

Research

“Aquila and Priscilla, together with the church that meets in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord.” [1 Cor 16 v 19]

From the early days of Christianity churches were small and this has been the most usual form they have taken throughout Christian history. In the 21st century world large churches are still an exception. Abraham Lincoln is said to have commented that God must love small churches because he made so many of them.

I have spent a large part of my life and ministry in small churches. These have mainly been churches which have always been small, rather than ones which were once large and are now declining. The three churches where I now minister would count as small by most definitions, so I decided to do some reading and research into small churches, in the hope that this would be of benefit and interest to them and to me.

I realised fairly early on that there are many definitions of “small”. In America churches with less than 100 members would be called small (or even under 200 members in some research). Academic research here takes 50 or less worshippers as a definition of “small”, with 12 or less being considered “tiny”. (Some denominations, including the URC, tend to count in terms of members rather than worshippers.) In the course of reading and discussion I discovered the following numbers used to define small – 100, 50, 40, 30, 20, and 12. The Methodist Church has a minimum number of 7 for being a church. Less than this and the “church” becomes a “class” and falls under the auspices of another church. People of other denominations take a different line in defining a church and quote the words of Jesus: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” [Matt 18 v 20].

Various attempts have been made to classify churches. Anthony Pappas, an American pastor, describes some of these (p13). There is Rothauge’s classification: family church (up to 50 members), pastoral church (50-150), program church (150-350) and corporation church (350 and above). Schaller’s classifications, based on average number of worshippers, are - under 35 “cat”, 35-100 “collie dog”, 100-175 “garden”, 175-225 “house”, 225-450 “mansion”, 450-700 “ranch”, and over 700 “nation”. The inference in the two smallest categories is that a cat is independent minded, whereas a dog can be tamed! Pappas himself likens a small church to a “tribe” or a “folk community”.

Paul Lack (p4), writing from an Anglican perspective, refers to a church of less than 12 worshippers as a “cell” and one with between 50 and 150 worshippers as a “congregation”. He sees many small rural churches as “cells” who want to worship as “congregations”. Although there are clear differences between small rural churches and small urban ones, which I am not investigating in this study, his comment may apply to many small churches whatever their context.

Throughout Christian history the majority of worshipping congregations have been small and still are. Some fairly recent figures illustrate this. The Small Church

Network Supplement (July 1996) quotes research done by the English Church Census in 1989 and by the Bible Society in 1991:

- 36% of all English churches have a weekly attendance of 50 or less
- 75% of churches with 25 or less adults in worship are in rural areas
- 61% of churches with 50 or less adults are in rural areas

In 1998 the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church set up a Task Group to look at small churches. The report of this group (January 2001), using the average congregation numbers from the 2000 Year Book, produced the following statistics:

- 56.32% of churches had less than 50 worshippers
- 34.94% of churches had less than 30 worshippers
- 9.21% of churches had less than 12 worshippers.

Even accounting for closures, as the denomination has got smaller so the number of churches with small congregations will almost certainly have increased.

Stuart Scott, who was a member of this Task Group, has done considerable further research on small churches. He proposes 4 categories of small church (p 46):

1. Declining churches – often in larger decaying buildings
2. Church plants – meeting in homes or renting schools
3. Inherently small churches – due to context e.g. rural
4. Intentionally small – e.g. “cell” church which splits when a certain size, or “Base Christian Community” with emphasis on justice and empowerment

This is helpful when trying to understand the differences between small churches.

With some of these thoughts and figures in my mind, I decided to send out a questionnaire. This was not intended to be a scientific study – it was not based on a representative sample, nor was it truly random. It was merely to form a “snap-shot” of views held by some ministers of small churches at that time (September 2011). I limited the research to the three Synods where I had served (Yorkshire, Mersey and Northern) thinking that I had at least a passing knowledge of the churches there. Using the 1989-90 URC Year Book and the 2010 Year Book and “50 church members or less” as a criterion for “small”, I listed churches which were “small” in both Year Books. This meant that I would focus on churches which had been small for some time, rather than ones which had relatively recently been much larger and were now declining. I then sent out questionnaires to 20 ministers whose e-mail addresses were in the 2010 Year Book. 13 of these ministers replied, which I considered to be a good response.

The questions I asked were:

1. What are the positive things about small churches?
2. What are the drawbacks?
3. What do you consider to be the main differences between smaller and larger churches?
4. Why do you think some small churches are still open while larger ones have closed?
5. What can smaller churches teach larger ones?
6. What are your main concerns for the small churches(es) where you minister?

7. What are your hopes and plans as minister of a small church?

There was also an opportunity to add any other thoughts or comments. I later did some follow-up interviews. The responses to the questionnaire were as follows:

1. The main positive things about small churches are the close relationships, the high level of commitment, participation and loyalty. Comments were made that people are more likely to attend worship every week because they know that their presence makes a difference. If people are away they are missed. A high proportion of members are actively involved in the life of the church. One minister wrote: "It feels more like their personal church". Small churches are seen to be more flexible and more willing to take risks.

2. The main draw-backs were lack of people, resources and finance. Some people tend to focus only on survival. If there are bad relationships this shows more in a small church. When regular worshippers are away it makes a noticeable difference to the congregation. As there are fewer people to hold office, those who do so often have to stay in post for a long time. There were comments about the problem of attracting new people when the congregation is known to be small. This was described by one minister as "lack of a critical mass". Another commented that when people have known each other for many years they do not always realise how much work is involved in befriending new individuals.

3. The main differences were seen to be the close relationships. One minister wrote: "In larger churches a person may be known by sight or name, but very little else." Another wrote: "In larger churches voices can be lost." It seems to be easier to consult and organise and change plans in a small church. Once on side with an idea smaller churches can move faster. On the other hand, intensity of relationships can be problematic leading to situations which are difficult to diffuse. A comment was made that a small church is not a failed one unless it continues to struggle to maintain church life as if it had over 30 members.

4. I asked this question because I sometimes wonder why it is that some small churches have kept going while larger ones have closed. The replies indicated several reasons: people in smaller churches have "greater investment in their buildings" or a "dogged determination to stay open". Commitment and loyalty also figure, as does the fact that people in small churches have "learned to travel light". There can also be a reluctance to accept that life has moved on. Members of larger churches may be able to regard a situation less emotionally and more realistically. In some cases resources are put into small churches because they are the only Christian presence in a place or because their building is a vital part of the community. Closure of a church of any size seems to depend on its finances, the state of its buildings and its position within the community.

5. The replies to this question indicated that there are many things which small churches can teach larger ones: the value of small groups, the ability to provide intimacy and friendship, informality and a relaxed atmosphere. Small

churches can also teach others “how to make the most of what you have” and how to manage with less ministerial input. A comment was made that it is sometimes more difficult to find people to do things in churches with 250 members than in small churches. The theme of care for one another kept occurring and included the expression: “where two or three are gathered there is a greater concern for the other.”

6. The main concerns of the ministers included sustainability, viability and vulnerability. They also mentioned the increasing age and infirmity of church members, the lack of potential leaders and office holders, and finance. Some fears were expressed about the intentions of the wider church, with a variety of opinions as to how much support there is for smaller churches at a Synod level. Even though the question asked for concerns, there was a note of optimism from one minister: “If major repairs placed us in danger we’d only fold if we couldn’t justify our existence”.

7. One recurrent theme in the answers to this question about hopes and plans was the desire to establish and build up links with other congregations both within the URC, and ecumenically. In one case the hoped-for link was with a local ‘Fresh Expressions’ of church. There was much concern too that as ministers they should go on providing care, support and guidance to the small churches and keep encouraging church members to care for each other and to work out what role their church has in the local community. The phrase “come to terms with their predicament” was also used. The plans of one minister include imminent retirement and this question prompted the comment: “Ministry is changing drastically and small churches are in the forefront of the changes”. Another minister, after saying that the local church is continuing to develop “in small but significant ways”, added “I am very hopeful for the future”.

Not many additional thoughts or comments were added, but these included requests for a copy of my findings and reading list, best wishes for my sabbatical and a note (from a minister I had known in a previous Synod) about the joys of becoming a grand-parent! One minister sent a follow-up e-mail stressing the need to celebrate: “celebrate your size - whether large or small. We don’t do it enough.”

This small “snap-shot” of feelings about small churches echoes much of what I had been reading. In 1978 these words were written by Carl Dudley in his book “Making the Small Church Effective”:

“In a big world, the small church has remained INTIMATE.
In a fast world, the small church has been STEADY.
In an expensive world, the small church has remained PLAIN.
In a complex world, the small church has remained SIMPLE.
In a rational world, the small church has kept FEELING.
In a mobile world, the small church has been an ANCHOR.
In an anonymous world, the small church CALLS US BY NAME.”

(quoted in Oct 1996 issue of ‘Small Church Network’)

It is difficult to remain anonymous or unnoticed in a small church. Those who belong to small churches feel a sense of responsibility towards them which is not always the

case for many people in large churches. Members of small churches cannot shift the responsibility onto others when there are no others. Neither can they easily keep their gifts or expertise hidden.

Small churches survive best when they do not pretend to be large churches or try to do all the things which larger churches do. This came strongly through in the books and articles I read. Stuart Scott (p154) writes:

“There is no single way of being small church, but to be small church is positive and not negative”.

He argues (p167) that “small churches must be able to tell their stories free of external judgments and criticism” and concludes (p169) that “small churches remain part of the economy of God”. An article by Philip Walker in the Small Church Network Newsletter (Number 17 – Oct 2000) describes churches with too few people to do all the things they want to and adds:

“When someone tells them that they should be doing only what they can with the gifts and ministries available, it sends a wave of relief over them.”

There can be a palpable sense of guilt in a small church.

One recurring theme is that small churches function through relationships rather than through programmes. Stuart Scott (p129) speaks of the problems with programmes “devised at the centre, which frequently have little or no relevance to the life of small churches”. Those who belong to small churches are even more likely than those who belong to larger ones to identify closely with their local church and hardly at all with their denomination.

Yet small churches are vulnerable, and are sometimes made more so by decisions taken by the wider councils of the Church. This applies across the denominations. Some small churches feel misunderstood or undervalued and fear that their future may be determined by policies made elsewhere. A small church, through the fact of having small numbers of people, is less likely to be represented on committees at a national or regional level. It follows that the voice of the small church may be less likely to be heard.

One of the current Co-Moderators of General Assembly, Val Morrison, has made a conscious decision to visit small churches during her two years of office. As it happened, her first preaching engagement as Moderator was at a Joint Service for the churches of the Two Dales Pastorate in August 2010. As part of my research I went to Doncaster to interview Val. Two comments stand out from that interview. Firstly, some people have been so pleased that she has come to their church, because they had not thought they were important enough to have a visit from the Moderator of General Assembly. Secondly, Val has been determined that every church should feel equally valued. As a symbol of this she decided that she would wear her green moderatorial cassock for all services. So, when she was in Westminster Abbey on the occasion of the Pope’s visit, those who had been in the congregation at Barnard Castle in August 2010, and no doubt many others, easily recognised her!

It is important that small churches should feel valued for being themselves, rather than having a growing sense of guilt that they are not doing all the things larger churches do, or which the denomination appears to be asking them to do. The Report of the URC’s Small Churches Task Group (p6) comments:

“Village churches can sometimes think of themselves as failed large churches, rather than successful small churches in their own right.”

Those who give talks on small churches sometimes use the phrase “a satsuma is not a failed orange”.

Many small churches do face difficult problems. Buildings are a common problem. The Report of the Small Churches Task Group (p4) refers to “unwieldy buildings that have turned into albatrosses around the necks of ageing congregations”. Deployment means that in many cases ministers live some miles away from the church. With fewer people and rising costs, finance can be a problem.

Some small churches have a tendency to want to live in the past. Stuart Scott writes (p44):

“Small churches are not museums, safeguarding past treasures, but signposts on the way to God’s future.”

The past need not be neglected, but can be learned from and built upon. Pappas (p62) says that an effective leader of a small church must be “willing to live with a sprained neck”, looking both backwards to the past and forwards to the future.

Discussing the options open to someone moving to an area John Benton (p8) describes the choice between “a big thriving church” and “a little needy congregation” While not minimising the problems of joining a small church, Benton suggests that the question to be asked is: “How can we drive past one church to go to another?” It is a question all Christians should take seriously.

Size is only one criterion to be taken into account when a decision needs to be made as to where to worship. Some people prefer a quiet meditative form of worship, some like to be challenged by deep theological argument, others are happiest when they can give full expression to their praise by waving their arms in the air. It is good that the Christian Church can offer such variety. A common feature is that church worship takes place in the company of other people.

In Hilary Taylor’s book “A Toolbox for Small Churches” there is a contribution by Catriona Gorton (p210) called “The Church is not a building” in which she quotes a song she learned as a child in Sunday School:

“The church is not a building,
The church is not a steeple,
The church is not a resting-place-
The church is PEOPLE!”

When I told people that I was going to do research into small churches there were some who understood me to mean by this small church buildings. Although I did not learn this song at Sunday School, I think my idea of church has always been that it is the people. (This was reinforced when I spent over two years in Mersey Synod as the minister of a church where the building had been demolished and I preached frequent sermons about the church being the people of God!)

However, I did decide to visit a few churches which described themselves as small in terms of their buildings. There were three of these, all in County Durham – the Parish Church at Witton Gilbert, Escomb Saxon Church and Newbiggin Methodist Church. It was interesting to see how these catered for visitors/pilgrims,

and I was particularly impressed by the arrangements and the information at Escomb, which is the oldest complete Saxon church in the United Kingdom.

There is scope for future research in investigating the link between the size of a building and the size of a congregation. The three churches of the Two Dales Pastorate are small congregations in small buildings. It must be more disheartening to be a small congregation in a large building, especially if the greater part of it is no longer used.

When he was younger one of our sons had a theory that ministers and churches were linked because of their size. This formed in his mind through the ministers and churches he knew in Leeds at the time (and might even explain why his small mother is minister of, and doing research into, small churches!) I doubt whether there is scope for further research in this, but the Synod Moderators might like to consider whether there is a grain of truth in it when they review how they match up ministers and potential churches!

One of the many images for the Church in the Bible is that of living stones: “like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house” (I Peter 2 v 5). During the summer of 2011 Emmanuel Parish Church, Saltburn, held an exhibition of art-work done by members of the congregation. The theme was Living Stones. Malcolm Bennett wrote of his painting:

“The more stones a wall loses, the weaker it becomes. Christians are the Church’s living stones.”

These words apply to all churches, and especially to small ones. Small churches need to be encouraged, supported and celebrated. Above all they need to be told that it is all right to be small, that they are the “satsumas” of the Christian world and not the “oranges” or, in the words of the American writer David Ray, it is not right to try to “turn a Volkswagen into a Winnebago”.

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OTHER MATERIAL

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Report of URC Small Churches Task Group
Copies of Small Church Network Supplement (insert into Church Growth Digest)
Articles in “Rural Theology” (Journal of the Rural Theology Association) and “Country Way”
Biblical quotations from NRSV.

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