



## Who is Visiting Small Churches These Days?

By Lewis A. Parks

When small church lay and clergy leaders gather, the first comments you often hear reflect an understandable anger, defensiveness, and dread of an imminent future. This is understandable given the challenges they face. But if you listen long enough, as I have done regularly for the last several years, you begin to pick up signs of hope – hope consistent with the empirical data showing that approximately 35 percent of small membership churches are indeed growing each year and hope consistent with the church's own theological metrics for measuring the viability and vitality of a congregation.

So who needs a small church these days? What I hear paints a hopeful picture. Call it a work of prevenient grace. Call it a wooing by the Spirit. Call it a happy confluence of the new seekers and the congregations they seek. Whatever you call it, five types of persons keep showing up as visitors to small churches, whether those churches are located in cities, towns, or rural settings.

**1. Persons seeking surrogate family.** They are separated from their families of origin by work, or school, or military. They are estranged or divorced from those once dear. They are looking for brothers and sisters with whom they can relate in reciprocity. They are looking for aunts and grandfathers who can share wisdom for the journey of life. They hunger for family-like gatherings brimming with assorted characters and stories. The surrogate family language that dominates Paul's letters written to congregations of 35 to 50 persons resonates with these persons.

**2. Persons seeking an alternative to the anonymity of the work place and public square.** They have learned to be compliant minds and bodies so they can navigate the interstate highways to get to work or to get through airport security without setting off alarms. They shop in big box stores like Home Depot, Target, and Ikea where consumers seek products without regard for etiquette. They bank and take courses online. But when it comes to worship and spiritual growth, they want a setting where they know and are known by name. They want to be more like performers in worship and less like audience.

**3. Persons weary of self-absorption and in search of a corporate story into which they can jump.** C.S. Lewis once observed that there comes the day when one realizes one isn't going to be a Great Person after all! So where does one go from there? One of the healthiest answers is to find a community or institution that is more than the sum of its individual members, and give oneself over to it. One reason small churches need to have their story ready to tell is that there are people looking for such stories. Many of the seekers are looking for a story bigger than themselves but still small enough that they might contribute to the advancement of the plot.



**4. Persons who have a score to settle with God but want to settle it in a safe environment.**

They have outgrown the eclectic and nebulous spirituality of their New Age phase. They demand that God make sense of the sudden death of a child, spouse, or best friend. They regret the setbacks of their lives and would like to find an overriding providence. As they have it out with God, they have a strong preference for an intimate setting. They want to be able to ask the preacher face to face their hardest questions after the sermon. They want to tell their stories in Bible study with persons whose ongoing stories they are following. They want to be able to feel their way into new vistas of faith and know that those who see the collateral tears read them sympathetically.

**5. Persons who are looking for a place to give back for the blessings they have received.** Life has been good to them and they have reached a fork in the road. Will they be anxious and grasping like the farmer in Jesus' parable whose logic is "more, more; there's never enough!"? Or will they deem themselves blessed to be a blessing? If the latter, chances are they will look for a place where their gifts make a visible difference. Behold the small church where the budget is nearly always barebones and where "extras" like sending a teenager on a mission trip to Bolivia, having a 2600 lumens projector for the worship service, or making the bathrooms handicap accessible usually depend on the presence of patrons and the energy of volunteer labor.

Whether these five types of persons will come back to the small churches they visit is another story. There are issues of hospitality and excellence of execution that must be faced. But courage for facing them surely starts with a belief that someone is likely to show up and notice. The signs are strong that someone will.

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## The Right Question

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

A question used once a year with a church staff can be modified to be used in a number of settings.

What makes you most proud about being a part of this congregation?



## **Two Views of Vision** by Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

Margaret Wheatley distinguishes between a traditional “linear” view of vision and a “circular” view, which she sees as more compatible with today’s world. The linear view points to a future destination and the vision serves as a magnet pulling everything toward the dream. The classic illustration of linear vision is President John F. Kennedy’s announcement in the early 1960s that the United States would send a man to the moon and bring him back safely before the end of the decade. The things needed to achieve this great feat were not in place when he made that declaration. In a speech at Rice University on September 12, 1962, Kennedy said that the astronauts will travel in space ships “made of new metal alloys, some of which have not yet been invented.” But as the dream caught on, it brought with it the necessary money, innovation, and technology. That is the character of such a vision.

The circular or spiral view of visioning sees the process beginning with small next-step visions that become “fields of energy” out of which larger visions emerge. The final destination may not be known. If the mission stays clear as the guide point, then instead of the energy spiraling into unrelated activity, the energy builds from one vision to another. Destinations are reached but in a much greater self-organizing pattern. There are times when both approaches are fitting for churches, but my experience is that this second view is more often the one that suits congregations. It is true that if we are faithful in the smaller visions God gives us, we are given greater visions.

Wheatley’s view of visioning comes from her study of “new science” and gives attention to how nature innovates. Peter Senge says it this way: “The underlying shift that I believe is needed is to think of our organizations as living organisms rather than machines.” Senge, Wheatley, and others remind us that the Machine Age was built on the ability to control; whereas, no one controls living systems. They suggest that leadership would do well to allow for surprise and for the power of the impact of small changes. Just as chaos theory teaches that small changes can have big effects in physical systems, the same concept can be seen in human systems.

The historical worldview shaped by a Newtonian paradigm assumes that the world is like a machine. The parts of the whole are finite in number, and they are related in simple and repetitive ways; one cause has a direct effect. The new science paradigm assumes that the parts are interdependent and whatever affects one can change all others. This approach can help shape how we understand vision and other elements of leadership as well.

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Though we are skilled at creating hierarchical cultures, we are very unskilled at altering organizational structures that have outlived their usefulness.

*Robert Quinn*