

Ministering to the Needs of Small and Declining Churches
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The following is a list of observations that I have made over the years in regard to the challenges of preparing ministers for the life and ministry of small churches in the Reformed tradition. More and more, due to the recent economic recession, large churches are not hiring assistant pastors and pastors at established churches are not moving (a process that would create openings for aspiring pastors graduating out of the seminary). Therefore, in recent years, I have seen more of our graduates being attracted to the opportunities afforded by the small (and often “more” rural) churches and I have encouraged students to consider such opportunities while giving due consideration to some of the attendant cautions mentioned below.

THE POTENTIAL OF SMALL CHURCHES

1. Small, established churches have potential due to the fact that financially, their building and property is usually paid for, there is little lingering debt and often, over the years, the church has saved money and has some resources in the bank. This resource is crucial for the future viability of the church.
2. Small churches usually have a core group of people who are committed to keeping their church alive if at all possible. Motivation in this group is usually sustainable with the right leadership.
3. Having a building and a small core group of people with whom to work and who will support the (aspiring) pastor is very attractive to the seminary graduate who wants to reach the lost, but doesn't want to raise the necessary support to plant/start a new church nor wants to place the responsibility of funding property and a facility upon himself and his people. Almost any pastor should be happy to start with a well maintained facility located in a potentially vibrant area.

4. Congregants in small churches have most of the usual pastoral needs that a young minister wants to experience and address as he learns to do ministry in a church context. This context of ministry is a positive one for the aspiring pastor. He can learn on the job if the people are patient with him and grow into becoming a more effective servant of the Lord Jesus.
5. Small church congregants are happy to have a pastor who cares for their spiritual needs.
6. The pace of life in a small (and particularly in a “rural”) church is conducive to “learning” ministry. There is usually less pressure in a small and rural church setting (unless of course, the pastor’s existence and family support is dependent upon the survival of the church).

THE CHALLENGES OF SMALL CHURCHES FOR THE ASPIRING PASTOR

1. Church culture: small churches tend to be like large families and/or very small towns. They are difficult to join from the outside. Churches of 40 or less people usually have a well defined and potentially rigid culture. Reginald W. Bibby, Canadian sociologist, calls the church of 50 or less people the “Family Church.” Families are hard to break into. Small church leaders and members almost always tell a pastoral candidate that they are open to change and want to grow. However, this hope for change means both meeting and assimilating new “family” members. This assimilation is actually usually very difficult for both parties, the visitors who are entering the family, as well as the “intact and established” family. Even marriage into a small church culture can be a difficult transition for the newcomer. Small churches can declare and insist that they want to grow, but the adjustments required for such growth translates into change. The fear of change often prevents growth. A new and especially a young pastor cannot change the church culture overnight and if he attempts to do so, he both disrupts the status quo and also jeopardizes his job security. Ask the question, “What is our church culture like and how does it prevent church growth?”

2. Demography (rural culture): The small, declining established church is often located in a rural area where the population is not only *not growing* (i.e. maintaining itself), but is probably shrinking. These rural areas also include residents who have some sort of connection with a local or regional church, either due to family ties or the cultural pressures or networks associated with living in the local community for years. To try to reach a person in that demographic area is to try to pull a person out of his/her “local home church,” whether or not the individual(s) attends that specific “home” church regularly. This demographic factor makes “peaceful” evangelism very difficult; too much disruption can occur. This factor should not discourage us from reaching our long time “churched” neighbors with the Gospel as they often don’t know or trust Christ personally. However, even if they have a true conversion experience, repenting of their sins and trusting Christ alone for salvation, that doesn’t mean they will necessarily come to our church. Also, in regard to demographics, if the community is shrinking, the potential pool of prospects to be reached by the church is shrinking as well, making the goal of church growth theoretically very difficult.
3. The Nature of Evangelism: Most churches and particularly most churches in the Reformed tradition are weak at evangelism. Small, Reformed churches are probably most prone to losing this necessary distinctive of a healthy church. Rather than attempt to address all of the reasons for this seemingly inherent weakness of our tradition in this paper, I would simply suggest that unless your church is consumed by the concept of making almost every activity of the church evangelistic in some way, passion for the Great Commission easily wanes. We tend to be ingrown, both individually and corporately. Evangelism often means that our people and our churches are going to be involved in the reality of messy lives. We are reaching lost and broken people in most evangelistic endeavors. Churches are strained by new intrusions into their daily lives, needed support for hurting people’s needs, and the effort to maintain a stable environment for the broken, lost people we are reaching. The pastor cannot follow up, counsel, pastor, teach, train and love all of these people by himself. Even if he wanted to do so, he would have to count the cost of discipleship

required by reaching unbelievers for Christ and bringing them into the church. So, we maintain “church as usual” and then wonder why we don’t grow. Members need to count the cost of discipleship caused by evangelistic growth if indeed they really want to grow. This cost is a serious consideration for every small church.

4. Church change: Leaders bring change, but leaders also resist change. Pastoral leaders, if they are leaders at all, will be given God-inspired and Scripturally directed leadership to the church. However, long term church leaders (elders, church “family” patriarchs and/or matriarchs and/or wealthy influencers who sustain the church) often resist the change agent (the pastor). A young minister (especially if “young” refers both to age and experience) will find that implementing the changes necessary for church growth is a very difficult task. He might discover some very large barnacles in the docking area of the ship (or large boat in this case) called the church. He wonders how long he will have to chip away at these impediments for free sailing. Often the barnacles appear frozen in place. I have watched some very gifted seminary graduates enter into a frozen church culture where the leaders and the people have promised to work with them for change, only to get beat up so badly that some have left the ministry or at least temporarily withdrawn from their full time calling from God. These churches simply would not respect the “change agent” sent to them by God.
5. Church attitudes: There are some basic attitudes that must be exhibited among the remnant of the members who remain in the small church if indeed that church is hoping to truly grow.
 - A. First, there must be a hope in the Lord that believes that God is at work and He can build His church. This hope is not the power of positive thinking, but it does spawn a positive attitude. We must become a people who put our corporate hope and trust in the living and resurrected Christ and believe that He wants to send us revival and life. We believe God and we look up to Him in faith and prayer, trusting His

promise to build His church. Martin Luther once wrote these inspiring words, “When the heart firmly trusts God’s promises, it regards Him as faithful and truthful. Nothing more excellent can be ascribed to God.” God is very pleased by a faith, a hope and a vision that looks to Him for help.

- B. Secondly, we must embrace change. We must acknowledge that the growing Christian expects change and that the growing church expects change. The Holy Spirit changes us through the Gospel (conversion and justification) as well as through the Means of Grace (sanctification) and He will often bring changes in our world to discern if we are willing to keep in step with His leading and His activity in the world. Keep this principle in mind: growing churches change – change can bring growth (or death) but growth demands change.
- C. Thirdly, the church that wants to grow and survive must love people, all people and all types of people. It must love people who are different from the church family and the members who make up the church. The growing church must be proactive in reaching people, whether these unbelievers share our backgrounds or not. Openness to others who are made in the image of God is critical to demonstrating love, especially to those who are foreign to Christ as well as to the culture of the church.
- D. Finally, there is the question regarding prayer. Is your church a praying church? Do your leaders pray? Is there a specific time set aside for corporate prayer on behalf of both the church and the local community? Are your own members confessing and forsaking their sins and identifying with the needs of the lost (non-Christian) community that they are trying to reach? Prayer demonstrates passion for Christ and His church; passion for Christ leads to prayer on behalf of others, particularly the lost. Without prayer, the local church should not expect to grow or to draw unbelievers into its midst.

THE SEMINARY GRADUATE

The aspiring minister who has just completed seminary has challenges of his own. Often, these challenges either make him reluctant to take the charge of a small church or they create a spirit of uncertainty in the minds of the small church congregation that calls him.

These challenges are as follows:

1. He is still learning to preach. RTS requires our students to take 5 semesters of preaching courses, which is a lot for any seminary. As professors, we observe vast improvement from the first preaching course until the last. Many students have opportunities to preach during their seminary church internships and some preach as they fill local needs in the seminary region. However, the graduating student usually needs to improve his preaching significantly upon entering the ministry and this task is laborious, particularly in the early years of ministry. A small church should expect their young pastor to spend at least a little extra time in the study in the early years. This time in the study will mean, potentially, less time in the field. Preaching should be a factor that helps churches to grow if it is capable and good, but the preparation necessary for such preaching can minimize some of the “field” opportunities needed for time with people.
2. He is a pastor more than an evangelist. The students coming to RTS Charlotte are, on the whole, evangelical, i.e. they want to reach others for Christ. However, as far as giftedness (gifts of the Holy Spirit), they tend to be pastors more than evangelists and preachers more than strong, inspirational type leaders. They will learn to lead and probably will do so both by preaching and pastoring, but not necessarily by evangelizing. Church leaders who study the spiritual gifts (particularly the 19 gifts of the Spirit mentioned in the New Testament) have often observed that the gift of evangelism is given to 5% of church members (10% at most), a low figure and yet a percentage that would appear to fit such a challenging and difficult ministry (or gift). I have found that most seminary students do not identify their spiritual gift(s) to be one of

evangelism either. I am not sure that Reformed seminaries draw students who are naturally gifted to do evangelism. Most seminary graduates have a vision for doing some type of gospel proclamation, but they do not usually sense or acknowledge that they have the gift of evangelism. RTS Charlotte trains our students in personal evangelism, small group evangelism (exposure to the concept) and how to lead a church in evangelistic and outreach oriented endeavors. However, I do not know how many graduates are effective evangelists in their ministries. Even if a man is committed to doing evangelism without the gift, he must learn how to be an evangelist in whatever ministry the Lord places him. Most of our graduates are going to be solid pastors, not outwardly focused evangelists. As a matter of fact, I tell our students in the evangelism course that I teach, that if they spend *most* of their time trying to reach non-Christians instead of being pastors to the people in their congregations, they will lose their jobs!

SOME ADVICE FOR THOSE WHO WANT A PASTOR WHO CAN TRULY HELP THEIR SMALL CHURCH

1. Pray. Make prayer your number one ambition. Number ONE! Create a prayer meeting or call for more people to come to the prayer meeting that you already have and cry out to the Lord of the harvest for conversions and revival. Go to your grave praying. Let prayer for your church become your legacy.
2. Change your view of the pastor. Empower your new pastor. Free him from some of the consuming nature of pastoral responsibility. Tell him to spend less time in the study (but enough to honor the preaching and teaching of God's Word) and less time visiting the (faithful) members you already have. Tell him to spend time visiting or "hanging out" with non-churched locals, newcomers to the community and non-Christians. Tell him he can start any ministry he wants to start if, in doing so, it reaches new people and non-Christians. Tell him to start a home Bible study or a sports ministry that reaches out to those who don't attend your church (or any church) and tell him not to worry about including church members in these

activities. Tell him he won't lose his job if he does these things. Tell him that you (the officers) and any other active lay people will help him carry the load of hospital and home visitation, counseling and taking care of the physical needs of the members while he spends seemingly endless time and energy trying to reach the lost and the unchurched. Tell him that you may not have much energy, but you love this church so much that you will expend the energies you do have to work with and for him and to support and complement him in any way possible so that the church might increase its potential for growth.

3. Give. If your people have or your church has discretionary income, give it (or release it) now on behalf of the vision of a revitalized church. I knew one seminary graduate who went to a small, rural church (along with his family), but every time he suggested a way to grow the church or reach out to the community, the leaders constantly told him that they could not jeopardize their savings to follow his ideas. The problem was that his ideas weren't very expensive and the church was sitting on \$300,000 in the bank. But the money couldn't be touched. The energetic young man finally moved on to another similar situation where the leaders and the people would financially support the vision for growth and reaching the community, although they had significantly fewer financial resources.
4. Consider sending your pastor and at least 2 key leaders to a seminar on "Church Revitalization." RTS Charlotte has a Doctor of Ministry degree emphasis track in Church Revitalization and Dr. Harry Reeder of the Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama frequently leads seminars on this vital topic. The small church lay leaders could and should attend a seminar, along with their pastor so that they might gain a vision for church revitalization as well as the means necessary for creating an environment of change that could bring needed growth.

5. Be willing to change. This is often easier said than done. Follow your leader/pastor, change and live. Resist change and risk church death. The church leaders' attitudes are key factors in this regard. Church revitalization usually requires change.
6. Look to the future. Recognize that most probably, for your church to survive and minister into the future, it will not look like it does today. There will be new people entering, a new culture created and new life that gives you hope for the future. Rejoice that your church is part of a confessional tradition that will maintain a Christ-centered, grace focused and Reformed doctrinal position long after you are gone, assuming that your church is still alive and vibrant. But accept and celebrate the changes the Lord will bring to your future as you grow.
7. Be willing to watch your church culture change. Enfold those who are different from you. As Christ broke down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, begin embracing those who are culturally different from you and your people. Be willing to watch your church culture become more diverse. Encourage it. Be willing to not only hand your church over to those who are different from you, but ask Christ for the grace necessary to *embrace* those whose world doesn't reflect all of your personal or church cultural values.
8. Think "Transition." Make every effort to plan how to pass the church on to the next generation. Love, train, support and encourage the potential leaders (including your pastor) of the next generation. "Let go!" Begin handing over the reins of leadership and trusting those younger, newer leaders, just as previous leaders did with you in the past. Yes, things might look a little different, but your hope is that your church will proclaim the gospel from a Reformed perspective for many years to come.
9. Training and seminars: stimulate your pastor. His seminary training may be over, but he continues to need to be challenged to learn and grow and to learn "to grow" a church, just as you wish him to do. Send him to

annual training of some sort, particularly in evangelism, leadership training or church dynamics. And put this continuing education into the budget so you can pay for every penny of it.

10. Training for your elders, leaders and people: RTS offers an Evangelism course every year. Lay people are welcome to apply and attend (gaining seminary level credit) or to attend class as auditors (non-credit students) for a modest fee. Your people would be stimulated by the classroom instruction and environment. Some churches will send groups of people to audit a class. Check with your nearby RTS campus for an Evangelism course near you. And if RTS isn't nearby, look for the nearest Bible believing seminary or Christian college that might offer a course to train your people in outreach and evangelism. If your presbytery or denomination would like for RTS to create an Evangelism seminar for a large group of people (church leaders, etc.), that is a possibility as well. Training can be the spark that brings the fire of revival to your church!
11. Assimilate with another like-minded church: Be willing to join another similar church in the area in order to survive. It may or may not be your own denomination, but maybe it is close enough to join hands and reach the community together. Be willing to compromise your ownership of your church, but not your essential doctrines. Unite the leaders and share the buildings. Create a working agreement for leadership roles and responsibilities. Use the lesser building (that might be a tough call but it has to be decided) for outreach and ministry (church planting for a local ethnic group or minority led ministry). Hold onto your past, but make sure that the heritage of the church doesn't undermine the future of the church.

CONCLUSION

My hope and prayer is that small churches all over our country will thrive, even if they remain "family churches." Of course, to thrive these churches need to expand their families and constantly look outside of themselves. A

pastor is part of the answer, but hardly all of the answer. Church culture, attitudes, views of evangelism and change, as well as church posture (on her knees in commitment to prayer) are crucial to a future of growth. May the Lord pour out His Spirit on small churches everywhere so that the Gospel of Jesus might be clearly proclaimed to the ends of the earth, beginning at home, as the small church reaches those whom God has placed at their doorstep and in their community, wherever they are found.