

Small is the New Big

The significant message for churches is *smaller is better...*

If you've visited an electronics store in the past few years, you'll know that in the world of electronics, smaller is better. Unlike the electronic industry, North American automobile manufacturers didn't pay attention to the *smaller is better* movement and that inattentiveness brought them to their knees. Guess what – the new message to churches is also, 'smaller is better'! The mega-churches of the previous century have learned that small groups are crucial to their survival, and many of the 'emerging' churches of the past few years are being designed to stay small. The largest percentage of churches in Canada has less than 50 people in regular attendance. Smaller churches can feed the need for close-knit, authentic relationships and that is something many people are looking for today. So, it's okay to be small in number, however, churches are called to **not** be small in faith.

As well as being big in faith, churches also need to think big when it comes to ministry with children. If there are no children crossing the threshold of your church building on a Sunday morning, it can be easy to say, "There's just no point in even thinking about ministry with children." If that's the case at your church, I challenge you to think big and act in faith. Here are some ideas:

- Look to the broader community and consider the needs of the children in your community. Has the music or art program been cut from the school budget? Are there people in your church who could offer music lessons, choir, or art classes? Is there a library in your community that offers a children's story hour for which your church could provide readers or helping hands? If there isn't a library, could your members provide books and a weekly 'Grandparents Read' session?
- Offer 'Spiritual Grandparenting' groups. Many grandparents long to offer faith formation and spiritual grounding to their grandchildren whether near or far away. Consider forming small groups at which grandparents can share joys and concerns and pray for their grandchildren. Discuss ways to share one's own faith and nurture the spirituality of grandchildren.
- Provide faith formation when grandchildren are visiting. If there are often children present at Christmas, during school breaks, or summer holidays, offer well-staffed and well-resourced opportunities to share the love of God during those special times.

If there are few children in your community and attendance is sporadic, it may be frustrating and costly to purchase curriculum for a whole year when weeks may go by with no participants. That doesn't mean, however, that it's okay to give up on the children in your midst. Here are some ideas:

- Develop a rotating calendar of leaders who are ready to work with the children on their scheduled weeks. Keep on hand a kit of good quality craft materials (no dead felt markers!) and a copy of Ralph Milton's Lectionary Story Bible for Year A, B, and C. Develop a small-group format based on the Godly Play® model:
 - Gather and check-in (you may want to sing and take an offering as well as finding out how the week has been for each child);
 - Hear the appropriate story from the Lectionary Story Bible;
 - Respond to the story with some wondering questions: I wonder what part you liked best? I wonder what part was most important? I wonder if we could leave out any part of the story and still have everything we need? I wonder where you are in the story, or which part is about you?
 - Allow free individual response using the materials in the craft kit;
 - Gather back as a group for prayers and snack;
 - Blessing and dismissal.
- Invite leaders to name their favourite Bible stories and work with the minister to develop a story box or bag and a plan to engage the children with that story. The story box should include materials to help tell the story and activity resources. Look in your cupboards and you may find a felt story board and figures, story leaflets from previous curricula, art posters, song books, etc. to develop the story boxes. The Armored Penguin website, <http://www.armoredpenguin.com/>, can help you create word searches, crossword puzzles, and other activities for your chosen story. Again, a rotating calendar of leaders can be developed so that someone is always ready with their story box.

Remember too that small faith communities are often better at developing children and youth leaders because there is greater opportunity for children to be active leaders. Giving children significant roles in the congregation is easier because they are more visible in the smaller church. A small congregation offers more opportunity to be flexible and spontaneous. You can include children in greeting and handing out leaflets, collecting and counting the offering, reading Scripture, playing a musical instrument during the offertory, taking attendance, sharing stories of church camp, or leading a children's time.

Remember, small is good when faith is big!

(written by Amy Crawford, Program Minister for Children, Young Teens, and Youth, United Church)