

Appendix D

Strategically Small: Is your church small? If so, you have lots of company. Sixty percent of all Protestant churches in the U.S. have less than 100 adults attending. Worldwide, over one *billion* Christians worship in churches of under 250 people. This means small-church pastors shepherd over one billion of God’s sheep. First-century congregations were small too — gathering almost exclusively in private homes. It was these small churches that God used to turn the Roman world upside down. Good things really do come in small packages! Small is part of a divine design. The small church strategies found in the New Testament can help make your small church of significance in God’s kingdom.

Mega church pastor Adrian Rogers joked to those who preferred a smaller church, “Just sit in one of the first ten rows and don’t look back!” However, a genuine advantage small churches have is being positioned to reap strategic benefit from New Testament small church practice: participatory worship services, a weekly love feast (the *Agapé*), a plurality of elders who lead with the servant love of Christ, a commitment to congregational consensus and an understanding of the vital importance of making disciples by regularly teaching people to observe all that Jesus commanded.

According to the Barna Group’s research, people under 35 are the most likely to consider attending a small church. Their stated desire is to be personally known and connected, something that can be more difficult to achieve in larger churches. Small churches that follow the ways of the early church are in good position to offer what many people are looking for: true fellowship, lasting and transparent relationships, and less politics.

Church Houses: Some Christians put entirely too much emphasis on church buildings. It is interesting that there is a total absence of any instruction in the New Testament regarding the construction of special buildings for worship. This is in contrast to Mosaic legislation, which contained very specific blueprints regarding the tabernacle. When the New Covenant writers did touch upon this subject, they pointed out that believers themselves are the temple of the Holy Spirit, living stones that come together to make up a spiritual house with Jesus Christ as the Chief Cornerstone (1Pe 2:4-5, Ep 2:19-22, 1Co 3:16, 6:19).

We should question when inordinate amounts of revenue are spent on purchasing and maintaining church buildings, revenue that could be better spent on disciple making, evangelism, benevolence and supporting workers. Objecting to the false veneration of buildings, Bernard of Clairvaux reportedly wrote: “I will not dwell upon the vast height of their churches, their unconscionable length, their preposterous breadth, their richly polished paneling. . . Your candlesticks as tall as trees, great masses of bronze of exquisite workmanship, dazzling with their precious stones . . . what, think you, is the purpose of all this? O vanity of vanities — no, insanity rather than vanities!”

A church building is not a church—it’s just a sheep shed. That’s why Donald Guthrie concluded that “the expression ‘in church’ (*en ekklesia*) . . . refers to an assembly of believers. There is no suggestion of a special building. Indeed, the idea of a church as representing a building is totally alien to the NT.” Believers themselves are the temple of the Holy Spirit, living stones who come together to make up a spiritual house with Jesus Christ as Chief Cornerstone.

Itinerant English Bible teacher Arthur Wallis said, “In the Old Testament, God had a sanctuary for His people; in the New, God has His people as a sanctuary.” Consider the penetrating words of John Havlik: “The church is never a place, but always a people; never a fold but always a flock; never a sacred building but always a believing assembly. The church is you who pray, not where you pray. A structure of brick or marble can no more be the church than your clothes of serge or satin can be you. There is in this world . . . no sanctuary of man but the soul.”

The churches in the New Testament met in private Roman villas. This practice continued until around the time Constantine legalized Christianity with the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313.

After that, the construction of church buildings began in earnest. Pagan temples became huge Christian places of worship (such as happened with the Pantheon in Rome). Worst yet, Christians began to treat their new church buildings with the same reverence that the Hebrews had for the Jerusalem Temple. For example, there were no toilets in early church buildings. The thought seems to have been that such facilities were incompatible with the holy nature of the building.

Charles Spurgeon asked, "Does God need a house? He who made the heavens and the earth, does he dwell in temples made with hands? What crass ignorance this is! No house beneath the sky is more holy than the place where a Christian lives, and eats, and drinks, and sleeps, and praises the Lord in all that he does, and there is no worship more heavenly than that which is presented by holy families, devoted to the fear of the Lord." The real issue is, thus, not where a church meets, but where and how it can best do what God requires of it.

House Churches: Many forward thinkers suspect the church in the West is headed for a relationship with civil government similar to that already existing in China or Iran where the church has largely been driven underground. As secularized administrations continue to get elected in the West, church teachings against sexual immorality will be increasingly portrayed as intolerant hate speech. Christians will be painted by the godless media and atheist government as backwards, close-minded, religious bigots. It is proverbial that the power to tax is the power to destroy. The tax-exempt status of many churches and Christian schools will likely be revoked as government legislation prioritizes sexual freedom over religious rights. In times of persecution, meeting in private homes becomes an increasingly attractive option.

J. Vernon McGee predicted, "As the church started in the home, it is going to come back to the home." Given the right circumstances, a private home can still be the ideal setting for a church meeting. The smaller, homey setting fosters genuine friendships. The Lord's Supper celebrated as a fellowship meal in this relaxed, unhurried, comfortable setting helps build unity and love. Since a home is not big enough to accommodate a huge number of people, participatory worship wherein each person contributes according to his spiritual gift is much more intimate and meaningful. Using suitable private dwellings where possible is a good use of scarce financial resources. Because every member's participation and ministry were highly valued and encouraged in the early church, a large home is still a good setting wherein every person can comfortably contribute and function for the edification of the whole body of Christ. House churches can be simple, wonderful, down-to-earth (yet touching heaven) expressions of new covenant church life.

The problem is that many modern homes are simply too small to hold enough believers to have the strength of a New Testament house church. Thus, in a typical, modern, Western house church, no one is qualified to serve as elder and no one gifted to teach. Lacking leadership, the house church becomes more of a "bless me" club. The fellowship is fantastic, the worship is wonderful, and the kids have a good time playing together. However, no significant discipleship takes place. Outreach is minimal. The congregation is so small there is no way a pastor or missionary could be supported. Even if the home is big enough to host a fair number of people, your neighbors will not be pleased if, every Lord's Day, the streets around your house are choked with cars. Many counties have passed zoning ordinances against churches in homes for this very reason.

In all, to accomplish what the early church accomplished may necessitate *not* meeting in homes (but rather some dynamic equivalent). Therefore the real emphasis should be on New Testament church practice in general, not simply meeting in homes. To function as effectively as the early church functioned, a church building's size and layout should be carefully considered. Ideally, it should have a homey feel, be designed to house a relatively small congregation and its seating arrangement flexible. Since eating together was a big part of early gatherings, it should have a food preparation area (sink, long counter top, refrigerator, etc.) and dining area. To help families with small children it should have a nursery and quality indoor and outdoor play areas. There should be ample parking.

Houston Baptist University professor Peter Davids and German Baptist pastor Siegfried Grossman wrote, "The witness of the New Testament is clear: the living space of the church was the house. We judge the church-historical development to be a step backward from relationship to religion. Today a new desire for a face-to-face fellowship has broken out. For too long we have exclusively seen the formal church services as the center of the church and neglected our concrete life together in houses. We cannot slavishly imitate what took place earlier, but we

concrete life together in houses. We cannot slavishly imitate what took place earlier, but we should be challenged anew by this foundational structure of the church as a network of house churches. We see the following concrete challenges:

The church needs face to face fellowship.

The church dare not bracket out daily life from the life of the church.

The church needs structures through which the reality of concrete life can be encouraged.

The church must keep in balance the handing out of the word and the handing out of life.”

Small in a Big Way: Pastors deeply desire to see their churches grow both spiritually and numerically. They want to reach people with the Gospel and see lives transformed. A small church with the life of Christ that adopts early church practice likely will grow both spiritually and numerically. As people’s needs are met, as people walk closer with Christ, they get excited and can’t help but tell others about both Christ and His church. Growing churches love and loving churches grow.

As your small church grows, the temptation will be to allow it to get bigger and bigger. However, past a certain size, a church will begin to lose the small church advantage. Following the practices of the New Testament will become more and more difficult. It will become a victim of its own success! The solution is to intentionally keep the church relatively small through the multiplication of new small churches. Continually train up new leaders and send out your best people to start new congregations. The goal is dynamic small churches that start other dynamic small churches that start other dynamic small churches.

Celebrate the multiplication of small churches. Gauge success by multiplication rather than addition. Church growth consultant Bill Easum suggests, “Success shouldn’t be measured solely by our worship attendance. Success must also be measured by how many people we send out and release into ministry.” There are 400,000 churches in America with an average size of 100. If only 10% start a new church in the next five years, that would be 40,000 new churches. Now, that is something to get excited about!

The City Church Concept: It is entirely possible that New Testament house churches within a city were networked together, sharing elders and essentially functioning as one church though meeting in numerous locations. This approach can help overcome the limitations of modern Western homes being isolated and smaller than a Roman villa. The elders from the various house churches could meet weekly as a sort of presbytery. A mid-week centralized teaching open to all house church members could be offered by those elders especially inclined toward a teaching ministry. The house congregations could also all meet together on a regular basis (monthly?) in some large rented facility for worship and encouragement.

Bi-Vocational Pastors: Often when serving a small church, it is necessary to be bi-vocational—working at a secular job to support your family. Famous are Jesus’ words that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Not so well known is the context of those words. Not found in any of the four Gospels, Jesus’ words were quoted by Paul at a pastor’s conference. Paul assumed most of them would earn their livings working at regular jobs like he did and, thus, be in the position of *giving* silver and gold to the church, rather than receiving such from it: “I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

Most pastors feel a great burden for serving and reaching out, almost like Jeremiah: “If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.” This creates the type of tension expressed by a bi-vocational pastor, who wrote, “I leave home at 5:30 a.m. and return at 5:30 p.m. While I see the people around me as an open field for ministry so much of my time is consumed in commercial activities that I feel like there is something beyond all this that pulls my mind to it perpetually.”

I too have felt this tension. For over twenty-five years, I led a church and worked selling electronics parts to radio stations. One thing I focused on was serving the various engineers at the stations, seeking to share Christ with them and treating them with value as men made in God’s image. I found solace in Paul’s example. He was God’s premier evangelist, church planter and disciple maker. Yet God, in his sovereignty, felt it was a good use of Paul’s time to make tents. You may be thinking that since Paul was single, without a family, he still had more time

for ministry than a bi-vocational pastor with a family. However, there is more. God's divine wisdom also judged it would be better for Paul to spend much of his time in jail, totally unable to do the "Lord's work." However, if not for that time in jail, the church might not have the prison epistles Paul wrote. Our idea of the Lord's work and His idea may be two different things! No one knows, not even you, the work God is doing in your life to prepare you for whatever is next. The question remains: Are you where he has called you to serve? If not, look elsewhere. If so, what else can you do but remain faithful and stay in place?

No matter what, your family must come first before an outside ministry. The church will have many pastors over the years, but your children will only have one father. Don't let your ministry become an idol. As time is short, find a way to spend less time in sermon preparation. Perhaps cover a smaller amount of Scripture but really well and with good application. Maybe teach a shorter time, or in a different way with more discussion or allow time for questions and input from the brothers about the sermon. Of course, there will be resistance, but inform the church that change must come (such as increased financial support, in the way church meetings are conducted, of what is expected of you) or else you will have to step down. Roll your burden onto Him. It is His church anyway, not ours. Jesus promised to build the church. Let us rest in God's sovereignty.