

Amazing Possibilities for Small Churches

Gleanings from the book "Discovering The Other" in which Cam Harder talks about how small churches have an advantage as they prepare for new ways of ministry.

Notes by Joyce Sasse

The 21st century could be the Century of Small Churches. This thesis lies at the heart of Cameron Harder's book ***Discovering The Other***, a study of community-building possibilities for small faith communities.

The book, a thought-provoking look at how congregations function in communities, includes two well-defined processes that could be used by small groups to bring community and church aspirations to reality: *appreciative inquiry* and *asset mapping* are development techniques. The terms may sound dry, but Harder describes how they can be used to strengthen a congregation and community to function without any major input of money or leadership from outside sources. (*Details on how to proceed with these approaches are well laid out in the book.*)

I experienced many "Ah Ha!" moments as I read Harder's deep theological insights, sound Biblical references and practical narratives.

It is obvious that Harder is an experienced pastor in both large and small churches. He is also a researcher and seminary professor, a community development leader, a family member and a storyteller.

The central premise is that the Father-Son-Holy Spirit understanding of God models a "divine community." Each member of the Trinity is different, but is inextricably and rightfully bound with the others. The diversity of each, within a deep and loving relationship, has enormous creative potential.

Furthermore, the assumption attributed to God is that "we make (humankind) in our image, according to our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). Humans are blessed with that same capacity and energy, enabling us to carry out the work God would have us do.

God's mission, when working through the faithful, according to Harder, "is to form communities that embody and reflect the life of the Trinity ... God loves communities and saves communities." How exciting to realize what great resources we have within us!

Congregations and local communities often encounter enormous problems, including lack of youth involvement, housing for the poor, supporting those in grief, and others. When a top person or organization dictates proposed solutions, the people at the bottom of the pile are usually crushed. They lose their motivation and whatever momentum they had already established. A participatory-style community-building process is more effective. It involves building healthy relationships, not new programs.

“It is not the leader’s job to cast a vision or imagine a future for the congregation/community,” writes Harder. When people are brought together to share a concern, “ideas emerge as people listen to each other and talk to each other.” The relationship builds. “A leader’s task is to facilitate, coalesce and connect ideas, to catalyze and stimulate the development of a vision.”

A significant part of the vision is to “think about how the church’s gifts might connect, interact and overlap with the elements of community life that we don’t normally regard as spiritual.” For example, the church treasurer works with the farmer facing bankruptcy, or church space can be used for meetings of those protesting unfair policies that cause distress for rural businesses.

Power and decisions reside in the people, inspired by the Spirit. They are the ones who can best make the vision become a reality. This “*Asset-based Approach to Community Building Together*” is the sub-title of Harder’s book ***Discovering The Other***.

Some small churches may simply surrender to their perceived limitations but many live by their God-given resilience. Not only do they realize they can do things for themselves, they are also aware they have much to offer others.

They are the ones who are willing to move outside the stained glass windows. They “ask people not connected with the church to talk about their experience of awe, wonder, mystery, God.” They connect “the Christ-story with the specific realities of our world”. They understand how “God’s love for the world is directed as much toward communities as toward human individuals”, and that the possibilities of building and working with these relationships are endless.

"Even as a community begins to hope, to believe it is capable of doing better, it is already better," says Harder.

He concludes: “In their shrinking size, small congregations are being prepared for a new way of ministry.” They are already aware that their strength lies not in their size or wealth, but in their engagement with their God-given mission. “In the grocery store, at the post office, in school, in the hospital with aging parents, or out on a tractor ... they are small enough they can work out what it means to be a follower of Jesus.”

(***Discovering The Other*** by Cameron Harder, published by the Alban Institute [2013], available through Amazon.com)