

# CHAPTER 1

## THE POWER OF SMALL(ER)

**W**here I grew up everything was small: the town, the schools, and the church two blocks from my house. It is a beautiful church and it was my church. Memories of how that congregation helped shape me are as vivid as if they were yesterday. They begin with the married couple who served together as our pastors and move to my service as an acolyte for the first time, with the fear of setting the church on fire. Remembering the smells of the sanctuary, the classrooms, and the basement where we had snacks and talked about Jesus makes me smile. There are the Sunday school teachers, vacation Bible school crafts, and the haunted barn that we would create as a youth group during the Halloween season at a church member's farm. We didn't know our church was small. It was simply our church and we loved it. What we know today about faith formation and discipleship is true: These are the kinds of experiences that make faith stick.

While that church has remained small, many people continue to form relationships with one another and Jesus in that place today. There are people of all ages, young and old, who will spend or have spent sixteen to eighteen years of their lives growing up together. I witnessed this on a recent visit home to pay respects to a family friend who had died. Not only did being there remind me of how this congregation was so vital to my faith journey, but it also

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assured me that their commitment to nurturing the faith of families like mine remains strong today.

With a college degree in education in hand and a vision of teaching awards, coaching high school wrestling championship teams, and a steady stream of successful students, my wife and I went on to have thirteen years of living our dream. God, though, introduced us to a new vision through two key life events: walking with a friend through the pain of losing his wife to cancer and experiencing our first pregnancy. As we prayed and processed all that was taking place, we felt it would be best if I became a stay-at-home dad. Around the time of that decision, we began attending the small Epworth United Methodist Church in Franklin, Tennessee. It was here we chose to raise our two children. We had no way of anticipating what would happen next.

In 2005, during the dedication service for the new sanctuary that the church had built to accommodate odd-defying growth, Bishop Robert Spain, a retired United Methodist bishop, encouraged the audience not to sit back but to become actively involved in the ministry of Jesus Christ in the world. Later in a meeting at the church parsonage, our pastor shared that the church had plans to hire a part-time youth minister. That fall, I was asked to join the ministry team as the youth minister. Inexperienced and untrained, I said YES! I enjoyed serving at my church but at the same time felt that God wanted me to do more. Over the years, “more” came to involve training opportunities, volunteering for the Tennessee Conference of The United Methodist Church on various teams, and serving in my current role as the conference resource person for children, youth, and young adult ministries. God uses small churches in powerful ways.

## **WHY SMALL MEMBERSHIP CHURCHES MATTER**

In the Tennessee Conference, approximately 82 percent of the congregations have a worship attendance of 99 or less. Across

the United States, researchers have determined that 59 percent of churches have a worship attendance of 7–99 people.<sup>1</sup> The study further revealed that 35 percent of churches in the U.S. have 100–499 worshippers; 4 percent of churches see 500–999 in worship; 2 percent have 1,000–1,999 present; churches with 2,000–9,999 in attendance make up 0.4 percent; and the final .01 percent, or 40 congregations in the U.S., have 10,000 or more in worship.<sup>2</sup>

With our society's obsession on the "bigger is better" mantra, small congregations get lost in the mix. We don't hear the stories of the amazing ways that small congregations are living as Jesus Christ incarnate in the world. Mostly we talk about how the church is dying and overtly blame small churches themselves for their plight. The truth is, there is a different reality we don't see. The Tennessee Conference Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative was created because we believe in the power and promise of God's intended reality for small churches.

Yes, congregations are dying and closing each year. But I believe that this death is more about the need for new life than the need to assign blame. Blame doesn't change the outcomes; only a new future can do that. The call we have for churches in the Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative is to help them see a new possibility for their future, a future filled with hope that reveals their value in the work of Christ in their communities and neighborhoods.

Imagine having a jar, several rocks of varying sizes, and a bag of sand. The challenge is to get everything into the jar without any of it left over. What would be your plan to make this happen? Would you put the rocks in first or the sand? If I told you that 18 percent of the jar was to be filled by the rocks and 82 percent of the jar with the sand, would that change your plan? In order for the jar to be filled by the sand and the rocks, we would start by putting the rocks in first and then pour in the sand. As the sand flows over the rocks, we will see that it fills the gaps between the rocks, ensuring that

the entire jar is filled to the top. But please don't misunderstand the analogy here. This isn't a lesson on priorities. Rocks have their purpose and sand has its purpose. The grain of sand is as important to the task of filling the jar as the rock. In the same way, each size of church has a specific place in the kingdom of God.

There is an old and ongoing debate in the Western church on whether evaluating ministry success by tracking the number of persons present is an effective practice. While numbers satisfy our need to quantify ministry, counting heads has arguably served as a distraction from the mission of Jesus Christ. This measurable, at its core, breeds consumerism, comparison, confusion, and despair and cripples the church in its efforts to achieve the goal presented in the Lord's Prayer—may “your kingdom come, . . . on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10, NIV). I believe when we lay this battle to rest, we will begin to see the value of churches of *all* sizes present in the global Church today. A disclaimer: This book is not a defense for the existence of small churches. Rather, I hope to make it clear that size doesn't matter. Effectiveness does.

In the Tennessee Conference, we have come to believe that the way we are to serve churches in obedience to Jesus' command to “go and make disciples” is to seek ways to equip churches and leaders of all sizes for the task. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* proclaims that local congregations provide “the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we must see the value in the small and the big. Our focus for the churches in the Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative is to push back on the societal value to be better than the church next door and instead focus on becoming the community of faith God has created and called each to be. This challenge encourages the discovery of uniqueness and also the need for connection to other faith communities in the community so that every person knows the extent of Christ's love and redemptive power.

## A NEW MODEL

Starting out in my role as the director for young people's ministries for the Tennessee Conference of The United Methodist Church, it was important to listen—a lot. It was clear from listening to youth workers that how we helped churches in ministry with young people needed to change. We had done a good job of training volunteer youth workers designated by the church as the point people to do youth ministry, yet they weren't able to recruit and lead other volunteers. While dreaming about what this new model would be, I met Stephanie Caro, lead consultant specializing in smaller churches, with Ministry Architects. As Stephanie and I began discussing what this new thing would be, I shared about the need of training for small congregations who desired to be in ministry with young people but didn't know where to start. I shared about the passion our small congregations have for discipleship and their struggle at the same time to turn that passion into action. Through my role at the Tennessee Conference, I partnered with Ministry Architects to launch the Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative. This initiative is rooted in the deep love that all of us—youth workers, Stephanie Caro, and I—have for the small church.

Over the past five years we have intentionally focused on helping smaller membership churches build teams with systems, structures, and vision around forming ministry with young people that is relationally cohesive and foundationally sustainable. We believe that by building these components correctly, the church will increase its capacity to build disciples. Through the Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative, many churches moved from a feeling of limitation fueled by a belief they didn't have enough to a feeling of hope fueled through the lens of a unique calling and a realization that God has already provided everything they need. Transformation takes time, and each church changes differently and with different results. While some have progressed more slowly, others have seen powerful change as they implemented the principles learned through the Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative.

## MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

One of the first challenges that churches in the Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative had to overcome is the notion that small churches are abnormal. The 2010 Religious Congregations Membership Study found that the median church in the United States has seventy-five regular participants.<sup>4</sup> The average worship attendance of a United Methodist Church in the United States is eighty-seven persons.<sup>5</sup> In our training cohorts, we discovered church after church limited by its belief in what we call the Small Church versus Small(er) Church Mentality. Phrases such as “We’re a small church, so we can’t . . .” and “We’re a small church so we don’t . . .” were spoken as kind of a statement of faith. The often used statement “We don’t have enough . . .” was usually completed with *youth, volunteers, money, space, parent involvement*, and so forth. The list, as daunting as it may seem, can be overcome by a change in perspective, processes, and vision. While attendance and participation do affect how ministry can be done, they don’t change the call to make disciples.

Churches stuck in a Small Church Mentality are most concerned with saving their church and are often unable to see the opportunity their situation presents to breathe new life into it. Programs are often promoted as the magic bullet. In these cases, young people are often viewed in one of two ways: machinery or scenery.

Alicja Iwanska, a Polish anthropologist, points out that we tend to divide our world into three categories: scenery, machinery, and people. Iwanska found, however, that not all human beings are seen as “people.” Iwanska defines *machinery* as “tools people use in their lives to get their work done.”<sup>6</sup> Church people are guilty of viewing young people as machinery when they believe that adding youth ministry programs will perform the task of saving their congregations from death.

Churches can also be guilty of viewing young people as scenery, which Iwanska says is enjoyed “in a disinterested sort of way.”<sup>7</sup> This

perspective values people as decorations or objects to be displayed. Well-intended church leaders demonstrate Iwanska's theory when there is an expectation that young people be seen (being present on Sundays, performing token roles such as holiday programs, or doing manual labor that someone in the church thinks would be a good job for teens) but are not given a voice or place in the life and ministry of the church. Young people, just like their adult counterparts, have much to offer the world in both worship and service.

There are other ways in which smaller churches have become stuck. As the number of smaller churches increases, their health may be worsening. They often appear resilient, weathering the storms of cultural changes, population movements, and denominational neglect and/or efforts to close them, but the onslaught of these challenges takes its toll.

Often inexperienced pastors in their first jobs will envision a new reality for their church. It isn't long before these challenges, limited finances, and the unending mountain of resources and seminars promising solutions overwhelm them and they leave. The church rallies to make it until the next pastor arrives. However, weathering the storm only leaves churches to assess the damage: families who have left, a long list of former pastors, and little hope for a future. The way out of this stuck way of thinking requires a change in perspective, processes, and vision.

William T. McConnell, in his book on congregational renewal subtitled *Healing the Sick, Raising the Dead*, says, "To get to where you want to go, you must first know where you are."<sup>8</sup> Transformation in the smaller membership church is greatly impacted by leaders seeing the current reality and the potential for what can be and inspiring confidence that a new future is possible. This foundational principle motivated us to create a new model with contextually oriented training and coaching based on the hunch that smaller churches could begin to step into their new futures.

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Churches in the Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative are able to learn and utilize a new framework that helps them shift from the Small Church Mentality to the Smaller Church Mentality. With this new mentality, churches celebrate their size instead of being limited by it. Smaller Church Mentality churches dream God-sized dreams, they are ready for new possibilities, they easily adapt to changes and challenges, and they realize the advantages of being smaller. A smaller church living in the Smaller Church Mentality sees young people for who they are instead of as the machinery to save their church or scenery to make it look hip. Rather, they are viewed as persons with the ability to change the world through their relationship with Jesus Christ. Churches who think Smaller rather than Small understand that numbers matter not because they are comparing themselves to those with more but because each number is a real person who needs to know God's love. The smaller church way of thinking fosters the call for the church to build relationships with the people God has blessed them with so that they can send them out to bless the world.

### **ONE CHURCH'S STORY**

One of the churches who recognized the need to change their framework from a Small Church Mentality to a Smaller Church Mentality was the Santa Fe Charge in South Central Tennessee. Comprised of four churches, the Santa Fe Charge was a part of the first cohort of smaller churches in 2013. They are served by Rev. Joe Bowers, who has a unique calling to serve multiple smaller church charges. Joe was asked to share his perspective on the effect that the Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative had on his ministry with the Santa Fe Charge.

Living with a clear calling from God to serve the smaller membership church, I responded with joy when contacted concerning a new effort to assist smaller membership churches in our conference with a practical way to address one of our problems, that of having a viable and sustainable

youth ministry. The “Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative—2013 Cohort” lasted a year and involved four one-day seminars requiring outside reading assignments, application of the material taught, and coaching calls with Stephanie Caro and my team from the Santa Fe Charge.

The background to this story started several months before when the Santa Fe Charge administrative committee had committed to hiring a part-time youth minister (a full-time student) from Martin Methodist College, located within driving distance of the charge. The charge leadership had responded to my proposal to recruit a student youth minister with mixed response and some hesitation. Two of the churches expressed concern at the value of the effort to their church because they had no youth who attended, while all raised the issue of cost and how to share the expense equally. However, all four churches agreed to humor their pastor with his strange plan and participate in the cohort for the full year. We formed a team with one representative from each church on the charge to participate in the training. By the time the cohort sessions had started, we had hired a young person who was living at home and working part time at a sandwich shop, while attending college at Martin Methodist and working with our charge’s youth ministry on alternate weekends.

In one of the chapters of the textbook and during the first training day, the model of what it cost to build a sustainable youth ministry in the local church was presented as a ratio of \$1,000 to \$1,500 per youth per year. Our charge had committed to investing about \$3,000 for our total program for the year. Realizing that we were setting ourselves up for failure or at the very least limited success, I asked our youth pastor how much he was making per week from his job at the sandwich shop. He replied, “About \$100 per week.” I then asked, “So if we could pay you \$200 per month extra, would

you consider working with our youth each weekend?” His reply (indicating his disdain for the sandwich shop job) was, “I would change for even less.” So I reworked the proposed budget and presented the new idea to the churches. Over the objection and non-commitment of two of the churches, we went ahead with expanding the youth ministry to meet weekly, and thankfully it worked.

Because of our successful increase in the number of youth participating and the overall success of the program, the next year all four churches voted to support our youth minister and our ministry with the youth in the community. We have not achieved the \$1,000 to \$1,500 per youth per year as recommended by the textbook, but we have approached that number.

The byproduct of this effort in our youth ministry has led to several other cooperative ventures by our four churches. We’ve also seen invaluable cooperation from other churches in the community, and we now are ministering to the community of Santa Fe with a backpack ministry for children in the local school that provides food for the weekend, an enhanced food pantry ministry housed in one of our churches, and a community-wide 5K run event each year, which raises money for the ministries as well as awareness in the community of our ongoing mission work.

Since Santa Fe’s time in the cohort, the youth minister has graduated from college and is now serving a different church while attending seminary. The youth ministry continues to thrive. Because of the efforts of the team developed during the cohort and the faithful work of the youth minister, a strong unit emerged that sustained their ministry with youth while they sought a new college student to serve as their youth minister. Now with a new youth minister on board, the team continues to serve alongside her as partners in ministry. Santa Fe’s willingness to adopt a new mental framework

was the key to where it is today. This faith community is committed to the ongoing work of building sustainable youth ministry that continues to match this community's God-sized dreams.

This is just one of the stories of churches who participated in the cohort. Transformation does not take place without effort and commitment. Throughout the rest of this book you will have the opportunity to read more from churches who adopted this new framework for ministry in their unique contexts. The concepts discussed in this chapter will also be discussed through their stories.

## STEPHANIE'S RESPONSE

Brad, I love what you're saying here with the whole "small church" versus "smaller church" phraseology. What a great lens to give us as a guide for our outlook! Brad's research numbers are spot on with my research as well. In my training workshops, my experience is that when smaller churches find out the average size church is 75 people, it re-orientes them to the fact that THEY are the normal and not the larger "cool church down the street" they think everyone prefers. Some churches use their size as an excuse for not doing great ministry, providing less-than-stellar systems. Imagine the powerful growth toward God that would occur if smaller churches fully understood just how precious is the ministry they bring to the Body's Table!

Since Brad shared his story, I'd better tell mine. How did my love for equipping smaller churches begin? It was accidental . . . or was it? God uses our circumstances, whether created by us or him, to move us where we'll thrive best. It's what God did for me.

I'd been serving in church ministry since the '80s, and the majority of that was spent working in medium/large ministries. All that changed when I got hired on at St. James UMC in St. Petersburg, Florida. I came on staff in 2003 to find eight or nine youths connected to the church. I was clueless about what to do with that; my previous two churches were well over one hundred youths. Who teaches about this stuff? Who could show me how to make the appropriate algebraic adjustments?

I looked around for resources, couldn't find any, and long story short? The folks from Group Publishing/Simply Youth Ministry said, "We don't have many resources to support smaller congregations, so why don't you write/blog/teach it for us?" And so

I did. Despite my large personality, I discovered my wiring is more suited for intimate-number settings in church youth ministry. With smaller numbers than my previous big youth groups, as each youth ministry experience, such as lock-ins and mission project days, passed my calendar, I researched and wrote about it.

My “aha” observations in youth ministry were:

1. Smaller youth groups are easier to manage. Duh!
2. It's easier to make course corrections with a group of ten than a group of one hundred. Spontaneity is nearly impossible with lots of people to contact. Ten kids? One easy phone/mail chain clues everyone in.
3. I knew every kid's name, their siblings' names, their pets' names, and so forth. In other words, less of them meant more of me and the other adults.
4. With fewer kids, we could spotlight each one more. We could get to each Christmas concert and final basketball game.

Friends (old and new through this book), I am so excited to take this journey with you as your church moves to a stronger, thriving ministry to the teenage circles your church intersects. It has been an uber pleasure watching churches grow through the small church cohort-type programs. I've helped lead about a dozen training cohorts now around the country (with five more beginning fall of 2016), and I can tell you this: Small churches who trust the process and the Spirit? They see change. Oh, not an overnight quick fix but through steady tweaking and personalizing their systems. From the ministry principles we study together in each cohort, I've seen God moving as they “square the corners” of their youth ministry. Funny thing is, what happens is that not only does their youth ministry strengthen, but so do the other systems and ministries within each congregation. Amazing, isn't it?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 1: THE POWER OF SMALL(ER)**

1. William T. McConnell is quoted in the chapter: “To get to where you want to go, you must first know where you are.” Where is your congregation right now? What is the story of your congregation so far?

2. *Visioning* is a word to describe the process of looking toward the future, and praying for what God will do in and through your church next. What is a vision you have of God’s leading for your church’s Smaller Church Youth Ministry?