



Leadership and the Small Membership Church

By Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

Understanding the unique leadership context of smaller congregations is vital to the future of the church. According to the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, the average worship attendance of a U.S. church is ninety persons; thus the majority of churches are “small” by the often-used definition of a hundred or fewer in worship.

I have always been close to the concerns of smaller congregations. I grew up in a rural Mississippi church that was part of a three-point circuit. I spent the early years of my ministry in similar circuits or in open country and small town churches. As a seminary president, I worked with student pastors and denominational leaders who served a preponderance of small membership churches. Over the years, I have learned some lessons about leadership and small membership churches.

The importance of history. History is important everywhere; but it seems to be more important in the small membership church, where yesterday often seems more important than tomorrow. As Anthony Pappas says, "For small church people time goes the ‘wrong’ way.... It goes toward the good that was, or that was thought to be." (*Entering the World of the Small Church*, Alban, 1988, 43) He goes on to say: “Effective small church leaders will not use bold, new paint or pie-in-the-sky visions of the New Jerusalem ... or babble on about a Bright New Tomorrow. They will speak quietly about who we are on the basis of who we always have been, about how we can become even more of who we are, about what was good about the ‘good old days,’ about how we can keep that good alive in our midst today.” (79-80) Small church leaders must become church history buffs, clearly linking a future vision to historical memory.

The importance of culture. Cultures are distinctive within individual churches. Even on a three- or four-point circuit where the churches are only a few miles apart and have identical demographic profiles, there is a different church culture present in each congregation. One must get in touch with this culture.

No leader can have the attitude "This is how I do my ministry," and then proceed to do things that way regardless of the cultural context of the congregation. A pastor brings in values, but they must be held alongside the values of the congregation. The pastor may need to learn to do things against her or his natural inclination because it is what God is calling for in the setting. Entering religious leadership is not about “doing one’s own thing” with many different folks. Rather, it is about being God’s servant. To do that requires taking a congregation’s particular culture very seriously.

Change is often viewed negatively. Denham Grierson concludes that churches generally live either in the past or in the future, but have difficulty living as if they could influence their own situation in the present time. (*Transforming a People of God*, 1984, 53-60) So most churches will do what poet Paul Valery describes as "backsliding into the future." Small membership churches tend to be interested in maintenance, not transformation. Typically change has not been a friend for the small membership church. Pastoral changes may have brought unwelcome variations to the worship services through the years.



Political and economic changes may have had unfavorable impacts, as well. Persons in such congregations often have negative feelings about change that their pastors do not understand. Endurance is enough of a struggle for the small membership church. Pappas says, "To add to the burden of endurance the burden of responsibility for change is often crushing, not liberating." (47)

Leading "in the middle." To be a leader is to live in the middle – in the tension between a future vision and the current reality. This tension is inherent if a leader becomes the steward of God's vision for the congregation. One cannot give in to the current reality and abandon the vision to which God is calling the church. Nor can one simply lift up the vision and ignore the realities. To be a leader means to stay with the tension. It also means to stay with the people. Remember, people in the small membership church often are people who are living on the edge – geographically, economically, theologically, and culturally. They know whether you are living with them or not.

Live into new thinking. The small membership church is not always a rational organization. Pappas points out that this does not mean that people are incapable of being rational; but they may not have found rationality a very helpful tool. The small church is often, as Pappas says, a reflexive organization, rather than a reflective one. It is probably not realistic to expect everyone to approve something before anything can be done. Yet there are those few people who, with the pastor, are willing to see a new vision and approach it as something that is in continuity with the past. The approach to change is likely to be incremental, perhaps starting with a trial period. Rather than expecting people to "think their way into doing something new," give people a chance to "live their way into change." (Pappas, 65-76)

Importance of hope. Clergy and lay leaders in small membership churches have a key assignment – to be bearers of hope. People who have lost hope cannot lead others to God's preferred future. One of the major things that holds back planning for the future is that change has been experienced as a negative, making people uncertain about the prospects for a better future. But if people can have some hope, can taste some small victories, then there is a fresh kind of energy that comes with that hope.

Small congregations can be extremely vital and effective faith communities. Sensitivity to their special characteristics will help a leader be more effective in assisting them to achieve that potential.