



Opening Up the Small Membership Church

by Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

Anthony Pappas is area minister for the Old Colony Association of the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts. He was formerly pastor on Block Island. His book *Entering the World of the Small Membership Church* (Alban, revised edition 2000) is a fine resource. More recently he edited a collection of articles from newsletters and magazines, *Inside the Small Church* (Alban, 2002).

Pappas contributes a chapter on how hard it is to “open up” the small church to be a welcoming church. He likens the small church to French bread. It is wonderful once you break it open, but breaking it open is not easy! Pappas suggests three ways such churches can open up to others.

Building Up (attitude)

Self-esteem needs to be built up. Small churches are often defensive after experiencing many rejections. Pappas’s suggestions:

1. Language. Start talking a language of health. Lift up strengths.
2. Reinforce the good. Celebrate successes.
3. Do things that bring about successes. Take things in bite-size chunks.

Breaking Up (relationships)

In many small churches it is hard for a newcomer to find a place. Everything is so set and monolithic. Pappas’s suggestions:

1. Rewrite the story. Rethink the story of who “family” is here. Find pieces of history that show a much more diverse heritage than most assume today.
2. Encourage bridge people. Some people stand at the bridges between church and community. They need to be encouraged since they can help reach people outside the church.
3. Nurture the rebel within. Pastors are expected to advocate change. It is much easier, however, for a member of the church to challenge the status quo. Find and encourage such persons.

Getting Up (behavior)

The range of behaviors and activities of the typical small church is not wide enough to let new people in. Pappas’s suggestions:

1. Engage in high-service, low-threat activities. Events that expose the community to the church without requiring commitment are ways to build initial connections. Opening the church for community functions or providing services for the community are some examples.
2. Avoid exclusionary activities. What do you do that seems closed to outsiders? What practices make your activities unwelcoming to those who may be new to the community?
3. Preserve continuity in change. The small church is oriented to the past. Introduce change in ways that can be handled. Keep a slow and steady timeframe. Don’t wear everybody out!

For more small membership church resources, check out the Congregational Resource Guide web site at <http://www.congregationalresources.org/ShowCat.asp?CN=84&SCN=108>.



Leadership Vignette

A pastor who went to a 100-year-old church in serious twenty-year decline tells a story of renewal.

Before going to this church eight years ago, I heard tragic stories about the church. Most of the members were dead or dying, I was told, except for the mean ones who are alive and well! Needless to say, I went reluctantly, but leading this church has been one of the greatest experiences of my life.

It was here that I began, out of necessity, my personal quest in leadership. Everyone knew something was wrong, yet nothing changed. I began with a positive attitude. I was consumed with a passion for renewal. Average attendance was 56, and the average age over 65. With no children or programs, members feared the church would close.

We formed a vision team, did enormous research, and prayed. We met weekly. Our findings were clear. The church was a numerical nightmare, and the spirit was gone. Nevertheless, the demographics also revealed that things could be different. The community was actually growing as our church was dying. What was wrong?

We found we had generational, organizational, and spiritual issues keeping us from growing. A turning point came when we stopped looking for what was "most" wrong. Two persons from different generations attacked each other personally. "We are not about finding fault but getting better," I said. "Let's just deal with the evidence." A breakthrough occurred. Now we were looking for solutions.

We did not worry about things we could not do. We sought to change the things that we could. We changed our organization, developed a mission statement, and trained leadership. We celebrated and dreamed big dreams. Our goals were achievable and measurable. My key contribution was in bringing a diverse group together, helping them understand the facts, and, therefore, change the future.

The Right Question

*Leaders do not need answers.
Leaders must have the right questions.*

Peter Drucker, the influential management thinker, says that an organization should raise, on a regular basis, the following question about every activity and program:

If we did not do this already, knowing what we now know, would we start it?

A leader's job is to rally people toward a better future.

Marcus Buckingham