

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL
Workshop at “New Shoots from Old Roots” CiRCLe M Conference
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Words in [] refer to pictures on powerpoint.

In small communities

As part of my work in community development I have visited a lot of small places over the last ten years. I have to say that many are feeling poorly about themselves. Ontario towns lost a lot of their manufacturing plants when the automakers declared bankruptcy. This year our prairie communities have been hit hard with climate events. The fire in Slave Lake AB [**FIRE**] [**UNHOMED**]. Businesses destroyed, people unhomed. In southwestern MB and southern SK [**FLOOD 1, 2, 3**] communities have been besieged. Land inundated and impossible to plant. [**TEARS**] The devastating sense of loss. Of course it's not just the climate that stresses our rural communities and the churches that serve them. Some communities are close to large towns or cities. These big centres act like magnets leaching away the identity and services of nearby towns. Community connections disintegrate as people stop looking to each other for business and recreation and head into the large town or city.

In some rural areas there is a natural resources boom. Oil and gas, uranium and diamond mines are creating a rapid influx of workers. [**WASKADA OIL RIGS**] Waskada MB for example has had dozens of rigs and crews suddenly show up on its doorstep. The culture and infrastructure of such smaller centres can be overwhelmed as rigs draw on health, housing, recreational and other key services. Taxes and housing prices rise rapidly. Young families who've grown up there can't afford to live in their own towns anymore.

While some resource-based industries boom, others are really struggling. [**SOFTWOOD LUMBER DISPUTE**] Changes to legislation and international

disputes over softwood lumber has hit mill towns hard. **[WEYERHAUSER]** **[PINE BEETLES]** Mountain pine beetles are destroying forests in interior BC and western AB. **[TRAWLERS]** Cod trawling has devastated maritime fishing communities. **[FLOOD/DROUGHT]** And drought, flood, frost, **[BSE]** BSE and poor markets have hammered agriculture on and off for years.

Tourist towns struggle too with the seasonal boom and bust. And workers often find they can't make a living as minimum wage tourist servants. On average rural population in Canada overall has been stable for decades, though not growing with the rest of Canada. But the boom and bust reality of rural life has meant that many communities have seen a savage dismantling of core institutions **[SCHOOLCLOSED]**.

That includes churches. The long-time organist left and they can't get a new one. **[EMPTY PEWS]** There are lots of empty pews. The Sunday School has folded. Money is tight and a full-time pastor is a distant memory. There is a pall of depression that settles over these communities and congregations. **[HALF-EMPTY GLASS]** The glass they hold up is, in their minds, almost empty. What they often don't see is that in their shrinking size they are being prepared for a new way of doing ministry.

In Gideon's life

Gideon encountered God's unconventional training methods in Judges 7 **[GIDEON]** The Midianite army was camped on Israel's doorstep. As Israel's warrior-leader Gideon figured the only way to fend off their enemies was to raise a huge army so he recruited 32,000 men. But listen to what God tells Gideon in Judges 7:2: **[JUDGES 7-1]** "The LORD said to Gideon, "The troops with you are *too many* for me to give the Midianites into their hand. [How often do you hear "too many" from the Pentagon, or our pastors!] *Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, "My own hand has delivered me."* Now therefore proclaim this in the hearing of the troops, "Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home." Thus Gideon sifted them out; twenty-two thousand returned, and ten thousand remained. Then the LORD said to Gideon, "The troops are *still too*

many; take them down to the water and I will sift them out for you there. When I say, “This one shall go with you,” he shall go with you; and when I say, “This one shall not go with you,” he shall not go.’ [JUDGES 7 -2] So he brought the troops down to the water; and the LORD said to Gideon, ‘All those who lap the water with their tongues, as a dog laps, you shall put to one side; all those who kneel down to drink, putting their hands to their mouths, you shall put to the other side.’ The number of those that lapped was three hundred; but all the rest of the troops knelt down to drink water. Then the LORD said to Gideon, ‘With the three hundred that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand. Let all the others go to their homes.’

You may know the rest of the story: those three hundred musicians walked into the Midianite camp at night with nothing in their hands but a trumpet, a torch and a clay jar covering the light. They spread out through the camp, then pulled the jars off the torches and blew the trumpets. The Midianites, thinking the Israelites were attacking at night, jumped up and not being able to see in the dark, fought each other. Then the Lord put fear in their hearts and they ran.

The approach that Gideon and the three hundred took was unorthodox of course. It had to be; they couldn’t use a large army’s methods and resources. Gideon’s guerrilla “band” had to give up on swords and shields and look for other weapons. It took imaginative asset-mapping and a lot of guts but they saved Israel with lamps, clay pots, and musical instruments. A most unexpected victory.

Why did God prefer that commando unit to a big army? Because Israel’s only hope in that hostile world was to depend on God. If they started to believe that their hope was in the number of their soldiers or the sophistication of their armory, they were doomed. They would be cut to pieces by Babylon or Assyria or Egypt. And they would cut themselves off from God. God *insisted on smallness*, so that their *only hope* would be in God and so they would understand that *all of life*, every aspect and artifact, has potential for mission in the hands of God.

North Americans need to hear that. There is an independent streak that runs through our societies. Perhaps left over from pioneer settlement myths,¹ many of

¹ I explore some of these in *The Shame of Farm Bankruptcy: A Sociological and Theological Investigation of its Effect on Rural Communities*, available at http://cameronharder.com/publications_presentations/index.htm.

us like to believe that we are self-reliant people, capable of managing our own lives, in control. We can forget that God is the source of our life, and that we need each other. It is easier to remember those things when we are small.

It's not just that smallness creates conditions in which we may be open to Divine assistance. The biblical stories hide a secret not well-recognized even by those who claim it as their sacred history: that most significant change begins small. **[MATT 13]** Jesus tells it in parable form in Matthew 13:31-33: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. He told them another parable: The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

Yeast and seeds. That's what our small congregations are. Not dying patients in a palliative care ward. Not the fossilized bones of once-mammoth congregations. **[MAMMOTH]** **[YEAST]** They are God's yeast growing new life in their communities. **[SEEDS]** They are God's seed saved from an old harvest, offered to their community as the start of a new crop.

Below are some of the things smallness may allow congregations to do well. Note however that smallness does not *in itself* ensure these effects. Just as one would not expect to get "the *greatest* of shrubs" from a mustard seed except by some miracle, so it is the *power of God* at work that gives the small and weak an impact disproportionate to their size.

AN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY INTO SMALLNESS: SMALL PLACES MAY DO WELL AT...

Allowing everyone's gifts to be opened. I've sat in many small congregations and listened to a young flute player or Sunday school singer share their musical talents in worship. **[GUITAR]** It's easier because the atmosphere is less formal. In larger places people assume that only the most skilled performers should be up front, and there are lots of those, so the young and novice get little opportunity to share their

gifts. In a large congregation people may not even offer. They think, “Well there’s someone else who can do this better.” In a small church you know there may not be anyone else who can do it at all—so you’ve got to step up to the plate. So smallness helps bring out hidden gifts.

Ensuring people feel that they, and their participation, matters. A higher percentage of small church members tend to be in worship each Sunday than in larger churches; they know that they will be missed. **[OFFERING]** They tend to be more generous, per person, in their giving because they know that their contribution will be noted, and that it will have a greater impact on the overall budget of the congregation. When I did a survey of leadership in urban churches in Toronto I discovered that the leadership of these larger congregations had come, disproportionately, from small rural churches. These folks had moved into the city, joined a church and heard the announcement “we need Sunday School teachers and council members.” Having been formed in a congregation where everyone was expected to do their part, they stepped up to the plate and volunteered. So our big urban churches were dependent on leadership formed in small, often rural, congregations!

Connecting on a personal level. This is possible in several arenas of church ministry:

1. *In worship.* If the congregation numbers in the hundreds, people are relatively faceless. The minister can really only preach *at* them. Among a hundred or so, she might know enough individuals to begin to preach *to* the people. At fifty or less the preacher can begin to *talk with* her people, getting them some space to talk back. But with a dozen or so it is possible to have a genuine heart-to-heart conversation. There is room for the sharing of individual faith stories and experiences—what we used to call testimonies.
2. *In care-giving.* It is much easier to find out each other’s business in small churches. The gossip travels quickly at the potluck after church on Sunday **[POTLUCK]** and on Monday on coffee row. **[COFFEE ROW]** That can lead to shame and misery if people are judgmental. But it can lead to wonderful

caring if they are hospitable and compassionate. The terms *hospital* and *hospitality* come from the Latin word *hospes* meaning “host.” When we host others **[PRAYING TOGETHER]** we open our hearts to them, we open our time to them, we open our wallets to them. We become willing to give and to receive from them. In a large church there are so many that one may hesitate to open one’s heart in a public setting for fear of being overwhelmed. But in a small place there aren’t so many. It is possible to keep track of who is sick, **[HOSPITAL]** who has time to visit, who needs encouragement, guidance or intervention. So small places can be better at lending a hand directly to someone who needs it; **[LENDING HAND]** they are right-sized to be up-close and personal.

This sort of vulnerable hospitality characterizes the life that Father, Son and Spirit share with each other. The technical theological jargon for it is “perichoresis” or “circumincessio”—it means living within each other, or interweaving one’s lives like macramé, **[MACRAME]** like an intricate dance.**[DANCE]**

However it does take courage. Small churches are not good places for those who want to be anonymous. People in small churches may put up firm walls to protect their privacy. They know that being vulnerable *will* mean getting hurt; there’s no question about that. Jesus’ openness to the Father resulted in great pain when he couldn’t sense the Father’s presence on the cross. “My God, why have you forsaken me?!” If such pain can happen inside the Trinity, who love each other so dearly, it will surely happen in small groups when people open up to each other. When we share our needs, some people will respond in ways that aren’t helpful even if they intend to be. Others, when they are hurt or angry, will use our vulnerabilities against us—attacking our soft spots. So to be a hospital, a place of hospitality, a small congregation has to have courage, a commitment to loving even through hurts, and a regular practice of confession, absolution and reconciliation.

This is true in the relationship to their pastors too. Small churches can have very close relationships with their clergy. **[PASTORS]** Pastors who love

their people in small congregations usually get a lot of love in return. But if they hurt their people, or are hurt by them, there can be a lot more pain.

Getting things done. When the Spirit moves someone in a small church to start something they have far fewer barriers to overcome. There is less red tape, fewer people that need to be convinced. Individuals generally have more influence. Bigger churches have a lot of inertia. It takes time and push to get them going. Of course small churches can bog down because one or two people are strongly opposed to something; there is more of a concern for consensus. But they can also make quick decisions. **[PAINTING CHURCH]** I was present at a worship service when a congregation member said, during the announcements “That outside west wall is starting to look kind of shabby. Who will join me next Saturday to give it a coat of paint?” Several hands went up and by the following Sunday it was done. In a bigger place that process could have taken weeks or months and several contractor bids. Similarly I have seen small churches mobilize rapidly to deal with floods, sickness and death and a variety of other community crises. Smaller groups can be flexible and responsive. They tend to respond to the concrete, which means that giving to general expenses may not always be high. But when there is a crunch, the practical need to put on a new roof, or to build a long-term care facility or to help a family whose house burned down, the money can come in quickly and generously.

Connecting the generations. This can happen in a couple of ways: **[CEMETERY]**

1. Smaller churches may find it easier to remember their history. There are simply fewer events and people to remember so it is easier to pass on. The exploits of a fabled matriarch, the lightning strike that hit the church, the favorite hymns of Mrs. Jones who had sole custody of the organ for twenty-five years are all remembered, retold, re-sung. Town and country churches may have the additional advantage of a cemetery outside the sanctuary where the ancestor’s names and dates are constantly on display. It’s easier in such places to talk about the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (or “the God of Ole, Morgan and Lois”).

2. **[CONNECTING GENERATIONS]** In large churches, like one that I served, each age had its own group and they didn't mix much. Smaller churches don't face that temptation. Christian education, for example, tends to happen in multi-graded classes. There is good evidence from secular education studies that the learning in such classes can be better.² Students are less likely to be passive absorbers of information. They have to actively integrate it so that they can help younger students, and in the process they learn by teaching. Apart from education, almost any activity that requires a significant number of people will draw on more than one age group in small churches. It makes adult-child relationships and responsibilities more comfortable. It fosters understanding of other generations. And in the adolescent years, when peer competition is high, it can be a saving grace for students to have strong connections to people younger and older than themselves.

Retaining members. In small groups, people notice when members are absent. In a large church I served people sometimes said "I suppose you're wondering why I wasn't here last Sunday." I never had the heart to tell them that, out of 1000+ members, there was no way for me to tell that they hadn't been present. Small churches on the other hand, may be difficult to get into and feel accepted. But if they genuinely welcome new folks and adopt them into their family, it is not easy for those folks to leave. They know they'll be missed. People ask how they're doing. Ties and friendships develop that hold them close. I remember talking to a man in a small suburban church who was very unhappy with the pastor's theology. I asked him why he stayed. He looked at me for a moment, then reached over and grasped the hand of a frail woman nearby. "Mary would miss me," he said. "I pick her up for worship each Sunday. And my daughter teaches Sunday School." Like a net, friendship and mutual responsibility kept him there.

Celebrating the rhythms of life in church and community. [BLESSING HARVEST] Birthdays, graduations, special honours and anniversaries can be

² See for example *The Multi-Grade Classroom : Myth and Reality, a Canadian Study*, edited by Margaret Gayfer, extracted from research by Joel Gajadharsingh, Toronto: Christian Education Association, 1991.

publicly celebrated in smaller churches. In smaller communities it is common for churches to be actively involved in local festivals, work bees, community fund-raising and other events. *[NAVIGATING LIFE'S PASSAGES]* Because the life passages of church and community members are better known, it is easier for small congregations to help folks navigate the joys and sorrows of those changes.

Forging community and ecumenical partnerships. *[PARTNERSHIPS]* Large churches with many internal resources can often function quite independently in a community. But a small church knows that if they are to get anything done they will have to work with the Baptists, Lutherans or Catholics down the street, or the staff at the long-term care facility, or the town council. They know that they need others and so they may help to form the kind of interdependent community that reflects God's own communal life. In the process, they also develop community credibility because their willingness to partner suggests that they care about the community's well-being and not just their own institutional engorgement.

Making disciples. The commission Jesus gave us in Matt 28 was not to “put on a good show that will bring in the multitudes.” It was to “make disciples.” Making disciples is a formational task. Normally we don't try to form persons in large groups. We form adults in family-sized units of under a dozen usually. We form citizens in classrooms of ten to thirty. We don't assume that in raising and educating children, bigger groups are better. I don't feel bad because the family down the street has ten kids and we only have three. Nobody says “Gee, we might as well shut the Harder family down. There's only two old geezers left at home—three if you count the cat—and they haven't given birth to a new child in twenty-four years!” Nor does my wife—a school teacher—envy teachers who have bigger classes. She never comes home and says “Wow—wish I had another thirty or forty kids in my class—then I'd feel like a success as a teacher!” She knows she does her best formational work in small groups. Small groups can pay attention to the details of individual growth. They can talk about the questions raised at work by their Muslim colleagues. They can help people wrestle through the blows to

faith that sickness and death can bring. They can be accountable to and responsible for each other.

One of the factors that contributes to discipleship formation in smaller churches is the fact that lay people are forced to shoulder a larger share of the ministry. As clergy climb the size ladder in their careers they may spend little time in small places; there is a fairly rapid turnover of clergy. So it falls to the laity to keep the mission going. That doesn't mean pastors aren't important. They are very useful encouragers, leaders, coaches. But the staying power is in the people. In larger churches clergy tend to be more like managers, decision-makers. People depend on them to direct the ministry. And when a pastor leaves a large church it has a large impact. In smaller churches the people make more of the decisions. One pastor in a small congregation told me that he was phoned one Saturday evening and told that there wouldn't be church the next day because a few of the council members had stained the pews and they weren't dry yet.

[EPH 4] Listen to what Ephesians 4:11 says about the relationship between lay people and pastors: “God’s gifts were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, *to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*” Small places often find themselves forced to grow “into the measure of the full stature of Christ,” to develop their own capacities simply because they can’t afford or can’t secure the services of a professional spiritual leader.

Those are some of the joys of smallness. So when I hear congregations bemoaning their shrinking size, I tell them, “You’re just about small enough to be effective.” And to those who have trouble believing that it’s possible to be small *and* effective I tell them (as my friend Joyce Sasse says) **[MOSQUITO]** “you haven’t been in bed with a mosquito!”

CHOOSING TO BE SMALL

Constantine left us a legacy of church as *grand theatre*, modeled after the coliseum: many seats, all filled, gathered around a marvelous religious spectacle, led by a cadre of elite clerical performers and flush with money. That legacy continues to be secretly treasured by most churches I've encountered. Young seminarians dream of preaching like Billy Graham or Martin Luther King Jr, attracting hundreds who will hang on their every word. Parish councils dream of filling the pews, filling the offering plates, gaining status and respect in their community. Their secret prayer: the one Ronald McDonald has taught us: "Supersize me!" [*SUPERSIZE ME*]

We put on "events" and when many come we inevitably say "Now that was a success!" If the numbers are high, we rarely stop to gather any further data. Who asks "Was the gospel actually shared and *heard*?" "Were people's lives changed, and if so how?" "Does this community now reflect more clearly the character of the life shared by Father, Son and Spirit—and if so, in what ways?"

Perhaps it's about time we heard the people of a church which is shrinking say: "Now, finally, we are *small enough* to be the church Jesus intended. Small enough to know each other intimately, small enough to share each other's stories, to pray and care for each other, to give the young, the old, the poor and the weak a full voice in this place, small enough to be accountable to each other and responsible for each other. Now we are small enough that we can work out together *in detail* what it means to be a follower of Jesus in the grocery store, at the office, in school, in the hospital with aging parents, or out on the tractor."

Perhaps we need a new kind of vision: many churches small enough to build disciples well. Kennon Callahan, well-known church leadership author, says that "The twenty-first century is the century of small, strong congregations. More people will be drawn to small, strong congregations than any other kind."³ He uses the term "strong" here not as a measure of a church's size or finances but its engagement with its mission. In my own context one group of Mennonites in

³ Kennon Callahan, *Small, Strong Congregations: creating strengths and health for your congregation*, 2000, Jossey-Bass, pp. 12-13.

Alberta have chosen as their motto for all future church plants this apparent oxymoron: “small, strong and missional.”

These folks, and many more in the small group movement that has been active on the fringes of Canadian and American churches for decades, know that the term “small is beautiful” is not just a consolation prize but an insight into the way that God often works most effectively.

PETER YEUNG

SMALL CONGREGATION WORKSHOP

STORY TELLING

(1) Failures : trying to act like a big congregation. Offering too many choices of worship models, resulting in even smaller congregations, and alienation.

Biggar model.

(2) Successes : Organized women's group turned into ecumenical study group.

Biggar model.

Edgerton church roof.

WEAKNESSES to OPPORTUNITIES

(1) Language

(2) Understanding environment

(3) Paternal or Maternal Leadership= Non-Bulky Bureaucracy

(4) Finances

(5) Entrepreneurial Leadership= Mission vs numbers

(6) Small Number = more space

(7) Move from Management to Mission---Why do we exist?

(8) Easier inplanning changes= no committee gridlock= outcome focus planning

