

S M A L L C H U R C H E S : B E A U T I F U L

AN APPRAISAL OF SMALL CHURCHES IN
NEW ZEALAND URBAN AND SUBURBAN CONTEXTS

The average New Zealand Church has less than one hundred people. What are the advantages and disadvantages of small churches? Is there a place for them or have they had their day? How can we make small churches excellent?

AN ESSAY BY STUART MCGREGOR

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THE REASON FOR THE QUESTION

I was at a friend's place and they had invited their pastor and his family back for lunch. As I was talking with him he made the statement that "Bigger churches do it better." He went on to explain that there are more people resources and money available in a larger church. I was unimpressed because in the back of my mind I was thinking how the small church I was attending was actually fulfilling a critical niche that the bigger church was not. I also thought it was a little arrogant of him to say this in front of someone next to me who has headed up a very successful children's ministry at our church that has grown numerically from 3 to 12 in 6 months—something any good Baptist would be proud of.

What struck me was that his thinking was shaped by a hope in statistical probabilities for resourcing excellence. I suspect his logic was that there are only a certain number of people in the world who can excellently perform particular tasks, therefore if you have more people in your church then the chances are that there will be more of who will excel. I doubt he would ever voice this, but why else would bigger churches be able to do it better?

He is a Baptist minister who is representative of the 'new' initiative of the Baptist Union to "Growing Healthy Churches." This slogan and vision has been conceived and implemented by the leader of one of the largest Baptist churches in New Zealand. The language of the mission strategy is straight out of church growth movement handbooks, with phrases such as "Setting your Church Free!", "Evaluating Church Values" and the like.¹ This is not a bad thing in itself, it is always helpful for any organisation to take a good look at itself and work toward people-owned goals, but there are varying opinions about how effective the movement really is. Irrespective of the theologically de-christocentric overtones² of the slogan one of the biggest problems is that

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the new model hints at “Big is Better”—if not explicitly now then definitely to those who succeed the current leadership the Union.

This essay is an effort to give smaller *urban* and *suburban*³ churches peace of mind (not to be confused with complacency) about their size. The smaller churches have a very vital role to play in the contemporary Christian Church and for anyone to deny this is a crying shame.

FACTORS OF HEALTH

I think that there are three primary factors that are normally considered when assessing the ‘health’ of a church.

EFFECTIVENESS

Murray Robertson suggests that this type of church can be seen as a ‘Seven Day a Week Church’ where activities are being located at the church (either in the building or in congregation members’ houses) every day.⁴ A church that is involved in all of these activities could be seen as being very effective. Furthermore the diversity of opportunity for the giftings of the members in the congregation also looks impressive.

The problem is that the effectiveness is measured in numbers—“bums on seats.” Can we actually measure the nature of effective relationships and growth? In the end when we measure effectiveness we look to quantities like, number of cell groups, number of ministries, amount of giving to and from the church. But these actually do not tell how strong a congregation is in their understanding of their faith and nor is it an indication of how much actual support is taking place within the structures.

GROWTH

Growth is seen as the primary objective of almost every church, and usually it focuses on the numerical (all nations) aspect of the great commission instead of the spiritual growth (disciples). The interesting thing about the statistics on church growth is that whilst the bigger churches are growing, it is not from evangelism, rather from what Kevin Ward calls “musical chairs.”⁵ Only 5% of large church congregations are from unchurched backgrounds.⁶ This figure is also reflected in the United States, Canada and Australia.⁷ The ‘evangelistic triumph’ often heralded by the large Church growth is a myth that needs dispelling.

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FISCAL VIABILITY

There is only one reason why churches close their doors. They have no money. The usual reason there is no money is because the attendees cannot support it through their level of giving and like any business, if the outgoings are greater than the incoming, something has got to give.

In her book *Congregation and Community*, Nancy Ammerman gives a snapshot of the history and future of 23 congregations. Every single one of these congregations is faced with financial issues in one form or another. Whether big or small, meeting the budget is a primary concern of most churches. The bigger church I talked about in the beginning of this essay is currently embarking on a multi-million dollar building project which commits them to serving a budget and also certainty in what they think is the foreseeable future. No church ever sets out to become bankrupt, but many do. It may seem cynical, but this is the bottom line.

F E A T U R E S O F S M A L L C H U R C H E S

Are bigger churches really better? Well, for a start it's not a competition. I believe that both have their place. As we shall see there are not many specific advantages or disadvantages in being either small or large—to say so limits the potential of each congregation.

All of the following features have positives and negatives depending upon whether the small church has a positive or negative culture. Ammerman suggests (along with Robertson⁸) that the financial and people resources that are released by larger church are significant.⁹ Stephen Lim objects strongly to this claim from his experience,¹⁰ and is supported by Christian Schwarz who, after conducting a study “covering over 1,000 churches on 6 continents” came to the conclusion that “on nearly all relevant quality factors, larger churches compare disfavouredly with smaller ones.”¹¹

Let's look at some of the features of the small church that are often heralded as disadvantages.

R E S T R I C T E D F I N A N C E S

It almost goes without saying that the “fiscal viability” of smaller congregations is a core concern of their survival. The budget will usually be tight and the building will be in need of repair. Any funds for programming or equipment are absorbed by debt or operating costs.

But this is not necessarily a bad thing. For example, a tight budget will determine how essential a \$16,000 video projector is and what impact

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the visual “ministries” that ensue from it might be. Financial shortages will also determine the importance of carpet colour, encourage more creative use of what already exists, draw more people into the building project to save costs, develop a sense of community where fundraising is concerned and most importantly enforce sensible spending of God’s money.¹² It will draw on the existing resources of the congregation, someone’s TV or keyboard or drums instead of tying up the church’s capital. Tight budgets can bring about creativity and sensibility.

PASTORAL CARE

It is often argued that the pastoral care of the congregation is served better in the bigger churches because the Pastor is released to do what he or she is good at (usually administration!) and also bigger churches will have a greater opportunity for team ministry than smaller churches who have less people to draw from.¹³

On the flipside if the small congregation allows the Pastor to have weaknesses then there is room for congregational involvement to compensate.¹⁴ Pastors should not feel forced to do anything that they are not actually good at i.e. if the pastor is musically incompetent, she shouldn’t necessarily feel that she has to lead worship. Someone in the congregation needs to be empowered for this role and if the pastor is a good leader this is what she will be able to offer to that ministry.

Another benefit of the smaller congregation is that the pastor is more likely to know people’s names and personal situations. The congregation will inevitably feel important and not just part of a programme. Lim also suggests that the pastor who is not so tied up in the programming can spend more time training his disciples (modelled after Christ) who will in turn disciple others.¹⁵ This is key to Carl George’s Meta-church idea where small groups perform this function in almost all growing churches (big or small).¹⁶

DIVERSITY

Robertson suggests that the bigger churches can offer more choice and describes the small church as offering one of two choices “take it, or leave it.”¹⁷ However he does concede that there is a place for the boutique style of church. The issue here is that there is a very important biblical principle that is being overlooked, namely unity of diversity.

I am yet to be convinced that encouraging segregation for the sake of worship styles and experience is actually a particularly helpful thing in the

long run. It's disappointing to hear the pastor of a large church express his disappointment that many of the congregation do not come to combined church services and had even requested a separate communion on those Sundays. The segregation of what many would call the one community into factions misses the point of texts that speak of there being neither "Jew nor Gentile, Male or Female, Slave or Free" (Galatians 3.28). Ironically the effect of this 'choice', as Robertson calls it, separates the church into smaller churches anyway.

There is a sense where the "Traditional, Contemporary and Youth" oriented services that many churches are adopting is self-defeating. Older congregation members enjoy hearing and seeing the Youth because it gives them hope for the future. Youth need to hear and see the older members for wisdom on how to handle the future and because it provides a sense of history—a key factor in the post-modern church movements.

It is a very strong feature of the small church that it cannot allow the cultures *not* to collide on a Sunday morning. Because of this I believe a greater understanding of the family of God is nurtured and a deeper sense of belonging since it is the people in the shadows that will come up and say that they missed you the other week. As Lim says "larger churches strive to create a small-church atmosphere—something that naturally exists in most smaller churches."¹⁸

I suspect that there is enough choice in denominations and styles within denominations without introducing the "church within a church within a church" of three different services on a Sunday.

BELONGING

Smaller churches also have a greater sense of belonging. Kevin Ward suggests that one of the contributors to the decline of the Church in the West is the lack of belonging that contemporary Christians feel in their churches.¹⁹ In the latest Cityside Baptist Church annual report is there a recurrent theme of belonging and ownership of the church and its ethos. It's quite obvious how important belonging in any sector of society has become. Even big churches recognise this which is why they try to involve their congregation in small groups. Interestingly only 12% of the large church congregations participate in this way which when compared with 46% of smaller churches must say something.²⁰

Mark Pierson suggests that the most important aspect of church is not excellence, but participation because that will bring about authenticity.

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The social accountability of the community needs to be empowered because the community is potentially a very powerful motivator and encourager. Participation brings about ownership and belonging for and of everyone. Pierson says:

“ . . . I want to emphasise it [participation] lest anyone think that authentic worship that builds community and reflects the reality of the people worshipping can be planned and led by one man. It can't. Not even by one woman. Not even by one theologically educated and ordained person. Liturgy is the work of the people. Active involvement in shaping our worship week by week is a basic right of every follower of Christ. Our diversity will only be recognised by a diversity of 'leaders'. We need to be willing to risk awkwardness and poor theology and embarrassment. After all, building a community of authentic worshippers is our aim. Isn't it?”²¹

In this sense diversity is celebrated through participation and risk.²² Excellence is what the participator should want to bring, but excellence on their own personal scale not some exterior idea of what it may be. Worship with all the best sound loses the grass roots feeling of the unpolished and earthed (this is the reason why unplugged albums by many artists being so popular). Authenticity lies in the mistakes and imperfections.

This sense of belonging through participation is demonstrated by the strong ties that past members of the Cityside community still hold with their small congregation. Every other Sunday Mark will read out a letter or e-mail from one of 120 Citysiders in all parts of the world. There is a sense that 'once a Citysider, always a Citysider.'

EVANGELISM

Smaller churches do this better. The bigger churches primarily consist of people from other churches. Their evangelism culminates in an attendance increase of 3–5% pa from unchurched backgrounds.²³ Schwarz concludes that “the growth rate of churches decreased with increasing size.”²⁴ Carl F. George advises his readers that “once a church passes 400 . . . it tends to become a receptor church”²⁵ i.e. it draws people from the local church communities. Based on the ratio of conversions to members, Schwarz concludes that small churches are 16 times more effective evangelistically than mega-churches.²⁶ These are damning statistics for Church Growth enthusiasts and pastors of large churches.

It would seem that the notion of big churches being able to offer better evangelism is wrong because their focus is primarily on program and church. One out of seven people who become Christians do so at a worship

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service or church event.²⁷ More programming is not going to increase the ‘harvest’. It is true that both smaller and large churches suffer from thinking that evangelism comes through programmes and overlook how the key to successful evangelism is actually walking the talk—it’s as simple as that. Walking the talk comes from a congregation that is authentic in their understanding of their faith.

MISSION

In addition to evangelism, small churches provide the resources for evangelism and church growth. Lim cites Ron Klassen and John Koessler,

“A disproportionate percentage of professional Christian workers, including as many as 80% of foreign missionaries, come from small churches.”²⁸

A high proportion of the Pastoral Leadership Students at Carey Baptist College are from small church backgrounds. Most of the missionaries in the TRANZSEND (former New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society) are from small churches who also provide most of their financial support.²⁹

It seems that most of the actual growth of Western Christianity takes place in the smaller church contexts where the sense of belonging is being nurtured to such an extent that the message is having a profound impact on their lives.

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George Barna tells the story of a woman who was interested in spiritual things. She had attended the local church which was so big she could be anonymous, but was turned off the idea that most of the meaningful ministry occurred in small groups during the week. Who had time for that? Barna juxtaposes this with another form of church that was located at a nearby café where the honesty was experienced by people who were “earnestly seeking to understand and apply the Bible, and they just had a different way of growing.”³⁰ The appeal here is authenticity, belonging and relationship.

An interesting thing about Cityside Baptist is that it too is playing musical chairs. The difference is that it is putting the extra chairs out so everyone can have a seat.³¹ Over half of the congregation³² (from a very diverse age range too) come from larger churches and attend because they are “worn out by religion.”³³ They have come from churches that aren’t answering the questions of our society (or even asking them) and have left

them too suckle on the breast of pop-Christian culture. They've grown up and left, disillusioned that the 'mother' didn't see the need for weaning them.

Cityside has not had her day. Not by any stretch of the imagination. Graceway Baptist, an intentionally post-modern congregation, has not had her day either. They have both grown from nothing in recent years to healthy small church attendances. But they will never (with the grace of God) grow huge.

My gut feeling is that the era that we are entering into will not see the disappearance of the small church. Murray Robertson is quite incorrect in his assumption that the love affair is over.³⁴ I see that the small church will start to develop the sense of belonging that cannot be nurtured in the larger churches.

The plethora of choice that is offered in our malls is still limited to certain styles and brands. The church is starting to do this now with offering different styles of service. In Waikanae Anglican Parish for example, I attended all three services one Sunday: 17th Century Liturgical, Contemporary Family Service, worship centred Youth Service at night. Each drew a different crowd, each fulfilled a different need. It is three different small churches that meet in the same building. Small churches are not a thing of the past, they are the inevitable future—though I am still uncomfortable about the exclusiveness and segregation of different congregations. The mega-churches are no more likely to be the only form of church as blockbuster movies are going to be the only type of film ever made.

George Barna suggests the following types of church are emerging: House Church, Cyber-church, Event Church, Boutique Church, Communal Church, Dialogical Forums, Compassion Clusters, Prayer Shelters, Marketplace Ministries. Within all of these different forms a sense of belonging will be discovered by those who attend.

EXCELLENCE REBUFFED

The idea of "Participation not Excellence, but in your participation bring your excellence" is a major component of the primary ethos of Cityside Baptist. This is how church needs to be shaped because in the midst of the decline are little quasi-churches of the churchless faithful hanging out with their Christian friends and experiencing 'church.' These communities are characterised by participation and excellence not so much in programming, but in their relationships.

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I still see a place for the mega-church. Society still needs blockbuster movies, chain stores and Britany Spears and (whilst this could come off sounding cynical), I sincerely believe that many large Churches offer a faith that is simple with happy endings—you can see it in their advertising and on TV. The cynic in me suspects that the niche churches will be there to pick up those who find that this is not enough for their faith journey.

Leonard Sweet is adamant that the church needs to be adaptable and able to change and claims that innovation and creativity are the key to survival in most areas of life. He is embarrassed to find that the representative of the creative God is so bankrupt on creativity.³⁵ Creativity comes through participation by many different members of the congregation who provide the essential ‘collective creativity’ that is so desperately needed in churches that all look the same.

C O N C L U S I O N

Take a leaf out of a book on contemporary economic theory. “Bigger is better hark the modernists, Better is Better is the post-modern view of economics. Why are the quantitativists still winning in the church?” asks Leonard Sweet.³⁶ The economic parallel serves well for us to draw lessons. The pastor I mentioned at the beginning of the essay focussed more on the church as a quantitative entity—increasing numbers made things better. But if we embrace the post-modern idea we focus on the very thing that makes the church significant, people’s understanding of Christ’s love for them. If this understanding is better then surely that’s better! This is truly something that should be excellent and if the church is not providing the mechanisms to achieve this then, heaven help us all.

I have been involved in two larger churches (300+) and two smaller churches over the last 20 years. I have found personal growth in the smaller churches, and personal drain in the larger whilst my involvement has been at the same level. My most satisfying years have been in the smaller churches for this is where I have learned the most about myself and my faith.

And whilst I still like the bright lights and the glitter of Las Vegas, I have to say, playing ‘last card’ with a group of mates is much more meaningful. Give me small churches with excellent relationships any day.

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F O O T N O T E S

¹ See their website: www.baptist.org.nz for a more comprehensive outline.

² Thanks to Rob Kilpatrick for the advice here. (Lunch, 2 October 2002)

³ I have deliberately focussed my attention on these two church types at the expense of the rural churches. These are the churches I will be involved in for the foreseeable future and are the ones most likely to suffer impact from the mega-church phenomenon that we are witnessing at present. These are the churches I will be most responsible for helping through the transition into the future. The essay would have been twice the size I am sure if I had included the country churches too. Having said this, I trust that many of the observations here may be useful to these congregations too.

⁴ Murray Robertson, "Are our churches too small?", *Reality*, Issue 19. <http://www.reality.org.nz/articles/19/19-robertson.html>

⁵ Kevin Ward, *Christendom, clericalism, church and context: Finding categories of connexion in a culture without a Christian memory. Implications of New Zealand research*, Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, <http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/spanz/feb2002/ward2.html>

⁶ Kevin Ward, *Rethinking Church for New Zealand, 2002*

⁷ George Barna and Mark Hatch, *Boiling Point: Monitoring Cultural Shifts in the 21st Century*, (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 2001), 234

⁸ Murray Robertson, "Are our churches too small?", *Reality*, Issue 19. <http://www.reality.org.nz/articles/19/19-robertson.html>

⁹ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, (New Brunswick, USA: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 48

¹⁰ Stephen Lim, *Smaller Churches Can Do it Better—How To Take Advantage of Your Size*, <http://www.smallchurch.com/eeadvantage.htm>

¹¹ Lim, *Smaller Churches*

¹² I am not convinced that a video projector for powerpoint presentations of the words for songs is a particularly wise investment. I think it is only justifiable if multimedia was an integral part of the service. In which case, I would suggest that having fifteen 29" \$1000 televisions might be a better purchase for all the interesting effects that that might create in a worship space.

¹³ Robertson, *Churches Too Small*

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¹⁴ Lim, *Smaller Churches*

¹⁵ Lim, *Smaller Churches*

¹⁶ Carl F. George, *The Coming Church Revolution: Empowering Leaders for the Future*, (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1994), 26

¹⁷ Robertson, *Churches Too Small*

¹⁸ Lim, *Smaller Churches*

¹⁹ Ward, *Christendom*

²⁰ Lim, *Smaller Churches*

²¹ Mark Pierson, “Anti Excellence” *Reality*, August/September 2001

²² I’ve seen it work and it is beautiful to witness.

²³ Ward, *Christendom*

²⁴ Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, (Carol Stream: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 46–48

²⁵ George, *The Coming Church Revolution*, 37–38.

²⁶ Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 48

²⁷ Barna, *Boiling Point*, 242

²⁸ Ron Klassen and John Koessler, *No Little Places*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 86.

²⁹ Rob Kilpatrick, Lunch, October 2, 2002

³⁰ Barna, *Boiling Point*, 233–235

³¹ Or to use another metaphor, it is the garbage heap at the back of the denomination that just gets bigger and bigger.

³² Thanks to Steve Taylor who is studying Cityside for his Ph.D. and shared this fact with me (discussion, Carey Baptist College Library, 2 October, 2002)

³³ The message translation of Matthew 11 hangs 15 feet tall in the sanctuary: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 1993), 31

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³⁴ I suspect it is more that we are learning to love in the more mature years instead of being diverted by the attractiveness of makeovers.

³⁵ Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 159

³⁶ Sweet, *Soul Tsunami*, 146