

Is Your Church Too Small?

By Dick Chatterton

I'm not writing about what Lyle Schaller calls the "mom & pop church". I don't think the issue has to do with the numbers on the rolls or in the pews. I'm not writing about buildings either—if you can't find a parking place or a seat in worship or a room to hold class, I trust you'll solve the problem.

I'm writing about your conception of the Church and the way it is in ministry. It's the kind of issue J.B. Phillips addressed in [Your God Is Too Small](#). He wrote, "The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs." I believe many people today have not found a Church big enough for modern needs.

I think your church is too small if:

- There is no room for question
- There are fewer than three pillars
- People can find only one way in
- Gifts cannot find a way out
- New people cannot fit on the leadership team
- Folks have to leave their deepest concerns outside
- Children get in the way of adult activities
- Personal faith remains private and unexpressed
- Mission support has to take a back seat
- The Bible isn't opened and explored

I think the world needs a big Church—a big, strong, healthy, intelligent, caring, Spirit-filled, energetic, vital Church—a Church that carries out the ministry of Jesus Christ by helping people form a connection with God, with other people and with great causes.

My Church is United Methodism; my congregation Troy Conference. This is where I have membership and where I worship, learn and serve. I experience it as a big Church—big enough to provide pastoral services for thousands in communities large and small; big enough to broaden my horizons and deepen my commitment; big enough to have the world as its parish with projects around the globe. I think the world needs Troy Conference.

Does the world need your Church or is your Church too small? It's not a question of numbers or location. It's a question of vision and participation. It's a question of being part of something worthy of our best efforts in the service of our Lord and Savior.

*At the time of this writing, **Dick Chatterton** was a District Superintendent of the Albany District, Troy (NY) Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. This article appeared in Troy Conference's United Methodist Record, May 1991.*

STRENGTHS AND GIFTS OF SMALLER MEMBERSHIP CHURCHES

1. The smaller membership church is a significant part of the United Methodist Church:
 - 50% of UM churches have worship attendance of 53 or less and/or membership of 112 or less.
 - 60% of UM churches have worship attendance of 69 or less and/or membership of 152 or less.
 - 75% of UM churches have worship attendance of 108 or less and/or membership of 250 or less.
 - 1 out of every 9 UM churches has 25 or fewer members (about 3000 churches) (the largest 3000 churches have 3.5 million members).
 - In the past 20 years, numbers of the smallest UM churches have increased although total numbers of UM churches have declined.
 - The smallest UM churches are primarily rural.
2. Smaller membership and rural churches have great potential for growth and development:
 - They have gifted, experienced, and committed leaders.
 - 40% of people living in rural communities are unchurched.
 - Churches are located in almost every community.
 - Many people prefer a small membership church experience.
 - Most small membership churches can experience growth in:
 - commitment - giving - spiritual depth
 - outreach - program - numbers
3. The small membership church is a network of relationships, like an extended family. It is a place where nurture, caring, and loving happens, where we are known by name. We can accept and affirm everyone; we are intergenerational.

How do we define family? How can we reach out beyond the tight knit circle of the family church to include the stranger and newcomer?
4. Small membership churches usually have an active, informal communication system: the grapevine.

How can we be intentional in using the grapevine to include the outsider?
5. Smaller membership churches have a strong sense of history and shared experience. We know who we are when we know the stories of the family.

How do we plan for times to share our stories with newcomers and also hear their stories?
6. Smaller membership churches understand the importance of place – a sacred place – a place to belong, to believe, and to encounter God.

How do we learn to share our place with those who have no place?
7. Smaller membership churches often have conflict within the church family.

How can we use our conflict for growth and not allow it to consume all our energy?
8. Smaller membership churches often have influence for good in their communities that is out of all proportion to their small size.

How can we lead our people to extend their ministry into their everyday lives in the wider community where they work and play?

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TEN KEYS TO BUILDING A HEALTHIER CONGREGATION

For many years, Hinton Rural Life Center staff have worked with congregational leaders to help build stronger, healthier, and more vital churches. Consultation with congregations usually begins with a visioning/planning process and continues with training around the basics of local church development. These 10 key components of healthy congregational development are the result of our combined experiences.

1. Helping church members discern the congregation's call to ministry is the primary task of all church leaders, lay and clergy.

We believe that every congregation, no matter what its size or location, is called to significant ministry. God has placed the gifts, graces, and resources there for ministry. The task of members is to discern God's call to ministry and to respond to that call. *Where is the Spirit leading us as a congregation?* People discern the Spirit's leadings as they worship together, hear the Word preached, pray together, study together, and as they nurture their own devotional lives.

2. Helping members get focused around a vision/hope/promise for the future is the second task of leaders.

This usually takes place in a visioning/planning process where people can share insights, gather information, and reflect together about the congregation. Next, the people themselves must set priorities and clarify direction for the congregation's energies. No congregation has enough people and resources to do all the things that need to be done all at one time. The task is to focus everyone's attention on a few key issues for the next year or six months.

3. Self-determination is the key to building strong self-esteem for the congregation.

At Hinton, we believe that the people in the local church are the real experts who know about the church's ministry. It is necessary and critically important to build a broad-based decision-making process that includes as many ideas as possible from as many persons as possible in formulating the new vision for ministry. It is usually not very helpful for an "expert" from outside to come in and tell a congregation what to do.

4. Persistence and patience will prevail.

Things take time. Significant changes in the life of a congregation usually take three to five years to put in place. Leaders must be realistic about how much time and energy are required to establish new directions for ministry.

5. Out of an effective discernment/reflection - visioning/ planning process, the congregation will come to a clear sense of "the right thing" for this church to do at this particular time.

Of all the many good things that we could do, what is the one thing that we must do if we want to grow and develop into a healthier, more vital congregation? What is our growing point right now? Every congregation is unique, and the "right thing" will be specific to each congregation.

6. Congregations must focus on their strengths, what they do well, rather than on their weaknesses.

To succeed, take what you already know how to do and build on it. If you want to expand ministries or develop new ones, use the skills and strengths and situations that you already possess and figure out how to use them in another way.

7. Paying attention to the basic building blocks of congregational development must always be the first priority.

While there are many new programs and resources available for congregations, the basics include such things as

- an annual visioning/planning process,
- an annual financial campaign coupled with year-round stewardship education,
- regular attention to Christian education and the Sunday School,
- adequate pastoral care and visitation,
- quality worship and preaching from week to week.

8. Congregations are more effective when they do not become dependent on outside resources.

It is best to build program and ministry that can be self-sustaining. Long-term dependency relationships undermine self-esteem and do not empower congregations.

9. Congregations can greatly strengthen their witness when they link up with neighboring congregations in cooperative ventures.

Pooling resources and strengths with others helps churches develop more comprehensive and stronger ministries to tackle both internal and community-wide issues. When congregations come together to share their strengths and expand their visions, everyone wins. Cooperative ministry is especially helpful in enabling congregations to move beyond the nurture ministry focus of a family-style congregation to reach out to the community.

10. Pastors, congregations, and denominational leaders must work together for *longer pastoral tenure*.

When a church changes pastors every two, three or four years, far too much energy is spent on pastoral transitions: saying goodbye to one pastor and getting acquainted with the next one. A pastoral tenure of six to eight years, or longer, will provide stability within which the congregation can focus its energies on building ministry.