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Theology of the Small Church

By Rob McRay

The small church is and always has been the dominant expression of Christian congregational life in America. Two-thirds of Protestant churches have less than 120 present for worship each week, half average less than 75, and one-fourth have less than 35.¹ Most of these churches will never grow much larger than they already are.

Sometimes this is true for unavoidable reasons, such as the declining population of the community of a small rural church. Sometimes the lack of growth is for less than ideal reasons, such as members who are so intent on maintaining church life as it is that they do not seek or assimilate newcomers. But the smaller size of a church does not have to be the result of undesirable factors. Furthermore, there are reasons why a small size might be more desirable.

Much of what is written about the theology and practice of the church today seems to assume large churches, or at least the objective of becoming large churches. A constant stream of books and seminars focuses on strategies for helping churches break through barriers and become larger. The concern for evangelism and growth is good, but the tendency is to suggest that being small is a problem to be overcome. Consequently, many resources on the church and ministry are not well suited for the reality of small-church life.

The prevalence of this approach, coupled with the tendency of our culture to assume that bigger is better, leads

many small churches to hopelessly attempt to imitate the programs, structure, and worship of large churches. In doing so, they not only destine themselves to feel forever inferior, they also often neglect their own strengths—strengths which, ironically, many large churches are struggling to recover.

Schaller observes that the large congregation may not be the natural state of the church. Maintaining a large church, he writes, “requires the sustained efforts of many people to keep that water running uphill.”² Most church growth literature advocates getting bigger by getting smaller. Some kind of small-group structure is seen as necessary not only to growth but also to the meaningful experience of Christian community.

The predominance of small churches and the concern for small groups in larger churches calls for a theology of church that meaningfully addresses the small-church community. This theological perspective is best grounded in the almost universal form of Christian communal life of the first three centuries of the church—the house church.

House Churches in Early Christianity

From the very beginning, Christians customarily gathered in homes for meals, fellowship, prayer, and mutual encouragement (Acts 2:42–47; 12:12). Although the earliest Jewish Christians are described as continuing to worship in the temple, churches are always said to meet in someone’s house (Rom 16:5, 23; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15;

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Phlm 2). That continued to be the practice of Christians for more than two hundred years. Not until the third century do we have any evidence of buildings constructed specifically for church gatherings, and even those were still modeled on the room used in Roman villas.³

Some of those homes would have been the large villas of wealthy Christians. Such homes could accommodate gatherings of thirty to fifty people. Others would have been smaller urban apartments that could only hold ten to fifteen.⁴ Consequently, for the first two or three centuries of Christianity, church life was experienced in groups ranging in size from ten to fifty. In other words, the early churches were small churches.

Not until Christianity became entangled in imperial power, pomp, and circumstance did the church move from the house to the basilica. Perhaps not coincidentally, that shift occurred concurrently with the move from believers' church to state church. Congregational life experienced as informal, intimate family gatherings gave way to large, formal ceremonies. The table fellowship of the love feast gave way to sacramental ritual. The mutual encouragement and ministry gave way to hierarchy and priesthood. And the bond of a small group of spiritual exiles gathered in shared faith gave way to masses of uncommitted church members labeled "Christian" by virtue of birth and law.

While it would not be fair or accurate to lay all the responsibility for these shifts in Christian practice on the move away from house churches, the impact of that move should not be underestimated. The family life of churches in the New Testament is all but lost in the institutional church life of post-Constantinian Christianity. And still today, the reality of church life is often more institutional than familial.

That church life was experienced in homes appears to have been by design and not default. While during times of Roman persecution churches may not always have been able to own property, that would not have been the case in the earliest decades, when Christianity was still largely viewed as a Jewish sect (cf. Acts 18:15; 24:5, 14; 28:22). Practical considerations such as cost no doubt influenced

the use of houses as meeting places, but such considerations are given no attention in the New Testament discussions of church life. The most important reason for the use of homes was surely that they provided the best setting for experiencing Christian life and faith.⁵

Early Christianity emphasized fellowship, shared life, and experience. It emphasized informal, spontaneous worship in which spiritually gifted members had opportunity to use their gifts for the good of all. It emphasized mutual encouragement and edification and the reading and interpreting of Scripture in community, guided by those gifted as teachers and pastors. It emphasized table fellowship as the church family gathered to share meals and to celebrate the Lord's Supper as part of their "fellowship dinners." It emphasized the restoration of the fallen, the discipline of the disobedient, and the encouragement of the struggling. And it emphasized caring for the needs of the poor, the sick, the weak, and the suffering.

These emphases fit very well into the setting of a home. They are lived out best in a group small enough that most folks know each other, and almost everybody knows at least a good number of the group fairly well. There is no anonymity; there are few hidden crises. It's hard to pass the buck, and there are few if any full-time staff to whom to leave the work.

In early Christianity, resources could be poured into helping members in need and supporting teachers, evangelists, and missionaries—not into maintaining ever expanding facilities, management staff, custodial staff, and other such necessities of large facilities and large institutions. The house church was the natural setting for a community that defined itself in the language of family. And those small fellowships were apparently far more successful at evangelizing their world than most of the organized programs of later institutional Christianity.

House Churches and Small Churches

Small churches today are in a better position to experience the church life of early Christianity than are most large-church structures. Their small size makes knowing

each other and responding to each other's needs much easier. While in small churches members will notice who is missing, in large churches people can only tell how many seats are empty. "In small churches the members count faces. In large churches they count the furniture."⁶ Mutual ministry is a necessity in small churches, who rely heavily on volunteers since they often can't afford multiple staff positions.

Small churches often become the center of community life for their members. Events like weddings, funerals, and fellowship dinners are attended by the vast majority of members, while only a fraction of large churches' memberships may attend similar occasions. Small churches are built not as much on organization and activity as on relationships.⁷

While large churches tend to emphasize a variety of programs for various constituencies within the church, small churches tend to focus on the Sunday gathering for worship, preaching, and fellowship as the heart of church life. Willimon and Wilson suggest that what small churches do best is to provide

a Christian community where the people participate in worship, hear the Word, and carry on a ministry to one another and to the larger community. . . . In the preaching/worship event, churches of small membership may recover their unique identity and mission to the world, as well as their contribution to the larger body of Christ.⁸

Several pitfalls can prevent small churches from taking advantage of their opportunity to experience the congregational life of early house churches. The preoccupation of modern Christianity with large churches leads too many small churches to mimic large church organization, worship, and programs—an effort that will only leave them feeling frustrated and inferior. Small churches might form a choir despite the lack of talent, conduct a formal liturgical service complete with a processional down a very short aisle, or attempt to start a wide variety of ministries even though they lack the members to fill the committees. Small churches need to stay focused on community life, which is their greatest strength.

The financial resources of small churches and the time and energy of their members are too often swallowed up in building programs that stop the very growth that led to the perceived need to build. The friendly, informal envi-

ronment of a group that meets in a house or sits in a circle in a rented office is significantly altered by the construction of an auditorium with stained-glass windows and a large wooden pulpit. Churches should consider following the lead of the early Christians in seeking facilities more suited to life in a small-church family rather than building a smaller version of what a large church might use.

The closeness of the members, which provides one of the great strengths of small churches, can also present one of the greatest threats. Members may resist evangelism and growth because newcomers don't fit easily into established relationships and pecking orders. New members mean new ideas, and growth brings change, which can threaten familiar ways of doing things. The homogeneity that often characterizes small groups may allow unspoken prejudices to lock out those who are different. Strong fellowship can lead to weak evangelism, and being close-knit can lead to being closed off. A goal of any church should be to grow as it fulfills the Great Commission; at some point, small churches must decide between becoming larger churches or starting other small churches. Even churches in situations that inhibit significant growth must still freely draw newcomers into their family lives.

In the Stone-Campbell movement, small churches have a strength that is perhaps not felt as keenly in other traditions: they are closer to New Testament Christianity. We may not see the New Testament practice of meeting in house churches as a mandate for churches today, but we should not minimize the significance of that practice for what it means to live in Christian community. Early Christianity was a religion of relationships, fellowship, and community. Small congregations are the most natural setting for recovering that kind of church life.

As large churches search for ways to recapture the life of the early house church through various small-group and Sunday school models, small churches are already in a position to experience New Testament community life in rich and meaningful ways. Whether meeting in homes or in some other setting, whether in earliest Christianity or in American Protestant congregations, small churches are the most common and perhaps the best expression of the Christian faith.

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