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## What I Love About Small-Church Ministry

Roger Massey

Debbie Perry

Mike Sublett

Les Bennett

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# *What I love about* **Small Church Ministry**

**By Les Bennett, Roger Massey, Debbie Perry, and Mike Sublett**

About four years ago I was simultaneously offered the pulpits of two different churches in the same area. One had a good reputation, stable leadership, and around 250 members. The other had a declining membership of 40, ill-defined leadership, and had been without a minister for several years (and was not seeking one). Which church would have been the obvious choice? That may depend on whether preaching is seen as a career or a ministry, a choice or a calling.

I see it as a ministry to which one is called, and that's why, after much prayer, I accepted the position with the small church, where the need seemed tremendous. Such a call can be rewarding. Frankly, it can be frustrating, too. But what can be greater than serving as the Lord's instrument and watching him supply what is needed? As Habbukuk puts it, "Watch—and be utterly amazed."

Although I have worked with both smaller and larger congregations, my wife and I believe God called us to our current ministry with a small church. That conviction sustains us in those inevitable times when we would rather face simpler problems.

If you like puzzles, mysteries, or riddles, the small church is the place for you. Try paying a preacher a rea-

sonable wage in a high-cost-of-living area when church income is limited. Try staffing a quality Bible class program when the children are oddly grouped—two babies, three preschoolers, one fifth grader, and two tenth graders. Try jump-starting a leadership program where ideas diverge sharply on what elders and deacons are.

The challenges are myriad, and that perhaps is what I most appreciate about small-church ministry—knowing we are "in over our human heads." The discerning minister who racks his brain (and those of his congregation!) for solutions is then privileged to depend on God and witness his hand in bringing together the necessary pieces of the puzzle.

Such dependence is never comfortable, and often scary, so how could that possibly be attractive or enjoyable? In over thirty years of ministry, my most satisfying times have come when God's hand was evident in what I was doing and his name was glorified. When ministry is based on human ability rather than God's unlimited power, the foundation of the man-God relationship is misplaced. In our earthquake-prone lives, that can be fatal!

Success in human eyes may be defeat in God's view. Or things we deem inconsequential may be of cosmic

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importance to our God. Scripture paints the kingdom of God as an upside-down kingdom (upside-down, that is, by the world's skewed perspective). "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first," Jesus said. Our culture, which has influenced Christian thinking, equates riches, power, and size with success. But we serve a God who uses a different measuring rod. Jesus' standard, "a cup of cold water in my name," may be more reliable.

Small-church ministry is relationship oriented rather than program oriented. The cups of cold water are often personal—helping an older sister through the nightmare of losing her home to fire, sitting with an anxious young wife while her husband has brain tumor surgery, or counseling a widow with a staggering credit card debt. The minister in the small church has the blessing of being able to spend more time with individual people, caring for them during their crises.

Joy in small-church ministry comes when we learn to cherish simple acts of listening, thinking, serving—for his glory. Clearly, God uses weakness to magnify his strength. The apparent weaknesses in small churches may be God's laboratory to demonstrate his glory. Such ministry reminds me that it is all for his glory, not ours.

**LES BENNETT** serves as a minister for the Palo Alto Church of Christ, Palo Alto, California. Previously, he served as a missionary in Brazil and as a missionary-in-residence at Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas.



I didn't raise my hand when God was handing out small-church ministry assignments. However, now that I am involved in it, and because I believe that

everything has its appropriate time and its God-given purpose, I try to give it all I've got. No, it is not always rewarding, and yes, there are numerous challenges. But Jesus' story of the talents (Matt 25:14–30) reminds me that my Lord is training me in faithfulness to this ministry before he entrusts me with something else.

Still, I cannot count the times I have shaken my head, my face in my hands, and asked the Lord, "How long before you bless this small flock with growth in the areas that really count to us flesh-and-blood types?"

We small-church ministers feel that "small" is just a phase we pass through on our way to becoming one of those beacons on a hill with all the kingdom trimmings. After all, development and growth are worthy, noble goals. At times I am motivated by some of the newer church growth books: I pore over growth charts, and I visit and love some of the growing churches that seem to be "doing it right." But then I return to my real life—my small-church setting and the small-group me.

Nevertheless, I am learning that there is something to be said for those small-church challenges. Why should I be so anxious to phase out of small-church ministry when the majority of mainstream evangelical churches are moving toward small groups and small-group ministry, embracing it as a cure-all for their big-church isolation problems?

What have been the merits of my small-church ministry experience? To begin with, 1 Cor 14:26 now makes sense—in a small-group, small-church context. For a long time I just shrugged my shoulders when I read, "What then, brethren? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification" (RSV). I tried to imagine why, where, and how that kind of Pauline pipe dream could ever happen. I told myself, "Perhaps it was just for another age." Now I believe differently.

When I read and practice the same verse in the context of a small-church setting, it springs to life—and with it, the surrounding verses that describe its context of public worship. I have seen the "pipe dream" become practical in my own small-church setting. When time and place are given to allow the Spirit of God to work in the intimacy of a small church, God touches that group in intimate ways. We can today practice this Corinthian ideal in the safety of a small group of trusted Christians, growing corporately in ways similar to those in which we grow individually in our personal quiet times.



Christian faith thrived in its earliest years within the context of the small church. The throngs of Christians in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome didn't just move out of the synagogues and into cathedrals when they could no longer coexist with their unbelieving Jewish cousins. The first church buildings did not appear until the third century. How then did so many Christians in the early urban centers meet for worship? They met in small groups from house to house to practice the faith as their dear evangelist and teacher, Paul, instructed them. This Pauline model of meeting together may be the shape of things to come in the approaching millennium.

In the small church I am also learning to focus on the important and not merely the immediate. For example, I don't have the "luxury" of numerous immediate concerns to distract me from uncomfortable interpersonal problems. In the small-church setting, where mutual accountability is encouraged and nurtured (and where there are fewer bodies to hide behind), we have to deal with relational conflicts that would otherwise make short work of our church. Our small-group accountability forces us to come eye to eye with interpersonal conflicts, thereby denying Satan the foothold that can become a stronghold.

Developing leadership and expanding it over a wider base of men and women is often easier in a small church. It is hard to find people who are willing to stand in front of a larger crowd, much less who are able to say something intelligible at first. But smaller groups are less threatening. It is easier to find a friendly and familiar face when there are fewer faces to scan. In a smaller group of familiar folks, people are more comfortable speaking their hearts, sharing a struggle or a victory or a word from God.

The encouraging serendipity about small-group leadership is that leaders tend to surface naturally. People instinctively follow those who serve, encourage, and comfort them. People's grace gifts emerge in a small group because small groups need more than just one leader to survive. They quickly learn to depend on each other for mutual encouragement and support. In a small group, people get missed when they're not around. Someone inevitably goes looking for them. That's how shepherds are made. That's how we know whom to "appoint" to leadership roles: those who are already leading.


Small-church ministry is no cakewalk. I continue to dream of being in a larger-church setting where spiritual gifts, possibilities, and ministries abound. But even this big-church dream of mine includes being in a small group

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where every-member ministry flows, where issues of first importance are the focus, and where servant leadership is modeled before the eyes of my children. Just a pipe dream? The apostle Paul didn't think so. Why should I?

**ROGER MASSEY** is a missionary in Varna, Bulgaria with his wife, Erin, and daughter, Addie.

 What I love most about the small-church ministry is simply the absolute certainty that my husband and I are serving exactly where the Lord wants us. That conviction, and the abiding peace that accompanies it, is part of what has sustained us through seven years of the unique challenges of planting a church in a foreign land.

I was a freshman at Columbia Christian College. It was an ordinary day in chapel when the Lord planted the seed. I don't remember the missionary's name, face, nor even where he had been serving. I do recall being startled by this "something" that stirred in me as he spoke. I felt compelled to speak to him but didn't even know what to ask. Mission work was practically the last thing on my mind that year. What could this stirring mean? In the jumble of thoughts that day, all I could come up with was, "Well, maybe . . . someday—but not now. It just doesn't fit!"

Five years later that dormant seed cracked open. A Youth With a Mission mercy ship was docked in Portland for a few days. While I was on a guided tour, the Lord stirred my soul again. I had always longed to go somewhere—anywhere—to experience life outside my beloved Pacific Northwest. All prior efforts had been mine, and for my purposes. On that day, the Lord matched that long-



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ing with his perfect purpose. I heard his call to “go and make disciples of all nations.”

The prayers began. Was I ready for such a thing? Surely the Lord had much more pruning to do first. Where would I go, and with whom? An organization? A team? A husband? Only God knew. For four more years I prayed, “Lord, I want to go for you whenever, wherever, and with whomever you desire.” Whether it was halfway around the world, across the street, or across the office to a coworker’s desk, I wanted God to take me there. Some say that is a dangerous prayer. I think it’s the safest there is the prayer of obedience and trust.

Meanwhile, someone else was praying a similar prayer. He had served in eastern Europe. He knew the unique struggles of ministering alone. Therefore, his prayers included a team and a wife. Two weeks and three dates after being introduced, we cautiously spoke of marriage. God’s hand was so clearly evident in orchestrating the whole thing. Seemingly in one fell swoop, the Lord answered all. Within days, we learned of a mutual friend who was coordinating a church-planting team destined for Hungary. Our path was set.

I enjoy any excuse to share how the Lord brought us together in marriage and in mission. I want others to know that God’s personal calling can be unquestionably clear, even without knowledge of the particulars. Just ask Abraham. The Lord delights in our trust and will provide what we need. Always. We can go anywhere and do anything with confidence and peace. No matter how small, remote, or, in our case, how difficult the language.

Like everyone else, we’ve questioned. We’ve struggled. Who hasn’t? It is part of life to manage hardship as well as success. In our particular challenges here in Hungary, one constant has always brought relief and renewed resolve—the certainty of the call and the faithfulness of the One who called.

**DEBBIE PERRY** serves the Central Church of Christ in Budapest, Hungary.



Ever since I graduated from school in 1973 to begin my ministry, with one exception, I have worked in churches that have been under 150 in size. Several were 75 or less. There were times early in my ministry when I was saddened about that and even ashamed to tell other ministers of my church’s size. That is no longer true. I have come to love working in small churches.

There is a closeness in the small church that cannot exist in a larger church in the same way. It warms my heart to look around our sanctuary on Sunday mornings and not only know every face but feel like God has used me to personally serve each family. On my business card I have the description of our church: “A Family of Christians.” That is what the closeness is—family.

I love being able to “improvise” in a small church. If God lays something special on my heart concerning the lesson or the service, I don’t have to wonder if we can fit it in four or five months later. I don’t have to worry about a television timetable or a radio time limit. In my experience, small churches are far more flexible with their schedules.

What I probably love most about a small church is that there are no hiding places. I have seen so many believers go from a small church to a large one in the big city and become invisible. After visiting for the first time, one man (now one of our deacons) was overheard saying to his wife, “Boy, if we go here, there sure won’t be any place to hide.” That is a huge plus.

There is an informality I also enjoy. If I have a suit on, everyone knows there is a wedding or a funeral. In the larger churches where I have preached, ties and suits were the order of the day. That was important there. Not so in the small-town church. The relaxed atmosphere has become very dear to me.

Surprisingly, there is also a diversity in the small church. The larger the church, the more the ministry positions are specialized. I enjoy the ministry I have in our church as I prepare sermons, teach adults, work with both teenagers and senior saints, and am involved in a local

Christian academy. I cherish the blessing of wearing the various hats that small-church ministry requires.

In a small-church setting, there is a more relaxed pace. I know ministers who, in addition to all of the other duties, perform more funerals and weddings and make more hospital visits in a year than I may ever do in my entire life. No longer jealous, I now admire them for their stamina and organizational skills. I've learned that I am not the kind of minister who can deal with such overstressed demands, and I thank my God that I don't have to.

For years I ministered wondering if my tiny churches knew how "fortunate" they were to have someone with

my abilities and zeal. Thank God for saving me from such wicked pride. Now I am the grateful one, and I thank God and my small church in Pampa, Texas, for allowing me to be its minister.

Am I frustrated at times concerning money and career? Yes. Guilty of glancing at "greener pastures" from time to time? Certainly. But now I thank God for a career in ministry with the backbone of God's kingdom—the small church.

**MIKE SUBLETT** serves as a minister of the Highland Christian Church located in Pampa, Texas.