

SMALLER CHURCH YOUTH MINISTRY

NO STAFF

NO MONEY

NO PROBLEM!



BRAD FISCUS WITH STEPHANIE CARO
FOREWORD BY DUFFY ROBBINS

**SMALLER CHURCH YOUTH MINISTRY:
NO STAFF, NO MONEY, NO PROBLEM**

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DEDICATION

To my mom and dad,
Thank you for revealing Jesus Christ to me daily.
Your love is the best inheritance I could ever receive.

Love, Brad

FOREWORD

THE POWER OF SMALL MULTIPLIED BY THE POWER OF GOD

The small group of young people meeting alone on an August afternoon in the shade of a patch of trees near Sloan's Meadow along Massachusetts' Hoosac River probably wouldn't have registered so much as a burp on anyone's Youth Ministry Richter Scale. The numbers certainly weren't impressive; the program was pretty stripped-down. And they had to change locations right in the middle of the meeting because of a thunderstorm. In fact, they literally ended up meeting in a pile of hay where they basically waited out the rain by praying together. But that small group of young people believed in a big God, and they prayed that summer afternoon that God might somehow use the five of them to communicate the gospel to those around the world "who were not Christians."

Looking back on it now, it probably wouldn't have fit anyone's idea of a youth ministry success story. But in that simple gathering—now known as "The Haystack Prayer Meeting"—God began a work that has impacted thousands and probably millions of lives around the world. In fact, within six years of that Saturday afternoon in 1806, that small group of young people had helped to launch the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), and, through their collective efforts, some of the very

first American Protestant missionaries set out for foreign shores. Today, some two hundred-plus years later, the ABCFM has sent out nearly 5,000 missionaries to thirty-four different fields. And it all started with a very big God and a very small group of young people. (See *Global Ministries*, 28 February 2006.)

That's why this book you hold in your hands offers such a compelling vision. Brad and Stephanie believe that God can do bigger things in a smaller church than we often dare to hope or believe.

THE POWER OF SMALL

In one of my first writing assignments, I was asked to write curriculum for The United Methodist Church, specifically curriculum that could be used on Sunday nights for United Methodist Youth Fellowship. After submitting my first few lessons, I received some coaching from my editor. He noted that one of my learning activities had centered around the students building a Human Pyramid (that is, students stacked on top of each other, five on the bottom, then four, then three, and so on). He politely went on to explain that the average United Methodist youth group had an average attendance of precisely six kids, and that he wasn't confident that the "pyramid idea will be very effective with only three or four young people." It struck me as a reasonable concern. I tried to imagine three kids excitedly building a pyramid, one on top of two . . . and stopping there. Admittedly, it didn't sound very engaging. So I thanked him for his guidance, reworked the pyramid activity, and removed the relay race from lesson five.

What that little exercise forced me to see was this: yes, size does matter when it comes to programming and planning, and there are some real limitations faced by smaller youth groups. But it also stretched me to conclude: no, that doesn't mean God is somehow limited by a smaller church. The cook who is limited by the lack of ingredients just has to come up with new recipes. As long as there's fire to cook with, and salt for flavor (for the full recipe see

Matthew 3:11 and Matthew 5:13), there's still lots of potential for people to be fed. It was in coming up with those new recipes that I began to see some real advantages in a smaller youth group. That's when I became a believer in the power of small.

This isn't a new idea, of course. Theologian Robert Capon in his study of the parables of Jesus observed that the five primary images Jesus used for the kingdom of God are "The Little, The Lost, The Least, The Last and The Dead." Jesus understood that even a few loaves and fish could feed a multitude, and that even faith the size of a mustard seed could move mountains. Little wonder that although Jesus had multitudes of followers, he chose to spend the bulk of his time with a small group of twelve. We can imagine Jesus might have agreed with that old Ethiopian proverb that says: "With enough patience and saliva, even an ant can swallow an elephant!"

But, before you go any further in this book, just to be clear, let's affirm three clear advantages of a smaller youth group.

I. Intimacy

I heard a story about a very well-known youth worker who was surprised at a conference by a young woman who thanked him for the impact he had made in her life.

"You are the reason I met Jesus," she said.

And so he asked, "What was it? Was it a talk? Was it our group? Did you hear me speak on a retreat?"

"No," she replied, "You remembered my name."

Every teenager wants to be known. We all do. And it's just a fact: the smaller the youth group, the greater is the opportunity to really know each student and minister to them as an individual. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (John 10:14, NIV). This is *Shepherding 101*: if you have a smaller flock, you have a better chance of knowing each of the

sheep. Think about it this way: when large youth groups gather, one of the first things they do is divide all the students into small groups. So, if you have a smaller youth group, God has just saved you a step!

2. Involvement

You've probably heard this little aphorism: The church is like a football game. There is a small number of people on the field who don't really need the exercise, but they're the ones in the game. And there are large numbers of people in the stands who desperately need the exercise, but they often never make it out onto the field. If you have a small group, it's a lot easier to get all of the kids into the game.

Perhaps you've seen this principle at work. Let's say, for example, you go Christmas caroling with a large youth group. You've got three people actually singing on the porch, twenty-three kids watching from the lawn, two kids who stayed in the van, and one person throwing snow on the guy next to him. It's just tough to keep everybody involved. With a smaller youth group, you have a better chance of turning spectators into participators.

3. Innovation

Max Weber, in his study of organizations, found that the larger the organization the more likely it was to turn in on itself and begin to serve its own needs instead of the needs of its constituents. Unfortunately, we often see this played out in youth ministry.

As groups get larger, they tend to require more infrastructure and maintenance. They start to play it safer. They become less pliable. Individual needs have to take a back seat to group considerations. Changing plans for a group of forty is a major enterprise. Changing plans for a group of five is a few quick texts. A smaller youth group is flexible enough (and hungry enough) to be attentive to the students in the group. With fewer students to consider, that smaller youth group can be more intentional about meeting individual

needs—even a little outside-the-box intentional. The flexibility of smallness means it's possible to text your whole youth group one evening and organize an instant beach party, picnic, bike trip, work project, and so forth. That freedom for innovation and flexibility can help us be more kid-sensitive. We discover that the power of small transforms questions like “What have we got to lose?” into more of a doorway instead of a dead end.

You'll see that truth in vivid color in this book. I love its focus on real-life stories and real-life youth workers who dare to believe that a big God can do amazing work in a smaller youth group. Listen to them carefully as you read through these pages. You'll hear their names, recognize some of their challenges, and be inspired by their journeys. Hopefully, as you read, you'll also begin to realize their story could be your story.

THINK BIG WITH YOUR SMALL-ER YOUTH GROUP

So, get ready to have your ministry stretched by what you discover in this book. You'll be invited to imagine the power of small multiplied by the power of God. You'll be challenged to come to terms with the fact that the big question for your youth ministry is not about how many thousands are hungry and needy, but about what you and your church will do with the few loaves and fish you have on hand. You'll be reminded that Jesus pointed to the mustard seed and not the watermelon when he talked about the power of faith (Mark 4:31). And, in the end, I think you'll be compelled to dream about, and practically build toward, a youth ministry limited not by a smaller church, but only by a smaller vision and smaller faith.

Oh, and, by the way, thanks so much for serving Jesus by loving teenagers. Whether it feels like it or not, that's no small thing!

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is a result of a multitude of people who have mentored me both in life and ministry. I have been blessed to have the opportunity to learn from, partner with, and create lasting relationships with some of the leading youth ministry minds in the world. Each of them inspires me to seek creative and innovative models to equip and empower youth ministry leaders who build ministries that have a lasting impact on faith development of young people.

The creation of the Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative was not an instantaneous event. It was built on a foundation that was already laid by those who had created and designed training for youth workers in the Tennessee Conference of The United Methodist Church. That training model, known as Youth Ministry Institute, was instrumental in my development as a youth minister. I am forever grateful for the work and guidance of Rev. Terry Carty and Beth Morris, who trained me as well as hundreds of other youth workers throughout Tennessee. I am grateful for the partnership and commitment of the Martin Methodist College faculty and staff as they help equip and empower ministry leaders. Through Martin Methodist College, I have had the opportunity to partner with Dr. Dominic Nigrelli, Dr. Jack Radcliffe, and Dr. Ed Trimmer. Each of them is instrumental in training youth ministry

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leaders as well as encouraging me to continue to seek new models of training church leaders to be in ministry with young people.

I must thank my dear friend, cheerleader, colleague, and co-conspirator, Stephanie Caro. From the moment we met in Louisville at the Simply Youth Ministry Conference, Stephanie has been an inspiration for me and the many ministry leaders across the Tennessee Conference. We've spent many hours dreaming and scheming how best to train and develop Smaller Church Youth Ministries not only in Tennessee but throughout the United States. This book could not have been written without her partnership with SCYMI and her cheering me forward in the writing process.

I have an amazing group of folks I get to work with every day at the Tennessee Conference Connectional Ministry office. Jullie Meyer not only keeps me organized, pays the bills, sends out e-mails, and keeps me sane, she also serves on the Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative Coaching Team. Jullie is a veteran youth worker who leads with compassion. Todd Cox, who wrote the discussion questions for each chapter, has been a part of our team since I first met him when he was just a seventh-grader. Todd is already an inspirational leader with an amazing future in ministry. Thank you, Bishop McAlilly, Amy, Angela, Izzie, John, Mary Lou, Mary T, Patty, Rita, and Merrilee for the continual encouragement and support. Thank you, Lloyd and Bettye, for believing in me and trusting me with such an important ministry. I would be remiss if I didn't give thanks for the Congregational Development Team of the Tennessee Conference. This team has generously given the funding necessary to provide this vital opportunity to smaller congregations.

I am excited about the present and future impact that the Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative is having and will have because of the team of coaches investing in churches. Jullie Meyer, Christine Penner, and Chandra Inglis each is uniquely gifted and passionately called to help churches build sustainable ministry with young people. I am so grateful for the work they do every day to support the churches of the Tennessee Conference. Jullie, Christine, and

Chandra have contributed to the discoveries behind the content of this book.

To the churches and ministry leaders who have trusted us through your participation in the Smaller Church Youth Ministry Initiative, I am forever grateful. Many of you contributed to the content of this book through personal stories, dedication, and prayer. God is doing amazing ministry in and through you. Thank you for the commitment and passion you possess for creating disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

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To my friend Rev. Chip Hunter, I am forever grateful for the opportunity to serve in ministry with you at Epworth United Methodist Church. You are a mentor and a friend, and most importantly you have continued to nurture and deepen my call to ministry.

And most importantly I thank God for my family, Shelley, Maré, and Collins. Thank you for loving me and reminding me that my calling is not only in ministry but first and foremost as a husband and father. Thank you for the ways you remind me of who I am and whose I am. You inspire me daily.

Brad Fiscus
Nashville, Tennessee
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