which involves young people. In small churches in which I have been involved, children have played in the band (even when they are not very good), done the Bible reading, collected the offering, been involved in the sermon, and come to the front for a children's story each week. Because of the logistics, and the commitment to excellence, one does not see this in a larger church. Instead, in order to provide quality, age-appropriate ministry, children and youth tend to be separated from the other members of the congregation at some stage in the service. However, because of smaller numbers, this approach is often not possible for smaller churches. Many are not able to offer any more than a combined, all-age children's class and possibly something for the teenagers. This limitation also offers a unique opportunity for the small church to be an authentic (there is that word again), all-age community where different ages are not separated but are "forced" together. The inability to provide age-specific ministry to children and youth is not something to be lamented but something to be celebrated. In our increasingly fragmented society, the small church is a witness to the power of the gospel to produce ethnically and age-diverse communities where people set aside their own preferences for the sake of relational coherence. Further, "People often grow more in intergenerational environments. That's why God created families."¹³

The physical location of many small urban churches also provides a strategic advantage. McMahan demonstrates, "Few ministry contexts afford as much opportunity to impact the world for Christ with an efficiency and a power as that of urban ministry."¹⁴ Several factors that change the receptivity of a population toward the gospel are especially significant to the urban

¹³ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2009), 108.

¹⁴ Alan McMahan, "The Strategic Nature of Urban Ministry," *The Great Commission Research Journal* 7, no. 1 (2015).

context, including migration. The inner city thus becomes fertile ground for the spread of the gospel if it can be presented in terms that make sense and meet needs.

Larger churches tend to be located in suburban areas.¹⁵ They are often located away from the centers of cities because of the cost of land closer to the central business district. In contrast, many smaller churches are located in interurban locations. Often, they were larger churches that have been negatively impacted by demographic changes. However, although numerically small, their location provides them with the unique opportunity to take advantage of the increased level of receptivity for the gospel that many city dwellers experience. Small urban churches are uniquely positioned to reach migrants through ministries such as English conversation classes.¹⁶

Another unlikely advantage of the small church is its vulnerability.¹⁷ With scant resources and fewer people to support a budget, small churches are inherently vulnerable. However, as sociologist Brené Brown has pointed out,¹⁸ vulnerability is not a bad trait to have. In vulnerability lies great strength. “Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity.”¹⁹ Those who minister in small churches know this vulnerability and the hidden strengths that it brings. Vulnerability helps us identify with the poor and needy. It helps us understand the vulnerability of Jesus and our dependence on God and one another. Vulnerability helps make us faithful.

The limited financial and human resources of smaller churches provide another potential advantage—simplicity. People are hungry for simple because the world has become so complex.²⁰ Information technology has not simplified our lives but the exact opposite. Apple and Google have been successful businesses because they have made their products simple. Even their graphic design reflects this simplicity.

¹⁵ Carl S. Dudley and David A. Roozen, “Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today,” *Hartford Institute for Religion Research* (2001).

¹⁶ Mark Woodward, “Teaching English as a Tool of Evangelism,” *Journal of Applied Missiology* 4, no. 1 (1993).

¹⁷ Lisa G. Fischbeck, “The Strength and Beauty of Small Churches,” Faith and Leadership, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/lisa-g-fischbeck-strength-and-beauty-small-churches>.

¹⁸ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (London: Penguin, 2012).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁰ Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God’s Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 8.

Larger churches can be mind-bogglingly complex because of the range of programs they offer. Smaller churches, in contrast, can be beautifully simple. Sometimes the lack of resources means that the only “ministry” a small church can run is the Sunday morning worship service. Often this can be seen as negative, but it can be equally seen as empowering. Ministry becomes something that individuals do as they evangelize at work, disciple the young person from church at lunchtime, and serve at the local soccer club on the weekends, rather than a program to participate in at the church.

Reggie McNeil talks about changing the scorecard for the church.²¹ A scorecard determines what gets rewarded and what gets done. Since the advent of the Church Growth Movement, churches have focused on measuring things like church attendance and giving as a way of measuring how successful churches are. According to this scorecard, most small churches fail. What if we change the scorecard from counting participation in programs to growth in disciples? Participation does not ensure maturation. People do not grow just by attending programs, but sometimes that is all we measure. If small churches can set themselves free from the numerical growth scorecard, they can be free to “deprogram” themselves and focus on discipleship and its measurement.

David Ray points out that a person can meditate alone. A person alone in a crowd can be entertained, informed, and inspired. On the other hand, a person can only fully worship and be edified by actively participating in worship with a Christian community, and a Christian community is a group of Christians who know and care about one another. The small church can create this disciple-growing community as well, if not better, than the larger church.

The church growth goal, in response to the Great Commission, is “to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and to persuade people to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church.”²² As Arn helpfully points out, there is a distinction between “evangelism” and “disciple-making.”²³ Evangelism “success” is achieved when a verbal response is given by a non-Christian, which indicates their endorsement of a set of convictions reflective of their new Christian faith. Disciple-making “success” is achieved when a change in behavior is observed in a person, which indicates their personal integration of a set of convictions reflective of their new Christian faith. Arn concludes that “disciple-making” more accurately describes what should be our efforts in response to the Great Commis-

²¹ McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*.

²² Donald McGavran and Win Arn, *Ten Steps to Church Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

²³ Charles Arn, “Evangelism or Disciple-Making,” *Great Commission Research Journal* 5, no. 1 (2013): 74.

sion. This is because “when people have no meaningful contact with church members in the process of their conversion, they are likely to feel no meaningful identification with that church after their conversion, and are therefore likely to drop out.”²⁴

Larger churches are sometimes better positioned to succeed in “evangelism,” as Arn defines it. Their larger budgets and human resources means they can run programs and events where non-Christians can give a verbal response to the gospel. However, both large and small churches are equally positioned when it comes to *disciple making*. Their models of disciple making may differ. For example, the larger church is more likely to have disciple-making programs, whereas the smaller church is more likely to operate on an individual level. Both have the potential to be equally successful. Indeed, the more one-on-one nature of disciple making in smaller churches may be advantageous.

CONCLUSION

It may well be that many smaller churches have been falsely condemned by the Church Growth Movement’s emphasis on counting attendance and offerings as the basis of success. The research reported in this article demonstrates that in terms of vitality and Great Commission effectiveness, smaller Baptist churches in Australia are not just on par with larger churches, but in some areas, are actually more effective. The drift of *Christian* switchers from smaller churches to larger churches has disguised this important reality. It is indeed possible that a small church that is fulfilling the Great Commission may, in net terms, not grow numerically.

Still, many small churches are in decline, in which case they may well need to look at turnaround strategies.²⁵ These churches may need to consider looking at new leadership, establishing a new coalition, designing new ministries, and making the hard decisions. The goal of the small church is to be faithful to what it has been called to be, not to blame God for what it is not. Small churches make a mistake if they try to imitate what larger churches do, especially in worship services. They do better if they celebrate their uniqueness and build upon those strengths (to upcycle), rather than try to imitate what bigger churches already do well.

However, the measure of a small church should not be whether it is growing numerically or not. Certainly, small churches should be praying for growth and utilizing the strategic advantages suggested in this article, but attendance numbers are not what it is *all* about. In the sovereign will

²⁴ Flavil Yeakley, “Views of Evangelism,” in *The Pastor’s Church Growth Handbook*, ed. Win Arn (Pasadena: Church Growth Press, 1988), 285.

²⁵ Gary L. McIntosh, “The Impact of Church Age and Size on Turnaround,” *The Great Commission Research Journal* 4, no. 1 (2012): 13.

of God, numerical growth is something that may or may not be granted. Demographic trends, hemorrhaging of young adults to larger churches, and aging facilities may mean that a successful smaller church does not grow numerically. That does not mean it is not contributing, or cannot contribute, to the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

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