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INTRODUCTION

I love smaller churches. I've been serving, studying, and sharing about them for over forty years. I know that these churches can make all the difference in people's lives and that these are increasingly hard times for them. My purpose here is to share all the wisdom and counsel I know that's relevant and important for both today and tomorrow about the kinds of churches I know best and care about most. This is for all of you who also care about such churches and their place in society—pastors, lay people, students, denominational leaders, and academics.

A pivotal quotation in my life is from Walker Percy's novel, *The Moviegoer*, in which Binx Bolling, the main character, says:

What is the nature of the search? you ask. Really it is very simple at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life...To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be on to something. Not to be on to *something* is to be in despair.¹

Anyone worth his or her salt lives life in a persistent search for meaning. I still am, and I imagine you are, too. My ministry began as director of an ecumenical youth ministry in Brattleboro, Vermont, a community-wide ministry with both church youth and youth-on-the-streets. When money was withdrawn from the Youth Ministry to help pay for a new furnace in one of the sponsoring churches, the Youth Ministry was forced to close. The tiny Trinitarian Congregational Church in the little town of Warwick,

¹ Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Knopf, 1961), 13.

Massachusetts, where we had built a house in the woods, doubled its budget and called me to a \$30-a-day, two-day-a-week pastorate while I directed a crisis center and pursued a master's degree in education. I discovered I enjoyed being a pastor of that little church more than I might enjoy teaching or something else.

Pastoring that little church for fourteen years helped me discover the two things I've been *on to* for the last forty years. The first is that smaller churches are, without apology, the right size to be and do all that God calls a church to be and do. Secondly, they are different, fundamentally different, when compared to their larger cousins. Doing ministry in smaller churches in the light of these two benchmarks has meant that there's been little *despair* and great satisfaction as I've worked to help such churches realize their potential and handle their challenges. This book has been four decades in the writing, and the resulting learning offers real possibilities for smaller churches in these difficult times for many if not most congregations.

I've been pastor of five smaller churches since 1971—which has been my calling, my passion, and what I do best. Since beginning a doctor of ministry program at Hartford Seminary in 1978, I've coupled what I've learned from others with what I've learned from my own experience in four books about smaller churches. Except for four years as a full-time pastor, I've earned my living as a smaller church bivocational or “tentmaking” pastor. While being a pastor, I've also served on four denominational state conference staffs, most recently as the Associate Minister for Small Church Development in the Maine Conference of the United Church of Christ. I've also taught about smaller churches as a seminary adjunct professor and been used as a consultant and program leader on smaller church issues by a dozen denominations. Along the way, I've been a house husband, director of two social service agencies, and a pastoral counselor. I've not gotten rich, but my life has been richly blessed and I would do it all again.

In 1982, Lyle Schaller published *The Small Church Is Different!* and I published *Small Churches Are the Right Size*. These two titles provide the two most important things we need to know about smaller churches. Throughout the two-thousand-year history of the Christian Church, almost all churches have been small. (The generally accepted definition of a “small church” is less than one hundred in worship.) In the theology chapter that follows, I’ll demonstrate that small churches are, without apology, the right size to be and do everything God expects churches to be and do. Their diminutive size is not evidence that they are failed, premature, illegitimate, malnourished, dwarfed, or incomplete versions of “real” churches. They are the right size for worship that offers a communal, intimate, and profound experience of the presence of God; the right size to nurture experiential faithfulness in young and old; the right size to care deeply for all of its people in appropriate ways; and the right size to address pressing needs and commit to missional opportunities beyond themselves. And, as Schaller and I have demonstrated, they are—due to the determinative power of numbers—fundamentally different in every way from their larger cousins. For them to be genuinely faithful and effective, they must understand to their core that they are the right size, and they must do all that they do differently than their larger cousins.

I found the best illustration of the reality that size makes all the difference in a 1980 book that helped shape my understanding of church and society. Kirkpatrick Sale, in a stunning but obscure book, *Human Scale*, developed the thesis, with extensive documentation and illustration, that *the* problem with society and its institutions is that much of that which humans have created has grown out of scale to what looks good, feels right, and works well. He wrote and I’ve practiced ministry by this statement:

As we all know, a big mansion is not simply a bungalow with more rooms, a big party is not simply an intimate dinner

with more people, a big metropolitan hospital is not simply a clinic with more beds and more doctors, a big corporation is not simply a family firm with more employees and products, a big government is not simply a town council with more branches. Size, indeed, might well be regarded as *the* crucial variable in anything.²

A decade later, my first book was soon to be out of print. Much of what was there needed to stay in print, and I'd learned more that should be in print. While working as a UCC Area Minister in Iowa and pastoring a small church in northwest Iowa, I used a vacation and study leave to rewrite and expand the first book. The most significant addition was a *small theology*. This was a theological examination of the importance of numbers in the nature and practice of being and doing church, an application of relevant social theories to churches where there is not a crowd, and an expansion from ten to twenty-seven distinctive and potentially positive characteristics of a small congregation. The publisher and I disagreed over what to title the book. They insisted on calling it *The Big Small Church Book*, even though my thesis is that BIG is *not* necessarily better or best. In fact, bigness is often problematic. Their title implied that since this was the *most* that had been written about small churches, it must be better than its competition and provide more for the reader. I lost the argument.

My pastoral pilgrimage took me to a small urban church in San Rafael, California, fourteen miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge. I was no longer in a rural or small-town setting. Would what I believed about smaller churches in smaller settings translate to urban and urbane Marin County? It did. It all did. I discovered that no matter where you find it, a small church—due to

2 Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980), 60.

its size—will look, feel, and act like a small church. And I realized from a lifetime of experience in churches and twenty-five years of ministry that if there is not life, vitality, and commitment in a church's worship, there will be no life, vitality, and commitment in what it is and does beyond worship. I had also learned that the one who designs and leads worship must plan and implement worship in organic, size-appropriate ways that particularly fit the number of people present so that each and all leave feeling affirmed, connected, and equipped to live and minister. Since there was no good worship resource oriented to smaller church worship, I went back to our Maine island farmhouse to write such a book.

The result was *Wonderful Worship in Smaller Churches*. *Wonderful* was in the title because worship in any sized church can and should be full of wonder—wonder that hints at the unknowable wonder of God and wonder that moves us beyond the stale and shallow in our living and into the wonder of genuine relationship in a congregation small enough for most or all to be in relationship. I put the word *smaller* rather than *small* in my title, writing, and conversation because many people and small churches live in denial about their size or are embarrassed to use the word *small* to describe themselves. (See the following discussion of *sizeism*.) They seem to find the word *smaller* more acceptable.

Two years later, I realized that *The Big Small Church Book* would soon be out of print and that I again had new material and ideas for smaller churches in a changing world. I also wanted to incorporate the experience and examples of other churches and church leaders beyond me and my own. So in 2001, I drove 6,000 miles in fifteen days between San Rafael and Vinalhaven, Maine, and visited twenty-one small faith communities around the country. Drawing on that experience, I devoted my sabbatical and vacation time to writing *The Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches*. It included more theory, a whole new small theology, and an attempt to envision what the world and the world of small church-

es would be like in thirty years and what the need would be for smaller churches in that brave new world. I knew that using the word *indispensable* in the title might sound presumptuous, but I prayed the book *could* be indispensable for others who love smaller churches.

Now, in a world and a church quite different from the world and the church where I began ministering forty years ago, and with that much ministry under my belt and with many larger churches becoming smaller churches, I asked my congregation in Bristol, Maine, if I could take a three-month sabbatical during their busiest season to begin writing a book that would compile the most important of what I had learned, the best insight and wisdom of others, all brought together for smaller churches in a rapidly changing and challenging world. What motivated me to tackle this labor of love was the realization that much of the best, most timeless, and most needed wisdom that has been written for small churches was already or would soon be lost or unavailable unless an intentional effort was made to keep these ideas available for a new generation of people and churches. And those who have written the most helpful material in what was called “the small church movement” that began in a 1976 symposium at Hartford Seminary have retired or moved on to other subject matter. And all that is included here is intended specifically for smaller churches in the demanding decades to come.

Prior to proceeding, we need a clear-eyed understanding of the statistical reality of congregations in the second decade of the twenty-first century. According to the Hartford (Seminary) Initiative for Religion Research FACT survey published in 2010, there are about 334,000 congregations (300,000 Protestant, 22,000 Roman Catholic, and 12,000 non-Christian) in the United States. About 177,000 congregations of these 334,000 congregations are smaller churches, averaging fewer than 100 worshipers. More than one in four congregations average fewer than 50 worshipers. The

median sized church (half more, half less) averages 75 in worship. Only 1,200 out of the 334,000 churches average more than 2,000 worshipers, making them “megachurches.” Today, most worshipers attend larger churches, but most churches are smaller churches.

Even in these difficult economic times, smaller churches are not going the way of the dodo bird. Most congregations today are declining and graying, which means that many once larger churches are now smaller. The number of smaller churches is growing and will continue to grow as new churches are birthed and many, if not most, medium-sized churches are becoming small churches. Many churches are in settings that are not large enough to support a large or megachurch. Many others are in settings (declining rural communities or at-risk inner city communities) where the church is a critical and much-needed hedge against greater community decline or crisis. And many people still choose smaller churches for their sense of community over larger churches with their programs galore. Another demographic change to note is that the number of congregations with a majority of non-Caucasian members has grown from 23% to 30%, and these tend to be smaller and are proliferating.

The Hartford research helps us with more than numbers. Christianity and its congregations are in flux and in need of strategic attention. There’s research that shows that most American congregations are less healthy now than ten years ago. Congregations are poorer. Eight of ten churches report the 2008 recession negatively affected their finances. In addition to declining financial health, there’s a higher level of conflict, fewer young people and more older people, fewer people joining and attending, and decreasing spiritual and congregational vitality. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of churches reporting “high spiritual vitality” fell from 43% to 28%. One report says that 80% of U.S. churches are in decline. Other research shows that what has been called “main-line Christianity” is in decline and that an increasing percentage of

Americans claim to be “nones” or “spiritual but not religious” or of no faith. In a time when the world cares little about the church, the cost of being a conventional church continues to rise. Where does this leave smaller churches that may be struggling even more? So, what to do?

The five churches I served mirrored and illustrated the decline of today’s churches. In each, the pews were emptier and the spirit of the people was flagging. Four of the five could no longer support a full-time pastor. These five churches represent many but not all smaller churches. But all smaller churches can learn from their experience. Here’s a thumbnail description of my experience with each.

The Trinitarian Congregational Church of Warwick, Massachusetts, was the only active church in town, but it was barely active. It was pastored by a rotation of retired clergy and lay preachers, and their 1971 budget was \$1,585. The church that accepted my offer to be their two-day-a-week pastor for \$30 a day was peopled by fourteen adults (half retired) and a few Sunday-school children. They worshiped in the front room of the 1816 colonial house that was their church building. Practicing the theology, approaches, and strategies developed in this book, the Warwick church pulled together, worked hard, reached out, and grew dramatically in every way.

In retrospect, I realized that by intuition and common sense, I had practiced ten principles that made all the difference for that church in our fourteen years together. These principles or practices have characterized my ministry ever since, and I would commend them to other congregations and their leadership. Can you imagine these making a difference where you are?

1. *Listening.* Especially in the beginning of one’s ministry, during times of change and crisis, and while others are doing most of the talking, listening is particularly im-

portant. There are some who are seldom listened to by anyone else and others who see the world very differently. If you're an introvert, listening may come easily; if you're an extrovert, it may be harder to give others the air space they need. Listening before speaking is almost always the right sequence. Much of those two, then three, then four days a week pastoring in Warwick were spent listening to church and community members.

2. *Worship.* Worship is the heart, soul, and seed ground for everything else in smaller churches. In that front worship room in the Metcalf Chapel (the Warwick church's building), I wasn't more than fifteen feet from anyone. Worship was our primary activity. Our choir grew from two to a half dozen and then a dozen. We bought new, better hymnals and enjoyed them. Before the local lawyer got the first photocopier in town (and let me use it), I bought a used spirit duplicator (remember that good-smelling purple print?) so our people could participate in the rich possibilities and diversity of liturgy. I used the sermon time to share the Bible's bias for smallness, to affirm our people's growing faithfulness, to articulate God's call to this particular people, and to challenge them to greater faithfulness. We celebrated everything. As their worship came alive, we experienced the church coming alive.
3. *Innovation and action.* I've seldom followed the conventional counsel of starting slowly and not changing things for at least a year. Often smaller churches are in crisis, and change is urgent and necessary. Many smaller churches find themselves mired in a rut, and something new and different can be an enjoyable sign of life. We mailed a letter to every home in town telling them about our new beginning and inviting their participation. Before recycling