



# The Importance of Small Churches

*Healthy small churches provide people with the opportunity to enjoy community and be involved in ministry in a family-type atmosphere.*

—Dennis Bickers

Abraham Lincoln said, “The Lord prefers common-looking people. That’s the reason he made so many of them.” The same might be said of small churches. Although much is written about megachurches, we’re simply a nation of small churches. Approximately two-thirds of all churches in the United States average 100 people or fewer on Sundays. More than 100,000 churches average 50 people or fewer in their Sunday morning attendance.

Small churches can be found in every denomination and among every ethnic group. Some of these are new church plants, while others have been around for 150 years or longer. They are found in the rural countryside, small towns, and large urban areas. Some were once large churches until population shifts, church splits, or something else occurred to cause them to lose their large membership. Others started small and remained that way due to many different factors.

Several years ago denominations began to encourage their churches to grow larger. Resources and programs were developed for the larger churches and for those who wanted to grow larger. Smaller churches were sometimes closed or merged with other churches. Fewer and fewer resources were developed specifically for the smaller church. Some denominations began to require a seminary education prior to a minister being ordained, and smaller churches often found they could not afford a seminary-trained pastor.

# The Healthy Small Church

In more recent years we've seen great interest in the megachurches, such as Willow Creek Community Church, near Chicago, and Saddleback Church, near Los Angeles. Pastors and church leaders flock to leadership conferences hosted by these and other large churches, hoping to find a program or an idea that will help them grow their church into a megachurch. Often these leaders experience more disappointment than growth when they return to their churches.

There's nothing wrong with large churches, of course, but there's also nothing wrong with small churches. Some small churches will never experience great numerical growth, but that doesn't mean they're not important or that they have little to contribute. Small churches contribute much to their membership and communities.

## People Experience Community in Small Churches

I sometimes tell congregations that we should pattern our churches after the theme song from the television program *Cheers*, which spoke of a place where everybody knew your name. Although churches are far removed from bars, people everywhere are looking for that kind of relationship with others. People want to be known, accepted, and loved for who they are. They can often find this acceptance in the smaller church.

Larger churches often promote small groups within the church so their members can have more intimate relationships with others. The small church is already a small group where such relationships can develop. When a person becomes a member of a small congregation, he or she doesn't just join a church—he or she becomes a member of the family.

This community is experienced in many ways. In my pastoral ministry we had a time in the worship service in which people could share their stories of praise and any prayer concerns they might have. In larger churches there isn't time for this type of sharing, but in the small church this is important. Not only did we know about the good things that were happening within our church family, but we also knew some concerns that our congregation was feeling.

Community is experienced in the board meetings and business meetings of the small church. Early in my ministry our board meetings frustrated me. The meeting might last for two hours with no more than 30 minutes of actual business discussed. During the meeting we would talk about how the crops were doing, swap fishing and hunting stories, and reminisce about people and things that happened in the church 40

## *The Importance of Small Churches*

years earlier. I sometimes wondered if we would ever get around to discussing church issues. I later came to understand that small churches are centered on relationships, and these discussions simply came from the relationships these people had with one another. In many cases they were as important as the church items we needed to discuss.

Community is also seen as people talk with one another before and after the worship service. It's a sign of church health when people are in no hurry to leave the church building at the close of the worship service. In a healthy relationship people enjoy being with one another and talking about their lives. A small church offers them the opportunity to do that. The importance of community and how the small church can meet this need are covered in more detail in chapter 9.

### **People Have an Opportunity to Serve and Use Their Gifts**

A large church once called in a consultant to help find out why so few people were joining the church. The consultant asked the pastor how long it would be between when a person joined the church and the time he or she was able to serve in the church in some significant capacity. After considering the question for some time, the pastor answered that it would probably be about 10 years! The consultant identified that as one reason the church was not seeing many people become members.

Studies have proven that people want to join a church in which they can become involved. For two years Thom Ranier conducted a study on formerly unchurched people who joined a church. One of the findings that came out of that study was as follows:

The formerly unchurched deeply desire to be a part of a church that makes a difference. They want to be involved in small groups, Sunday school, and ministry. They want to participate in a church that has clear direction and vision. And they do not mind, indeed they desire, churches that expect them to do ministry for God in the church where they met Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Small churches give everybody the opportunity to serve in the various ministries of the church. In fact, these churches have to be careful that they don't overburden new members with too many responsibilities. I know of one church that tried to talk a new Christian into teaching a Sunday School class within a few weeks of joining the church. Fortunately, the individual understood that he was not prepared to teach a class. However, there were other opportunities for this person to serve within the church, and he has been a very active member of his congregation.

# The Healthy Small Church

## **Small Churches Communicate Quickly When Problems Arise**

Never underestimate the power of the church grapevine. While it obviously can be used in negative ways when people are disgruntled, it can also enable a church to respond very quickly when a member is in need. Many small churches establish prayer chains so that members can pray for one another when needs arise. The church family can be contacted in a very short time with such prayer chains. Needs other than prayer can also be determined at this time and shared with one another. From personal experience I can assure you that it's comforting to know that the entire church family is praying for you when you're going through a difficult challenge.

I recently met with the pastor and members of a small church to discuss some changes they want to make in their church. When I asked them to identify some of the strengths of the church, the first one mentioned was their prayer chain. One lady mentioned that not only were prayer concerns shared with one another, but other issues important to the church and community were also quickly relayed to members of the congregation.

## **People Share Common Experiences**

Members of the small church often share very similar life experiences. Work experience, economic status, education level, racial and cultural background, language, and age may be very similar among members of the small church. It's also not uncommon for many in the smaller church to be connected through marriage. I know some small churches where 50 to 75 percent of the members are related through blood or marriage. This certainly has an impact on the sense of community in the church, and it also may have an impact on the church calendar. Church events are often scheduled around family reunions or other gatherings of the larger families of the congregation.

A small rural church knows that the spring and fall months are not a good time to schedule revival services or other major emphases in the church if many of its members are involved in agriculture. These members will focus on getting their crops into the ground or harvesting the crops during these months. Such churches also know not to schedule anything special during the first few days of hunting season if they want the men involved in the activity.

## **People Are More Important than Programs or Performances**

As stated previously, small-church pastors will often experience great frustration when they return from church growth conferences. While at the conference they may have heard about a program they believe would work very well in their churches. When they return to their churches, however, they find the people much less excited about that program than they are. Typically a church will ask questions about how the program will affect them, the current members. If they perceive that it might affect the sense of community in the church, they're likely to reject it.

Small churches are also more interested in community than in performance. One good example is found in the worship services. Laypeople in these churches often lead congregational singing. Sometimes a layperson cannot read music and may not even be able to carry a tune, but that often doesn't matter to the small church. What does matter is that this person has led the music in that church for 20 years. What matters even more is that when the church kitchen had a fire a few years earlier, he was there every Saturday helping the men rebuild the kitchen, and his family replaced the refrigerator.

## **Community Benefits**

The community surrounding the small church benefits from the presence of the church. In many places the small church still serves as a meeting place for the community. It may serve as a building where people vote in local and national elections. Community youth groups such as scouts or 4-H may use the church building as their meeting place. People in the community often want to be married in the small neighborhood church.

Small churches serve their communities by providing assistance to people in trouble. The church I served helped many people pay rent and utility bills and bought food for people who requested our help. Because of limited resources, we could not help everyone who approached us, but many larger churches have the same limitations.

A few years ago a nearby river overflowed its banks and caused great damage. One small community was particularly hit hard, resulting in many people being homeless and without basic services. A small church in that community immediately became the assistance center. That church's denomination sent disaster relief money to the church. Other area churches provided money and volunteer help.

## The Healthy Small Church

Meals were prepared and served to the residents of that community. Other basic needs were met, and when the river went down, the volunteers helped with the cleanup. That small church doesn't average more than 30 people on Sunday mornings, but it served its community well in a time of great need.

The small church also provides its community with a sense of hope and an awareness of God. Some people may live almost within the shadow of the steeple but never attend the church services. However, the mere presence of the church gives them a sense of strength and hope. The small church makes a powerful statement every time a person passes it. When life begins to crumble around these people, they're often attracted to that small church in their community to see if there are any answers to be found there that can help them. In a healthy small church they'll find those answers and will often find a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

I believe God still uses small churches in big ways. They're important to the kingdom of God because of the impact they can have on the people surrounding them. The challenge is to find ways to help these churches become and remain healthy so they can fulfill the task God has given them. The following chapters will help us find those ways.