

Something for Everyone

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Sometimes we small-town pastors find ourselves apologizing because our church doesn't have specialized ministries for all ages and categories of people. Perhaps we should rather communicate the advantages of our situation.



Not too many years ago there was an extremely limited selection of breakfast cereals: corn flakes, oatmeal, cream of wheat, and maybe a couple of others. Today in most grocery stores both sides of a full aisle are devoted to cereal options. We have become accustomed to having something for everyone.

This “having something for everyone” creates a dilemma for the church—especially the smaller church. The first dilemma is theological: The church is a family (1 Tim. 3: 15; 5: 1-2). Families are healthiest when they inter-mix and inter-relate with each other, rather than each member living a separate life that caters to his/her desires and interests.

The second dilemma is practical: It is impossible for the smaller church to have a specialized ministry for everyone. How can it have a youth “group” when there are only two teens? Or a “singles ministry” when there is only one single over age 25? Or a ministry for divorcees? Or alcoholics? Or offer both a contemporary and traditional service (not to mention a seeker service!) when there aren't enough people for multiple services? How, in the smaller church, are we to offer “something for everyone” to a world that has grown accustomed to an aisle-full of cereals?

Perhaps we should consider the advantages of churches that are too small for

specialized ministries.

Intergenerational

At a recent funeral service for a senior saint who had lived to be 88, I listened as RHMA's Harold Longenecker remarked about the wisdom the deceased had imparted to younger people during the latter years of his life. But in the same breath he lamented the fact that church life today is so segmented and compartmentalized that different ages don't benefit from each other's stories and experiences nearly as much as they could.

Picture the family arriving on Sunday morning in the larger church. The kids run to different Sunday School classes. One goes to the nursery. After Sunday School one goes to children's church, another to junior church, the third remains in the nursery, and Dad and Mom go to the adult worship service. When the morning is over, they get back together in their van and head home.

With everyone having their own “subchurch” one has to wonder: When did anyone in this church last have a small-town cafe. “Do you get much rain out here?” he asked. conversation with someone 20 years younger or older than he?

But now picture Sunday morning in the smaller church. The family goes their

separate ways for Sunday School but then, because there is no children's or junior church, they are together for the worship service.

Can you see some advantage to the smaller church? True, there are also advantages to the compartmentalizing that happens in larger churches. (This article is not meant to be an argument for one over the other. Both have their advantages.) But because there are also advantages to mixing ages, smaller churches don't have to view their inter-generationalism as being something for which they must apologize. Rather they should accentuate the strengths of different ages mixing together.

Consider Wednesday night. There is no kids' program—a negative, right? In some ways yes. But in others not. The kids and adults interact with each other during Bible Study. This isn't all bad! And what better way for kids to learn to pray? And adults, who sometimes strive to use lofty, "spiritual-sounding" words in their praying, benefit from listening to the simple, but beautiful, prayers of children.

There is great advantage when people of all ages mix together in church. And this doesn't apply to just the formal services but to times when the church plays volleyball together (the smaller church needs every age person to make two teams!), goes caroling, or enjoys a time of fellowship in someone's home.

One youth pastor who has served in both smaller and bigger churches noted, "Teenagers who experience only the youth group and never bond with others in the church are almost guaranteed to drop out [of church] after high school. If it's only the youth group that drew them, then only the youth group can hold them. No more youth group, no more kids. That's why I worked so hard to get our mega-church kids interacting with the rest of the church. But it was nigh unto impossible. Large churches tend to

have an age-division paradigm that controls everything."¹

There is great benefit when all ages mix together in church. There is benefit to separating ages too, but if that is not a possibility in your church, don't look at it as all bad. The small-town church is one of the few places left in American society where intergenerational relationships still exist. The advantages to this are so great that the pastor need not apologize when a visiting family asks whether the church has a teen ministry. Instead he can share the advantages of functioning like a family.

A Place for Everyone

A pastor was asked a number of questions by an out-of-towner who was curious about his church:

"How many ministries does your church have? Do you have a singles ministry?"

"Yes, we do."

"How about a ministry to the handicapped?"

"Yes."

"Single parents?"

"Yes."

"College age?"

"Yes."

"Widows?"

"Yes."

"Wow! How big is your church?"

"Fifty-five."

In most every smaller church you'll find couples and divorcees and singles and handicapped and alcoholics all inter-mixing with each other, benefitting from each other's unique situations and experiences.

In the smaller church everyone is ministered to by including them with everyone else. There is no handicapped class, or singles' class, or widows' class—they're all just part of the fellowship, treated like everyone else.

When you think about it, who do seniors need to be around to stay healthy? Just other seniors? It is kids that put a spark in

their eyes, not to mention the fact that seniors have a lot to offer kids!

Who should singles be with? They are healthiest and happiest when mixing with couples and families. I recently visited a small-town church which has a single lady in her forties who is an integral part of every aspect of church life. She is frequently invited to church people's homes, and she invites them to hers. No way does she consider her church inferior to a bigger church with a singles ministry! There is a good big-church option just down the road a few miles in a neighboring city, but she is not even tempted.

How about alcoholics? Some time ago I talked with a young alcoholic who had made a deliberate choice to attend a smaller church where she wasn't expected to be a part of a class for alcoholics. She believed that the best way to overcome her addiction was to interact with healthy non-alcoholics.

A few months ago I visited a smaller church which had a handicapped girl in attendance. It warmed my heart to see how she was treated as one of the bunch. Kids played

with her as if she was just like them. Adults interacted with her. If she needed special help navigating her wheelchair, there were plenty of hands anxious to offer assistance. I couldn't help but wonder what advantage there could be for this girl in a church with a specialized ministry for handicapped children. I noted that these advantages extended to the non-handicapped as well, who had learned valuable lessons about people: Everyone is accepted. Everyone is included. Everyone is treated like everyone else.

A husband and wife with six children told a pastor-friend of mine that they were thinking of moving out of their small town of 500 because they wondered if their children were missing out on benefits that might be available elsewhere. In reality, the most benefits for their children might be had right where they were! The next time someone asks what programs your church has for teens, don't apologize. Instead say, "We have church!"

1 Dave McClellan, "The Small-Church Advantage," Group (Jan-Feb 1999), p. 34.