

Some Reflections on Certain
Advantages and Disadvantages of
Being a Smaller Membership Rural Church

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*The Lord remembers us and will bless us:
He will bless the house of Israel,
he will bless the house of Aaron,
he will bless those who fear the Lord--
small and great alike. Psalms 115:12-13 NIV*

Among the battles I waged while serving as a leader of the town and country church program for the Southern Baptist Convention was the tendency for many to transfer the secular American view that “bigger is better” into their understanding of the mission and work of the churches. (A related battle swirled around the assumption that metropolitan is innately superior to the rural.) The clear teaching of the scripture cited above is that size neither determines, nor indicates God’s blessing. Certainly, a church may be small because it is not doing what God wills for it to do. But it may be small primarily because it is being faithful in a context or climate where small is natural. Or it may be small because that is the appropriate form for the ministry it has been commissioned to perform. On the other hand, a very unfaithful congregation may draw a big crowd, at least for a time. Therefore, one must use criteria other than size to determine whether or not a congregation is blessed of God. Personally, I have turned to passages such as Ephesians 4 through 6 for a statement of what God expects of his churches--unity, purity, mutual submission, and focused activity. These are the indicators of health and of blessing.

However, while a small church may be a healthy and a blessed church, it may have a set of advantages and disadvantages which are, to a large extent, the result of smallness. Recently, I had occasion to generate a list of these for a conference I conducted with bivocational pastors of small, mostly rural congregations. Let me share the list with you for your reflection. As you do, note that often a disadvantage can be turned into an advantage. I will conclude this article with a brief account about how one small church has done just that.

DISADVANTAGES

1. *Lack of Resources*

Often money is tight, trained workers scarce, musicians weak, and maintenance deferred. Often this poverty is exacerbated by comparisons with other congregations which appear to have excess resources. Poor churches like poor people may have “poor ways”.

2. Absence of Programs/Functions

The various faith families generally agree that there are about five or six basic functions that a church ought to perform--worship, nurture, pastoral ministry, evangelism and outreach, fellowship, and mission support. During the central half of this century the national agencies of the various American denominational families developed programs that could be utilized in a church to support these functions. For example, Sunday school program materials typically aimed at nurture, with some attention also given to the functions of fellowship and evangelism. For many smaller-membership churches, the lack of participants has resulted in the dropping of some programs with the consequence that certain basic functions have been neglected. In my denomination the national agencies, which are mostly funded by sale of program material, have been slow in responding to this problem, and have not generated a unified curriculum that carefully addressed all of the basic functions. Consequently, not a few of the smaller churches may be failing to address all the functions as they ought.

3. Lack of "critical mass".

Some smaller churches have become so small, and so elderly that their future seems to be in doubt. Their activities are so weak that they do not appear attractive to those they wish to reach and involve in the life of the congregation. For example, they realize that they need to reach young families, or believe that they do, but lacking attractive young families, they do not seem to be able to reach their targeted group. They sense that they are caught in a vicious cycle, or a downward spiral.

4. Had some hard licks

Many smaller congregations have experienced serious conflict and for some it has become episodic. The misbehavior of a pastor or of a lay leader, the mistreatment of a pastor, or harsh gossip about some of the members has resulted in a poor reputation for the church within its community. The scarcity of financial resources has often resulted in conflict between a pastor and the congregational leadership. Overcoming a poor congregational reputation is not easy.

5. Old and comfortable

Most smaller rural churches have been around for several generations. Some have become comfortable. They have nice facilities; they get along; they do good things; they are respectable; and the "family" comes with real regularity. Often these churches have lost sight of the founding vision, however. They have become focused on *being* and lost sight of *becoming*, becoming a full expression of what it means to be the body and bride of Christ and extending His kingdom here on earth.

6. *Provincial in outlook*

“We have never done it that way before, pastor.” Often, the implication is, “and we had better not do it that way again.” Many smaller rural churches have bought into fordism, that is, there is one best way to do things, and that is our way. Certainly, tradition is important. But adherence to it runs the risk of confusing culture and Christianity. Times change. The eternal must be wrapped in the temporal. While care must be exercised not the “throw out the baby with the bath wash”, the “wash” must be disposed of. There seems to be an inevitable tension here. It should be dealt with honestly and sympathetically.

7. *Pessimistic about people changing*

It seems that with age also come a degree of pessimism. A heritage of dashed hopes is a part of the baggage carried by the elders of the older, smaller church. Consequently, they have a tendency to pour “cold water” on the dreams of the youth, particularly of youthful pastors. They recall trying “something like that” and it did not work. They recall personal repentance and conversions that did not last. So, they may be slow about rejoicing at the coming of a convert.

8. *Love too much*

Usually when one thinks about the advantages of the smaller congregation, the quality of its caring for one another is ranked near the top. Indeed, in a busy, often faceless society, being loved is greatly valued. However, love can smother. An advantage can become a disadvantage. Too often, the small congregation is so busy caring for one another that it fails to broaden its circle to include the new people who might want to join and who need to join the circle.

9. *Bearing guilt*

Being a bivocational pastor carries with it the probability of experiencing significant levels of guilt. Usually, there is not enough time to do work at the level one wishes to achieve on the job and in the pastorate. Laid on top of this is the fact that often the family sees itself as “short changed” as the bivocational pastor attempts to balance the demands and expectations of the job and of the church. When bad things come on the job, in the church or in the family, as they will, the pastor will tend to “second guess” him or her self and wonder if he/she failed to manage time correctly.

10. *Being second-class*

Both the pastor and the church are often made to feel like failures. If each had only worked harder or been more faithful, the church would have grown at least to midsized.

Like Job's friends, folk seek to find the source of smallness in some personal or corporate flaw. Pastors in my tradition tend to respond to this in one of three ways--be obnoxious, loud and critical of their church, be far too humble about being "just a little country preacher:", or distancing themselves from fellowship with their pastoral colleagues. Likewise the church may become overly proud of its spirituality which has caused it to be neglected by secular people, perceive itself to be inferior and insignificant, or distance itself from inter-church fellowship.

Certainly, this is not a full listing of the disadvantages of being a small church. You can probably identify five or ten more. But I hope that this list is inclusively enough to dispel any saccharine sentimentality about smaller, rural churches. Actually, while many are truly wonderful, others are simply terrible. Further, I hope that this list has helped you be more aware that there is often a kind of dialectic relationship between disadvantages and advantages. Like some sin, the problem may lie in the degree. This will become more evident as I move to a discussion of the advantages.

ADVANTAGES

1. *Dependence upon God*

When a church lacks resources and knows that it does, then it is more likely to recognize its utter dependence upon God. When one has about all of the resources that he needs, it is awfully easy to cruise along on his own. When a church is well-resourced, it may not be driven to ask tough questions about what the special will of God is for it and its ministry. Those of us who have pastored limited resource churches have a better understanding of God's miracles because we have experienced them in the many ways God blesses our little to do great, significant things in the life of the church and its community.

2. *Biblically faithful*

The picture of church life that one finds in the New Testament is one of close, multi-bonded relationship. The members saw one another and broke bread with each other daily. I contrast this with the typical suburban, mega-church where most of the members may not see each other from Sunday to Sunday. It seem to me that the small rural church where the members lives and families are intertwined provides a setting in which the rich body-life of the early church can be most nearly duplicated. The fact of multi-bondedness opens up opportunities for truly struggling with living out the teachings of Jesus in everyday life with people who know us very well, people whom we cannot fool, people who have memory of our past acts and with whom we expect have to interact with again and again in the future. Focus must be upon relationship. In such a continuing stream of interactions justice, mercy, faithfulness, and love take on deeper meaning. Certainly, small rural churches and their members are subject to sinning, but the webs of their relationships seem to fit the life situation described in the early church. The teaching of

Jesus reflect the activity that characterizes traditional rural communities.

3. The Bible Addresses Rural People

Many of the accounts found in the Bible speak of crops, livestock, wild creatures, rain, sowing and gathering. It champions the people of the land in the face of their exploitation by the moneyed class and by the nobility. So, the pastor of a rural church finds a ready link up between the congregation and the teachings of Scripture. Think for a minute about how different it would be to preach a sermon on the parable of the soils in a city church, compared to doing the same in a church which serves a farm community. Or the vine analogy in John 15. Or the passage from the Sermon on the Mount concerning the lilies of the field.

4. Life Focused Sermons

Have you ever thought about the frustration of a pastor who must seek to bring a word from God to an audience of 5,000, most of whom he does not really know, and most of whom to do know one another. How different this is than the challenge of a small church pastor who knows of the joys and hurts of each member of the congregation, who thinks about these things as he seeks to prepare his message, and who, consequently, can enter the pulpit with a sense of assurance that God's Holy Spirit has given to him/her a word that will address a very real need. It is my observation that many rural pastors preach great sermons, and this is the reason. They know their people. They know their needs. So, they can bring to them a strong message, an appropriate message from God's word. Talk about being relevant. It is happening.

5. Heightened Responsibility and Accountability

One cannot hide in a smaller, rural church. One cannot live a double life, not for long. The heritage of many rural American congregations is in pietism and the Great Awakenings. These events and movements called for accountability. Providing nurture for one another and the acceptance of spiritual criticism from a fellow church member were significant elements of the church member in this heritage. While the practice of "church discipline" which gave expression to this last century has fallen into disuse in this one, the foundational concept is still present. Believers ought to be different. They ought to be actively involved in the ministry of the church. They must hold one another accountable for moral behavior which measures up to the teachings of Jesus.

6. Knowing the Spiritual Gifts of One Another

God seems to gift a congregation for the ministries He wants it to provide. It is the task of the church to recognize and evoke those gifts in the life of its members for the ministry of the church. It is a wonderful sight to see a congregation busy with ministry as the

members exercise their gifts.

7. *High Touch*

If you have ever needed the ministry of a smaller, rural congregation, and it happened, you will connect with this concept. It is so comforting, so empowering to know that this wonderful congregation really cares about you and your hurts, your joys. Often it seems to spring out of an attitude on the part of those who minister—I have been blessed; I have been forgiven; I have been the object of caring ministry; now it is my turn. The love of God is made manifest in the touch of these congregation.

8. *Signature Ministry*

Often the smaller, rural church does not have the resources, or the need to do the full “menu” of programs provided by its denomination. So, rather than wear itself out trying to live up to the expectations from “headquarters”, it has zeroed in, and are specializing on one or two or three activities that they can do well. Unlike the very large and even most mid-sized congregations, it does not try to be a “full service” church. No, it focuses on those things that need to be done in its area which it seemed gifted to do. This becomes its *signature* ministry, the one it is famous for in its region. It draws folk who want to perform that ministry and those who need it. This congregation comes to see itself as a part of a church ecosystem, as a part of the spreading Kingdom of God. It has its ministry which complements the ministry of other churches in the region and which, in turn, is complemented by theirs.

9. *Connecting*

God has called some very gifted persons into bivocational ministry to serve these smaller, rural churches. They bring to ministry some unusual gifts which God blesses to enrich his Church. Often they gather persons to the church from their work setting. Often they find their ministry enhanced by the fact that they know the hurts and joys of their fellow employees; therefore, they preach and teach with unusual realism. Further, some of the unchurched find a ring of reality in the life of bivocational pastors. Not a few times God has blessed in tremendous ways the efforts of bivocationals.

10. *Appropriateness*

It has been easy for mission strategists and others in this age of glorifying bigness, to neglect to see that for some people groups and for some places, small is the appropriate size for a church. Perhaps you have visited Cade’s Cove in the Great Smokies National Park. This was an isolated, rich in land quality, small community. Its total population never exceeded 800. A total of four congregations served the cove. One would not have been adequate before the advent of the automobile because of distances. Significant theological

and social issues made consolidation impossible. So, a set of small churches seems to have been most appropriate to serve the needs of a sparsely settled region. This is also true all across the country in many rural places and among many small pockets of peoples who are a minority within their setting.

Again, you might be able to add five or ten other important advantages that characterize smaller, rural congregations. It seems to me that God wills to have a very diverse set of worshipping, working congregations. In a dialectical sense each has advantages and disadvantages. This is simply the way life is.

Casestudy

Perhaps you lead a church that abounds in disadvantages. Consider how you might turn these into advantages. I know of a church that was small and troubled 25 years ago. Pastor tenure was short. It was one of six congregations in the township that it served. Total population was less than 1,000. Attendance ran in the low 30s. There were three other Baptist churches within 3 miles, a United Methodist, and a Church of the Brethren. The other Baptist churches appealed to blue collar folk. This church had been founded and built by a major land owner in the area. The building was a beautiful brick structure with handsome stained glass windows. It set on the bank of a large Tennessee Valley Authority Lake.

Change began with the calling of a professor from a nearby college as bivocational pastor. His style of worship leadership appealed to most of the existing members. He networked with five to ten of the students at the college who had come from small churches. He asked them to come over and work with the music and youth programs. They reached out to the unchurched in the area. He called upon disgruntled former members and upon new neighbors who had built on or near the lake. He also related well with the children and grandchildren of the founder--persons who maintained summer homes in the community, but lived most of the year in Florida. He initiated an outdoor Sunday School which met during the summertime in a nearby campground. He initiated better maintenance and improvements to the church house. He stayed for five years as has each of his four successors. The church is now running 80 to 100 in worship and seems very stable. Most of the leadership of 25 years ago is now dead, but they have been replaced with good, progressive leaders. The impact of the founding family is now much diminished.

Note that this bivocational pastor was able to redirect the efforts of this congregation. He recognized that it was different than the three other Baptist churches in its old parish area. Instead of trying to compete with them for the same set of people, carrying a disadvantage of class differences, he focused on their strengths--an attractive building, progressive and modern worship, access to a stream of talented young persons to service good programs and events. He broke the short tenure pattern. He initiated some new ministries. And he expanded the field served by the church from six to thirty miles. Its new reputation that of a lovely church, in an picturesque setting, with quality worship for

the more moderate wing of the Baptist movement.

Certainly, this brief casestudy glosses over a host of problems and mistakes. But it does illustrate that disadvantages can be made over into advantages by a leader who has a vision and who can gather up a set of supporters who will commit to the vision. Certainly, this cannot be replicated in every small, dysfunctional congregation. But in far more than most imagine positive change can occur.