

Small Churches Feel Good

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There is a growing awareness that smaller churches, those with fewer than 40 in average attendance, are a different "breed" than even those twice their size. They are tough, resilient and "hard to kill." They are survivors. Their standard of success is different from the standards of the denomination or of society.

Yet, a recent study by the new Evangelical Lutheran Church of America states that many smaller congregations suffer from the sense of inferiority. Essentially, when they measure themselves by secular standards of success—bricks, bucks and bodies—they feel unsuccessful. The study continues that a church with a poor self-image is not likely to attract new members, so it gets caught in a vicious circle. The small church, feeling inferior, is not attractive to new people. And it stays small and isn't attractive. Small congregations in Southern Baptist Convention life share this sense of inferiority.

At certain times in the small church's life, however, these feelings of inferiority are overcome. Specifically, the small church feels good about itself when:

- The bills are paid.
- There is a sense of harmony—everyone is present or accounted for.
- The revival, or other annual event, is well-attended by those from neighboring churches.
- A church project—for example, carpeting the auditorium—has been completed successfully.
- A member of a church family becomes a member of the church.
- A stray returns to the fold.
- The pastor "does them proud" at the annual associational meeting or a community Easter service.
- The Vacation Bible School is well-attended, and the performance of the children in commencement exercises is memorable.
- The pastor makes a small "mess up" in the worship service, one that becomes included in the ongoing stock of "Do you remember when . . ." stories of the congregation.
- The church wins the banner for the highest percentage of attendance at the annual M-Night, or is recognized at the state convention for evangelism efficiency.
- One of its sons or daughters is called into ministry or missions.
- A beloved former pastor or church leader pays a visit, affirming them.
- A surprise or a good practical joke is pulled on the pastor or a church leader, such as a "This Is Your Life" program.
- The building debt is paid off.
- Some in the church family have been recognized in the community for accomplishments.
- A group from the church has completed a mission project successfully.
- A new record of attendance or giving is recorded.
- A baby is born into the church family.
- One of God's great saints goes happily to be with him.
- A crisis occurs in the community, and the church responds quickly and appropriately.
- Someone thanks the church for its ministry.
- The church entertains the association; a good crowd comes and there is more than

enough food.

- A young man is ordained as a new deacon.
- The annual missions offerings are up.
- The new building is dedicated.
- Someone who has been a source of problems leaves.
- The annual Christmas program jells and is well-received.
- Conflicts are resolved, and the church experiences renewal and healing.
- A couple elects to be wed in the church.
- A pastor they have loved deeply is called to another, much-larger church.

12. Healthy, wealthy and wise in the spiritual sense (Rev. 3:48).

If one knows the theology of many electronic media evangelists, their focus is upon offering physical and material health, wealth and wisdom to followers. However, Jesus, in his letters to the seven churches, warns about this kind of "humanism"—making one's material welfare the motive for worship. Humanistic materialism, in the guise of religion, is very dangerous. Rather, to the faithful, Jesus offers spiritual health, wealth and wisdom, not for gain but as a means of ministry through churches.

13. Given opportunity (Rev. 3:8).

Churches that attend to things already mentioned have opportunity for growth and success. One lesson seems obvious. Churches that are interested in winning the lost to faith should give careful attention to this maintenance. Certainly, new churches that want to grow do not, because internal problems keep them from growing. Evangelism and church growth, if this verse is correctly interpreted, are byproducts of a healthy fellowship.

When a church uses the right measuring stick, notes its deficiencies and corrects them, then it can expect to be blessed with an "open door" of opportunity to do the external work of the church. Again, the small church can rival any congregation when measured by this standard. Many times a small church that does this does not continue to be a small church.

Third, implicit in the characteristics for a church is a prescription for therapy for a sick church:

- Repent.
- Do first works and develop them.
- Hold fast.
- Be watchful.
- Repair, strengthen.
- Rely on spiritual resources for health, wealth and wisdom. Apply this prescription and restore sick churches to health.

Fourth, all small churches do not have internal maladies. All of them do not suffer from inferior feelings. Some are smug and self-satisfied. They are full of "warm fuzzies." They enjoy their fellowship. Some are guilty of "closing membership." At least symbolically, they sing "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" and dare anyone from outside to try. They may seem small and "tacky" to other folks, but they still love themselves.

Still others, although small, are about as large as they might expect to be. Churches that serve a ranch area or a village in the West will be small. Churches that serve a language or special-needs group may be small. The congregation that regularly reaches 20 of 25 potential participants is doing very well. And it feels good about itself. But it must guard against arrogance.

In conclusion, all churches should feel good about themselves, but for appropriate reasons. The small church, when measured by the true yardstick, can be a "good" church. If it is not, Jesus has provided a prescription for its cure. The small church has an important role to play in the total work of the kingdom. Let's help it do just that.

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