

Small Churches



jim czegledi

evangelism, church growth
and worship
ext 270

jczegledi@presbyterian.ca

In the book, *The Tipping Point*, Canadian author Malcolm Gladwell makes an astonishing observation. He calls it the magic of 150, and it represents the maximum number of people with whom we can have genuine personal relationships. This is kind of relationship that goes with knowing who people are and how they relate to us. Once you go over the tipping point of 150, structural impediments limit the group's ability to agree and act with one voice.

Gladwell has just described the nature and culture of a small church. According to author and small church expert David Ray, a small church is a single cell of caring people. The Presbyterian Church in Canada is a denomination of small churches. Approximately 80% of Canadian Presbyterian congregations have fewer than 124 adults at worship services.

Small churches are not smaller versions of large churches. They tend to be relationally, not organizationally or programmatically focused. They offer family-like connections, adopting newcomers into the family. They are also more intergenerational in nature when compared to larger churches.

Small churches commonly face significant challenges similar to those of larger churches. These challenges pose a bigger threat to the health of a small church with its fewer leaders and resources. Their challenges are:

- status quo thinking: *We have never done it this way before.*
- the club mentality: *We exist primarily for our members*
- family politics
- poor self esteem
- power cliques
- unresolved conflicts,
- fewer people and less money to do the work of the church
- the high cost of maintaining the building and a full time ministry

Small churches can overcome some of these challenges by:

- creating a shared sense of mission and vision
- thinking beyond the needs of church members—mission not maintenance
- managing conflict and dealing effectively with difficult people and issues
- developing relevant worship that is in touch with the truth and the times

Small churches continue to evangelize through relational evangelism, where members and adherents invite others to church. Visitors will decide if it is a church where they may be comfortable and grow spiritually.

We have all heard the old saying that "God must love small churches because God made so many of them." God loves all faithful churches regardless of their size. I believe, also, that God wants all churches to be healthy and to grow spiritually, financially, missionally and numerically.

So then, what is the future for the small church? In the national study report to the 125th and 126th General Assemblies, we discovered that small churches of 75 members were remarkably stable with respect

to membership loss. Also noteworthy was the fact that one third of the congregations with memberships of under 124 experienced some degree of growth over our study period.

In the future we will see new models of ministry for small churches. There will be more part time ministries and bi-vocational or what the New Testament refers to as tent making ministries. Churches will be led by trained lay missionaries, and there could be an increase in cluster ministries. A cluster is a group of three or more congregations which have covenanted together for mission and ministry. They have a ministry team of at least one ordained working with lay leaders. It is not the more common structure of one minister and three churches, but one team and three churches. Presbyteries need to become more creative in mentoring small churches within their bounds.

My vision for The Presbyterian Church in Canada is a denomination of healthy, growing churches, whether they are small, medium or large.