

## Best Practices for Small Churches

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In the summer of 2008, the Local Evangelism, Envisioning and Planting (LEEAP) Committee of the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ was faced with an interrelated set of problems. Committee members were depressed about the rise of 'legacy churches' that were expected (and in some cases, invited) to close in the coming years, unsure as to how to apply current strategies for redevelopment to existing congregations and were discovering that the new church starts of the Conference were becoming strong mission projects but not strong, self-sustaining congregations. How could the Conference empower and revitalize small membership churches? What could be done other than grimly await a congregation's demise?

Small membership churches are a significant, even core, organizational expression of the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ and the entire United Church of Christ. *Historically* small membership churches were the norm until after the Civil War. *Theologically*, our traditions (especially the Congregational and Evangelical Synod) privileged the size of church that would be a true "fellowship of believers" where the number of people in the church was small enough to allow for everyone to know and love everyone else.<sup>i</sup> *Numerically*, congregations that average under 50 in worship are now 47% of the churches of the Illinois Conference.<sup>1</sup> Richard Sparrow, Minister of the Parish Life and Leadership office of the United Church of Christ, notes that small membership churches are the "fastest growing type of church in the U.C.C."<sup>2</sup> This is well illustrated by the Illinois Conference: while 31% (114) of the 365 congregations had fewer than 200 members in 1969, that number grew to 47% (121 congregations) of the 272 remaining congregations in 2009.<sup>ii</sup> If large numbers of small membership churches are the present reality of the UCC, they are also likely to be our future. Kennon

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<sup>1</sup> The Illinois Conference is made up of the northern most 2/3 of Illinois and is distinct from the Southern Illinois Conference. References to "Illinois" reflect the former and not the later.

<sup>2</sup> These numbers can be deceiving. Throughout all denominations, the *median* church (an equal number with a higher and lower attendance averages) has 75 regular participants in Sunday morning worship. Half of all churches have fewer than 75 in worship, but this represents only 11 percent of those who attend church. 50% attend the largest 10% of congregations (those with an average worship attendance of greater than 350). Thus while there are more small churches, more people attend large churches.

Callahan noted the emergence of mega churches and predicts that the future will see a religious landscape (called the 'religious ecology' by sociologists) of very large mega churches with a large number of small membership churches. The medium sized church is most likely, in Callahan's view, to feel the squeeze.<sup>iii</sup> Not denying the importance of growth strategies, how could existing congregations that perceived themselves as living with the impossibility of growth either due to hostile demographics or institutional inadequacies (congregational, denominational and conference) be empowered for a vital existence? What would that mean in the life of a (real) small membership church?

Small membership church members and leaders report a sense of disempowerment and vulnerability.<sup>iv</sup> At a time when it is commonly estimated that it takes an average of 130 worshippers to support the traditional church model of one-congregation-in one-building-with-one-pastor, many congregations cannot or soon will not be able to afford to be a church in the way they have known. Critics (and small church advocates like David Ray) argue that a form of 'size-ism' pervades both church and society in that 'big' organizations are viewed as good and successful while 'small' organizations are viewed as bad and failures.<sup>v</sup> Social mobility, in which the local population moves or dies out without replacement (a major issue) can sap the resources and eventual life of even the most vibrant congregation. The different ways in which small churches hold together people of diverse opinions have been at odds with denominational efforts seeking theological and ethical vision. Denominational programs that emphasized growth as the mandate of the church have added to a sense of alienation and hopelessness in many churches even as the need for growth is admitted, at least in a theoretical sense. The small church projects of the 1970s and today find that many small church leaders and members can easily become dispirited. Members of congregations perceive that there is nothing that they can do; denominational leaders perceive congregations rigidly resisting change while awaiting their death. In Illinois, of the 114 churches with under 200 members in 1969, 62 had closed or left the denomination by 2009. The 121 congregations with fewer than 200 members in 2009 included 16 churches that were new-church-starts or new to the denomination since 1969, 62 had also been small in 1969, and 49 had 'downsized'.<sup>3</sup>

### **Prior Work**

There exists over a century's worth of work on the challenges facing small (and especially rural) congregations. The initial work on the problems of "The Church and Rural Life" by the Federal Council of Churches was initiated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century as the migration from rural to urban America quickened. That was

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<sup>3</sup> The reasons why include regional migration out central America, local migration out of rural America to more urban 'micropolitan' (small cities) communities, intra-urban migration of racial (African American, Euro-American and Hispanic American) groups, changes in the religious ecology, rise of Protestant mega-churches and opposition to denominational social justice initiatives.

supplanted by the “Town and Country” program of the National Council of Churches in the 1950s. After a decade of intense urban focus in the 1960s, in the early 1970s the UCC’s Board for Homeland Ministries designated the Family Thank Offering for a special project for small churches. Three pilot programs were launched in Ohio, New England and Washington which completed their work by 1977. The Illinois Small Church Project (1978-1980) was adapted from those experiences. It included gathering representatives from small membership churches to listen to their concerns, attempting some program responses to those concerns and funding seminary interns in small membership churches (the author of this report was one of those interns). The program, with minimal cash investment produced well thought of results in terms of increased morale and congregational enthusiasm. In Illinois, all participating congregations were rural in nature (and some were not truly ‘small’).

These projects coincided and interwove with the emergence of a minor ‘cottage industry’ in the study of small churches. While previous generations of scholars had also studied congregations, what was new in the 1970s was the application of the academic disciplines emerging from American management theory that were applied to churches. Schaller (marketing), Dudley (organizational dynamics) and Callahan (planning) each added to our understandings while applying insights from management theory.<sup>4</sup> Lyle Schaller (1982) argued that churches are to be compared not based upon membership but on average worship attendance and that churches may be grouped according to size based upon that size. Small churches, in Schaller’s view, with 35 or fewer in worship were ‘cat churches’ for whom the minister was not necessarily personally essential. Between 35 and 100 in worship were the ‘Collie Dog churches’ who boasted on how friendly they were (but who tended to growl at outsiders!). Schaller focused on the

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to reflect on this new ‘discovery’ of small churches. By whom? Why? In whose interest was this discovery? I hypothesize that at this time there was a convergence of five factors:

1. denominational membership and church losses
2. the influence of organizational sociology that directed a focus attention on small churches as an ‘organizational type’.
3. The type of church that was the ‘frame of reference’ for seminaries and seminarians was no longer the small church, and so seminary graduates could not longer be presumed to know how to do ministry in this setting.
4. Money. There was suddenly grant money available (especially from the Lilly Foundation), and those few scholars like Dudley, Jackson Carroll and Walrath who studied congregations suddenly had an audience, and funding for research.
5. Political pressure from small churches, long major givers (in aggregate) to denominational mission coffers, were demanding help and a restoring of balance after a decade of investment in the cities, which led to research grants becoming available.

distinctiveness of the small church, and how their needs could best be addressed by judicatory executives. Carl S. Dudley focused on small churches as “single cell” associations that were “... not organizational errors to be corrected, but intentional choices of members who put a priority on human relationships.” (1978, rewritten and cited from 2003:11). In Dudley’s view, small churches are “associations that generate and live by its social capital”, a “single cell of caring that includes the entire congregation.”<sup>vi</sup> “Small churches” David Ray famously wrote, “Are the right size.” Anthony Pappas later wrote the influential Entering the World of the Small Church that connected the organizational culture of small churches with the culture of ‘folk societies’ (as described in a classic 1956 sociological article by Robert Redfield) that are characterized by a group of people who:

1. are small in number
2. have a long-term association,
3. know each other well, and
4. have a strong sense of belonging.
5. are isolated from other groups in neighboring areas and
6. have a high identification with the territory it occupies,
7. often function as if it is “in a little world off by itself.”
8. wisdom, prestige, and authority strongly correlate with the age of each individual,
9. are enhanced by the fact that each generation goes through a similar sequence of life events,
10. have a is a simplicity of roles,
11. a primacy of oral over written communications, and
12. a straightforward level of technology.
13. Position in the folk society determines an individual’s rights and duties,
14. Behavior is as much expressive as it is effective, and
15. Relationships are ends in themselves, not a means of achieving an external object.
16. Social recognition is a greater motivator of behavior than material gain.
17. Qualities that contribute to long-term stability, not change, are valued.
18. Tradition determines actions, and
19. Moral worth attaches to the traditional way of doing things.<sup>vii</sup>

David Ray (1982, 1992 and 2009) continued the campaign for the worth of small membership churches, combining overviews of the research of others as illustrated by his own research and experiences as a small church pastor. Small churches were capable of amazing worship and mission, if done on the church’s terms. Kennon L. Callahan (2000) adapted his “Effective Church” strategies for the life of small membership churches in what remains the single best strategic approach to ministry for the small church.

Two characteristics of this research are important to note. First, on a positive note, the research was done *for* the service of congregations and ministers. While this led to a certain marginalization within the academic community, in the communities of congregations and clergy it led to a genuine sense of appreciation. It led to an

enormous outgrowth of derivative scholarship on the small church and pastoral care, preaching, worship, Christian education, etc. that continues to nourish people in small membership churches. Second, due to the reliance upon organizational sociological paradigms of the time, the research tended to examine small membership churches as divorced from their social context (Walrath, 1983 was an important exception). A 'small church' in the city was expected to behave pretty much like a 'small church' in the country, if there were important differences they were theoretical "ad hoc's". Relating to the context was something that churches were expected to do, almost by definition.

That organizational paradigm was a major problem. Even where relating to the social context was recognized as a major issue (e.g., in Dudley's work), church leaders did not have effective tools for perceiving the changes in their context that were happening all around them. Pappas' application of the sociology of 'folk societies' was brilliant, but applied to communities that were essentially stagnant. In a time when rapid social change at both the national and local levels seems to predominate, his work may mislead a congregation that would like to believe that its context is unchanging. Schaller's focus upon niche marketing as a key to church growth led him away from small churches. Dudley led the way in seeing small churches as ends in themselves, but his focus on organizational sociology (single cell theory) led him to take for granted the contextualization of particular churches in their environment. What worked in the past might work or it might not work today, but not because the social world is the same. Mary Jo Neitz found that this was the key issue in studying rural life: the rapid and constant state of change in rural America.<sup>viii</sup> More work is needed to empower congregations to engage their social context.

### **Research Strategy**

What are we to do? It was the perception of the Illinois Conference LEEAP Committee that our efforts to effectively connect with small churches were not working as well as we wanted. Was it the various church revitalization strategies that we sponsored, or something else? To explore what the right questions were and to have that exploration be as positive as possible, the Committee adopted an "empowerment project" that sought to:

- Connect insights from academic, denominational and congregational resources.
- Listen appreciatively to the experiences and wisdom of small membership congregations.
- Have real practical benefit for small membership churches and the wider United Church of Christ.

To that end the researcher interviewed a range of denominational officials and researchers about small membership churches, identified with Illinois Conference Area Association Ministers particular congregations that were deemed highly 'vital' and suitable for research, discerned a "best practices" list for small churches that were shared, discussed and modified at two 'Listening Summits' (one rural, one

urban) for a wider array of congregations and before a large workshop at the Illinois Conference annual meeting.

Six congregations (one per Association with one additional church to fill any demographic gaps) were selected based upon nominations by Association Conference Ministers. Each made three to six nominations with the final selection made by myself. Churches with interim leadership were excluded due to the transitional nature of pastoral leadership. The study churches all reported average worship attendance of less than 50.

The study congregations were approached and asked permission to be studied. Each site study included an interview with the pastor, interview with a focus group of church leaders, selected by the church and ethnographic (participant-observation) attendance at a worship service (and in two cases, annual meetings). Focus Group questions are listed in the appendix. Background demographic information was examined from the U.S. Census Bureau ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)). The churches that participated in the study were:

**Philippine American Ecumenical Church** in Chicago, an ethnic community of primarily first and second generation Philippine-Americans, led by Pastor Marcelo Rivera located on the north side of Chicago, but drawing from the entire metropolitan area.

**God Can Ministries** of Ford Heights, founded and led by the Rev. Dr. Sharon Ellis Davis. God Can was placed in one of the poorest communities in Illinois and has developed important ministries in worship, youth development and education with its African-American members.

**United Church of Chebanse**, led by Rev. Connie Williams-Moody. Chebanse is a small town located south of Kankakee, Illinois. The church shares their minister with a neighboring UCC congregation (not as a yoked church, but as two churches who share a minister). Chebanse hopes to be growing in the near future as the population of Kankakee grows on the southern edge of the community.

**Union Church of Brimfield**, located north of Peoria in an area that is now starting to see exurban housing developments. After a long term pastor, they now partner with Parkview UCC of Peoria to get pastoral care needs met by that church's pastor while their licensed lay minister, Robin Henry, provides program assistance at Parkview (in addition to her full time job!)

**Ebenezer and Salem UCC** of Pearl City, Il. Led by part time licensed minister James Brown, these two open country churches (one Reformed, one Evangelical) considered closing before the Association Minister persuaded them to try a licensed UCC lay minister to replace the retired pastor from a different denomination (who recommended that they close upon his departure).

**St. John UCC of Aurora**. Located in what was once the German east side of town that is now largely Hispanic and African-American, they called a recent seminary graduate (but second career minister after work in the corporate world), Rev. Cindy Gavin to be their pastor after a long but negative

experience with a Four Square Gospel pastor. While there have been some bumps in the road, the church is effectively reaching out to their Hispanic neighbors and is attracting as new members African-Americans.

“Best Practices” were discerned by the researcher based upon how well the practice was working, replicated in other research and whether it was common to other churches. Practices that seemed to be effective in a multi-cultural or multi-racial situation are also lifted up. Obviously, a sample size of six does not produce “Laws for Small Church Vitality”. But they did produce grounds for discussion, improvisation by congregations and continued dialogue; all evidence of empowerment.

## Results

Fiscal and ethical limitations precluded a control group of ‘non-vital’ churches, additional African-American and Hispanic churches are needed and while the UCC has some overtly social-action oriented congregations, none were in my sample. Since the churches were all nominated by Association Ministers, they were obviously known by them (there are churches that choose not to relate to the broader church) and reflected the values of the staff. In particular, the Conference staff valued, as does most (but not all) of the research, churches that choose to be active in their communities through mission programs or projects. Such a bias reflects the broadly ‘reformed’ background of the UCC, the emphasis among denominational leadership on *Missio Dei* theology (the church joins God’s mission in the world) and the life experiences of denominational leaders (and researchers). We came of ‘spiritual age’ during a time of significant wrestling with social ills and sins, and value that engagement with society. But not everyone in the UCC, nor entire congregations, would necessarily share that perspective. Congregations likely to be overlooked with such a bias would be those that emphasized worship or insular fellowship (many racial-ethnic minority and immigrant congregations) over mission. This is a significant bias! See McRoberts ( 2005), Dudley and Johnson (1993) and Roozen, Carroll and McKinney (1984) for a sociological discussion on the range of styles of engagement with local communities. While this lends an element of tautology to the findings, (if you pick your sample of ‘vital churches’ based on how well the church does local mission, one sure finding will be that vital churches do local mission!), this does reflect both the scholarly literature and the denominational emphasis.<sup>ix</sup>

The congregations were contacted with permission requested enlist them in the research project. Pastors were the initial contacts, four of them then went to the congregation’s council for their approval of participation, two gave permission. There was some suspicion of the project (and its sponsorship by the Conference) in several of the churches (In effect, “What do they *really* want?” was asked of the pastors by three church councils). After the completion of field research, two “listening summits” were held at which representatives of all small membership churches were invited. Including the research sites, 19 congregations participated

in these listening summits. The research findings were discussed, commented upon and additional findings were suggested. A workshop was then held at the Illinois Conference annual meeting at which around 80 people participated. Two of the research sites did not participate in the listening summits; they were contacted with an early draft of this report for their comment and discussion.

Three overviews became clear from the beginning:

1. 'Vital' small membership churches have all of the problems that 'non-vital' small membership churches do (aging membership, lack of money, lack of new members, old buildings, etc.). But they are not confined by their problems. While certainly aware of the issues facing them, none of the churches focused on the problems. Rather, their focus was on how they were 'church'.
2. There is a need for fresh research in small membership churches. Previous generations of research were strongly shaped by academic presumptions (e.g., the influence of organizational design and market segmentation theories) that tended to over-sell change strategies and neglect key issues (contextualization). The context, especially in rural America, is rapidly changing. The image of the small church as an unchanging community in an unchanging world has never been less true than today.
3. There exists an urban/rural divide in the way church is done in the UCC. This cultural divide reflects a division in society between metropolitan (urban, suburban and the small city, so-called 'micropolitan') America that is rooted in a 'Post-Industrial' economy and culture and a rural economy and culture that has lost its moorings (and in many areas, its economic base). I found evidence, however, of growing urban-rural cultural divide in the UCC, evidenced by:
  - a. Metropolitan (urban and suburban) churches use Still Speaking material, rural churches did not.
  - b. Metropolitan churches have seminary trained clergy, rural churches increasingly do not.
  - c. Metropolitan churches use 'professional/managerial rhetoric' (vision statements, goals and objectives, power point, etc.) and rural churches do not. Pastors and leaders of metropolitan churches utilize the goals and directions of the UCC ('God is Still Speaking', 'Becoming a Multicultural and Multiracial Church', but in my small sample, not Open and Affirming of people who are Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgendered, even if they have members who are open about their sexual preferences); pastors and leaders of rural churches defend their churches from the goals and directions of the UCC.

In brief, churches in metropolitan areas serve as a counter-culture to metropolitan life and can organize around clearly defined theological and ethical stands (and often have to, since few members live in the geographical vicinity of the church).



Rural churches see themselves as expressive of rural life and hope to integrate the church with the community, at least on a surface level. As one church leader told me, “I sincerely believe that anybody and everybody is welcome to be a part of this church. But their sexual preference is none of my business.” An ‘out’ lesbian told me: “I am proud of being a lesbian. It is who I am. But in the larger scheme of things, that is not why I am here (in church). I am here to worship God. I am here as a Christian, a child of God. That’s what I will (eventually) want on my tombstone.” To call upon research in another setting, metropolitan churches can be ‘movement’ churches calling upon people to join the cause. Rural churches, out of necessity, must usually be places with ‘big yards’ with room for all kinds of people. Urban pastors can sometimes succeed by ‘leading the march’. Rural pastors must usually maintain a (big enough) yard.<sup>x</sup>

### **Best Practices**

Based upon the practices of these six congregations and reflected in research on contemporary small membership churches, I hypothesize that vital small membership churches:

- 1. Are engaged with a particular context in which they exist and have ministries.** They are aware of changes in their context and are trying to respond. Churches exist in multiple contexts, the key appears to have picked (at least) one and work with it. While the Philippine-American Church could focus upon its geographic neighborhood, its context is the broader Philippine ex-patriot community. God Can Ministries drew both from its immediate neighborhood and from a wider network of African-Americans who were determined not to abandon the African American poor. Contexts are not necessarily geographical (especially in urban areas)! In rural areas, attention to the local context helped congregations be aware of how their communities were changing, and to be proactive in adapting to those changes. **Effectively adapting to the changes of contexts includes finding ways of letting the new context adopt the (new to them) church.** The planting of a garden by St. Johns in a newly Hispanic neighborhood served as a point of connection (doing something beautiful for God is a traditional Hispanic spiritual practice) with the new community
- 2. Are not focused upon (mere) survival, but have something more important that keeps them going (God).** What was more important varied, but there was a reason that kept them going. The church was not an end in itself, but a means for personal spiritual growth, pastoral care, local mission, making sense of the world and connecting with God.
- 3. Have a core group of lay leadership, usually in their 50s to 70s.** God Can’s leadership cadre was centered on the multiple (very) part time staff who led programs for the church (e.g., a dance ministry, after-school program, Bible study, etc.). The other churches had a cohort of leaders

who were actively engaged in the life and support of the church. A pastor of a small membership church (at least!) would do well to focus some attention on the development of leadership by people in this age group.

4. **Have pastors who are especially adept at shaping the culture of the congregation.** The old adage that the clergy in the small church aren't very important is emphatically not true. Clergy, lay ministers or ordained, were the key shapers of congregational hope and self-image. It was the clergy who kept prodding churches to focus upon practices, beliefs and relationships rather than the 'crisis-of-the-moment'. It was the clergy who modeled caring for others (and coping with conflict) in helpful ways. But it was not programs (or even great sermons) that shaped the congregations, rather it was a sense of vision, hope and love that shaped the people of the congregation.
5. **Have had significant (but not always recognized and acknowledged) input from the Conference in their lives.** Usually, this is the presence of the Association Conference Minister who has effectively guided the placement of appropriate leadership and been present with the church in some public manner, but also in the form of renewal grants and other resources. This connection is highly personal: a change in staff does not mean that the relationship between Conference and congregation automatically continues! Curiously for Illinois, it was common for church leaders to praise the involvement of the *Association* ministers in their life but to deny any involvement by the *Conference*. Association Ministers are, of course, part of the Conference staff. An challenge for the Conference at a time when the pastoral contact with churches is increasingly relegated to telephone conversations, Association meetings and Church and Ministry meetings (with even search processes being farmed out to interims) is that congregations may not know that they have been helped by the wider church.
6. **Have worship services that emphasize the participation, joy and community.** Singing, a choir, the sharing of joys and concerns in prayer were key ways of congregational participation. Worship was fun and usually centered on music and sharing of joys and concerns. Sharing was personal and deep, laughter abounded. While suburban small church pastors noted strongly the benefits of effective preaching that connects the Gospel with local life, there did not seem to be much emphasis on 'polished' sermons. Rather, authenticity was the key. Liturgies from purchased material (e.g. Lavon Bayler's widely used [Fresh Winds of the Spirit](#)) were often used in the non-African American context. In part this is due to the ease of use of previously prepared material and its 'plug and play' nature---ideal for the part time pastor who is paid for twenty hours of work per week. But David Ray cautions that worship in small churches needs to be more informal, more emotional, and more personal. The ease

of use may be counter-productive to worship that connects people with God and each other in small churches.

7. **Find ways of adopting new people into the tribe, and find ways of enabling new people to adopt old members of the 'tribe'.** This is especially important in multi-cultural and multi-racial contexts. At St. Johns one African-American woman declared that she would be a (older, seriously ill and white) man's 'prayer warrior' as he went through chemo. Building renovation projects served as ways for diverse members to work together on projects that mattered to the whole. 'Adoption' is a two-way street!
8. **Have a strong sense of (personal) mission.** Mission was very important in every church (but this was also one of the reasons that they were nominated). The mission projects that were talked about were local and personal. OCWM was a duty, faithfully borne, but was not made personal. **Christian education was seen as mission of the church and not as a structure of the church.** The Christian education programs that were lifted up as the most successful were Vacation Bible Schools, which served a much larger number of people than traditional Sunday Schools.
9. **Mobilize effective resources to support appropriate ministries.** Two congregations had endowments, gifts from previous generations that were vital to their current ministries. Two employed part time, lay ministers; one shared a minister with another congregation, two had sought and received outside funding for special projects and renewal.
10. **Eats well together.** Participants at Listening Summits noted that one of the characteristics of their churches were the opportunities for communal meals (usually pot-lucks or fund raisers) which brought people together, nurtured sharing and built community. This was especially important for ethnic communities, where communal food was a way of transmitting ethnic heritage and values. Food is never just food: it is an opportunity to work together, share similarities and differences in positive ways, an opportunity for group building and value formation.

The project met its goals in three senses: The project itself was empowering: attendance built at meetings held throughout the input process, involvement by the particular congregations was strong with quite positive responses from participating congregations and from other congregations that participated in the follow-up workshop at the Conference Annual Meeting. About 75 handouts listing the 'Best Practices' were taken by attendees for use in their congregations. Additional consultations are being planned with congregations that are particularly interested in the process. Second, there was genuine learning from the processes that will feed into the life and planning of the Illinois Conference. Third, what was learned points to profound issues for the life of the United Church of Christ (indeed,

all mainstream churches) at a time when we are caught between our ethics and our realities. Sociologically, these “Best Practices” point to congregations that through their life together provide opportunities for participants to find meaning and understanding for their lives and connect people with one another and God. Theologically, these “Best Practices” point to ways people can love one another and God, with a little bit of organization. They point to key issues for all churches: how to engage one’s social context and what it means to ‘be church’. This calls for more sustained theological and sociological examination.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> For an elegant theological explanation, see Miroslav Volf’s *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. For a much simpler explanation, see my “Non-Conformist Ecclesiologies” in *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, edited by Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge, New York/Oxford: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>ii</sup> National figures are from the National Congregations Study, found at <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong>. UCC figures are from a comparison of the 1969 Yearbook and 2009 Yearbook of the United Church of Christ.

<sup>iii</sup> Kennon L. Callahan *Small, Strong Congregations*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

<sup>iv</sup> A premise of most of the literature on small membership churches. For research based results, see David J. Brown, et al. *Small Church Project*, United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, 1977. See also “Small Churches Can Be Powerful” by Theodore H. Erickson in *New Possibilities for Small Churches*, edited by Douglas Alan Walrath, New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1983 and Keith Watkins, “The Recovery of Vitality in Small Congregations’ *Mid-Stream* 33:4, 1994 (pp. 391-419)

<sup>v</sup> David R. Ray, *The Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches*, Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2009.

<sup>vi</sup> Carl S. Dudley, *Effective Small Churches in the Twenty-first Century*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, p. 11.

<sup>vii</sup> Anthony G. Pappas, *Entering the World of the Small Church*, Alban Institute, 2000.

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viii A finding echoed by UCC Association Ministers. See Neitz' summary of the Missouri Rural Churches Project at [http://hirr.hartsem.edu/cong/research\\_rurlchrch.html](http://hirr.hartsem.edu/cong/research_rurlchrch.html), accessed July 28, 2009.

ix See however Dudley and Johnson, (1993), Roozen, McKinney and Carroll (1984) and the summary found in Ammerman, et al (1998) for additional discussions of the various ways congregations engage their local cultures.

x Michael H. Montgomery, On Easter Morning: A Sociological and Theological Examination of Liberal Church Renewal; Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Chicago Theological Seminary, 2003.

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Appendix: Congregational Interview Protocol

1. Demographic picture of focus group:
  - a. Was this a normal Sunday?
  - b. male-female?
  - c. length of membership?
    - i. under a year
    - ii. under five years
    - iii. 5-10
    - iv. 10-20
    - v. 20 to life?
  - d. How many:
    - i. live in town?
    - ii. could walk to church?
    - iii. live within 10 miles?
    - iv. if not, where?
2. Does your church:
  - a. Practice tithing?
  - b. Participate in 'Still Speaking'?
  - c. Have a Vision Statement?
3. So what makes you such a great church (everybody thinks so!)
4. Describe the community in which you live?
  - a. if multiple communities, which ones?
  - b. describe the community in which the church is located, if different from above.
  - c. How is this neighborhood/community different from what it was like 10 years ago?
5. The most important thing about your church's life is:
  - a. (Open ended)
  - b. Fellowship?
  - c. Worship
  - d. Mission
  - e. Sunday School
6. What is the most important thing about our mission? What is it?

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7. What is the most important thing about your fellowship?
  8. What is the most important thing about your worship?
  9. What is the most important thing about your Sunday School (if they have it)?
  10. What is the biggest challenge for you in terms of being a Christian?
  11. What are the biggest challenges for you for being a church?
  12. Carl Dudley famously said that big churches have programs, small churches have personality. What's yours?
  13. What advice would you give to other churches about your size?
  14. What else should I be asking you?