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Dean Petty

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Slippery SKILLS OF SMALL CHURCH MINISTRY

By Dean Petty

My Dad once found a stray cat in our basement. He tried to get his hands around it to help it out the door. The scared cat bit him, and Dad now has a scar on his hand to prove it—a memory of good intentions gone bad.

Ministry in all its various forms is a slippery cat that sometimes bites back. Those in ministry who have tried to get their hands around this peculiar profession know how the cat can bite all their good intentions. The scars, of course, are not on the hands, but the bite marks on the soul are just as real.

I do not know if the cat of small-church ministry bites more than other ministries, but I believe it gets more slippery. Within a small church, ministry is simplified and complicated all at once, taking on many different forms—some characteristic of large-church ministry, others uniquely necessary to serve God in a smaller community of faith. The slipperiness is in the details of serving a few instead of hundreds.

In some ways it is the classic contrast of shepherd versus rancher, of tending a home garden plot versus farming a quarter section. The shepherd personally tends to each issue in the flock, from being hands-on protector to physician to provider to personal friend. The rancher, in contrast, must look at a larger picture, managing more than mentoring those under his care, directing his ranch hands to provide hay in the winter or to lead the herd to better pasture in the summer. He hires the specialist to doctor and the consultant to evaluate, while he makes the decisions and gets others to enact them.

The shepherd smells like his sheep because he is always among them; the rancher smells like the upholstery of the pickup he drives to inspect the status of the ranch. The home gardener smells like dirt and has dirt under his nails from digging out the weeds; the farmer of a quarter section smells like diesel and has grease under his nails.

The name of the game today is specialization; find the market niche and fill it. Who would have thought a little cart in a mall selling gourmet coffee could make it as a business—yet it became a perfect fit for today's caffeine addicts. Look around and count the number of small coffee specialists in your town.

The gurus of church growth tell us that the nature of our culture demands the same niche marketing from the church—more specialization of ministries aimed at specialized markets. Perhaps this is great for the megachurch, but with a staff of one or one and a half, who is going to do the specialization work?

In a congregation of dozens instead of hundreds, the concept of specialization feels misplaced and burdensome. Ministry in the congregation of one hundred is a task of many skills, talents, and endeavors—a task usually performed by a few, or just one. It is the work of the general practitioner, using a broad range of skills for a broad range of needs.

To wear the hat of pulpit minister, campus minister, small-group coordinator, youth minister, or family life minister is to narrow the scope of expectations for the job to that given area. The cat isn't as slippery, because the

range of necessary skills is narrowed (though, certainly, the challenge of ministry is just as great). In the small church, all those hats become one; the small-church minister dabbles in many areas if he hopes to keep the flock tended.

For the slippery cat of the small church, there are five principles I suggest as foundational for successful ministry. These principles can be stated in one sentence: (1) Relationship with the God who (2) reigns keeps us in (3) reality, helping us to be both (4) adaptable and (5) people-centered.

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Relationship

Foremost in any ministry is our relationship with God. If we neglect our prayer lives, our time in worship, our study of his Word for personal guidance, then we risk losing all. The functional activities of the job description may get done, but they will be a facade. It is from the well-spring of the heart that our fruit will come (Matt 12:34; Luke 6:45); we must cultivate our hearts if there is to be any substance to our ministries.

In the midst of his prison ministry, Paul wrote that he considered all other things as rubbish compared with “knowing Christ.” His one goal was “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings” (Phil 3:10 RSV). Nothing in this life matters except knowing Jesus, building that relationship with him, and learning more of him each day. If we keep that focus, we have the most important foundation on which to build our ministries.

Reigns

The God with whom we build our relationship is also the one who reigns—not you or me, the elders or the disgruntled church members. God is in control and his will will be accomplished. Our job is to be instruments that he can use. He wants to use us, imperfect clay pots, to hold and deliver his perfect message of mercy (2 Cor 4:7).

That has some critical application where ministry in the small church usually pinches. The members of the small church expect that the minister will personally respond to their calls. In a large church, the minister is part of a staff that serves the whole body, and everyone knows he can't be everywhere at once. Members do not expect a say in every decision in a larger body, but such is not the case in a small fellowship. In a congregation of four hundred, the “employer” is usually clearly defined. The minister is accountable to the elders appointed by the church to oversee the church's affairs. However, in a congregation of a hundred, there are one hundred employers (or so it feels) who want input into all matters, including the minister's job description and the evaluation of his job performance (and they feel perfectly free to let him know!).

If we strive to meet the expectations of the fold, we quickly find that there are too many to meet. Some expect us to be at the office before they drive by at seven in the morning. Others think we should spend every evening visiting or teaching. There are those who want us to maintain doctrinal correctness, or peace and harmony, or to encourage spiritual growth. Some want us to stir the congregation to evangelism; others want us to maintain that “family” feeling. Some expect office hours; others expect community involvement. Some just seem to expect everything.

How we respond to all the expectations and keep our sanity is contingent upon remembering who really reigns, who really is in control—for whom we really work. It is not the family who has owned pew number five for three generations, nor the widow who expects her preacher to visit twice a week, nor the largest contributor. God's expectations are the ones we must follow over all others.

As a fellowship, we have always been good at letting people know that our church is not our own, that it is “Christ's,” that he has only one church and he is its head. It is the “church of Christ” because it's his and he is the one in charge. Yet practically, it is often hard to live by that theology when dealing with real live people. It is easy to think that it all depends upon me or the member who disagrees.

Successful ministry in the context of a small congregation needs the perspective that God indeed reigns, that he will complete the good work he has begun (Phil 1:6). God's expectations are the ones we work toward, and we can be assured that he is always working toward those goals himself. Our role is to recognize his reign, to see how he is working, and to join him in the process, becom-

ing tools to be used in his church as he sees fit—all the while confident that he will do precisely that, because he is in control working things according to his perfect will.

Reality

The third foundational principle for successful ministry is to always let God remind us of the reality of the context in which we minister. It is easy to be constantly disappointed with a congregation if we forget that they are neither a perfect church nor a megachurch. We read the church management and growth books and see how we need to structure for growth, get the right people trained, provide quality service in a variety of forms, keep the church building looking sharp, and staff for growth. Then we look at the flock on Sunday morning and realize that there is no one qualified to serve as deacon, no one to groom to become an elder, no one else to teach the Bible class or lead singing, no more money in the budget for fresh paint, and no extra room to start a “seekers” class.

There is an ideal (which we often find in the books) and a reality (in which we usually live), and rarely do the two meet. If we are always expecting the ideal (or close to it), we will never find peace in the ministry God has given us. Sure, a second adult class is needed, but without another capable teacher, it is an ideal that needs to be modified to fit the reality of the context in which we live. Certainly, more classroom space is the ideal, but without the funds it is not going to materialize.

Or our disappointment may be with the imperfection of the personnel with which we work (the members). Ideally, they should all be pleased that we work so hard; we know that in reality, they will not be. My current mentor in ministry, who has nearly fifty years of experience, once told me he decided to leave his first congregation because he found that someone wasn’t pleased with the job he was doing. At the next congregation he again found that there was someone he couldn’t please, so again he moved on. In the third place, he finally realized that you can’t please all the people all the time. “I thought I was supposed to be able to please everyone,” he says, but he quickly learned that that was not reality!

Rarely is a small church seen as the dream church in which to serve: it does not fit the ideal; it has too many warts and barriers to become the megachurch of the community. But the reality is that God can still use us effectively for his glory there. Where we are is where God has us, and if he had wanted us in the perfect church, he would

have put us there! We must keep the perspective of why we serve in ministry and who is in control. If we lay the foundation of living in reality, then we will be able to develop the skills we need to serve God there and to do so in a way that will bring him glory.

Adaptable

Being all things to all people was a key in Paul’s ministry (1 Cor 9:22), and it is an essential for small-church ministry as well. Similar to accepting reality, being flexible in our service in the small church means that we do not expect the perfect out of ourselves. We adapt as needed, flexing to the situation. That may mean wearing a lot of different hats in one day, from counselor to evangelist to janitor to the informal meals-on-wheels delivery man. The hat may be that of chaplain one day, change agent on another. Sometimes we will need to be the pastor, sometimes the preacher—and, on occasion, we may even be asked to be the leader.

Ministry in a small church gives us much opportunity to redefine our job descriptions. One member who is carless may need our taxi services; we may be asked to teach a Bible study with some kids at the high school at lunch and some senior saints at the rest home in the afternoon and then to do a marriage counseling session before dinner. Or we may have the whole day in our offices with no visits (or help either) as we work on the bulletin, our sermons, and Sunday’s adult Bible class. The key is flexibility and allowing God to use us as he provides opportunity.

Sometimes in a smaller fellowship, the minister is expected to wear the hat for every aspect of church: all of the teaching, preaching, evangelizing, writing, song leading, organizing, decision making, and problem solving. The reality may be that we must wear all those hats, but the key to sanity is to try to delegate and let others learn some of those roles. In the long run, the more we can let others have a part and learn to minister, the healthier the congregation will be. In missions, it is always emphasized that the missionary is working himself out of a job. In the small church, it would do us good to look toward the same goal, always allowing our tasks to be passed on to others so they can develop their skills. That can happen if we remain adaptable.

People-Centered

With the other four principles in place, the fifth foundational principle for ministry within the smaller church

is a people-centered attitude of service. God loves people, and he would have us in ministry to do the same—to love them as he does and serve them as he does. I've heard folks joke, "I love the church, it is just the people that I can't stand." Yet we all know that "we are the church," we imperfect, hard-to-love creatures. And we all know that God has called us to love one another. Learning to do that comes as we see both others and ourselves as God does. People-centered ministry keeps us humbly focused on trying to serve and love in a way that will glorify God.

In a small church and a smaller community, that is especially challenging, because we work and interact with people more closely. We see people not only in church on Sundays but in the community throughout the week. Worship, work, and our lives constantly intermingle. We do not sit with someone different each week; we probably share the same pew with the same person. The small-church minister does not stand back and ranch, because the context will not allow it; he must be a shepherd to the core, because he lives in a context of community where he will smell like the sheep whether he wants to or not.

The dynamics of family are also more present in the small church. The smaller the congregation, the more it reflects family and is familial in its interactions (in both positive and negative ways). There is also a greater likelihood that everyone is related, or at least a large segment of the church is related, a factor that further impacts the social dynamic. Family feuds can easily become church family feuds. Informal lines of communication can work quickly. Secrets are harder to keep, and privacy harder to maintain. While the parsonage is usually not made of glass, its walls often feel transparent. To be a minister in such a context requires a people-centeredness; a willingness to love people, warts and all; and a willingness to let people know our warts as well.

Yet in a way, that is part of the joy of the small-church ministry; in a society of isolation and anonymity, the small church provides a place to belong and to be known. It is a place where we can be let into people's lives and have opportunity to minister in a deep way. Of course, that is the kind of investment on our part that may stretch our willingness to serve. It may require an investment of years and of heart that we are not willing to give. If our hearts are not people-centered, we will struggle.

Finally, a people-centered approach means that we recognize the value of people to God and realize that our mission is to bring them into relationship with God through Jesus. It means that we have our eyes on the mission of God: we strive to reach them, disciple them, and help them pass on the message throughout the community.

Without the heart of the Lord, who so loves the world that he sent his Son, we find ourselves feeling sidetracked and sidelined in a congregation where earthly rewards are small. A people-centered approach recognizes the value of the charges that God has given us, each precious one, whether they be twenty or one hundred twenty, in a city of five hundred or fifty thousand.

Ministry is all about touching lives with true life, about helping people find the One who truly loves them. In the end that happens on the scale of one-to-one, in the context of relationships where God's love is seen and experienced. What better place can it happen than in the familiar setting of a small church, where we know each member by name and each one knows us?

In summary, the cat of small-church ministry is not a lap cat, though at times it may purr. It also is not an alley cat that always runs from love. It can be a little of both, requiring us to approach our service seriously, utilizing skills that flow out of our relationship with God, the One who reigns and is in control. He is working in and with the imperfect reality in which we work, and he enables us to accept it, to adapt to it, and to keep loving the people he puts in our care.

In all the various forms and varieties in which small churches come, there is no set of skills that guarantees success. The key to successful ministry in a small church is found in the foundational principles from which those skills flow. God gifts us with the skills that we need as we stand strong in our relationship with him, recognizing that he reigns in the reality of the small church. We in turn are enabled by his promises to remain flexible and centered on loving the people with whom he has placed us. Our relationship with the God who reigns keeps us in reality, helping us to be adaptable and people-centered so that he can accomplish his mission and reach this world for Jesus.

DEAN PETTY is minister of the Bozeman Church of Christ in Bozeman.