

Embracing a theology of small

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I am the pastor of a small church engaged in deliberate transformation. Or maybe I should say we hope to be transformed. Over the past three years of our intentional journey, our understanding of transformation has changed.

We began our journey with the hope that our small congregation would be transformed into a larger one, with more people and more resources for programs and ministry.

What we have discovered is that the nature of our hope has changed. We now hope to be a faithful Christian congregation, beginning with the size we are today.

After three years of intentional work our congregation now recognizes that significant numerical growth is not on the near horizon. Yet in our work toward revitalization we have discovered that transformation *is* taking place. What has been transformed is *us*. We are beginning to understand that we can be ... no, we *are* a faithful Christian congregation engaging in meaningful ministry that makes a difference in this world. We have begun to embrace what I call a theology of small. We are learning to embrace our partnership with Jesus Christ here and now at the size and age we are.

How can we have a positive outlook? We have embraced our theology of small together. Our starting place is the Bible. Many of us engage together in weekly Bible study. The Bible is central to our Sunday school teaching. It is the foundation for our worship together. As we read and study scripture, one idea has become abundantly clear: *God embraces small*. As we read the First Testament we find God calling forth a people referred to as the “smallest of the nations.”

We read of Gideon sifting down his army of soldiers to an impossibly small number, so that God can receive the glory when victory comes. The young shepherd boy, David, is victorious over the outsized Goliath. Jesus gathers but 12 as his apostles, and even within that small group there is an inner circle with whom he works especially closely. And in his teaching Jesus states, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

He does *not* say two or three hundred or two or three thousand. He says, “two or three.” The God we believe to be most fully revealed in Jesus Christ has a passion for small — small nations, small armies, small people, small numbers. Those whom God does not write off, we dare not write off, either. And that includes the smaller churches to which many of us belong.

Becoming a small congregation is not a goal to seek, but it is the starting place for many of our congregations today. If a smaller congregation focuses on small size as an overwhelming negative, it is unlikely that congregation will begin a deliberate process of transformation. The chances are that such a congregation will either give up, go into a survival mode in which resources and energy are dedicated to keeping the church doors open, call a new minister, or engage in a “quick fix” church growth program that may or may not succeed but does nothing to alter the underlying issues that have led the church into decline.

Churches decline for a variety of reasons. Continuing to do the same old things the same old way, maybe a little bit better, will not revitalize a church. Hanging onto faulty patterns of thinking and doing what led a congregation into decline will stop any process of revitalization dead in its tracks. No congregation unwilling to examine practices, mindset, and theology can experience deep transformation. Upon examination we may reclaim some of what we do and think with renewed vitality; some we may need to jettison for transformation to take hold.

Transformation processes are hard, sometimes painful, work. There is no simple recipe that works for every congregation. But I know this — long-term revitalization and transformation rarely just happen. The church I serve knows this. And we offer this bit of advice: Start where you are, not where you were. Be willing to embrace some sort of theology of small, at least to begin.

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