

IF I WERE THE PASTOR OF A SMALLER MEMBERSHIP CHURCH

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Models for Ministry in smaller 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.

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When I speak of the things I would do if I were the pastor of a smaller-membership church today, I don't speak out of a vacuum of experience. More than fifteen years of my ministry have been spent pastoring nine small membership churches. As Conference Council Director I have preached, taught, led workshops in, and consulted with dozens of small membership churches. And I have been the District Superintendent of approximately fifteen small membership churches.

I am aware that I might not be able to do or to accomplish everything I would like if I were the pastor of a small membership church, but how would that be different from my experience in larger churches? I don't recall being able to do or to accomplish everything I wanted or attempted in them either! I knew there would be restrictions, limitations, barriers, and obstacles in the way. But what I have in mind are the goals of my efforts, the directions of my striving, the principles by which I would seek to be guided.

So, if I were again the pastor of a small membership church, what would I do?

As I try to answer that question, let me emphasize that though I speak as a pastor, what I say has implications for laypersons, as well, who are the longer-term leaders of congregations.

I. If I were the pastor of a small membership church, I would want to remember that I have plenty of company in that role.

In the North Georgia Conference, for example, there are approximately 700 churches with a membership of less than 250 at the time I write this. Approximately 475 churches in the Conference are on circuits served by just over 200 pastors. Many of the small membership churches are station appointments, which means that another 300 pastors - a total of over 500! - serve small membership churches.

If I were the pastor of a small membership church, I would try to remember that this is the norm not just in North Georgia but in our denomination. 83% of all UM churches have average worship attendance under 150. I would need to remember how much United Methodism - even the entire Christian church - depends upon what we do in small membership churches.

II. If I were the pastor of a smaller-membership church, I would seek to stimulate and nurture that church's sense of self-esteem.

This would be a strategy for effectiveness, *for without a healthy sense of self-esteem, a church will concentrate on its problems and on institutional survival, rather than on its potential for ministry.* How I would work on self-esteem will be seen in other things I am going to mention. At this point, I want to say simply that I would do my best to get that church to like and appreciate itself.

III. If I were the pastor of a smaller-membership church, I would *not* try to make the church act like a large membership church.

It is not just people, it is *churches* who need to be themselves. Haven't you seen people trying to act like someone else instead of who they are? Churches do that, too. Of course, churches need to "be all they can be," but that does not mean mimicking big churches. It means capitalizing on the strengths of being small membership churches.

IV. The fourth thing I would do if I were the pastor of a smaller-membership church follows that: I would focus on the strengths of that church, on what it can do, not on what it cannot do.

For instance, smaller-membership churches are the natural setting for caring relationships to grow and flourish. In the small membership church, everyone is known, everyone has a place, everyone is needed. I would try to nurture caring relationships in that church. In my own priorities, touching the lives of people in friendship and love would rank very high.

V. If I were the pastor of a smaller-membership church, I would seek to be in mission *now* rather than waiting to get a "larger church."

A friend once said to me that he wanted to write books, but he was going to wait until he got to a larger church, so he would have more of a market for what he wrote! Some pastors seem to have that philosophy in regard to being in mission for Christ through their church. They will wait for that until later.

Of course, there will always be some things you can do later at some other church that your present church cannot do. But the church - *every church* - is called to be in mission for Christ *now*. The nature of that mission will vary from place to place, from church to church, but the church that is not in mission now in its own way has no justification for its existence. So if I were the pastor of a smaller-membership church, I would try to be in mission myself and help my church to be in mission now.

VI. If I were the pastor of a smaller-membership church, I would not let the church hide from its responsibilities behind its smallness.

"We can't do that because we are too small." Haven't you heard that refrain? Naturally, there are some things small membership churches cannot do, but that does not mean they should not do what they can do. Often a church actually can do things it thinks its smallness makes it

incapable of doing. If the church would just shed its negativism and shake off the paralyzing self-justification of inactivity, the church - and even the community - might be surprised at what it can do.

What was it Jesus said about moving mountains if you have faith only as large as a mustard seed? Small membership churches, as well as large ones, need to be reminded of the power that is available when a church is obedient to the call and command of Christ.

VII. If I were the pastor of a smaller-membership church, I would not let structure strangle the church.

I remember early in my ministry, when the commission form of structure was new, some agency sent out a questionnaire asking if our "commissions were "active." There were four commissions at that point. A friend of mine was serving a five-point circuit; he answered that question by saying, "No, my twenty commissions are not active!"

I'm glad we are more sensitive now to the place and role of structure in the church. We organize and establish structure to get the job done. Form is to support and promote function. How we are organized is not the first question. The first question is, "What is Christ calling our church to do?" Then we try to decide how we should organize ourselves to do what Christ is calling us to do.

VIII. If I were the pastor of a smaller-membership church, I would do as much celebrating as I could.

The church that never celebrates will do less and less. The church that never receives affirmation will grow discouraged and may come to think that it is incapable of being in mission for Christ. If I were the pastor of a smaller-membership church, I would be constantly looking for something to brag on the church about, to commend it, to celebrate with it.

IX. If I were the pastor of a smaller-membership church, I would try to keep the church connected to other churches.

The tendency to localism is very prevalent, not only in the world, but also in the church today - in all kinds and sizes of churches. But it is especially easy for a small membership church to get to thinking that it is alone, isolated. It may even get to be paranoid, thinking the whole church is against it. Also, it can become terribly parochial, limited in its vision and restricted in its aims and its reach - *unless it keeps remembering that it is a part of something much bigger than it is by itself.*

If I were the pastor of a small-membership church, I would keep strengthening the ties of my church with other United Methodist churches in the community, the district, the conference, and the whole church. I would call to the attention of the church again and again specific ministries in which we are engaged *because* we are connected and not standing alone. I would not talk just about what the connection is doing for us but also about what we are joining with other churches in doing for others in the name of Christ.

[Note: Cooperative ministries are an excellent way to keep the church connected and reaching out beyond themselves.]

X. If I were the pastor of a smaller-membership church, I would work hard at the preaching and teaching tasks of a pastor.

I remember inviting a young pastor to go on a hayride and cookout with our youth group. As it turned out, only about five or six youth went, but over by a lake after the cookout, this young preacher preached to this handful of youth as if they were a congregation of a thousand people. His style wasn't necessarily appropriate for the occasion, the setting, and the audience, but he gave them everything he had.

Preaching or teaching should always be tailored to fit the audience, but that does *not* mean it should be inferior. Eduard Thurneyson, a colleague and friend of Karl Barth, was also a pastor as the theological revolution they led was just beginning. Thurneyson wrote once to Barth: "One is overstrained by every sermon, even in the most remote village."

I have never understood the attitude that says, "There is no challenge for me in preaching to this congregation." In my experience, preaching is always a challenge. And if I were the pastor of a small membership church again, I would still work hard at preaching and teaching - trying to be God's messenger, the communicator of God's Word to whatever people were available to hear that Word.

People in small membership churches need and deserve to hear good preaching and teaching just as much as people in large membership churches do.

XI. Finally, if I were the pastor of a smaller-membership church, I would take time to study and to grow mentally and spiritually.

In fact, it could be easier to find time for study in the small membership church than in a larger church. But regardless of whether or not that is the case, if I fail to study, I am not likely to grow mentally. And if I do not cultivate my spiritual life, what is going to happen to my soul? And if I lose my soul, what will it profit me, even if I do get appointed to First Church?

Now, some of the things I have mentioned would be appropriate in any size church. The matter of first importance is maintaining contact with God and being faithful to Christ's call to be a minister. Different strategies may be in order in different settings and situations. But in every setting and situation, we are called to love people, to use the best knowledge and judgment we have, and to seek continually the guidance and power of God. Paul's words to the Corinthians continue to provide challenge and direction for us: "Strive to excel in building up the church." (I Corinthians 14:12)

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