

When Small Churches Make a Big Difference Pepperdine Lectureships 2015

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I'm a small church kid who works at a small church now. I've worked at medium and really large churches, but in this season of life, I'm loving my role in a small church (cornerschurch.org) just outside of Atlanta, GA.

I think God loves Small. Not that he's opposed to big, but I believe with all my heart that God loves to take that which is small in number and do something incredible.

Think Noah, part of the 8 used to repopulate the earth; Think Israel, only 70 living in Egypt, became God's chosen representatives to every other nation. Think David, overlooked by Samuel, Israel's greatest of all Kings.

God loves to do great things with those who are small in number.

During my time at Corners I've come to believe there are a handful of principles that I believe have helped us succeed as a small church.

5 Principles for Succeeding as a Small Church

1. Accept WHO You Are.

Many of the leaders at small churches I talk to feel isolated and unique in their struggles to do church well. The truth is that the average church size in America is 76 - that's small - and 90% of all Churches are less than 200.

If you're the leader of a small church then you're not alone!

Once you realize that Small Churches are normal and you stop apologizing for being a part of a small church, you can begin to lean fully into what God has planned for you in your city!

Here are some immediate advantages:

- You are uniquely positioned to reach Millennials or young adults (18-35 year olds). When surveyed, 18-35 year olds said that the number one thing they are looking for in a church is “Community.” That is connection and belonging.
 - Barna says, Small churches play an important and valuable role in reaching MILLIONS of young adults who have no interest in a larger setting
- You already have what bigger churches are trying to achieve! Larger churches value small and are spending financial resources and attempting to staff positions to help them achieve this. The most successful large church in our area thrives in part because of their dynamic small group ministry.
 - Additionally, large churches are building smaller buildings! Most large churches are now creating multiple sights around their cities in order to create smaller and more intimate gatherings.

2. Accept ***WHERE*** You Are

Look around your community. What do you see? WHO do you see?

One of the best things you can do is to LOVE your CITY well!

The way we’re attempting to do that is to be a church ***OF*** your city and a church ***FOR*** your city.

There aren’t any churches that I know of, who fail to love God in a way that proves faithful to their own sense of heritage and theology.

But there are a ton of churches that ***FAIL*** to love their neighbors well.

Our church is uniquely positioned between the top income earners in our county and some of the poorest in our city. For us to be a church of the city, we must attempt to reach both/and, not either/or. Just about every church growth book out there will tell you NOT to do this, but we’re not interested in investing in a church growth strategy, we’re interested in investing in people.

Ask your city what it needs. Meet with the Mayor’s office, with school officials, and ask them how you can help invest in the lives of those living all around you.

Leverage what’s GOOD about your CHURCH’s identity for the GOOD of your CITY.

You may be limited in who you attract to your church. Not everyone will want to be a part of a small volunteer run organization that worships the way you do...

BUT your ***influence*** on your community doesn’t have to experience those same limitations. You may even find that there are those who will join you outside your church that would not join you inside.

Here's a simple move you can make to become a champion FOR your city...

- Follow every Twitter account you can find associated with your city/community...
- Perform a search every few days of your city on Twitter to see what people are saying
- Subscribe to your local PATCH and let it email you when things are happening in your community.

This will allow you to not only know what's happening in your community, but to also participate in your community by becoming a champion of things my community is excited about and responding to the needs present in your community.

Jeff Henderson says, there are 3 ways his church is **FOR** their city:

- Own an Event - Sponsor, host, and execute an event in which your church has complete ownership
- Participate in Events - Partner with an event organizer in your city and help them in a significant way by becoming a source of volunteers.
- Promote Events - Small churches can't do everything, but you can be a champion for your city by being excited about what your city is excited about. Put information on your website or on your social media accounts promoting an upcoming event in your city even if, no, especially if you have nothing to do with it.

3. Be *STRATEGIC* (and *SYSTEMATIC*)

Carey Neiuwhof says, one of the reasons small churches fail to make a big difference is not from a lack of desire, improper theology, or facility - these may be limiters, but there are not the cause of failure.

The #1 reason small churches fail to make a big impact in their community is because Small Churches think like...are you ready...SMALL CHURCHES!

Leaders of small churches often attempt to do everything, but here's the good news: you're not that important! Seriously, even if you were incredibly gifted, you as the leader of small church still couldn't do everything...or at least do everything **well**.

The best way to begin making this transition is to start thinking strategically and systematically.

Don't be afraid to adopt and understand organizational management. I know, I know. Many of you (or others at your church) are afraid of those things because you feel as though it organize the warmth and intimacy right out of your church.

The truth is, your members may be okay with this. After all they are the one's that have stuck around, but your guests (those looking for a church) will likely not put up with the same.

Strategy is hard.

Where mission and vision are the what and why of a church, strategy is the HOW. And when leaders start talking about the how, other people get nervous.

Small churches aren't failing to make an impact because their mission and vision is off. Nearly every church I know of - small and big; effective and ineffective, alike - are all, in one way or another wanting to love God, love others, and invite people to grow in their relationship with Jesus. The words may differ, but the heart of every mission and vision is the same.

Strategy is the difference maker. Churches that not only know what they want, and why they want it, but most importantly know **HOW** to achieve this are the ones that make the biggest difference in their communities.

This is why leaning into strategy is so important: strategy and systems are scalable... programs aren't!

How many times have you looked around at other churches who were doing something you considered successful and tried to copy their programs? What if, instead, you looked at the strategies and systems behind what they were doing?

4. PLAN Your Sundays (with the Guest in Mind)

The very first step here is...are you ready...**PLAN** your Sundays! Know what you're going to do before you do it.

As a small church, you have the ability to leverage your casual and intimate environment for connection, but you'll likely lose the potential for connection if you come off as unprepared.

Spend time each week working through **HOW** (*strategy and systems*) you do what you do...put a process in place that helps you and others who serve on Sunday to get out of the way.

I know what your church wants - you want the focus to be on God and what God is calling your church to do...not on the person who up front. So plan.

Don't just plan, though, plan with the GUEST in mind.

Know your audience. In any given church on any given Sunday you'll have Christians, Guests, Visitors, Cultural Christians, Unchurched, Non-believers...etc.

One of the things you can do is begin to shape your public speech - the parts of your church where people are talking - to connect with the person **LEAST** familiar with church or, more importantly least familiar with **YOUR** church.

Make the most of your moments when welcoming the church on Sundays by **greeting**, **welcoming**, and **directing** guests how they can take a next step toward getting to be a part of your church (meeting the minister in the lobby, filling out a connection/guest card, letting someone know that they want to know more about the church, etc.)

This might mean you:

- Introduce yourself when talking to your church (yes, your members already know who you are, and they will grow tired of you introducing yourself each week, but your guests will appreciate it!).
- Publicly greet and welcome your guest and tell them what your church is about in a very concise way.
- Limit the number of things/events you talk about publicly because most announcements don't have anything to do with your guests (your members can be directed to keep up with all that's happening in your weekly bulletin/handout or by looking on your website).

When you are aware of *WHO* your audience is and *especially* the guests, it changes *HOW* you talk, but not necessarily *WHAT* you talk about.

We still read from and talk about the Bible, Jesus, the teachings of the New Testament, etc., but we now attempt to do so in a way that help our guests understand what we're talking about.

5. Stay SMALL...

I believe that if you do these things you have potential to grow - not because you have bought into a growth strategy, but because you have invested in people's lives.

But here's the truth: You can never be small enough to grow deeply with each other. Even small churches need to work on getting smaller within the context of connection.

Many of the people that land at our church say they're looking for something *smaller*. They're coming from bigger churches where they don't feel connected for one reason or another.

The challenge here is obvious though, right? If more and more folks land at our church from larger churches, then we'll eventually deal with the same issues.

Churches often resist going to multiple services based on the idea that they can't get to know everyone if everyone is not meeting together in one place at one time. I understand that desire, but the fact is that intimacy can't happen across the board even in a church of 150!

For example, we baptized a guy a couple of weeks ago and in a church our size there were several folks who had never met him before even though he's been there for 3 months, and multiple environments at our church each week.

WHY IS THIS?

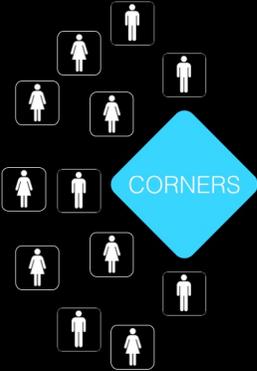
The Principle of Multiplying Relationships.

Relationships are rarely 1 on 1 in a group environment.

In a group of 4, there are 12 possible relationship combinations...in a group of 12 there are 132 potential relationship combinations! in a church of 132 there are 17,292 relationship combinations!

So here's a strategy we use for staying small...even though we are already small.

We use a strategy we call Corners, Circles, and Tables...(this language makes sense to us, but likely will not to you...chose language that does!)



CORNERS

Where we **ENGAGE**
RANDOM Engagement
A **STARTING** Point
Where Relationships **BEGIN**



CIRCLES

Where we **CONNECT**
REGULAR Connection
A **NEXT** Step
Where Relationships **BUILD**



TABLES

Where we **SHARE**
INTENTIONAL Sharing
GROWING Deeper
Where Relationships **BOND**