

Small Congregations with Big Missions

Encouragement, Inspiration, Challenge for Smaller Congregations

“For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you part of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:27)

WHAT THE SMALLER CONGREGATION HAS TO OFFER THE LARGER CHURCH

In the book *Religious Education in the Small Membership Church*, edited by Nancy T. Foltz, James E. Cushman wrote a chapter on *The Future of Religious Education in the Small Membership Church*. Here are a few of his insights into small membership churches and what they have to offer the larger church.

The major problem with the small membership church today is that it has been perceived as a problem. Although there may be complex issues related to enhancing the ministry of small congregations in the present cultural context, the problem does not rest primarily with the small membership church but with the dominant value systems of the major denominations.

It is the uncritical acceptance of institutional values of growth, wealth, and program production that has created an atmosphere in which small membership church is perceived as a problem. Instead of being a problem, the small congregation by its very nature may well offer some answers for the contemporary American church. (p 206)

But because the small membership churches are often viewed as problems the “frequent result has been a loss of self-esteem on the part of pastors and leaders. Therefore some churches have lost the ability effectively to reach out to new persons in the name of Jesus Christ or the will to become engaged in religious education ministry to the larger community.”

Cushman goes on to point out seven qualities that the small membership church has to offer the larger church. (p 207-210)

1. What the small membership church can teach the larger church is that the bottom line for all the deciding and planning and doing is people.
2. The small membership church offers a value system that is an alternative to the dominant cultural norms of twentieth-century American society that says bigger is better.
3. Small membership churches offer a very practical form of inclusiveness.

4. The laity of small membership churches generally have a higher level of commitment to the local church.
5. Another quality of small membership life is to affirm is the centrality of worship and religious education.
6. There is an assumption that the Christian faith really should make a difference in how one lives.
7. The small congregation exists to undergird human relationships with its richness of intimacy and caring.

We are often aware of what we don't have in the smaller congregations. Maybe it is time we discover and affirm what we do have. Maybe God has a mission for the smaller congregations that goes beyond ministry to our local communities. Maybe, through the smaller congregations, God has something to teach the larger church.

THIS BOOK IS IN THE PITTSBURGH PRESBYTERY RESOURCE CENTER:
Religious Education in the Small Membership Church, edited by Nancy T. Foltz
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