

**Hinton
Models for Ministry**

DYNAMICS OF THE SMALL MEMBERSHIP CHURCH

by Steve Burt

Models for Ministry in small membership churches are occasional publications of the Hinton Rural Life Center and demonstrate examples of programs, organization or procedures that have provided effective ministry and mission in small membership church settings. The models are suggestions by which a local church may gain insights for strengthening their own ministry and mission.

**Hinton Rural Life Center
P.O. Box 27
Hayesville, NC 28904
828-389-8336
E-mail: info@hintoncenter.org
Website: hintoncenter.org**

The title of Lyle Schaller's well-known book says *The Small Church Is Different!** And, of course, he is right. Smaller membership churches are different. They work out of a different standard for "success" than larger churches - one that is perhaps better defined as "relational success" rather than program or numerical success. Yet small churches are constantly - and unfairly - compared to their larger program-producing cousins. This indicates a failure to recognize that the small church *is* different.

In my opinion, David Ray may be more accurate: *Small Churches are the Right Size.**

My work with small churches across the country, both as an independent small church consultant and as Director of the Small Church Program at Missouri School of Religion, has shown me that the dynamics, the expectations, and the satisfactions of being in a small church are quite different than in other size churches.

The words that dominate the personal interviews during local church assessments are: "like family," "close knit," "caring," "intimate" - and now, in our technological age, "hi-touch." With such words and feelings rising to the surface, you'd expect people would recognize that a small, single-celled, relational organism, a primary group in which everyone knows everyone or at least knows *about* them, operates differently from a larger, partly-anonymous, multi-celled organization, *which, of course, it does.*

Decision-making

For example, the **decision-making methods** are different in a smaller church. A church with thirty-five at worship, *whether it realizes it or not*, probably uses a consensus model: everyone has a chance to speak, and even one person - if he or she is violently opposed to an idea - can kill the idea, because the group has agreed (either tacitly or openly) to let it be done so. It is different from a unanimous vote in which everyone votes *for* something; in consensus it is a case of everyone agreeing not to vote *against* something. So even though Mrs. Anderson can not be happily *for* an idea, she is willing to say, "If the group wants to it, I'm okay with it," and *she agrees not to say no.*

In a church with ninety at worship it is likely we will see some consensus and more participatory democracy like a New England town meeting, with votes being taken to ascertain clear majorities;

that's when an idea makes it. And in even larger churches we begin to see the rise of representative democracy, with elected officers casting votes--something more akin to the Electoral College system in the United States.

Conflict

There are different consequences to **Conflict** in a smaller church, so it is also handled differently. Larger and more suburban/urban churches are likely to deal with conflict a bit more openly than their smaller and more rural sister churches. Consider this: in a very small town, the small church's membership - *and the networks or circles in which people relate* - may be practically the same as those in the community. So if a person takes sides in a bitter church conflict (siding, for example, with the new minister) *and loses*, the interpersonal dynamics involved may outcast him or her - not only from the church, but from the other circles in which he/she relates to the same people as he/she related to in the church. The new minister can leave, but the ostracized resident has no place to go. (In an urban church the member may choose to attend a different church.) So conflict, because of its personal cost, is dealt with differently. There are other factors affecting the way conflict is handled (members' education levels, business experience, conflict training, etc.) which I will not go into here.

Time

Small churches really do march to the beat of a different drummer. They don't live on *kronos* (chronological) or measured time. They live on *kairos* or "**people time.**" Let me illustrate.

A large church is organized around task and program. Because there are so many interlocking, interdependent schedules, things must run on clock time. The worship service starts promptly at 11 a.m. and is tightly planned and choreographed, as if timed to a metronome. The majority of participants appreciate this orderliness, though visiting small church folks may comment on the congregation's lack of spontaneity. There will be very few detours or departures from schedule. Such adherence to schedule is important if a large church is to function well.

In a small church, however, people come first. Task, program, and accomplishing goals come second. The worship service at our Congregational Church in Maine didn't begin at 10 a.m. It began when 84-year-old Lula Richardson came in, walked to her pew, and prepared to sit. The pastor's unofficial job was to meet, greet, and seat her, helping ease her bony body (she'd had cancer treatments and lost weight) onto the needle pointed cushion someone had made especially for her. That's when the service began! Not at 10:00, but at 9:57 or 10:03. And if Lula wasn't there by five past ten, someone would walk to her house to check on her. (Small churches also take attendance differently, not by numbers but by who's there and who's not.) The small church, you see, operates on "people time."

This "people time" affects *liturgical seasons*, too, as a Missouri woman showed me. Each year their church asked families and groups (choir, women's circle, Sunday School, etc.) to take part in lighting the candles of the Advent wreath. A family/group would come forward the first week, read a scripture, a prayer, and an explanation of the candle's meaning; a family member would light the week's candle. The second week another family or group, and likewise for the third and fourth weeks. Finally, at the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service, the fifth family or group would do the readings and light the fifth candle. It was a meaningful tradition which involved folks.

One year things changed and this woman's church was to join the Methodists for a joint Christmas Candlelight Service. The host church (Methodist) would provide the family/group for the fifth reading and candle lighting. It meant her church's fifth reading/lighting slot would not be filled. A family or group would be cut out of participating.

"What did you do?" I asked. "Simple, really," she said. "*We changed Advent.* Started a week earlier, closer to Thanksgiving. That gave us five Sundays for readings, and all five of our families were accommodated."

I didn't tell her Advent is a fixed liturgical season you can't change. Besides, she knew better. She'd seen it done. Small churches on "people time" *can* change Advent. In our hi-tech/ low touch world, the small church, with its "people time" and its high people concern, offers us a hi-touch environment in which to grow.

Space, Place, and Artifacts

In the smaller church, **space, place, and artifacts** carry a different, relational, weight and are treated differently. One lady in a Methodist church told me she couldn't imagine praying (by that she meant deep, genuine, meaningful prayer) in a pew other than her own. Instead of giving her a song-and-dance logical argument ("But you can pray in a train, in a plane, shucking grain!"), I decided to listen to her. She described the ghosts in the pews around her - the Joneses, the Smiths, the Harts and their eight children, Mr. Shuckman who brought sourball candies for the children. She told me how her now-deceased husband and her now-moved children had sat and fidgeted beside her. She described tragedies and joys that represented sixty-eight years of communing with God in prayer and fellowship. And finally she pointed to the back of the pew in front of her, showing me how the oils from her palms had worn the finish off, even more so in these last years when she relied on that pew back to help her stand up for the hymn-singing. When she finished, I understood. She probably couldn't have prayed the same in just any pew or place.

Space and place may at times blend together with artifacts (objects which become locally "sacred"). In a tiny, one-room "open country" church in the heel of Missouri's boot, the congregation had cut, planed, and fashioned their own pews. But later, when a small stage was built in the pulpit area so they could put on chancel dramas and community plays, they were faced with a dilemma. The stage meant they'd have to remove a couple of the pews. Because they were artifacts that had been lovingly built by the church family, they couldn't put the extras up in someone's barn loft, because they would weather at a different rate. Nor did they dare sell the extra pews. What to do?

Their solution: place the first pew where it ought to be, then the second; for the third simply drop an inch in the spacing; for the fourth drop two inches; for the fifth drop three inches; and so on. In the end every pew fit in. From the minister's vantage point in the pulpit, it looked like railroad tracks coming together in the distance, but they did solve the age old problem of getting people to sit in front - people shuffling into the pews farthest back couldn't even bend their knees to sit down since the spacing was so tight!

Mission and Outreach

Mission and outreach in the small church are often more local and direct, person-to-person, or with the single-celled group responding as one. Our small rural congregation in Maine, discovering that one of the key families had been burned out of their home on Saturday night, stopped the worship

service and responded. Everyone went home, collected food, blankets, clothing, and other necessities, and drove in a caravan of fourteen cars to where the family was staying. The deacons presented a check for the entire \$200 balance in the Deacons' Fund, and everyone gave what they had collected. Tears streamed down everyone's faces as the church family hugged and sang "Blest Be the Tie that Binds." The story points to the fact that small churches can comfortably operate on a shorter time frame for planning than their larger counterparts. And the decision-making may be informal.

Rhythms

There are also **rhythms**, some of which are seasonal, that must be taken into account. When I went to preach at a church in Aroostook County in northern Maine around the middle of August, no one was there for worship. After waiting awhile I went to the local gas station to find out if everyone had been beamed up by Captain Kirk and Mr. Scott. The gas station attendant informed me that the weather was good, the potato crop was ready for harvesting, and almost every person in town was out picking potatoes. There would be church the following week - if the weather was bad enough. (He argued that Jesus said something about working on the Sabbath - if your ox or ass is in a ditch - or your ready potatoes in the field - wouldn't you expect to work and get it out?)

The rhythms and traditions may have developed in odd ways, ways that no longer make sense - or their rationale may not even be remembered now. A new pastor in a Vermont church noticed there was always a "Time of Greeting" in the middle of the worship service, a four or five minute break when worshippers milled around the sanctuary, shook hands, and said hello to each other - even though they had already done their "visiting" during the organist's prelude. *When they sat back down, they all sat in different seats!* At a church meeting one night the new pastor suggested moving the time of greeting to a different time in the service. People wouldn't hear of it. Once he spent his first winter there, though, the whole thing made more sense to him. The sanctuary was heated by two wood burning stoves, to which people would gather near for the first part of the service. But by mid-service, the stoves had heated up quite nicely and people needed an excuse to move away from them; therefore, the carefully placed "break" and the choreographed movements away from the stove during that break.

People-Affirming

And, finally, another dynamic of the small church is its **people-affirming nature**. This brings us back to our relational definition of success. In one small church in New England, nine year-old Christopher got to make his solo singing debut during worship. His adoptive father Larry accompanied him on guitar, and his step-mother Ellen sat in the pew with tears in her eyes. Half the congregation of forty wept along with her. Christopher's singing wasn't the greatest (he has since switched to playing a saxophone), but it wasn't bad, and the people appreciated his efforts and affirmed him. In a larger church, Christopher wouldn't have made it through the Junior Choir "cuts," but in a small church, everyone is valued. But think: would Christopher's "success" find its way into the denominational statistics for the record?

There's more to small church dynamics than I can stuff into this occasional paper, of course. I hope you'll investigate these and other issues.

- **newcomer assimilation and how it varies with church size** (see Arlin Rothauge's *Sizing Up a Congregation*, Episcopal Church Center)
- **the power (for good and for ill) of matriarchs and patriarchs** (see Carl Dudley, *Making the Small Church Effective*, Abingdon,)
- **small church esteem** (see Hazel Roper and Steve Burt, *Raising Small Church Esteem*, Alban Institute)
- **the "folk society" nature of small churches** (see Anthony Pappas, *Entering the World of the Small Church*, Alban)
- **pastoral leadership in the relational organization** (see Steve Burt, *Activating Leadership in the Small Church*, Judson Press)

As you can see, the last twenty years have brought those of us who work with smaller churches many helpful books to guide us.

Ultimately, both Schaller and Ray are right: small churches are different and small churches are the right size. Let's find out what's true about those statements, and let's rejoice in it.

Dr. Steve Burt is a national small church consultant and former Director of the Small Church Program at Missouri School of Religion.

**Small Churches Are Different, Schaller, Nashville: Abingdon, 1982*

**Small Churches Are the Right Size, Day, NY: Pilgrim, 1982, expanded and reissued in 1992 as All About Small Churches)*