



# HOPE FOR SMALL CHURCH MINISTRY

Guidance for Implementing a Vibrant  
Ministry in a Small Church

## BEST PERSPECTIVES, PRINCIPLES, AND PRACTICES

**Dr. Carlus Gupton**

Assistant Dean, Director of  
Doctor of Ministry, Lipscomb  
University Hazelip School of  
Theology

York University, Equip  
Conference  
March 2024

[LifeandLeadership.com/ministry-  
resources/small-churches](https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/small-churches)

## Hope for Small Churches

### Part 1: Unique Characteristics of Small Churches

---

#### Resources

See the categorized list of resources on my website, LifeandLeadership.com, in the section on Leading the Small Church, <https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/small-churches/>

#### Summary of Perspectives, Principles, and Practices

---

The base of this presentation, in both content and tone, is Karl Vaters, *Small Church Essentials*.<sup>1</sup> I have interwoven principles from my own experience and several leading authors in the small church development genre (e.g., David Ray, Anthony Pappas, Kennon Callahan). Do not skip a resource because it is *old*, as some of the best materials on this subject are perennial. For example, Lyle Schaller wrote at least four books on small churches, with the most recent one published 20 years ago, but his insights are as valid today as they were then.

#### PERSPECTIVES

##### New Realities of Church Sizes by Average Worship Attendance – Lifeway Research<sup>2</sup>

- Smaller churches – Under 50 in attendance: 31% of all churches
- Mid-size churches – 51–99: 37%
- Large churches – 100–249: 24%
- Larger churches – 250 and above: 8%
- For additional help: On church size typologies, see the pages below: “Lyle Schaller’s Church Typologies” (p. 8), “Arlin Rothauge and Four Sizes of Churches” (p. 9)

##### A few implications

- Karl Vaters
  - FACT #1: Most pastoral ministry students will never pastor a church larger than 250 people.
  - FACT #2: Virtually all of us will pastor a small church for at least some time in our ministry (most of us for a lifetime).
  - FACT #3: You can pastor a small church well without settling for less.
- Thom Rainer<sup>3</sup>
  - More pastors and staff will be co-vocational and bi-vocational.
  - Equipping church members to do the work of ministry is as vital as always.
  - Ministry and theological training must adapt to this reality.
  - Search committees will be looking for a different type of pastor.
  - Church budgets will be smaller.
  - Denominations must refocus their ministry and support this new paradigm.
  - More churches will need to be adopted or they will die.

---

<sup>1</sup> Karl Vaters, *Small Church Essentials: Field-Tested Principles for Leading a Healthy Congregation Under 250* (Moody Publishers, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Based on 2022 post-covid attendance. Lifeway Research, “Churches are Open but Still Recovering from Pandemic Attendance Losses,” November 8, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/11/08/churches-are-open-but-still-recovering-from-pandemic-attendance-losses/> (accessed 2023-09-18). Complete report available at <https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Pastors-Sept-2022-Attendance-Report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> As reported in Thom Rainer, “The New Very Large Church,” November 28, 2022, <https://churchanswers.com/blog/the-new-very-large-church/>, (accessed 2023-09-18).

- **There are many types of healthy small churches** – planting, training, house, retirement community, niche, countercultural, impoverished, persecuted, transitional, strategically small.
- **The vast majority of ministers have a relational-pastoral giftset and have neither the interest nor propensity for organizational-administrative necessities of a large church.**
- **Many people grow in Christ best through the pastoral care afforded by a small church.**
- **“Grow it or close it!” is a false dichotomy.** Numerical growth is not inevitable. It is possible to have thriving small churches.
- **Small churches are not a problem or a virtue.** Some churches don’t grow because of unhealthy tendencies (list below). Some churches do not have these tendencies and still remain small, and this is not a bad thing. Equip the saints, reach the lost, and glorify God. If you and your church are doing that, it doesn’t matter what size it is.
  - Selfish attitudes
  - Disobedience to the Scriptures
  - Babysitting the saints instead of reaching the lost
  - Honoring the building more than people
  - Trying to please everyone
  - Manufacturing energy
  - Lack of prayer
  - Following fads instead of following God
  - Territorialism
  - Putting comfort over mission
  - Lack of solid biblical preaching
  - Not enough discipleship
- **Small churches are not an excuse, and must replace excuses with purposeful declarations:**
  - Just because we don’t have a dynamic worship leader does not mean we’ll settle for passionless worship.
  - Lack of sermon prep time because of a bi-vocational schedule will not mean bad theology or passionless preaching.
  - Minimal finances will not stop us from being generous.
  - Not having professionally made graphics, flyers, and banners won’t stop us from inviting our friends to church.
- **For additional help:**
  - On raising small church congregational morale and challenging myths, see my website, LifeandLeadership.com, “Building Small Church Morale,” in the resource guide on Leading the Small Church, <https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/small-churches/#smallchurchmorale>.
  - See the sections below: "Raising Morale, Elevating the Spirit - A Twelve-Step Program for Church Renewal, David R. Ray" (pp. 21-22) and "Gupton, Assessing Congregational Climate" (p. 20), and “The ‘Break-Through Project’ Method of Church Revitalization” (pp. 27-29).

## PRINCIPLES

**The Law of Large Numbers:** The bigger the group, the more predictably they behave. The smaller the group, the less predictably they behave.<sup>4</sup>

- Once you reach a certain threshold of size, there's little difference in the way people function and interact. That's why, if a pastor of a church of 2,000 goes to a conference and hears a church leadership principle from a pastor of a church of 20,000, they can drop a zero and use almost everything they've learned. (Yes, this is an oversimplification.) ... When we get to smaller numbers, it's not a matter of scale anymore. The smaller the group, the more the idiosyncrasies of individual people and the relationships between them come into play.
- Attendance changes don't matter as much in smaller churches. In a big church, even a 10–15 percent shift from year to year can impact its budget, its staffing, and its facility needs. After all, if your church is running 2,000 people, 10–15 percent is 200–300 people! That's something to pay close attention to. In a small church, the percentage swings are bigger, but not nearly as significant to the overall functioning of the church.

**Some small church essentials are universal (i.e., shared with larger churches), some are exclusive to small churches.**

- The smaller the church, the more unique it is. In one church of 50, when one family leaves, the church loses its entire children's ministries department. In another church of 50, when one person misses a Sunday, everyone breathes easier because they don't have to worry about that "certain someone" saying the wrong thing in front of a new guest.
- Knowing what your church has in common with other sizes/types of churches will help you understand where it's different. Small church pastors sometimes too quickly dismiss the leadership principles all churches share. "Our church is different" is not an excuse to overlook universal principles of healthy church leadership.
- For example, an underlying reality is that you can't build a healthy church under the leadership of an emotionally unhealthy pastor, whether the church is large or small.
- On the other hand, some of the distinct characteristics of smaller churches are undeniable and require respectful acknowledgement.
- For additional help:
  - On the unique characteristics of churches based on size, see my website, LifeandLeadership.com, in the section on "Church Size Dynamics, Size Transitions," <https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/church-leadership-foundations-size-dynamics-and-transitions/>.
  - See the classic text, Gary McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (Baker Books, 2009), part two, "Church Size Stages," which presents five typologies: Relational (15-200), Managerial (200-400), Organizational (400-800), Centralized (800-1,500), and Decentralized (1,500-plus). This expands from earlier volume, *One Size Doesn't Fit All*, which presented only the first three types as compared in the chart below: "McIntosh Typology of Church Sizes" (p. 8).

### Strategic or Stuck?

- **Stuck**
  - If your church is small because you're not paying attention to mistakes that need fixing, you're not strategic, you're stuck.

---

<sup>4</sup>"Law of Large Numbers: What It Is, How It's Used, Examples," <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/l/lawoflargenumbers.asp> (similar article referenced in Vaters, 37).

- If your church is small because it excludes people, you're not strategic, you're stuck.
- If your church elevates traditions over making whatever changes are needed to fulfill the Great Commission, you're not strategic, you're stuck.
- If your church demographics look like the neighborhood used to look, instead of the way the neighborhood currently looks, you're not strategic, you're stuck.
- **Strategic**
  - If your church is small because you're equipping the new "small church people," you're not stuck, you're strategic.
  - If your church is small right now, but is being healthy during the time you're small, you're not stuck, you're strategic.
  - If your church is small because you're reducing overhead and simplifying your life and message (e.g., house churches), you're not stuck, you're strategic.
  - If your church is small in order to reach a culture where big churches can't go, you're not stuck, you're strategic.
  - If your ministry and your church finds its greatest kingdom effectiveness within a smaller setting, you're not stuck, you're strategic.

## PRACTICES

**Big churches must prioritize vision, process, and programs. Small churches must prioritize relationships, culture, and history.**

- Simply put, there is no single factor more important for the health and strength of a small church than healthy relationships — with Jesus, each other, and the people you're reaching.
- Culture, in this context, refers to the underlying set of assumptions and realities that give the church a sense of identity and guide (or override) the decisions we make, often invisibly. Peter Drucker's famous quip applies: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast."
- For additional help: On the importance of Relationships, Culture, and History, see the pages below: "David Ray, Thirty Common Characteristics of Smaller Churches" (pp. 13-14) "Anthony Pappas, Small Church as 'Folk Society'" (p. 11), and "Nancy Foltz, Characters in Small Churches" (pp. 11-12).

**True: Large churches must do intentionally what small churches do naturally.**

**Also True: Small churches thrive when they become purposeful about what is presumed.**

- Example of Intergenerational ministry: Small churches are intergenerational by nature. Small church children and youth constantly interact with mature members and are involved earlier and more meaningfully in church ministry. Older members rejoice in the presence of youth. Just because this is natural for small churches, however, does not mean it should be any less intentional.
- Example of Discipleship: Small churches often mistake the proportionally higher percentage of involvement and participation as discipleship, when in fact it may simply be reflexive enculturation in an entrenched religious system. Discipleship, by its nature is more focused on well-defined spiritual formation and requires deliberate teaching, role-modeling, mentoring, etc. In a study conducted by *Christian Standard*, small and very small churches were the most likely to use adult Bible classes as their primary means of adult discipleship, but only 2.5 percent of larger churches used classes as their primary discipleship method. Small groups were the primary discipleship strategy for only one in four small churches, and only 4 percent of very small churches relied on small groups as their primary form of

discipleship.<sup>5</sup> In one study, Tom Claiborne observed, “deeper interpersonal relationships, confession, and openness in the lives of Christians involved in small groups in large churches than I’ve seen in small churches. It is a matter of intentionality.”<sup>6</sup>

- For additional help:
  - On the importance of building on unique strengths of small churches, see below: “Kennon Callahan, Assessing Congregational Strengths” (pp. 15-19).
  - On building intergenerational ministry in churches of all sizes, see Holly Catterton Allen, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship* (IVP Academic, 2023), and *Forming Resilient Children: The Role of Spiritual Formation for Healthy Development* (IVP Academic, 2021).
  - On a model for disciple-making that has experienced good traction in small churches, see Bobby Harrington, Carl Williamson, and Alicia Williamson, *Trust and Follow Jesus: Conversations to Fuel Discipleship, Revised Edition* (Renew.org, 2023).

### **Redefine the benchmark to increasing your capacity for effective ministry**

- **This helps in many ways:**
  - First, it keeps our eyes on the prize, namely, effective ministry, not just doing more stuff or packing more people in the room.
  - Second, it allows for no excuses. We’re always striving to increase our capacity. Lack of numerical growth is not an excuse to do ministry with anything less than the full commitment of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.
  - Third, it removes unnecessary guilt. If we’re doing better, more effective ministry, we don’t walk away feeling defeated if it doesn’t lead to bigger attendance because bigger attendance isn’t the goal. Effective ministry is the goal.
  - Fourth, when we measure effective ministry by kingdom impact rather than attendance, it frees us to do ministry without an agenda. People are more likely to trust us and the message we carry when there’s no appearance of trying to gain something for ourselves.
  - Fifth, it’s a bigger way to look at the church and our place in the world.
- Stuck in a small building? Increase your capacity by doing effective ministry from the building, not just in it.
- In a rural area with a small population? Deepen your impact by capitalizing on the strength of community relationships, not just pushing for bigger attendance.
- Called to minister in ways that are small and intimate, rather than large and loud? Make simplicity your calling card by doing those few things well.
- **Remember, sometimes it takes the wrong people to change the world.** “Get the right people on the bus” doesn’t work as easily in a small church. Since we don’t have the ability to hire in from the outside, we must figure out how to fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission using the parts on the table and the people already on the bus.

---

<sup>5</sup> See Kent E. Fillinger, “2018 Special Report, Part 3: Small and Very Small Churches,” in *Christian Standard*, August 22, 2019, <https://christianstandard.com/2019/08/2018-special-church-report-part-3-small-and-very-small-churches/> (accessed 2023-09-19). For more insight on challenges faced by smaller churches, see the *Christian Standard* October 2019 issue, “The Rural and Small Church Challenge,” <https://christianstandard.com/2019/09/view-the-free-digital-mag-october-2019/> (accessed 2023-09-19).

<sup>6</sup> Tom Claiborne, “Small Churches: Responding to Some Stereotypes,” in *Christian Standard*, September 20, 2019 (reprint of 2012 article), <https://christianstandard.com/2019/09/small-churches-responding-to-some-stereotypes/> (accessed 2023-09-19).

## Change in Small Churches

- ABC's of change – **A**lways **B**e **C**hanging **S**omething. All change involves disruption, disorientation, and reorientation (integration). But do not let your church's "change muscle" atrophy. One of the worst mistakes a church leader can make is to change nothing for a long time, then change several things all at once. Churches that seldom change don't become good at it. Churches that have a regular process for change do it well and in a healthy way.
- Leverage tension. Instead of creating more tension for people—there's always enough of it to go around – leverage the tension that already exists.
- Handle change responsibly. No surprises. Provide personal, process, and product satisfaction. Make necessary changes, properly understood, with enough time to think, pray, learn, discuss, and implement them.
- Closet rule. Don't add a new ministry until you've dropped an old ministry, or until your closet grows. When people live in small spaces, decluttering experts say before you add a new item to your closet, toss out an old item. Small churches should do the same thing.

## Reframe Small Church Vision-Casting

- Rethink the pastor-led vision model. Listen to God together, and let the vision emerge from what God does among the people.
- Mission statements? Great mission statements don't make great churches or fix broken ones; we must *do* the mission first. We shouldn't put anything into words until we're already putting it into action, because the only real hope that a church will follow through on it is if it's based on what the church is already doing. Tim Keller says: "The larger the church, the more a distinctive vision becomes important to its members. The reason for being in a smaller church is relationships.... the larger the church, the more its lay leaders need to be screened for agreement on vision and philosophy of ministry, not simply for doctrinal and moral standards. In smaller churches, people are eligible for leadership on the basis of membership tenure and faithfulness."<sup>7</sup>
- Practical steps: Write out what you're already doing in the simplest, clearest language possible, including a nod to where you hope to go. Don't try to be clever; don't worry about rhymes or alliterations; don't read a book about how to write a mission statement. Just say "we do this and this, and we hope to do this." Then keep doing it with more passion and purpose every day.
- For additional help: On vision-emergence vs. vision-casting, see below: "Vision Cycle of a Healthy Traditional Church, Thom Rainer" (p. 25), and "Building a Mission Mentality in the Smaller Church" (pp. 23-24).

## Mission and Ministry

- Discover the few things your church does well, then do those on purpose.
- This is counterintuitive for most small churches in that there is a greater fear of offending an individual who has a ministry impulse. Admittedly, sometimes churches must go with the impulses that express the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. While this is happening, however, it is important to pay attention to the ideas that work, toss the things that don't, and watch for patterns that emerge. Allow a lot of trial and error. Many of the arrows

---

<sup>7</sup>Tim Keller, *Leadership and Church Size Dynamics: How Strategy Changes with Growth* (Redeemer City to City), 5.

you shoot may seem wasted, but instead of getting upset at missing our target, use it as another piece of information that allows you to narrow your focus.

- Five principles to consider starting a new ministry or ending a current one.
  - Passion – Someone must have passion for it.
  - Purpose – Focus on ministries that fit your purpose, and make sure every new ministry meets a legitimate need related to that purpose.
  - Partner – The surest way to burn out a leader and kill a ministry is solo leadership.
  - Plan – There must be a credible, conceivable path of execution.
  - Prayer – Constant, deliberate, focused.
- Assess, equip, encourage – Assess how each ministry contributes to your overall mission. Equip your people to succeed. Encourage every good deed.
- For additional help: On the importance of building on unique strengths of small churches, see below: “Kennon Callahan, Assessing Congregational Strengths” (pp. 15-19).

### **Adjust the Pace of Small Church Ministry**

- Remember, like our physical bodies, sometimes the church is unhealthy enough that it needs more rest and care than it does exercise and challenge.
- Balance filling up (worship, fellowship, discipleship) and emptying out (discipleship, ministry, evangelism)

### **Focus on the Achievable through “Breakthrough Projects”**

- Latent in every congregation are Spirit-endowed capabilities that can be enervated and catalyzed through one-time projects that act upon a servant-oriented impulse of the people.
- See “The ‘Break-Through Project’ Method of Church Revitalization” (pp. 27-29).



## Lyle Schaller's Church Typologies<sup>8</sup>

- **Fellowship or “cat” church – up to 35 in worship** – Independent, self-sufficient, willing to be fed and cared for, not noticing the pastor's absence as much, able to survive abuse and neglect (no one gets on top of a cat), not wanting to be trained, instinctively knowing how to care for itself, not wanting advice or to be transformed into something else (like a dog).
- **Small or “collie” church – 35-100 in worship** – Coming in different sizes, enjoying being loved and returning affection, responding to sensitive handling and training, lavishly showing appreciation, warmly greeting the pastor on his or her return, but sometimes barking or even snipping at strangers.

Note: The first two are more like each other than either is to any of the other types of churches. Both are alive, active, and playful. Both require care and form a relationship with their caretaker. Both are territorial.

Question: In what ways is your church like the cat? Like the collie?

- **Middle-sized or “garden” church – 100-175 in worship** – Comes in different sizes, is lots of work for the gardener, and you can never get all the weeds out.
- **Awkward-sized or “house” church – 175-225 in worship** – Requires a variety of specialized skills and needs constant repair. Big enough for great potential but too small to have the resources to fulfill potential.
- **Large or “mansion” church – 225-450 in worship** – Requires more help than it can afford and is not as close knit or efficient as it wants to be. Some people may come and go and only occupy a room in the “mansion” for the time they are present.
- **Huge or “ranch” church – 450-700 in worship** – Senior minister is the rancher and procures hired hands to help with the ranch work.
- **Mini-denomination or “nation” – 700+ in worship** – What we now call a “megachurch” and is quite self-contained and autonomous.

---

<sup>8</sup>From Lyle Schaller, *Looking in the Mirror: Self-Appraisal in the Local Church* (Abingdon, 1984), 15-23, as summarized in David R. Ray, *The Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches* (Pilgrim Press, 2003), 73-74.

## Arlin Rothauge and Four Sizes of Churches<sup>9</sup>

Focuses on how size determines factors like the role of the pastor, what people expect, how the church engages in mission, how it incorporates new people, and what kinds of people want to participate in each size of church.

- **Family Church – up to 50 members** – Rather than trying to be all things for all persons, this church focuses on one vocation and does that as well as it can. The pastor tends to fill the role of “chaplain” for the “family.” It tends to attract new members through preexisting ties with family members and friends who are already a part of the church. Newcomers are often attracted by the service the family performs in the community. Often, one or more “Gatekeepers,” more than the pastor, prepares the way for and lowers the bar for new people. Becoming a part of the church is a gradual adoption process.

Question: In what ways is your church like the “Family Church”?

- **Pastoral Church – 50-150 members** – This church tends to revolve around the pastor and designated leaders. It has at least two or three cells (primary relationship / task groups). It depends less on the matriarchs and patriarchs and more on a leadership circle. Communication is less spontaneous and needs to be more intentional. There will be more organized events and fewer happenings. New people will come through attention from the pastor. Membership is granted easily, but assimilation takes a little time. Visitation and assimilation strategies are crucial.

Question: In what ways is your church like the “Pastoral Church”?

- **Program Church – 150-350 members** – Democratic organization and leadership by the laity are critical for the effectiveness of this church. The pastoral leader is pastor to the leaders who are pastors for the church. Lay leaders need to be called, trained, and equipped to lead a variety of programs that are designed for differing ages and interests. The ministries, more than the minister, are the bait that attracts and the food that holds those who come to the church.
- **Corporation Church – 300 + active members** – Complex and diverse. A charismatic, visionary leader who is able to communicate and coordinate is required. The church depends on its size to communicate success. It grows through a strong and diverse small-group ministry. It’s a collection of mostly homogenous single cells who gather weekly for a mass event – worship.

---

<sup>9</sup>Arlin Rothauge, *Sizing up the Congregation for New Member Ministry* (New York: Episcopal Church Center, 1982), 5-36, as summarized by Ray, *Indispensable Guide*, 74-75.

### McIntosh's Typology of Church Sizes<sup>10</sup>

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Small Church</b>	<b>Medium Church</b>	<b>Large Church</b>
<b>Size</b>	15-200 Worshippers	201-400 Worshippers	401+ Worshippers
<b>Orientation</b>	Relational	Programmatical	Organizational
<b>Structure</b>	Single cell	Stretched cell	Multiple cell
<b>Leadership</b>	Resides in key families	Resides in committees	Resides in select leaders
<b>Pastor</b>	Lover	Administrator	Leader
<b>Decisions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Made by congregation</li> <li>• Driven by history</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Made by committees</li> <li>• Driven by changing needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Made by staff and leaders</li> <li>• Driven by vision</li> </ul>
<b>Staff</b>	Bivocational or single pastor	Pastor or small staff	Multiple staff
<b>Change</b>	Bottom up through key people	Middle out through key committees	Top down through key leaders
<b>Growth Patterns</b>	Attraction model through relationships	Program model through key ministry	Proclamation model through word of mouth
<b>Growth Obstacles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small-church image</li> <li>• Ineffective evangelism</li> <li>• Inadequate programming</li> <li>• Downward momentum</li> <li>• Ingrown fellowship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate facilities</li> <li>• Inadequate staff</li> <li>• Inadequate finances</li> <li>• Poor administration</li> <li>• Increasing complexity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor assimilation</li> <li>• Increase bureaucracy</li> <li>• Poor communication</li> <li>• Loss of vision</li> <li>• Lack of member care</li> </ul>
<b>Growth Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Renew of sense of purpose</li> <li>• Begin new ministries</li> <li>• Cultivate evangelism</li> <li>• Celebrate victories</li> <li>• Start new groups/classes</li> <li>• Involve new people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a sense of identity</li> <li>• Add additional staff</li> <li>• Use facilities multiple times</li> <li>• Offer multiple worship services</li> <li>• Write a long-range plan</li> <li>• Improve quality of ministry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Renew the vision</li> <li>• Design assimilation plan</li> <li>• Streamline procedures</li> <li>• Offer need-based events</li> <li>• Adjust leadership roles</li> <li>• Increase the number of small groups</li> </ul>

<sup>10</sup>From Gary McIntosh, *One Size Doesn't Fit All* (Revell, 1999). A revised taxonomy of church sizes adds two larger size typologies to this chart, the Centralized Church (800-1,500) and Decentralized Church (1,500-plus).

## Anthony Pappas, Small Church as “Folk Society”<sup>11</sup>

### Characteristics of a “Folk Society”

- Folk societies have a small population
- Most people are connected by long-term association and know each other well.
- The members have a strong sense of belonging.
- The group is isolated from other groups in neighboring areas.
- It has a strong identification with the area it occupies.
- It often functions as if it’s in a “little world off by itself.”
- There is a primacy or oral over written communications.
- Relationships are ends in themselves, not means for achieving some other ends.
- Social recognition is a greater motivator than material gain.
- Valued qualities are those that contribute to long-term stability, not change.
- Tradition determines actions.
- Moral worth is attached to the traditional ways of doing things.

---

### Nancy Foltz – Characters in Small Churches<sup>12</sup>

Most smaller churches have at least one of each and a few other characters. Some people fill multiple roles. Most roles are so essential that church folks often assume the role, even when it doesn’t come naturally. They make the church fun and not so fun, hot and cold, Christian and not very, real, and distinctive. Larger churches may have some of the same characters, but they’re not as easily recognized, nor are they the stuff of legends.

You may want to jot down a few names from your church beside some of these character descriptions.

**Matriarch and Patriarch** – have lived through the history of the church, are gruff on the outside and caring on the inside and must be won over if the pastor wants to stay very long.

**The Gatekeeper** (often an older man) watches the doors, enjoys greeting everyone and orienting strangers, and ushers newcomers into the family.

**The Legitim�izer** puts the stamp or approval on decisions, either verbally or nonverbally.

**The Cornerstone** is often both a leader in church and community and the church’s communicator, ambassador, and anchor.

**The Blarney Stone** tells the pastor what the church won’t and sometimes tells the church what the pastor can’t.

**The Pebbles** are the newcomers and the young, old, and sideline people.

---

<sup>11</sup>Anthony G. Pappas, *Entering the World of the Small Church* (Alban Institute, 2000), 14, based on anthropologist Robert Redfield, “The Folk Society,” *American Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 4 (Jan. 1947): 293-303.

<sup>12</sup>Nancy Foltz, ed. *Religious Education in the Small Membership Church* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1990), 38-41.

**The Sleeper** worships with eyes closed, usually without snoring.

**The Aginer or Wet Blanket** may be one of the hardest workers but is against almost everything and often bickers a lot.

**The Innovator** (may be the pastor) is often the first to recognize a problem or an opportunity, depends on allies, and has a backup idea if the first one is rejected.

**The Border Guard** knows everyone in the church family, often the honorary “aunt” or “uncle,” watches newcomers, and warns pastor of brewing trouble.

**The Storyteller** is the living historian who preserves the church’s myth and of often a legend him or herself.

**The Early Bird and Bell Ringer** arrives early and gets things organized and started on time.

**The Peacemaker** works to maintain and restore harmony.

**The Spark Plug** is the self-starter who sees what needs doing and does it.

**The Hugger** is the friendliest of all people, loves to hug and be hugged (usually appropriately).

**The Church Angel and the Holy Terror** (most churches have at least one of each of these children).

**The Bird Dog** points to where the pastor should direct his or her attention.

**The Captain Bluster or Steamroller** makes a lot of noise and enjoys fireworks.

**The Fickle Financier** uses money to register approval or disapproval and sometimes manipulates people and programs with money.

**The Busybody** enjoys telling others how to do their job.

**The Sniper** avoids face-to-face criticism; prefers to shoot from cover.

**The Candy, Cookie, or Gum Person** understands the ministry of hospitality, is loved by children, and usually has a pocket of goodies.

**The Warm Shepherd** is surrounded by children who feel loved by her or him.

**The Violet Lady** is the flower lover who loves to decorate and make things beautiful.

### David Ray, Thirty Common Characteristics of Smaller Churches<sup>13</sup>

1. A small church fulfills the common expectations of its people.
2. Almost everyone knows everyone else in a smaller church.
3. Beyond knowing one another, the smaller church acts and feels like “family.”
4. Almost everyone feels and is important and needed.
5. Organizational functioning is simple rather than complex and sometimes immediate, not delayed.
6. Communication is rapid and usually effective.
7. Smaller churches are known by their distinctive personalities and less by their programs or even their names.
8. A smaller church is likely to be rooted in its history and nervous about its future.
9. A smaller church’s theology is relational, horizontal, and historical.
10. Smaller churches understand and respond to mission in personal and immediate terms.
11. A smaller church prefers its minister be a pastor, friend, generalist, and lover; not a professional, specialist, administrator, or chief executive officer.
12. Smaller churches look and feel like New Testament churches.
13. Smaller churches are people centered and oriented.
14. Smaller churches are more likely to laugh and cry than larger ones.
15. Worship is their primary activity.
16. Eating together is their favorite activity.
17. The children in smaller churches belong to the whole church.
18. Smaller churches are more intergenerational and integrated than larger ones.
19. Smaller churches are very good at celebrating the various stages of life.
20. Smaller churches are more story than treatise, more mythology than systematic theology.
21. Smaller churches operate on fluid “people” time.

---

<sup>13</sup>Ray, *Indispensable Guide*, 88-103.

22. Most smaller church people would prefer, on the one hand, to give what is needed when it's needed and, on the other hand, to underwrite what they value as a gesture of gratitude for God's goodness.
23. Lay people are more important than the pastor.
24. Capable, compassionate pastoral leadership is usually required to lead a smaller church from only surviving to really thriving.
25. Smaller churches are usually hard to get into and harder to get out of.
26. Smaller churches are tough and tenacious.
27. Smaller churches would rather do it "our way" because they're locally owned and operated.
28. Smaller churches are more effective than efficient.
29. Smaller churches are better at events than programs.
30. Smaller churches are better at meeting immediate needs than long-range planning.

## Kennon Callahan, Assessing Congregational Strengths<sup>14</sup>

The small church possesses unique traits that equip it for a special God-given mission. The criteria used to assess the effectiveness of the small church differ considerably from those of larger churches. The experience and research of leading authors and practitioners in this area reveal eight characteristics or qualities found in small, strong congregations:

- Mission and service
- Compassion and shepherding
- Community and belonging
- Self-reliance and self-sufficiency
- Worship and hope
- Leaders and team
- Just enough space and facilities
- Giving and generosity

### Mission and Service

---

Small, strong congregations do not perceive themselves as miniature large churches. Instead, they discover the people and tasks toward which God has invited them to be in mission. God calls each congregation to its mission in a distinctive way that each congregation can hear. There is no universal, repeatable checklist of steps whereby all congregations discover their mission. There are, however, several general trends:

- Small, strong congregations share one excellent mission.
- The congregation shares its mission as its gift to the whole community. The participants of the congregation live a theology of service, not survival.
- The mission begins, frequently, with some precipitating event that stirs people's discovery of their longings and strengths.
- The mission begins with three to five people who share their mission with the spirit of a team.
- The mission is mutual. Eventually, new helpers for the mission come from among the persons helped. The congregation is a legend for the mission and service of a few people in the congregation.

Circle the number on the scale below that represents how well your congregation possesses this quality. The highest rating is 10 and the lowest rating is 1.

---

**Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High**

---

<sup>14</sup> These criteria are an adaptation of Dr. Kennon L. Callahan, *Small, Strong Congregations* (Jossey-Bass, 2000).



---

### Compassion and Shepherding

---

Small, strong congregations, perhaps more so than larger congregations, preach the gospel by how they live and how they share, more than by the words they speak. They share a remarkable spirit of shepherding and compassion:

- A small, strong congregation is compassion-driven.
- The congregation spontaneously displays acts of kindness, thoughtfulness, courtesy, gentleness, and compassion.
- The congregation lives a theology of forgiveness.
- The congregation is a legend for its spirit of a loving heart.

Circle the number on the scale below that represents how well your congregation possesses this quality. The highest rating is 10 and the lowest rating is 1.

---

**Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High**

---

### Open and Inclusive

One of the significant qualities of small, strong congregations is that people discover a deep sense of community. Countless millions of persons around the planet, with all sorts of human hurts and hopes, from all paths of life, discover a sense of home, community, and belonging in a small, strong congregation:

- A small, strong congregation is open and inclusive.
- The congregation helps people discover family.
- The congregation serves multiple neighborhoods within its community.
- The congregation lives a healthy life as one, or three, or more groupings.

Circle the number on the scale below that represents how well your congregation possesses this quality. The highest rating is 10 and the lowest rating is 1.

---

**Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High**

---

### Self-reliance and Self-Sufficiency

Small, strong congregations share a solid sense of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. They have the same shortages of personnel and money and inadequate supplies as do small, dying congregations. Yet by faith they have come to learn that money matches

mission. The stronger the mission, the more generous the money. The weaker the mission, the less generous the money. They learn that God provides resources sufficient unto the mission. They claim well the strengths, gifts, and competencies with which God blesses them. With the grace of God, they move forward with the mission to which God invites them:

- A small, strong congregation has a consistent sense of self-reliance.
- The congregation encourages creativity and improvisation.
- The congregation benefits from community resources.
- The congregation has reasonable ministerial resources.

Circle the number on the scale below that represents how well your congregation possesses this quality. The highest rating is 10 and the lowest rating is 1.

---

**Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High**

---

### **Worship and Hope**

One of the qualities present in small, strong congregations is their worship. Consistently, eight out of twelve Sundays and even more frequently, the services are:

- Warm and welcoming
- Stirring and inspiring
- Congregational (feels more grass roots and less top down) and sacramental (helps participants sense the presence of God in their lives).
- Relevant and hopeful

Circle the number on the scale below that represents how well your congregation possesses this quality. The highest rating is 10 and the lowest rating is 1.

---

**Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High**

---

### **Team, Leaders, and Congregation**

One of the qualities present in the small, strong congregation is the gift for living and sharing together as team, leaders, and congregation. They see the value and importance of working together, and they do this quite naturally. Leaders see the congregation as a family, and they lead as the team leaders of a family. The church counts on their

ministerial leader to be a part of the team. Leaders work hard to close any gap between themselves and the grass roots of the congregation.

- They have developed the capacity to see the whole, not the parts. All participate – whether children, youths, or adults – in the whole of the congregation, not just the parts. There may be specific activities for different needs, but the genius of the small congregation is to nurture the whole.
- They affirm the biblical principle of the diversity of gifts, not a hierarchy of gifts.
- Key leaders, and the congregation as a whole, have a deep sense of gratitude and recognition for the strengths and competencies that a ministerial leader brings to the congregation. Likewise, the minister has a clear understanding of both the diversity of gifts and the specific gifts that he shares with the congregation and the community.
- The minister particularly excels in the gifts of being a good shepherd, a helpful preacher, wise and caring leader, and a community minister.
- They have a few in the congregation with a strong capacity to lead, who match the nature of the small congregation and the distinctive mission they serve. The leaders love, listen, learn and *then* lead.

Circle the number on the scale below that represents how well your congregation possesses this quality. The highest rating is 10 and the lowest rating is 1.

---

**Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High**

---

### **Just Enough Space and Facilities**

They have space and facilities adequate for their mission. The mission is the focus. These congregations discover the mission to which God is inviting them. Then, they discover *just enough* of a facility to assist in that mission. Mortar follows mission, not the reverse. The blueprint for mission determines the blueprint for meeting. Instead of believing that they are not really a congregation unless they have a building; they believe they have become a congregation as soon as they have discovered a shared sense of their God-given mission. The first priority of the congregation is to discover the mission to which God is inviting them.

Circle the number on the scale below that represents how well your congregation possesses this quality. The highest rating is 10 and the lowest rating is 1.

---

**Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High**

---

## **Giving and Generosity**

Small, strong congregations share a remarkable spirit of generosity and giving. Members live with a spirit of generosity about life; and they give with that same sense of generosity:

- Informal giving – The small congregation lives an informal life together, thus much of the giving is informal (spontaneous gifts, seasonal, major projects).
- All six sources of giving are practiced – spontaneous, weekly Sunday, special planned, major project, annual gifts, enduring gifts.
- Congregation is alive with the strengths for giving – driven by compassion, solid financial leadership, and positive reinforcement.
- There is a strong sense of God’s gracious spirit of generosity, an overwhelming sense of God’s grace in the lives of members and the congregation as a whole.

Circle the number on the scale below that represents how well your congregation possesses this quality. The highest rating is 10 and the lowest rating is 1.

---

**Low 1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    High**

---

## Gupton, Assessing Congregational Climate

Read each statement at the left and circle the number in the appropriate column to the right.<sup>15</sup>

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. We talk openly about the presence and movement of God in our lives and in the life of the congregation.	1	2	3	4
2. We are willing to adopt new ways, and are not threatened by change.	1	2	3	4
3. We welcome newcomers into significant roles within the congregation.	1	2	3	4
4. We frequently learn new hymns and choruses.	1	2	3	4
5. There are a variety of orders and activities in our worship assemblies.	1	2	3	4
6. There is steady exposure to new ideas and many are evaluated and incorporated.	1	2	3	4
7. When an unexpected event happens, we try to discern God's hand in it.	1	2	3	4
8. We create several links to those outside the congregation (i.e., genuine human interaction).	1	2	3	4
9. We have several stories to tell about how God has worked in us and through us in inspiring and formative ways.	1	2	3	4
10. Our life together is full of humor, laughter and play.	1	2	3	4
11. Our worship and classes help members to understand how faith intersects with daily life.	1	2	3	4
12. We have a positive image of where God is leading our congregation.	1	2	3	4
13. We deal proactively with challenges as God's calls to growth and learning.	1	2	3	4
14. The joy of the Lord is evident in our church.	1	2	3	4
15. We behave constructively in our conflicts, learn from them, and use them to heighten our sensitivity to God's will.	1	2	3	4
16. There is a shared sense of authority. No one person or family can unilaterally block change.	1	2	3	4
17. Our traditions give us stability and identity, but we do not allow our traditions to hinder us from God's tomorrow.	1	2	3	4
18. We have a positive image of ourselves as a congregation, and believe our best days are ahead of us.	1	2	3	4
19. There is not an "elephant in the living room" (a "secret" everyone knows but no one brings out in the open), but a healthy honesty about congregational issues.	1	2	3	4
20. We have successfully admitted, grieved, healed, and released painful parts of our past.	1	2	3	4

<sup>15</sup> These criteria are an adaptation of insights from Anthony G. Pappas, *Entering the World of the Small Church* (Alban Institute, 2000), and Lyle E. Schaller, *The Small Membership Church: Scenarios for Tomorrow* (Abingdon, 1994)

**Raising Morale, Elevating the Spirit**  
**A Twelve-Step Program for Church Renewal**  
**David R. Ray<sup>16</sup>**

No number of people or amount of money can compensate for a church's collective lack of self-worth and self-confidence. However, a church that feels it can climb any mountain and meet any challenge will find a way to do so.

The following is a twelve-step program that is guaranteed to renew a church that follows it "religiously." A church that commits to this program will soon have significantly higher morale. It will be more effective and faithful in what it does. There is a high probability that following these steps will attract new people to your church, provide more money for your ministry and mission, and cause the community to wonder what's come over your church. It could be used over a twelve-week period, but twelve months is more realistic and would have more substantive and longer-lasting results. A church or at least its leadership should commit to following this program and should designate a three-to-five member task group to implement and monitor the program.

**Twelve Steps**

1. Use the *Church Morale Inventory*<sup>17</sup> with as many of your church members as possible and follow the process that accompanies it. Ask those present to do two things throughout the next year. First, ask them to commit personally to work at one or two strategies for raising church morale. Second, ask them to pray regularly for one another and for their church.
2. Plan one sure-fire program, event, strategy, or change; make sure it succeeds; celebrate it; and then plan a second, then a third. (CG – Some call this the "Break-Through Project")
3. As someone from your denomination, a neighboring church, or a counseling agency to spend one or more sessions with your church doing some basic leadership training and development.
4. Since worship is or ought to be the heart and soul of your church, take steps to make your worship more spirited, more faithful, more meaningful, and more enjoyable. Singe more favorite hymns; many new, beautiful banners; have shorter, more involving sermons; introduce a worship innovation for a trial period; pray for the effectiveness of your worship; read and utilize the book, *Wonderful Worship in Smaller Churches*.
5. Take at least two concrete steps to make being together more pleasurable – such as having refreshments at every gathering, paint the room, get more comfortable furnishings, have a mandatory cut-off time for church meetings, or whatever else you can imagine.
6. Hold an all-church potluck dinner. For the program, ask people to list on newsprint every success from the last two years of church life and list twenty strengths of your church. Post these lists where others can see them for a few weeks and print them in your newsletter or bulletin.

---

<sup>16</sup>David R. Ray, *The Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches* (The Pilgrim Press, 2003), pp. 196-201.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 272-274.

7. Capitalize on one or more strengths of your list. For example, if you have charming children, celebrate them and involve them more in church life; if you have a beautiful building, have postcards made of it.
8. Identify one significant but solvable problem; brainstorm every conceivable strategy for addressing it; pick one or two strategies and get key persons to accept responsibility for implementing the strategy; work the strategy; celebrate and evaluate what happened; and consider working on a second problem.
9. Pick one significant, new mission project (of the hands-on variety) that your church will enjoy doing together and do it.
10. Implement one interior and one exterior spruce-up or fix-it project as soon as you can schedule it. Encourage your people to do this together.
11. Over the time of this program, ask everyone in your church to give ten percent more money to the church. The money should not be used for paying routine bills. Rather, involve the church in identifying one or more uses of the extra money that they will feel good about. Some will make this additional ten percent a permanent increase.
12. At the end of the twelve weeks or months, plan an extravagant gala celebration of your twelve-step renewal program. Decorate the church. Ask people to dress up. Have a meal cooked by your best cooks ever or, even better, have it catered. Invite the whole church, including the kids. Invite the mayor and the news media. Show pictures that were taken throughout the process. Invite people to share memories and stories and learnings.

Beyond leading your church to work on measures to elevate their morale, what can you personally do if you are the pastoral or lay leader? G. Douglass Lewis, president of Wesley Theological Seminary...in his book on leadership in ministry (*Meeting the Moment: Leadership and Well-Being in Ministry*, Abingdon, 1997, pp. 22-23), names four simple rules for energizing or building the morale of others.

1. Remember that every person wants to do something significant with his or her life and is constantly looking for ways to give expression to that desire. Take each person seriously and help him or her decide how to pursue that quest.
2. Focus on a person's strengths. It's usually easy to identify what we can't do or aren't good at. Focusing on these negatives is debilitating for most people. Instead, help persons identify and apply their strengths in the ministry and mission of the church. This will release far more energy than one might imagine.
3. Help people feel included. At some level, every person yearns to be in community. Do what you need to do to make your church more inclusive and less exclusive. Don't let anyone in your midst feel that they don't matter.
4. Say thanks! Say thanks! Say thanks! Noticing and affirming even the smallest and most insignificant of contributions will energize and build the self-esteem and morale of your people. As an example, in [a few churches listed] "Feather-in-the-Hat" awards were given at each annual meeting to those who were unsung heroes or performed exemplary service in the life of their church. Each recipient got a crazy hat with a colorful feather, a flowery speech in their honor, a round of applause, and their picture taken.

## **Building a Mission Mentality in the Smaller Church<sup>18</sup>**

The survival and identity of Christian churches and their future depend on their outer focus – mission, which is defined as all that the church does beyond its doors. It can happen with any church, like a church that is down to 14 people and is “dying off,” but wants to “do something helpful” before it is gone. They adopt a local elementary school, helping wherever they were needed. In this involvement, they found a new lease on life. Within a year, they had about ninety people in worship.<sup>19</sup>

### **Ten Commandments of Congregational Mission:**

1. Mission is a life-and-death matter for smaller churches.
2. People want to make a difference.
3. Authentic mission grows out of a church’s history, unique character, and context.
4. People have to “feel” the need.
5. Smaller church mission needs to be hands-on, person-to-person.
6. Smaller church mission is integral to the whole life of the church, i.e. it is felt and expressed in worship, education, and care-giving.
7. Smaller churches are better at doing mission than planning it, therefore remember to KISS your plans (Keep It Simple, Stupid).
8. More gets done when you’re having fun.
9. Love without limits.
10. Smart mission is both smart and faithful (e.g. involve the family of the person whose house you repair on the congregational work day).

### **Ideas:**

1. Plan a year-long consciousness-raising mission-education series. Have a different speaker every month. One church did this and included:
  - A hunger banquet in which one person got a gourmet dinner, a few got a basic meal, and most got thin soup in a can and water, followed by a reflection on the experience.
  - An after-worship program to honor all our members who were volunteering time and talent in various service programs. Survey the whole congregation and make a construction paper balloon naming each person and the work they are doing. Exhibit the balloons on the wall somewhere conspicuously. The amount of volunteer effort engaged by one small congregation may amaze you. Give each person a certificate and symbolic gift.
  - Have a mission fair. Ask every person you support in a budget to send a representative or something to display. Have a panel of these representatives give the sermon during worship. Following worship, have games for the kids, food, time to tour the displays, and opportunity to talk to the representatives. It will be an exciting and educational event.
2. Allot ten percent of next year’s budget to go for some new and innovative mission venture. Challenge your members to write “grant proposals,” and offer a workshop to help them envision significant projects and write winning proposals. Have these criteria for a project to be funded:
  - Be realistic and doable.
  - Address a real issue or problem in a way that could make a real difference.

---

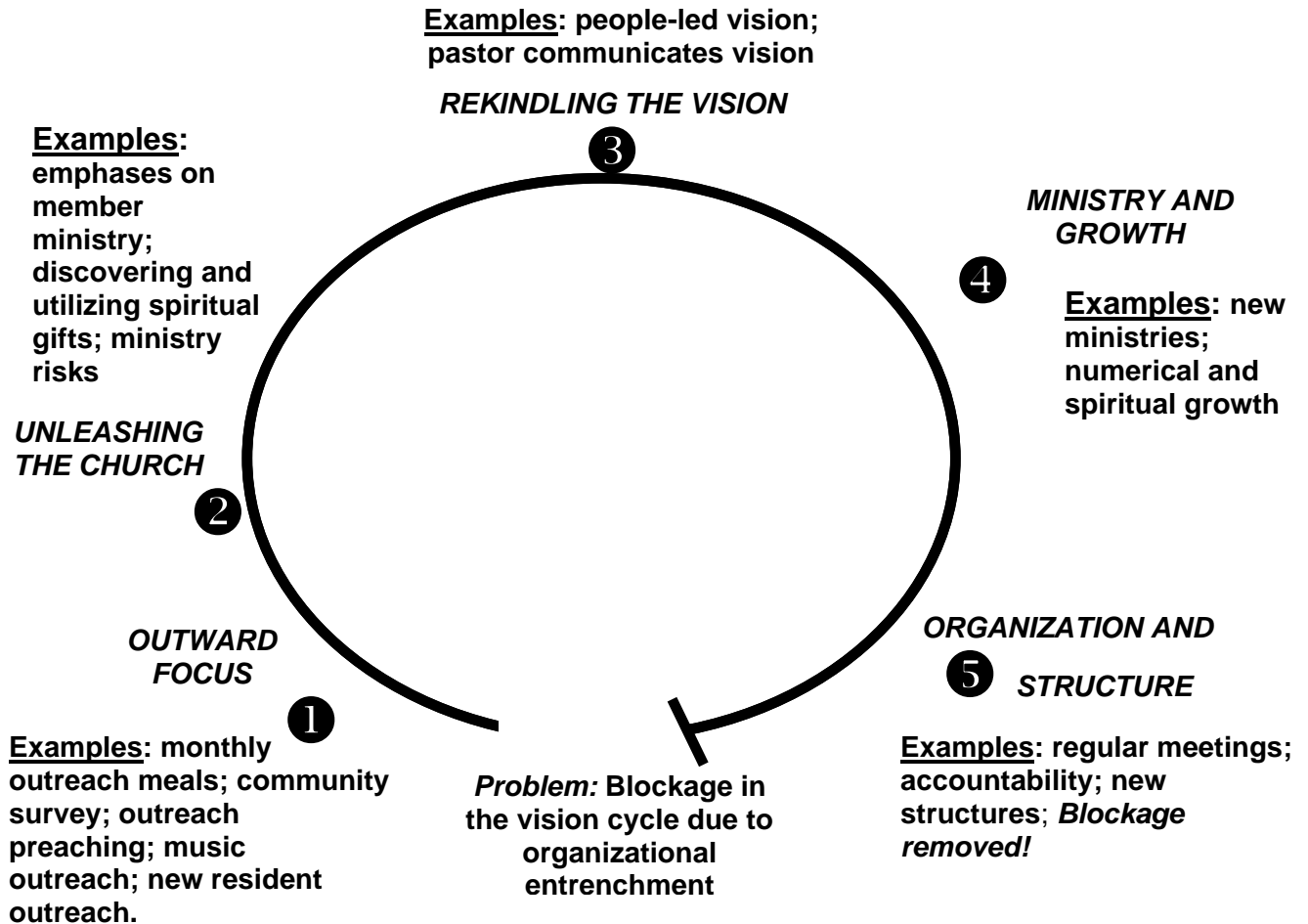
<sup>18</sup>This section summarizes and adapts Ray, *Indispensable Guide*, 169-190.

<sup>19</sup>From Kennon Callahan, *Small Strong Congregations: Creating Strengths and Health for Your Congregation* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), 32.



- Provide a fresh and creative approach.
  - Involve our people in a faithful and effective way.
3. Get the book, *Acting on Your Faith: Congregations Making a Difference* by Victor M. Claman and David E. Butler. It has seventy stories of what other churches have done (with photos), along with suggestions for identifying and developing your own mission venture. Here are a few examples.
- One church of 130 members started the New Start Bakery as part of their community center. Some bread is sold to help support the center, some is used for school lunches, and some is given away.
  - A church of 140 members in Detroit focused on inner-city poor and homeless, serving three thousand meals a week, offering a free medical clinic, operating a drop-in center for homeless people and another for developmentally disabled, and so on.
  - A church of 75 members operates a half-day, three-day-a-week preschool for thirty-five families and charges each one two dollars a day.
  - A church of 85 members acquired seven acres to be farmed on a cooperative based by migrant farmers.
  - A church of 75 in a declining neighborhood hired a Hispanic minister who reached the new population that had sprung up around the building.
  - A church of 100 formed a partnership with a village in Honduras and began sending mission teams to start a medical clinic, develop a water system, and work on agricultural programs.
4. A few good questions to ask:
- What will fit the history, character, and context of your church? What kinds of projects fit the priorities and experiences of your people?
  - Is your church oriented toward social justice issues, is it likely to respond to an educational or developmental concern, or does it have evangelistic concern?
  - Do you want to work at the charitable level, the developmental level, or the social-change level?
  - Or perhaps there's a pressing need staring your people in the face that they must respond to?

# Vision Cycle of a Healthy Traditional Church Thom Rainer



Thom Rainer, *Eating the Elephant*, p. 55

## The “Breakthrough Project” Method of Church Revitalization George Hunter<sup>20</sup>

Hunter was an avid researcher of growing churches in the 1980s – 2000s. He discovered an often-repeated pattern, typified in the example of Shiloh Church that moved from “tradition to mission” through the catalytic experience of a series of “projects,” namely, a building project following a tornado, an organized response to the critical illness of one of their members and the difficulty pregnancy of another, and others.

Typical features of these projects include:

1. The project takes a limited period of time, weeks (or months at most), to achieve the project’s objectives.
2. The project usually requires special “promotion” among the members, or the target population, the supporting constituency.
3. To achieve the project’s objectives, the church usually needs to devote priority deployment of resources (human, financial, or physical) for the duration of the project.
4. The project frequently requires the close orchestration of the services of many people with different gifts necessary to the project’s success.
5. The achievement of the project is usually visible and is publicly celebrated.

Often, in churches that experience turnaround through projects, the projects typically become the milestones that shape the church’s identity. The first project is often a response to a crisis. But the “energy” derived from this event often builds into multiple projects that are focused on achieving something special in ministry for the people and for God.

Many Christian leaders seem to know, intuitively, that periodic achievements give a necessary “shot in the arm” to congregational movement, so they organize and promote projects – to keep spirits up and people involved, and to maintain momentum.

This is often especially helpful for churches who feel beleaguered, with a low image of themselves. They do not have the resources or the capacity to observe the hard discipline of an intentional discipleship model or a missional strategy. But, very few churches lack what is necessary for the renaissance-forming impact of projects. So, based on significant organizational research at the time Hunter wrote this book, he suggested that churches lay low on diagnostic activities. He says:

*“Looking at the weaknesses of an organization that is not ready for that only depresses the organization and arouses and intensifies the very forces (“restraining forces”) stacked against the changes the organization needs. [But] pathological organizations are never as unhealthy and hopeless as appearances suggest.”*

He quotes one researcher:

*“In any situation, no matter how many problems exist, no matter how many gaps and weaknesses in the people and the systems, no matter how many conditions beyond the control*

---

<sup>20</sup> This is “old gold” from a popular turn-of-the-century writer in church leadership, George G. Hunter III, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Asbury Theological Seminary’s School of World Mission and Evangelism. It is found in his classic text, *Leading and Managing a Growing Church* (Abingdon Press, 2000), 110-136.

*of management are impeding progress, it is almost always possible to identify one or to specific short-term bottom-line goals for which the ingredients for success are in place and could be readily marshaled.”*

Furthermore, in such organizations a focus on specific goals are results will motivate action more than focusing on problems are grand designs. The experience of one of more successful projects will help the organization feel more competent. The way forward is through aiming at tough-but-attainable objectives and should take place in groups, where individuals publicly contribute their ideas to what is being considered, commit themselves to the objectives, and feel ownership in the emerging projects.

Hunter then proposes the “Zest Factor,” or a set of project-worthy conditions that can stimulate radically higher performance than usual.

- Sense of urgency
- A challenge
- Success near and clear
- People collaborate – an new “espirit”
- Pride of achievement
- Fear of failure
- Exciting, novel, like a game
- People experiment and ignore “red tape”

Organizations who experience this must resist the temptation that the energies revealed through such a circumstance are not “normal” and thus cannot be sustained. Instead, Hunter suggests that these factors should be allowed to breathe new life and satisfaction into work, and show people a “new normal.”

Facilitating such projects usually requires a project manager who collaborates with a guiding task force to do the following:

- They define the project’s objectives, and the periodic milestones toward achieving the objectives, and the scheduling of each milestone’s achievement.
- They divide the project into tasks and subtasks and define who will need to achieve each task by when.
- They determine and allocate the resources – the people, time, funds, and facilities that will be needed for each task and for the completed project.
- Once the project is underway, they periodically monitor the progress of the project, to perceive problems and engage in interventions of midcourse corrections.
- Throughout the project, they are reminding everyone of the objectives of the project and communicating its progress to each work unit and to the church. This communication is usually amplified visually.

What project should you choose? Start with the principle of “exploit existing readiness – don’t try to create new readiness.” He suggests several criteria:

1. Consider beginning with an urgent and compelling goal.
2. Consider choosing a project that is achievable in a relatively short period of time – thirty to sixty days maximum.

3. If the project will take longer, choose a first-step sub-goal that can be achieved in thirty to sixty days.
4. Choose a project that expresses what people are ready, willing, and able to do.
5. Choose a project for which the resources and authority for achieving it are already available. Many churches (and other organizations) wring their hands over what they cannot do, and ignore what they can do.
6. Choose a project that, when achieved, would be a clear and visible success, breaking the hand-wringing syndrome.
7. With the momentum of several successes, and the people's increasing confidence and competence, take on larger projects.
8. Choose projects that would advance the long-range objectives of the organization, as those become defined.
9. In time, with increased congregational self-esteem, the leaders will want to put their project orientation more clearly within the service of a strategic plan.